Christian-Muslim Relations
A Bibliographical History

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Edited by
David Thomas and Alex Mallett

with Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala,
Johannes Pahlitzsch, Mark Swanson,
Herman Teule, John Tolan

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The prophecies and exhortations of Pseudo-Shenute

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown; perhaps late 13th century
PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown; presumably Egypt
DATE OF DEATH Unknown; perhaps mid-14th century
PLACE OF DEATH Unknown; presumably Egypt, possibly at the monastery of Dayr al-Muḥarraq in Upper Egypt

BIOGRAPHY

Nothing is known of the Coptic Christian author of a pseudonymous apocalyptic sermon beyond what can be gathered from the text itself.

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Qawl Anbā Shinūda raʾīs al-mutawaḥḥidīn, waʿẓ wa-taʿlīm li-awlādihi l-ruhbān, 'The saying of Abba Shenute, head of the recluses, an admonition and an instruction to his children the monks'
Nubuwwat abīnā l-qiddīs Anbā Shinūda, 'The prophecy of our holy father Abba Shenute'
'The apocalypse of Shenute'; 'The second (Arabic) apocalypse of Shenute'; 'The prophecies and exhortations of Shenute'; 'ApocShen II'; 'ShenII'

DATE The original version may have been composed around 1325-30; slightly reworked at least once c. 1400
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

DESCRIPTION

This early Mamluk-period work, which records an apocalyptic sermon purportedly addressed by the Coptic monastic saint Shenute (d. 464) to an assembly of his fellow monks, is largely unedited and known only from two recent and closely related manuscripts. The sermon is clearly a composite work, made up in large part of passages from older Christian

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apocalyptic sources that have been put together with only a minimum of redaction. The later part of the work, however, seems substantially original, and it is here that, in a remarkably historical style, transcending the typical vagueness and obscurity of much apocalyptic literature, the sermon provides an interesting picture of Christian-Muslim relations under early Mamluk rule from a contemporary Coptic miaphysite perspective.

Prophecies and exhortations of Pseudo-Shenute falls roughly into three parts: a prophetic homily, *vaticinia ex eventu* of a political nature, and eschatological prophecies. These can be divided into smaller sections on the basis of content and origin (for which cf. Troupeau, 'De quelques apocalypses').

The first part of the work, the prophetic homily, consists of more or less the entire first half of the well-known *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Samuel* followed by a passage taken from the *Letter of Pseudo-Pisentius* (see *CMR* 2, pp. 743-53 and 266-74 respectively). The former piece of borrowing makes up almost a third of the entire *Prophecies and exhortations of Pseudo-Shenute*, and it remains very close to the original (Troupeau, par. 1). The most important differences with respect to the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Samuel* are the substitution of the name Shenute for that of Samuel, a lengthier narrative introduction, and the use of the term *muhājirūn*, 'emigrants', where the direct witnesses to *Pseudo-Samuel* have *hajara*, 'Hagarenes', or *'arab*, 'Arabs'. Its main theme being the assimilation of Coptic practice to that of the Arab Muslims, it includes *Pseudo-Samuel*'s famous lament concerning the Egyptian Christians' abandonment of the Coptic language, which is then followed by a series of prophecies *ex eventu* on the oppression of the Arabs, interpreted as God's punishment of the Christians because of their deviation from the canons of the Church and the precepts of the fathers. The passage copied from the *Letter of Pseudo-Pisentius* (common recension) – the first of three borrowings from the *Letter* – is much shorter and contains an exhortation to avoid sinful behavior, in addition to an enumeration of a number of social evils, together with a description of the punishments that will await the sinners in hell (Troupeau, par. 2).

The second part of *Prophecies and exhortations* comprises a long series of *vaticinia ex eventu*, which seem to be aimed at providing an overview of the history of Arab-Muslim rule over Egypt and its Coptic miaphysite inhabitants, starting from the Arab invasion up to and including the author's own time. It is introduced by a section on the decline of a monastery, which is unnamed but characterized as a place 'in which Christ halted many times and which he consecrated with his

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pure hand' (Troupeau, par. 3). This suggests that we are dealing here with the Upper-Egyptian monastery known as Dayr al-Muḥarraq, of which tradition says that Christ himself consecrated its principal church in the place where the Holy Family had stayed during their flight from Herod. This account was possibly taken from an earlier source, which is certainly the case for the next section (Troupeau, par. 4), which contains a political prophecy dealing with a succession of 19 Muslim 'kings' following the Prophet Muḥammad, the last of whom is identified as the Caliph al-Amīn (r. 809-13). This text probably goes back largely to a 9th-century recension of the early-Abbasid *Proto-fourteenth vision of Daniel* (for details, see *CMR* 1, pp. 411-13; see also *CMR* 1, pp. 309-13 and *CMR* 3, pp. 697-703). After a second short passage taken from the *Letter of Pseudo-Pisentius* (Troupeau, par. 5), in which the powers inhabiting the Copts' sacred shrines ask Jesus Christ to intervene in the face of Arab-Muslim dominion, but are told by him to remain patient, the prophecies *ex eventu* continue with yet another succession of Egyptian rulers, this time seven unnamed men called the *ḥuqqām* (Troupeau, par. 6a). While the descriptions of their reigns are cursory and obscure, and while these may well have been borrowed from another source where they referred to a different set of rulers, it is likely that they refer here to the Ayyubid dynasty that governed Egypt from 1169 to 1254.

What follows next is a series of *vaticinia ex eventu* dealing with the rule of 'people called the Turks' (*al-turk*), i.e., the Mamluks, and in particular their attitude towards the Egyptian Christians. These political prophecies appear mostly original and, compared with those commonly found in historical apocalypses (including the present one up to this point), are also unusually explicit and detailed. A first set of prophecies (Troupeau, par. 6b) is focused on the reign of Sultan al-Ẓāhir Baybars (r. 1260-77) – here called 'Uluww ibn Muḥibb al-Dhahab Ẓālim, lit., 'Uluww ('Highness'), son of the lover of gold Ẓālim ('Oppressor'). It gives a colorful version of the well-known events of 1263/64, when the sultan threatened to burn all Christians 'close to him', which was only avoided by the payment of 'much gold'; the text describes in a remarkably hostile tone how the Coptic Patriarch John VII (r. 1262-68, 1271-93) travelled from 'Alexandria to Philae' to collect the fine, plundering the Christians' possessions and impoverishing them.

Then, after quoting from a passage of the *Letter of Pseudo-Pisentius* that predicts how the land will become impoverished due to God's withdrawal of his blessing (Troupeau, par. 7), the text turns to the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (r. 1293-94, 1299-1309, 1310-41).

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This section (Troupeau, par. 8) describes in considerable detail the governmental anti-*dhimmī* campaign of 1301, mentioning the enforcement of sumptuary laws, the closing of churches, and the conversion of Coptic 'senior-ranking clerks' (*al-kuttāb al-akābir*) to Islam. Even greater attention, however, is given to the famous riots between Christians and Muslims in 1321, when many churches were destroyed in Egypt and monks seem to have set fire to the mosques of Cairo, creating a series of blazes throughout the city (see Little, 'Coptic conversion', pp. 562-65). In what is quite an original version of the affair, Pseudo-Shenute insists that the real arsonists were envious Muslims, who started the fire in order to blame the Christians! Interestingly, the text gives a nuanced picture of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad himself: while it links the sultan to the Antichrist (by noting that the numerical value of his name is 666, the number of the beast, cf. Revelation 13:18) and describes how he initially persecuted the Christians, it also has an eye for the sultan's generally positive attitude towards them later on. Moreover, Pseudo-Shenute emphasizes that the killing of Christians by Muslim mobs shortly after the 1321 fire happened 'without an order of the sultan or the governors', while in a later section describing al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death, it predicts that he would not die by the sword 'because of the great good that the king did to the Christians.'

The account of the events of 1321 is followed by a digression on the sins that the Egyptian Christians would commit in those days (Troupeau, par. 9). Particularly telling is the remark that 'all the bad things that this [Arab-Muslim] nation will do in its days, the Christians will do like them', which reveals what may well have been central to the worries of the author, namely, that Christians were hardly distinguishable from Muslims anymore.

In the next section (Troupeau, par. 10), the prophecies rapidly become vague again, and eschatological history starts to take over. First, there are obscure and cursory allusions to internal strife among the higher echelons of the Mamluk administration, probably between Muslims and Copts/*masālima* (recent converts to Islam), which ends with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad being pressured into banishing the latter (identified as 'the chief clerks [*kubār al-kuttāb*] in his castle, whom he had put in charge of his riches') to Upper Egypt to die. Next, the text mentions a letter sent to the sultan by the 'king of the Greeks (*malik al-Yūnāniyyīn*), who is the king of the Ethiopians', discussing 'the restoration (*tajdīd*) of Jerusalem and the showing of affection for the people of the Christians'; badly advised by his imams and judges, the sultan seems to ignore it. This

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serves as a prelude to a very original version of the legend of the last Roman emperor, which is a standard feature of later Coptic miaphysite apocalyptic literature. 'After the completion of 62 years of the kingdom of Qalāwūn and his son', the angry king of the Ethiopians dams up the Nile in order to deprive Egypt of water, and then invades the country while the Romans (*al-Rūm*) attack from the north. The Muslims are defeated, and Ibn Qalāwūn falls ill and dies after three months in hiding, leaving Egypt prey to a 40-year struggle for power between the Romans and Ethiopians. After an interlude (Troupeau, par. 11) consisting of *ex eventu* prophecies concerning two series of Coptic miaphysite patriarchs, from Benjamin (r. 622-61) up to Alexander II (r. 705-31), and then from Gabriel II ibn Turayk (r. 1131-45) to John IX (r. 1220-27), the *Prophecies and exhortations of Pseudo-Shenute* ends with the rival kings of the Romans and the Ethiopians going to Jerusalem, where a divine ordeal sanctions the miaphysite faith and the kings make peace (Troupeau, par. 12). The king of the Romans will leave his brother behind in Egypt, and the king of the Ethiopians his brother-in-law; both will then return to their lands, and a period of bliss will ensue for Egypt. Remarkably, there is neither an Antichrist legend nor a description of the Last Judgement.

The last historical event described with some accuracy is the riots of 1321, which suggests that *Prophecies and exhortations* was composed not much later than this low point in Coptic-Muslim relations. This view is supported by the fact that the *ex eventu* prophecies on Coptic patriarchs mentioned above end with John IX, who died in 1327, as well as by a prophecy at the very beginning of pseudo-Shenute's historical overview (Troupeau, par. 4) that the Arab-Muslim rule would last for 730 years, i.e. until 1329/30. The passage on the crisis in the Mamluk administration is, then, likely to allude to the downfall of the *nāẓir al-khāṣṣ* (supervisor of the fisc) Karīm al-Dīn al-Kabīr, a powerful Coptic convert to Islam, who fell into disgrace in 1323 and died in exile in Upper Egypt. Likewise, the letter sent by the king of the Greeks/Ethiopians (for this curious identification, see below) appears to refer to a document that, according to al-Maqrīzī, was sent to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad by the Ethiopian *negus* Amda Seyon (r. 1314-44) in 726 AH (1325), in which he threatened to starve Egypt by diverting the Nile if the Egyptian Christians were not treated better. It is this letter, one of the first in a series of alleged Ethiopian interventions in Egyptian politics, that probably triggered the composition of the work and formed an important source of inspiration for Pseudo-Shenute's version of eschatological events.

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While the above cluster of references gives evidence that the work was originally composed towards the end of the 1320s, there are also clear indications that its text was slightly updated, perhaps more than once, in subsequent editing. Probably, this merely consisted of the addition of some figures and calculations here and there, and the text seems to have been left essentially in its original form. One such addition is the reference to the reigns of Qalāwūn (r. 1279-90) and his son al-Nāṣir Muḥammad as adding up to 62 years, which corresponds to historical fact (678/1279-740/1341). Another added phrase even appears datable: in the opening section on the rule of the Mamluks, the text seems to say that they will rule for 153 years and that there will be 27 kings, suggesting a date of 1399, the year of the death of Barqūq al-Yalbughāwī (r. 1382-89, 1390-99), approximately the 27th Mamluk sultan.

The work was composed by a miaphysite Copt, probably a monk or priest, who, considering his extensive use of older textual material, had access to a monastic or private library but at the same time knew what was going on in Cairo. The present author is inclined to believe that he came from Dayr al-Muḥarraq or its surroundings (Mount Qusqām), as this would explain the incorporation into the text of a whole section dedicated to this monastery. In the 14th century, after a long period of obscurity, Dayr al-Muḥarraq rose to prominence, thus becoming an important center of Coptic Christianity, together with the Red Sea monasteries of St Anthony and St Paul. In addition, the place appears to have been a staging post for Ethiopian pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, and it stood in close contact with the Ethiopian community of that place as well as with that of Ḥārit Zuwayla in Cairo, which may somehow account for *Prophecies and exhortations*' discernible affinity with Ethiopian literary traditions and popular lore.

Indeed, while pseudo-Shenute borrowed entire sections of text from older Coptic and Copto-Arabic literature, he also seems influenced, directly or indirectly (or both), by the famous Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast*, which is usually dated to the first years of Amda Seyon's rule (1314-1321/22). This is suggested by several elements of the episode about the kings of the Romans and the Ethiopians in *Prophecies and exhortations* that do not appear in earlier Coptic tradition, such as Jerusalem as the location of the divine ordeal sanctioning the miaphysite faith and the fact that both kings leave a family member as deputy in Egypt (cf. *Kebra Nagast*, ch. 117). In addition, the text has even greater affinity with the stories about the invasion of Egypt and the damming of the Nile narrated

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by an abundance of chronicles and hagiographies – Ethiopian, but also Coptic and Muslim – in relation to Amda Seyon, Sayfa Ar'ad (r. 1344-71), and later Ethiopian kings, notably Dawit I (r. 1379/80-1413), the only one who seems to have actually interfered with the Nile; however, the exact nature of its relation to these traditions remains unclear. In any case, the curious identification of the king of the Greeks as king of the Ethiopians may well derive from the Vulgate recension of the *History of the patriarchs of Alexandria*, which in the biography of Patriarch Michael I (r. 743-67; the biography was originally written by one John 'the Deacon', *CMR* 1, pp. 317-21) deals with the invasion of Egypt by the Nubian king Cyriacus and, in an echo of the famous *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (*CMR* 1, pp. 163-71), calls this king both 'the Ethiopian' and 'the Greek king'.

SIGNIFICANCE

Prophecies and exhortations of Pseudo-Shenute is a witness to Egyptian Christians' continuing interest in the meaning of history, and their hopes for its outcome, in the early Mamluk period. This was a period when, as we learn from the text itself, the Coptic community suffered from episodic crises of state tyranny and mob violence as well as a general pressure to conform to dominant Muslim norms, with increased Islamization and conversion as the results.

Prophecies and exhortations marks the end of the Copts' apocalyptic literary tradition. Not only is it the last medieval Coptic apocalyptic work handed down to us, but also, and quite remarkably, it offers a kind of anthology of prestigious older examples of the genre by incorporating some of their most striking passages.

At the same time, as a culmination of a late trend in the tradition (cf. the *Prophecies of Daniel to Athanasius* and the *Testament of our Lord*, for which see *CMR* 3, pp. 290-96, and *CMR* 4, pp. 743-49, respectively), it wanders away from apocalyptic literary convention in its unexpectedly clear and unstereotypical representation of contemporary events – to which the text should probably be taken seriously as an historical witness. A good example is its *ex eventu* prophecies on the Coptic-Muslim riots of 1321, where its version of what happened differs considerably from the accounts of most other witnesses (e.g. al-Maqrīzī, al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Abi l-Faḍā'il).

Moreover, as part of this phenomenon, and in violation of traditional apocalyptic norms, *Prophecies and exhortations* has no strict dichotomy between 'us' and 'the evil other', which allows for some nuance in evaluative judgments. We hear of an evil Muslim mob, but also of a sultan who

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does good, of a Coptic patriarch who plunders his co-religionists' riches, and of Christians who misbehave like Muslims; the text paints a rather realistic and worried picture of a turning point in Mamluk society, in which boundaries between the Christian and Muslim communities are rapidly breaking down.

Prophecies and exhortations is an important source for the reconstruction of the history of older Egyptian Christian apocalyptic works, especially the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Samuel* and the *Proto-fourteenth vision of Daniel*. In addition, it is of interest as a possible early witness to the influence of the *Kebra nagast*, as well as for its crossover combination of elements from the typically Coptic apocalyptic legend of the kings of Byzantium and Ethiopia with late medieval traditions concerning Ethiopian interference in Mamluk politics (invasion of Egypt, damming up the Nile).

Prophecies and exhortations also adds to our knowledge of the history of Dayr al-Muḥarraq. If it was indeed composed there, it testifies to the importance of the place as a center of Coptic Christianity in the Mamluk period, while at the same time enriching the heritage of this again flourishing monastery.

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