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## Coptic Conversion and the Islamization of Egypt

Articles by Gaston Wiet in the 1920s, M. Perlmann in 1942, and Donald Little in 1976 have encouraged the perception that the first century of the Mamluk period marked a turning-point in the history of Coptic conversion to Islam. According to Wiet in his article on the Copts in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: "The government of the Mamluks gave the *coup de grâce* to Christianity in Egypt," and he goes on, "It can be estimated that by the 8<sup>th</sup> century [that is, the fourteenth century], the Christians were barely, as in our times, a tenth of the total population of Egypt." Perlmann echoes, "The Mamluk empire contributed decisively to the crushing of the Copt element in Egypt," and "The power of the Copts as a community was crushed." Donald Little believes that his findings "tend to support Wiet's generalization."<sup>1</sup>

Chronological and demographic questions interested Wiet and his followers: when did the Copts become a minority in Egypt and the Muslims a majority, and what were the main stages in this process? To begin, they assumed that Coptic conversion to Islam was the main cause of demographic change in Egypt: Egyptian Muslims are thus mostly of Coptic ethnic origin. Next, they supposed that the Copts had converted in two waves—the first in the ninth century and the second in the fourteenth. Therefore, while heavily emphasizing the importance of the Mamluk period, they did not claim that the Islamization of Egypt occurred during this period alone.

Most recently, Tamer el-Leithy has made a comprehensive study of Coptic conversion during the Mamluk period.<sup>2</sup> In length and depth, this still-unpublished work eclipses the preceding article-length studies. Its subject is focused on conversion among the Coptic upper class in Cairo during the fourteenth century, on which there is much detailed evidence in unpublished Coptic material and in the Mamluk-period histories of al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībīdī. El-Leithy explores in depth the motives for conversion, classifies various forms of conversion, and

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<sup>1</sup>Gaston Wiet, "Ḳibṭ," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st ed., 2:996 f.; M. Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1942): 843–61; Donald Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahī Mamlūks, 692–755/1293–1354," *BSOAS* 39 (1976): 552–69.

<sup>2</sup>Tamer el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2004.



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analyzes the reaction to Coptic converts on the part of Muslims, especially among the ulama class. In the relatively little space he allows for the questions when and how Islamization took place in Egypt, el-Leithy agrees with Wiet that conversion was the main factor of change. Thus, in the last sentence of his work, he refers to "[t]he pervasive (and to this day, persistent) illusion that Egyptian Muslims are all of Arab stock—rather than converted Copts. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Yet, he goes farther than Wiet by arguing that no conversion wave had occurred in the ninth century: this was an erroneous idea, which arose from a misinterpretation of al-Maqrīzī's report. For el-Leithy, the fourteenth century alone marks the decisive sociological transformation of Egypt, as the only period during which the Copts converted to Islam en masse.

Wherein lies the evidence that the early Mamluk period was so decisive for the Islamization of Egypt through Coptic conversion? Wiet and his followers quote extensively from the historian al-Maqrīzī, whose *Kitāb al-Khiṭāṭ*, compiled from the 1420s, records a series of eight assaults against the Copts during the early Mamluk period from 1250 to 1354. They occurred in 1259, 1264, 1279, 1283, 1293, 1301, 1321, and 1354.<sup>4</sup> As described, these assaults took the form of violent outbreaks by the Muslim populace or 'āmmah, especially the lowest elements in Cairo and throughout the countryside. They also took the form of government measures variously prohibiting the public employment of Copts, renewing the traditional laws that restricted and humiliated Christians, and confiscating Coptic *waqfs*. The typical pattern would see a minor incident triggering a popular outbreak in Cairo, spreading sometimes to the provinces, and then quickly followed by government measures that punished the Copts but whose main intention was to placate the Muslim populace.

Perhaps most important is al-Maqrīzī's comment following his description of the last anti-Copt assault in 1354. This assault combined both popular riots against the Christians and their churches with government decrees forbidding the employment of Copts in public service. Such decrees had been promulgated many times before, but the difference this time was that the prohibition also covered Copts who had nominally converted to Islam. The government was now responsive to accusations that such converts were crypto-Christians who undermined the government and oppressed Muslims with impunity. Finally, the government confiscated all *waqf* land belonging to Coptic institutions. Al-Maqrīzī's comment suggests that this persecution was the last straw for the Copts:

In all the provinces of Egypt, both north and south, no church

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 479.

<sup>4</sup>Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahrī Mamluks," 553.



remained that had not been razed; on many of these sites, mosques were constructed. For when the Christians' affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam. Thus Islam spread among the Christians of Egypt, and in the town of Qalyub alone, 450 persons were converted to Islam in a single day. Many people attributed this to Christian cunning, so repugnant did the populace find them. But this was a momentous event in Egyptian history. From that time on, lineages became mixed in Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

So concludes al-Maqrīzī's description of the series of anti-Coptic outbreaks, which constitutes the main support for the view that the early Mamluk period marked a decisive advance in the Islamization of Egypt through large-scale Coptic conversion. From this passage, for example, Donald Little draws the following conclusion:

The Copts must have realized in significant numbers that their social and economic welfare lay thereafter in Islam. In this sense the year 755/1354, some seven centuries after the Muslim conquest of Egypt, may be regarded as a turning-point in Egyptian religious history, as the point in time when the second great transformation of Egyptian religion became virtually complete, as complete, at any rate, as it was to be for the next six-and-a-half-centuries.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the Islamization of Egypt reached its maximum point by 1354. After that date, the proportion between Muslims and Christians in Egypt remained unchanged at about 90% to 10%, in Wiet's estimate. Moreover, the early Mamluk period, culminating in 1354, was responsible for a significant part of the process by which the Coptic population was reduced to only 10%. This conclusion has been widely accepted. Certainly, its plausibility is reinforced by the critical military and political context of the early Mamluk period to 1300 and by the increased intensity of Muslim polemical literature against Christianity and Christians, which becomes noticeable from about 1250 and for long afterwards.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, al-Maqrīzī's statement does not constitute firm evidence for Little's conclusion, even when taken in conjunction with his previous reports of anti-Coptic pressure. It exaggerates, of course, in stating that no church was left standing throughout the Egyptian countryside, and that the Christians as a whole decided to embrace Islam. Furthermore, the single example given, the mass

<sup>5</sup>Quoted *ibid.*, 568.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 569.

<sup>7</sup>Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamluk Empire," 842, 845.



conversion in the town of Qalyub, is insufficient support for the preceding generalization that Islam now spread among the Copts throughout the country. Yet, statistics on conversion are almost absent from the corpus of the Islamic literary-historical tradition, and the standard of required evidence cannot be pushed so high as to exclude valuable reports like that of al-Maqrīzī. We may accept his statement that 1354 marked "a momentous event in Egyptian history," the culmination of a Coptic conversion wave that had begun in the late thirteenth century. Indeed, there is plausibility in Wiet's suggestion that the Copts formed only 10% of Egypt's population after 1354. For the Copts as a community did not suffer any serious blow from the late Mamluk period until the first census in 1846. This and later censuses consistently estimated the Coptic element of the population at about 8%, which may be raised to 10%, given the tendency of the Copts to underestimate their numbers to census-takers.<sup>8</sup>

But when and how were the Copts reduced to the proportion of 10% by the later fourteenth century? A range of possibilities appears. As to when, the reduction could have occurred mainly in the fourteenth century (el-Leithy's position); or in two roughly equal phases, the first in the ninth century and the second in the fourteenth century (the view of Wiet and his followers); or, as argued below, mainly throughout the early Islamic period (seventh–tenth centuries). As to how, the reduction of the Coptic proportion could have occurred mainly through conversion, which seems to be the view of all modern writers on the subject. However, a more important role may have been assumed by a combination of other factors: Arab-Muslim immigration and marriage with Coptic women, together with Coptic demographic decline following the failure of repeated revolts against Muslim rule. These factors have been given relatively little consideration in historical studies of Islamic Egypt. Yet, Arab-Muslim immigration to Egypt from 641 onwards is well documented, as is the outbreak and severe repression of repeated Coptic revolts. Such factors should therefore be borne in mind as a counterpoint to the factor of Coptic conversion.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the question as to when, the Islamization of Egypt may have been practically completed long before Mamluk rule began in 1250. In other words, by the eleventh century or even earlier, the proportion of Christians in Egypt may have already fallen to not much more than the 10% given by Wiet (it

<sup>8</sup>No documentary evidence exists until the first censuses of 1846 and 1882, which recorded the Copts as 8% of the population. But European travellers over the previous century had estimated similarly: Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam* (London, 1997), 64.

<sup>9</sup>Khalīl ‘Athāminah, "Arab Settlement during the Umayyad Caliphate," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 200–4.



would be unwise to advance percentages other than this one, which at least has a tenuous basis in nineteenth-century censuses<sup>10</sup>). Further reduction occurred under the early Mamluks from 1250 to 1354, but this was not significant in the wider picture. The historical evidence is too scanty to allow a decisive case for the early and rapid Islamization of Egypt. But we can reasonably argue that this is what occurred.

The main piece of evidence for this view comes from al-Maqrīzī again. He recounts the last Coptic uprising against Islamic rule, the so-called Bashmurite revolt, which took place in the Egyptian Delta in 831, during the rule of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn. The revolt was crushed by the caliph himself, and al-Maqrīzī adds:

From that time, the Copts were subjugated throughout the whole length of Egypt, and none of them dared to revolt against the sultan, *and the Muslims began to prevail in number in most of the villages*, so they turned from armed opposition to trickery and the use of guile, ruses, and deception of the Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

On the face of it, this important quotation informs us that the Islamization of Egypt began early and was accelerated by the failed revolt of the Copts. However, we must examine al-Maqrīzī's crucial statement more carefully because controversy has arisen over the historian's exact meaning. Al-Maqrīzī wrote:

wa-min hīna'idhin dhallat al-qibṭ . . . wa-lam yaqdir aḥad minhum ba'da dhālika 'alā al-khurūj 'alā al-sultān *wa-ghalabahum al-muslimūn 'alā 'āmmat al-qurā fa-raja'ū min al-muḥārabah ilā al-mukāyadah wa-isti'māl al-makr wa-al-hīlah wa-mukāyadat al-muslimīn.*

The key phrase *wa-ghalabahum al-muslimūn 'alā 'āmmat al-qurā* was interpreted by Wiet and Antoine Fattal as having a numerical sense—that the Muslims now came to outnumber the Copts in the villages. But more recently, Yohannan Friedman has interpreted the phrase as meaning that the Muslims "regained control over the rebellious villages [and presumably resumed the collection of taxes]."<sup>12</sup> As used

<sup>10</sup>El-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo," 26.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'islam* (Beirut, 1958), 282.

<sup>12</sup>Yohannan Friedman, "A Note on the Conversion of Egypt to Islam," *JSAI* 3 (1981): 238–40, cited in el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo," 19–20.



here, the verb *ghalabahum* 'alá thus means simply "to overcome them in (the villages)" in a political and military sense: it has no numerical reference. El-Leithy stressed this interpretation in order to disprove the hypothesis of a ninth-century Coptic conversion wave, which had been advanced by Wiet and his followers.

However, *ghalabahum* 'alá can also have the meaning "to prevail over them in something," "to be preponderant over them in something," that is, in a numerical sense.<sup>13</sup> Wiet and Fattal supposed this to be al-Maqrīzī's intended meaning, and its context here suggests that they were right. The preceding phrase already states that "the Copts were subjugated throughout the whole length of Egypt," so that to interpret *ghalabahum* as "to overcome [the Copts]" would be an incongruous repetition. And secondly, the succeeding phrase, 'alá 'āmmat al-qurá, means literally "in the *generality* of the villages," that is, "in *most* of the villages." But to say that "the Muslims overcame the Copts (in a military and political sense only) in *most* of the villages" is surely a case of *non sequitur*. In crushing the Coptic revolt of 831, the Muslims necessarily overcame the Copts, militarily and politically, in *all* the villages, not most of them (to put it the other way, overcoming the Copts in most of the villages would mean, strictly speaking, that the revolt was unsubdued). It seems, therefore, that al-Maqrīzī used the phrase *wa-ghalabahum al-muslimūn* 'alá 'āmmat al-qurá in the numerical sense. He meant that the Muslims began to outnumber the Copts in most Egyptian villages after the revolt of 831. That meaning sensibly completes the sequence of events: first, the Copts were subjugated; second, they were reduced to a minority in their villages; and finally, in consequence of this, they turned forever from open revolt to the use of trickery and guile. For the Copts had rebelled previously in 725 and 739; had they remained in a majority after their last effort in 831, would they not have rebelled again eventually?

On balance, then, it seems that the interpretations of Wiet and Fattal were correct. Al-Maqrīzī states that the Muslims became a majority in Egypt during the ninth century, following the last Coptic revolt of 831. This is an extremely valuable piece of information as regards when Islamization occurred. Yet, it immediately raises the question as to how. For al-Maqrīzī does not confirm in this passage or anywhere else that the process of Islamization took place mainly through Coptic conversion. In fact, the only occasion where he mentions Coptic conversion without ambiguity is in the context of the anti-Coptic measures of 1354, quoted above, where he says, "For when the Christians' affliction grew great and their incomes

<sup>13</sup>Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, 1955–56), 1:651–53, leaves no doubt that the sense of numerical predominance is included in the general meaning of "overcoming" that is attached to *ghalaba*. He cites the obsolete verbal form *ighlawlaba*, meaning "to be abundant" (*ighlawlaba al-qawm idhā katharū*), and the feminine adjective *ghalbā'*, meaning "luxuriant" (*shajarah ghalbā' idhā kānat ghalīzah*). The modern derivations *aghlabiyah* and *ghālibiyah* both mean "majority" (Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* [Wiesbaden, 1961], 680).



small, they decided to embrace Islam. Thus Islam spread among the Christians of Egypt. . . .<sup>14</sup> Perhaps al-Maqrīzī did not mention Coptic conversion previously, especially in his account of the failed revolt of 831, precisely because it was not the main factor of Islamization in Egypt until the fourteenth century. El-Leithy implicitly concurs, holding firmly that the Copts converted more slowly than any other people conquered by early Islam: he points out that had the Copts converted as rapidly as the Persians, for example, they would also have preserved their language within Islamic culture. Instead, the Copts became entirely Arabized long before mass conversions took place.<sup>15</sup>

This is a convincing observation, but the Copts' late conversion does not necessarily signify Egypt's late Islamization: the tenacity of Coptic Christianity does not necessarily preclude the early spread of Islam in Egypt. Indeed, from the contrast between al-Maqrīzī's descriptions of the revolt of 831 and the anti-Copt measures of 1354, we may infer that Islamization was indeed advancing in Egypt during the early Islamic centuries, but not primarily through Coptic conversion. For in his account of the Bashmurite revolt and its aftermath, al-Maqrīzī does not state that *Islam* prevailed throughout the Egyptian countryside, which would be the natural phrase to use in the case of mass conversion of a single ethnic group from one religion to another. Instead, he refers to two separate ethnic groups, the Muslims and the Copts, and states that the Muslims came to prevail over the Copts numerically in most of the Egyptian countryside after the crushing of the revolt. He does not say how this happened. But if not primarily through conversion, then it must have occurred, on the one hand, through the widespread rural settlement of Muslim Arabs and their marriage with Coptic women; and on the other hand, through Coptic demographic decline brought about by the crushing of their revolts and the severe fiscal and other repressive measures that followed.<sup>16</sup>

There is evidence in the earliest Egyptian Arab writers of Arab-Muslim settlement in Egypt from the time of the conquest in 641–42. Arab tribal immigrants

<sup>14</sup>A little after his description of the Bashmurite revolt, al-Maqrīzī makes the statement, "No other nation is known to have converted in such a short time as the Copts." However, following Yohannan Friedman, el-Leithy points out that this statement has no reference whatsoever to the Islamic period: it refers instead to the Copts' supposed conversion to Islam following the miracles performed by Moses before Pharaoh: "Here the 'Islam' to which the Egyptians (Copts) converted was Moses' religion. The phrase has been violently wrenched out of context when applied to conversion to Islam" ("Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo," 20, n. 52).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 8, 25, 458.

<sup>16</sup>These measures are described at first hand by Patriarch Dionysius of Tell Mahré (818–45), who visited the caliph al-Ma'mūn in Egypt at the time of the Bashmurite revolt: his account is preserved in Michael the Syrian's history (*Chronique*, ed. and tr. Jean Baptiste Chabot [Paris, 1899–1910], 3:62–64).



were dispatched to Egypt in the 640s to reinforce the initial army of conquest. At this time, it is said, one third of the Quḍā'ah or Kalbite tribal group was transplanted from Syria to Egypt with the aim of increasing the Arab population of Egypt and reducing tribal tensions in Syria. Evidence for the increase of Muslim Arabs in Egypt comes from the Egyptian military lists (*diwān*), preserved in al-Kindī's history, which show a constant and rapid rise in the number of soldiers enrolled. These were settled at first in the garrison center of al-Fuṣṭāṭ, and during Mu‘awiyah's rule, a second large garrison of some 27,000 soldiers was established at Alexandria. But Arab-Muslim settlers were not confined to al-Fuṣṭāṭ and Alexandria. From the start, they were permitted "to leave al-Fuṣṭāṭ in the spring . . . leading their flocks and horses to the grazing lands in the countryside." They were supposed to return to the garrison center in summer, but in practice, many settled permanently in the countryside: the Mudlij and other Himyarite tribes are cited as examples. Here, it seems, is a glimpse into the informal process by which Arab-Muslim soldiers (*muqātilah*) gradually turned into farmers and traders and spread throughout the Egyptian countryside.<sup>17</sup>

Especially well recorded is the settlement of 5,000 Qaysī families in the eastern Nile Delta, starting in 727. Their case was unusual in that they were settled by direct order of the caliph Hishām at the request of his Egyptian governor, Ibn Ḥabḥāb. Although registered in the *diwān*, the Qaysīs were allowed to practice agriculture, to breed horses, and to monopolize the export trade from Egypt to Hijaz through the Red Sea port of al-Qulzum. As a result, they soon became wealthy, building large houses for themselves in the region allotted to them. Their descendants long preserved a Qaysī tribal identity: al-Mutanabbi describes them in his visit to Egypt in the mid-tenth century.<sup>18</sup>

The Qaysīs' widespread settlement in the eastern Delta only two years after the first Coptic revolt in 725 suggests that they were granted lands previously occupied by Copts but now lying abandoned because of the revolt and its repression. To judge by the example of the Qaysīs in 727, it was probably the standard policy of the Islamic state to take advantage of the failed Coptic revolts of 725, 739, and 831 by settling large numbers of Muslim Arabs in the Egyptian countryside, especially in the Delta. If we add this to the evidence that Arabs were informally spreading throughout the countryside from an early date, and that the Copts themselves were subject to early and thorough Arabization—then we can dimly discern the process by which Lower Egypt at least was transformed into an ethnically mixed region where Muslims, many of them descended from Copts on the female side, prevailed numerically in most of the villages by the mid-ninth century.

<sup>17</sup> Athāminah, "Arab Settlement during the Umayyad Caliphate," 201–2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.



Coptic conversion may not have been the primary factor in the Islamization of Egypt during the early Islamic period. But it was nonetheless significant, especially after ‘Umar II (717–20) adopted a systematic campaign of Islamization among the subject Christians.<sup>19</sup> According to the historian Ibn Sa‘d, ‘Umar reproached his governor in Egypt, who had warned that the caliph’s measures to promote conversion could lead to a reduction in revenue, with the words “God sent Muḥammad to preach the faith, not to collect taxes.”<sup>20</sup> The Coptic revolt in 725 had been triggered by a census, after which the governor Ibn Ḥabḥāb raised taxes and promised converts exemption from the poll-tax. The Coptic *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, compiled in the eleventh century from records written mostly in the eighth century, states that in 727, the year of the Qaysī settlement, 24,000 Copts converted to Islam in order to escape the *jizyah*.<sup>21</sup> In 750, the first Abbasid governor of Egypt promised to lift the *jizyah* on converts, and, according to the same Coptic source, “because of the heavy taxes and the burdens imposed upon them, many rich and poor denied the religion of Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

‘Umar II initiated a radical change of policy by actively promoting the conversion of conquered subjects. But significant Coptic conversion is recorded even beforehand. The *History of the Patriarchs* states that about 700, the Egyptian governor al-Asbagh forced many people to become Muslims, including Coptic government officials and an innumerable group of peasants.<sup>23</sup> And John of Nikiu, a Coptic historian and probable eyewitness of the Muslim conquest of Egypt, states that many false Christians converted at that time and afterwards.<sup>24</sup> One of the earliest Islamic monuments, a tombstone from Aswan dated 71 A.H. (691 A.D.), commemorates the death of ‘Abbāsah bint Guraig, whose Christian patronymic suggests that she was a Coptic convert.<sup>25</sup>

Separately, the first Christian apologetic works, defending the Christian religion against Islamic accusations of polytheism and image-worship, appeared soon after 750, which suggests that conversion to Islam by subject Christians was then

<sup>19</sup> Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dūrī, *The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation*, tr. Lawrence Conrad (London, 1987), 64.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in H. A. R. Gibb, “The Fiscal Rescript of ‘Umar II,” *Arabica* 2 (1955): 8.

<sup>21</sup> Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d’islam*, 341–42.

<sup>22</sup> *History of the Patriarchs*, 189, quoted in Daniel Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll-Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> John Moorhead, “The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions,” *Byzantium* 51 (1981): 588; Demetrios J. Constantelos, “The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries,” *Byzantium* 42 (1972): 337–38.

<sup>25</sup> Hassan El-Hawary, “The Second Oldest Islamic Monument Known: Dated A.H. 71 (A.D. 691),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1932): 289–93.



becoming widespread in Syria and Iraq. At least half a century earlier, Christian apocalyptic works were implying the same. The most important, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, originating in northern Syria or Jazira not later than the 690s, describes the rule of Islam as a "testing furnace for all Christians"; it continues:

For the blessed apostle said: not all of Israel are Israel. Also, all who are called Christians are not Christians, for 7000 only were left over from the Israelites in the days of the prophet Elijah. . . . Thus also in the time of punishment of these tyrants, few from many will be left over who are Christians, as our Saviour showed us in the Holy Gospel, saying: when the Son of Man cometh, will he find faith on earth? Behold also . . . the multitude of the clergy will deny the true faith of the Christians and the Holy Cross and the mysteries of power. And without compulsion, blows, and wounds, they will deny Christ and will associate with the unbelievers.<sup>26</sup>

A similar work, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*, originated in Egypt about the time of the first Coptic revolt, corroborating the source evidence of significant conversion at that time. Clearly, Coptic conversion was not a negligible phenomenon, even in the early Islamic period.

As noted above, el-Leithy contrasted the slowness of Coptic conversion with the speed of Iranian conversion, evidenced by the successful transformation of Persian into a language of Islamic culture. It is worth considering how fast the process of Islamization took place in Iran. Richard Bulliet's well-known study of this question examined the relative frequency of Muslim and non-Muslim names in recorded literature over different periods.<sup>27</sup> Although the field of evidence is limited to the urban ulama class and the study is based on questionable assumptions, his work remains valuable in the absence of documentary material. Bulliet constructed a graphed curve to show that the Muslim population of Iran rose steadily from zero at the start of the Islamic conquest in the 640s to at least 80% by the 960s. The rise occurred in three stages: a slow rate of increase until about 720, when the Muslim population had reached about 10% of the total; then a rapid increase until the 890s; finally, a progressive slowing again as the Muslim population

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Paul Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), 46–47.

<sup>27</sup>Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of a Muslim Society in Iran," in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemiah Levtzion (New York, 1979), 31. See also el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo," 21–22. Bulliet attempted a similar investigation for other countries, including Egypt, using a smaller sample of names and with less positive results.



reached and surpassed the 80% mark. Of course, the curve ignores important events that accelerated, slowed, or temporarily reversed the process of Islamization. But the conclusion remains that Iran became overwhelmingly Muslim in just over three centuries.

Ottoman documentary records for the period 1520–35 reveal that the population of Anatolia during this period, about five million, was more than 92% Muslim and only 8% Christian.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the evidence from both Iran and Anatolia indicates a process of Islamization up to an overwhelming majority of 80–90%. The process took about 300 years in Iran and at least 400 years in Anatolia, taking the starting-point as the initial Turkish invasion in the later eleventh century. It involved the set of powerful and interlocking social mechanisms that we have discerned at work in Egypt: Muslim migration and settlement, marriage with non-Muslim native women, and conversions from among the native population. The relative importance of these factors differed in each country—conversion, for example, was especially important in Iran, whereas Turkish settlement, combined with intermarriage, was probably the main factor in Anatolia.<sup>29</sup> In each case, however, the process worked inexorably, with a snowballing effect, to achieve the Islamization of Iran and Anatolia within three to four centuries.

Adding these results to the evidence that Arab-Muslim immigration and Coptic conversion both took place in Egypt from an early date, and to the specific attestation by al-Maqrīzī that Muslims had achieved a majority in most Egyptian villages during the ninth century, we conclude that the Islamization of Egypt to the order of at least 80% was achieved well within the six centuries that elapsed from the Islamic conquest of Egypt to the Mamluk seizure of power in 1250. Several writers are of this opinion, although they all assume that Islamization was achieved mainly by conversion and ignore the factors of Arab-Muslim settlement, intermarriage, and Coptic demographic decline. Thus, according to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dūrī: “By the dawn of the third century [830] Islam had spread on a wide scale in the [Egyptian] countryside . . . and became the religion of the majority of the

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<sup>28</sup>V. L. Menage, “The Islamization of Anatolia,” in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Levzion, 53–59. See also Courbage and Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, 92: “In *Le Livre des Merveilles*, Marco Polo recounted how, 200 years after the battle of Mantzikert [1071], the Turks were still a minority in a country which remained Greek and Armenian.” Pointing somewhat in the opposite direction, however, the following page reads: “it is estimated that . . . in 1200, 43 percent of the inhabitants of Anatolia were still Christian.”

<sup>29</sup>Speros Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fourteenth Centuries* (Berkeley, 1971). For the controversy among Turkish historians over the ethnic composition of the modern Turkish population, see Menage, “The Islamization of Anatolia,” 53–59.



[Egyptian] population in the fourth century [tenth century]."<sup>30</sup> G. R. Hawting thinks that Islamization in Egypt was slower than in Syria and Iraq, "and that it was not until after the [Umayyad] dynasty had been overthrown that Islam became the religion of the majority."<sup>31</sup> Garth Fowden considers that Iran converted more rapidly than any other conquered country, its population being over 90% Muslim by about 950. He continues: "Iraq, Syria, North Africa, and Egypt lagged behind this very rapid conversion rate, but the result was the same—an almost entirely Muslim population by the 11<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>32</sup> Daniel C. Dennett and the demographer Josiah C. Russell both concur that Egypt was 80% Muslim by the time of the Bashmurite revolt in 831.<sup>33</sup>

In the study of Egypt's Islamization, the factor that perhaps requires more consideration than any other is that of Coptic demographic decline during the early Islamic period. The topic can be introduced here by referring to the recent demographic study of Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, based on Josiah Russell's work. Regarding Egypt, the authors take a radical stance, tentatively concluding that fully half the Egyptian population converted from Christianity to Islam within a few decades of the Islamic conquest, and that the Muslim element approached 80% as early as 800.<sup>34</sup> They reach this conclusion from Islamic source-historical evidence that the annual Egyptian revenue, the *jizyah*, fell precipitately from the conquest of Egypt in 641–42 to the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn (809–13): from about twelve million dinars immediately after the conquest, the Egyptian *jizyah* fell to nine million in 660, five million in 680, four million in 743, and three million in 813, remaining roughly stable thereafter.<sup>35</sup> Converts to Islam were exempted from paying poll-tax, which is the strict interpretation of the term *jizyah*

<sup>30</sup> Al-Dūrī, *The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: the Umayyad Caliphate A.D. 661–750* (London, 1986), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), 162.

<sup>33</sup> Courbage and Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; they quote the figures in dirhams, but dinars, the currency of Islamic Egypt, is surely meant. Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* no. 7 (Leiden, 1892), 339, records different figures within the same trend of rapid fall followed by relative stability: 10–12 million dinars per annum in 640–56, 4 million in 735, 4.3 million in 830, 4 million in ca. 880, 3.4 million in ca. 980, and 2.8 million in ca. 1080. See also A. S. Tritton, "Islam and the Protected Religions," *JRAS* (1928): 506–7. In contrast, however, al-Balādhurī, *Futūh al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1866), 216–18, states that the first governor of Egypt, 'Amr (642–46), raised only two million dinars per annum and the second governor, Ibn Sa'd (646–56), only four million



in Islamic law; consequently, Courbage and Fargues attribute the decline of the *jizyah* entirely to massive Coptic conversion during the first century of Islam in Egypt.

But this interpretation is problematic. If massive Coptic conversion during the period 641–813 explains both the *jizyah*'s large fall during that period and its stability thereafter (once Islamization was practically completed), then one is forced to suppose that the total population of Egypt remained relatively stable during the entire Islamic period. Therefore, since Egypt's population was quite reliably estimated at 2.5 million by the French in 1798, Courbage and Fargues suppose that, leaving aside temporary fluctuations, this was also the case going back to the Islamic conquest in 641: Egypt's population, then, was only 2.5 million at the end of Roman rule in 641, having declined from a peak of 4.5 million at the time of Augustus. Yet, this population estimate for Egypt in 641 seems too low compared to the estimates Courbage and Fargues give for Syria and Iraq (4 million and 9 million) and to other estimates of Egypt's population at that time;<sup>36</sup> it also contradicts traditional Islamic reports of Egypt's wealth during the early Umayyad period—according to al-Tabarī, for example, Mu‘awiyah "hoped that if he won control over Egypt, he would also be victorious in the war against ‘Alī on account of the huge sum that was raised from its *kharāj*."<sup>37</sup>

But there is an alternative explanation for the apparently rapid fall of the Egyptian *jizyah* during the seventh and eighth centuries. The treaty reports relating to the conquest of Egypt, as well as the fiscal documents contained in the Aphrodito papyri from Upper Egypt, dating 700–20, reveal that the term *jizyah* was used generally to mean *all* regular annual revenues paid by local communities to the central administration in al-Fustāt. That is, *jizyah* included not only poll-tax (*diagraphon* in the papyri), payable only by adult male non-Muslims, but also land-tax (*dēmosia* in the papyri), payable by all land-owners including converts.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the steady fall of the annual Egyptian *jizyah* from ten–twelve million dinars to three million during the period 641–813 would not reflect massive

<sup>36</sup> Peter Charanis, "Observations on the Demography of the Byzantine Empire," *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 1967), 454. The tenth-century Egyptian Melkite writer Eutychius states, with great exaggeration, that Egypt had six million adult males at the start of Islamic rule: Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Deroche, "Juifs et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VIIe siècle," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 244–45.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1879–1901), ser. 1, 6:3396; tr. E. Yarshater et al. (Albany, NY, 1987–89).

<sup>38</sup> Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, 90–98; Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, *Studies in the Genesis and Early Development of the Caliphal Taxation System* (Copenhagen, 1988), 81–129 *passim*; Tritton, "Islam and the Protected Religions," 494; H. I. Bell, "The Administration of Egypt under the Umayyad Khalifs," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 28 (1928): 282–83.



conversion because Muslims too paid *jizyah* in early Islamic Egypt. Instead, however, it ought to reflect a real decline in the total population of Egypt from the conquest onwards.<sup>39</sup> And this conclusion would seem to fit the picture of the demographic decline of the native Coptic population, still the great majority during this early period but caught in a cycle of repression, failed revolts, and aggravated repression—and, on the other hand, the spread and settlement of Arab-Muslim migrants throughout rural Egypt. Islamization in Egypt was achieved within three centuries—on the one hand by the shrinking of Coptic numbers; and on the other, by the introduction of a Muslim element that was small at first but grew quickly, both in absolute terms and relative to the declining native population. Coptic conversion had a significant part in the growth of this Muslim element, but it was not the primary factor.

The Islamization of Egypt was thus achieved by the ninth century, but the early Mamluk period may be seen as a long-delayed conclusion to it, since it gave rise to the last and most important in an intermittent series of Coptic conversion-waves. This was partly due to the unusually severe measures introduced by the Mamluk state against the Copts—notably the rule imposing conversion upon the wife of a convert (which practically ensured that the family's wealth would pass out of the Coptic community), the banning of traditional Coptic festivals, and the wholesale confiscation of Coptic *waqfs*.<sup>40</sup> But perhaps the main cause was the decline of morale among the Copts in the early fourteenth century, possibly prompted by external factors—especially the recent conquest of Monophysite Christian Nubia by Arab tribes at that time. Their direct connection to Ethiopia now severed, the Copts were reduced into a sealed pocket community with little hope of support from the outside.

But this is not to say that the early Mamluk period was a decisive turning-point in the Islamization of Egypt. Indeed, al-Maqrīzī's account of anti-Copt agitation and government pressure from 1290 to 1354 suggests that the Copts were by now a relatively small and weak minority in Egypt. For example, following the mass riots in 1321 that destroyed sixty churches and monasteries across the whole country, a group of monks armed with naphtha set fire to the mosques of Cairo, setting off blazes that burned for days. The sultan, according to al-Maqrīzī, refused to believe that the Christians were responsible: as he claimed, "they did not have

<sup>39</sup>Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, 97; Simonsen, *Studies in the Genesis and Early Development of the Caliphal Taxation System*, 89, 107, 127–29.

<sup>40</sup>El-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo," 96, 117–24. However, a much earlier example of severe fiscal pressure, fully justified by appeal to tradition, is minutely recorded in the Zuqnin Chronicle's eyewitness account of events in al-Jazira in 772–74: J.-B. Chabot, ed., *Chronique de Denys de Tell Mahré, quatrième partie* (Paris, 1895), 122 f..



sufficient strength and boldness to embark upon an enterprise of such magnitude.” And in the last anti-Copt episode of 1354, the government confiscated all the lands in Egypt held as *waqfs* by Christian churches and monasteries. These lands were the main source of revenue for Christian institutions, yet they amounted to only 25,000 feddans—that is, a few hundred square kilometers in a country possessing at least 25,000 square kilometers of cultivated land.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Little, “Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahrī Mamlūks,” 564, 568; el-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo,” 124. The feddan is taken to be roughly equivalent to the acre.



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