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—Dante, *Inferno*

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Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age



Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age

A Sourcebook

Edited by

Nimrod Hurvitz, Christian C. Sahner,
Uriel Simonsohn, and Luke Yarbrough



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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Timelines</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Maps</i>	<i>xviii</i>
General Introduction	1
<i>The Editors</i>	
PART ONE. THE PROPHET AND THE EMPIRES OF THE CALIPHS (CA. SEVENTH–TENTH CENTURIES)	31
<i>Nimrod Hurvitz and Christian C. Sahner</i>	
1. Conversion in the Qur’ān	41
<i>Abdullah Saeed</i>	
2. The Conversion of Khadija bt. Khuwaylid, <i>by Muḥammad b. Ishāq</i>	46
<i>Sean W. Anthony</i>	
3. On Three Jewish Converts to Islam from the Banū Qurayza, <i>by</i>	
<i>Ibn Hishām</i>	51
<i>Michael Lecker</i>	
4. Women Converts and Familial Loyalty in the Time of the Prophet, <i>by</i>	
<i>Muḥammad b. Sa’d</i>	54
<i>Keren Abbou Hershkovits</i>	
5. Reports on Tribal Delegations to the Prophet, <i>by Muḥammad b. Sa’d</i>	58
<i>Ella Landau-Tasserou</i>	

6. The Spread of Islam in Arabia: Expressing Conversion in Poetry,
by *Selected Early Arabic Poets* 63
Peter Webb
7. Early *Ḥadīth* Touching on Marriage and Conversion, by *Ibn Abī Shayba* 69
Christopher Melchert
8. Practicalities and Motivations of Conversion as Seen through Early
Ḥadīth and Law, by *ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Humām al-Ṣanʿānī and Abū*
Bakr Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Khallāl 74
Yohanan Friedmann
9. Christian Conversions to Islam in the Wake of the Arab Conquest,
by *Anastasius of Sinai* 79
Yannis Papadogiannakis
10. Jacob of Edessa's Canonical Responsa about Conversion and Islam,
by *Jacob of Edessa* 83
Jack Tannous
11. A Multireligious City in Khurāsān Converts to Islam? by *Shaykh*
al-Islām Abū Bakr ʿAbd Allāh al-Wāʾiẓ al-Balkhī 88
Arezou Azad
12. ʿUmar II and the Treatment of the *Mawālī*, by *Aḥmad b. Yahyā*
b. Jābir al-Balādhurī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, and Abū
Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Ḥakam 94
Gerald Hawting
13. Mass Conversion of Christians in Northern Mesopotamia,
by *Joshua the Stylite of Zuqnīn* 101
Christian C. Sahner
14. Conversion and Martyrdom in ʿAbbasid Damascus, *Anonymous* 105
Johannes Pahlitzsch
15. Three Accounts of Zoroastrian Conversion to Islam, by *Muḥammad*
b. ʿAbdūs al-Jahshiyārī, ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Qiftī, and Abū al-Faraj al-
Isfahānī 109
Michael Cooperson
16. Conversion to Islam among the Armenian Elite, by *Tʿovma Artsruni* 114
Tim Greenwood
17. Conversion and Martyrdom in Córdoba, by *Eulogius of Córdoba* 119
Kenneth Baxter Wolf

18. A Christian Intellectual Declines to Convert to Islam, *by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq* 123
Barbara Roggema
19. The Religious Commitment of the ‘Abbasid “Slave Soldiers,”
by Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī and Aḥmad b. Yūsuf “Ibn al-Dāya” 128
Matthew Gordon
20. Zoroastrian Priests Offer Legal Advice about Conversion,
by Ādurfarnbag son of Farrozzād and Ēmēd son of Ašawahišt 131
Christian C. Sahner
21. A Muslim Poet Consoles a Christian Friend Whose Nephew
 Has Converted to Islam, *by al-Qāsim b. Yaḥyā al-Maryamī* 136
Luke Yarbrough
- PART TWO. THE ISLAMIC COMMONWEALTH
 (CA. TENTH–THIRTEENTH CENTURIES) 139
Uriel Simonsohn
22. A Christian Convert’s Examination of His Former Faith,
by al-Ḥasan b. Ayyūb 147
Clint Hackenburg
23. A Monk’s Conversion to Islam, *by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī* 152
David Cook
24. The Conversion of the Volga Bulgars, *by Aḥmad b. Faḍlān b. al-‘Abbās b. Rāshid b. Ḥammād* 156
Gerald Mako
25. Notarial Forms for the Conversion of Non-Muslims to Islam,
by Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār 160
Linda G. Jones
26. A Monk Deploring the Assimilation of the Christians to
 the Hagarenes, *attributed to a monk called Apollo* 167
Arietta Papaconstantinou
27. The Foundation of Shaykh Abū Ishāq Kāzarūnī’s Congregational
 Mosque, *by Maḥmūd b. ‘Uthmān* 172
Negin Yavari
28. Conversion to Islam under the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr
 Allāh, *by Michael of Damrū (Mikhā’īl al-Damrāwī), Bishop of Tinnīs* 178
Mark Swanson

29. Conversion from Motives of Expediency, *by Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī* 184
D. G. Tor
30. Conversion, Confession, Prayer, and Apostasy, *by Ibn Rushd al-Jadd al-Qurṭubī* 186
Maribel Fierro
31. The Conversion of the Turks, *by Michael the Syrian* 193
Maria Conterno
32. The Tribulations of a Converted Man's Daughter, *by Bar Hebraeus* 196
Maria Conterno
33. A Polemical Treatise by a Twelfth-Century Jewish Convert to Islam, *by Abū Naṣr Samaw'al b. Yaḥyā al-Maghribī* 199
Gregor Schwarb
34. Anecdotes about Conversion in Twelfth-Century Syria, *by Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, Ibn Rajab, and Ḍiyā' al-Dīn al-Maqḏisī* 205
Daniella Talmon-Heller
35. Selections from Two Armenian Martyrologies, *Anonymous* 210
Sergio La Porta and Zaroui Pogossian
36. A Letter of Maimonides about Conversion and Martyrdom, *Attributed to Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides)* 215
Ryan Szpiech
37. Apostasy in Jewish Responsa, *by the Geonim of Babylonia and Abraham Maimonides* 220
Oded Zinger
38. Several Documents from the Cairo Geniza Concerning Conversion to Islam, *Anonymous* 227
Moshe Yagur
39. Conversion to Islam in the Period of the Crusades, *by John of Ibelin, Odo of Deuil, Pope Alexander III, and Anonymous* 232
Uri Shachar
40. Conversion Tales in the Vita of Shaykh 'Abd Allāh al-Yūnīnī, the Lion of Syria, *by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad 'Uthmān* 238
Daphna Ephrat

PART THREE. SULTANS, CONQUERORS, AND TRAVELERS (CA. THIRTEENTH–SIXTEENTH CENTURIES)	243
<i>Luke Yarbrough</i>	
41. The Conversion of Medieval Ghāna as Narrated by a Later Ibādī Scholar, by <i>Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Sa‘īd al-Darjīnī</i>	253
<i>Luke Yarbrough</i>	
42. Cheraman Perumal and Islam on the Malabar Coast, <i>Anonymous</i>	256
<i>Luke Yarbrough</i>	
43. The Conversion Miracles and Life of the Dervish Sarı Saltuq, by <i>Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Sarrāj</i>	263
<i>A. C. S. Peacock</i>	
44. The Providential Conversion of the Mongol King of Iran, by <i>Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Qāshānī and Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh Abū al-Khayr</i>	267
<i>Jonathan Brack</i>	
45. The Conversion of ‘Abd al-Sayyid, a Damascene Jew, by <i>Qutb al-Dīn Mūsā b. Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī</i>	272
<i>Yehoshua Frenkel</i>	
46. An Account of the Conversion of Egypt’s Copts under Duress at the End of the Thirteenth Century, by <i>Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī</i>	275
<i>Frédéric Bauden</i>	
47. A Syriac Communal Lament over Apostasy, <i>Anonymous</i>	280
<i>Thomas A. Carlson</i>	
48. Conversion to Islam in South Asia as Transformation of the Heart, by <i>Ḥaẓrat Khwāja Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā and Amīr Ḥasan ‘Alā Sijzī</i>	286
<i>Raziuddin Aquil</i>	
49. A Jurist’s Responses to Questions Regarding the Conversion of One Spouse, by <i>Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya</i>	290
<i>Antonia Bosanquet</i>	
50. Anselm Turmeda/‘Abd Allāh al-Tarjumān: A Former Mallorcan Franciscan in the Service of the Ḥafṣids in North Africa, by <i>Anselm Turmeda/‘Abd Allāh al-Tarjumān</i>	295
<i>Clint Hackenburg</i>	

51. Three Stories of Conversion from the Life of Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī, a Sufi of Timurid Central Asia, <i>Anonymous (or Nāṣir b. Qāsim b. Ḥājji Muḥammad Turkistānī Farghāna`ī)</i>	300
<i>Devin DeWeese</i>	
52. The Conversion of the Kingdom of Pasai, Indonesia, <i>Anonymous</i>	306
<i>Alexander Wain</i>	
53. A Tract against “Unbelieving Believers” in West Africa, by <i>Muḥammad b. `Abd al-Karīm al-Maghālī</i>	313
<i>Ulrich Rebstock</i>	
54. Conversions to Islam in a Late Medieval Chronicle from Damascus, by <i>Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Ṭawq and Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ṭūlūn</i>	317
<i>Tamer el-Leithy</i>	
55. Documentary Records of Conversions among Ottoman Palace Personnel, by <i>Ottoman Officials and Elite Servants of the Sultan</i>	323
<i>Sanja Kadrić</i>	
56. A Conversion Tale from Java, Indonesia, <i>Anonymous</i>	326
<i>Ronit Ricci</i>	
57. The Story of Master She Yunshan’s Conversion in Changzhou, China, by <i>Zhao Can</i>	330
<i>Suofei Liu and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite</i>	
<i>Appendix: Sources</i>	337
<i>List of Contributors</i>	349
<i>Index</i>	351

APPENDIX

Sources

PART I. THE PROPHET AND THE EMPIRES OF THE CALIPHS (CA. SEVENTH–TENTH CENTURIES)

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PART II. THE ISLAMIC COMMONWEALTH
(CA. TENTH–THIRTEENTH CENTURIES)

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CONTRIBUTORS

KEREN ABOU HERSHKOVITS, The Open University of Israel
SEAN W. ANTHONY, The Ohio State University
RAZIUDDIN AQUIL, University of Delhi
AREZOU AZAD, University of Oxford
FRÉDÉRIC BAUDEN, University of Liège
ZVI BEN-DOR BENITE, New York University
ANTONIA BOSANQUET, University of Hamburg
JONATHAN BRACK, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
THOMAS A. CARLSON, Oklahoma State University
MARIA CONTERNO, Independent scholar
DAVID COOK, Rice University
MICHAEL COOPERSON, University of California, Los Angeles
DEVIN DEWEESE, Indiana University Bloomington
TAMER EL-LEITHY, Johns Hopkins University
DAPHNA EPHRAT, The Open University of Israel
MARIBEL FIERRO, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)
YEHOShUA FRENKEL, University of Haifa
YOHANAN FRIEDMANN, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Shalem College, Jerusalem
MATTHEW GORDON, Miami University of Ohio
TIM GREENWOOD, University of St. Andrews

CLINT HACKENBURG, Heidelberg University
 GERALD HAWTING, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
 LINDA G. JONES, University of Pompeu Fabra
 SANJA KADRIĆ, Texas A & M University-Commerce
 ELLA LANDAU-TASSERON, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
 SERGIO LA PORTA, California State University, Fresno
 MICHAEL LECKER, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
 SUOFEI LIU, Saint Louis University
 GERALD MAKO, University of Cambridge
 CHRISTOPHER MELCHERT, University of Oxford
 JOHANNES PAHLITZSCH, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz
 ARIETTA PAPACONSTANTINO, University of Reading
 YANNIS PAPADOGIANNAKIS, King's College, University of London
 A. C. S. PEACOCK, University of St. Andrews
 ZAROUÏ POGOSSIAN, Ruhr University Bochum
 ULRICH REBSTOCK, Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg
 RONIT RICCI, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Australian National University
 BARBARA ROGGEMA, Ruhr University Bochum
 ABDULLAH SAEED, University of Melbourne
 CHRISTIAN C. SAHNER, University of Oxford
 GREGOR SCHWARB, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
 URI SHACHAR, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
 URIEL SIMONSOHN, University of Haifa
 MARK SWANSON, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
 RYAN SZPIECH, University of Michigan
 DANIELLA TALMON-HELLER, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
 JACK TANNOUS, Princeton University
 D. G. TOR, University of Notre Dame
 ALEXANDER WAIN, International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), Malaysia
 PETER WEBB, University of Leiden
 KENNETH BAXTER WOLF, Pomona College
 MOSHE YAGUR, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
 LUKE YARBROUGH, University of California, Los Angeles
 NEGUIN YAVARI, University of Leipzig
 ODED ZINGER, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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46

An Account of the Conversion of Egypt's Copts under Duress at the End of the Thirteenth Century

Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442)

Frédéric Bauden

Review copy only

Title: *al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Āthār* (Exhortations and lessons in dealing with the quarters and historical remains)

Genres: Historical writing (topography)

Language: Arabic

INTRODUCTION

Al-Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1442) is one of the major representatives of Islamic historical writing, particularly on his country of birth, Egypt. Born into a family of scholars working for the government, he followed the same path until he decided to retire from public life to devote himself to the writing of history. One of his first major works was the book he dedicated to the topographical history of Egypt and above all of its capital, Cairo, from which comes the following account regarding the beginning of the persecutions that the Copts (and, to a lesser extent, the Jews) had to endure from the end of the thirteenth until the mid-fourteenth century (the last of these campaigns of discrimination and intimidation took place in 755/1354). The account belongs to a section—one of the longest written by a Muslim author—whose subject is the history of the Copts and their beliefs and in which al-Maqrīzī narrates a succession of events that led to widespread conversions to Islam among Copts. Among the coercive measures adopted by the government, the harshest were the destruction of churches, the expropriation of endowments, and the prohibition to work as functionaries. The campaign started in 692/1293, under the sultanate of Qalāwūn's successor, al-Ashraf Khalil

275

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(r. 689–93/1290–93), who, two years earlier, had put an end to the Latin presence in Palestine by conquering Acre. In most cases, there were two sources of pressure for Coptic conversion: the government and the Muslim populace. Although members of the government often tried to limit the impact of measures taken by the sultan to satisfy the populace, as evidenced in the following account by the role played by the governor Baydarā, who pleaded in favor of the Coptic functionaries, they could not always avoid repression. Considered a turning point in Egyptian religious history, when the demographic transformation of Egyptian religion tipped decisively in favor of Islam, these events are analyzed by contemporary historians with a more critical eye. Al-Maqrīzī, born a decade after the last campaign of harassment, was not a direct witness of these events. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that even if these campaigns had a true impact on the level of conversion to Islam among Copts, it was more limited than has so far been contemplated; conversions were often limited to one generation and did not include the whole family.

TEXT

In the year 692 [1293 CE] the onslaught on the Christians took place. The emir Sanjar al-Shujāʿī [d. 693/1294] was held in wonderful honor in the days of al-Malik al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn [r. 678–89/1279–90] and the Christians rode on donkeys with girdles round their waists. No Christian ventured to address a Muslim on horseback, and if he were on foot, he was to make room for him with deference; neither could any Christian wear fine dress. But when al-Manṣūr [Qalāwūn] was dead and his son al-Malik al-Ashraf Khalīl [r. 689–93/1290–93] succeeded him, Christian secretaries were taken into service by the emirs who belonged to the sultan's retinue, and they subsequently showed themselves overbearing toward the Muslims and assumed superiority in their dress and demeanor.

One of them, who was secretary to an emir in the sultan's retinue known by the name of ʿAyn al-Ghazāl, one day met his master's granary agent [riding] in a street of Old Cairo (*Miṣr*). This man at once alighted and embraced the secretary's foot, upon which he [the Christian] began to abuse and threaten him about a sum of money still due from him of the price paid for the emir's produce. The agent implored and beseeched him, but this only served to aggravate his fault, until the secretary told his servant to get off his ass and to tie the agent's hands behind him and make him walk on. The people gathered round at this, so that by the time he came to the crossroads of the mosque of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn, a large crowd was following him, every man of which entreated him to let go of the agent, but he would not grant their request.

They then mustered in greater number, pulled him down from his donkey, and set the agent free. This happened near the house of his master, to whom he sent his

servant to ask him to come and deliver him from his assailants. He came out with a batch of the emir's slaves and grooms, who rescued the secretary from the crowd and began to grab them with the aim of wounding them. But they shouted: "It is not lawful!" and ran hastily until they stopped under the citadel and cried, seeking aid: "God let the sultan triumph!" He [heard them and] sent to inquire about the matter. And they made known to him the overbearing way in which the Christian secretary had behaved toward the agent, and what had happened to them.

The sultan then sent for 'Ayn al-Ghazāl and addressed him thus: "How can you let your slaves behave as they have done toward Muslims for the sake of a Christian?" 'Ayn al-Ghazāl excused himself, saying that he had been busy in his office and had known nothing about it. Then the sultan sent to fetch all who were in 'Ayn al-Ghazāl's stable and ordered the people to bring to him all the Christians. He also sent for the emir Badr al-Dīn Baydarā [d. 693/1293], the governor (*nā'ib*), and the emir Sanjar al-Shujā'ī, and ordered them to bring before him all the Christians, to put them to death. Those two emirs, however, did not leave him until the matter was decided, and it was cried throughout Cairo (*al-Qāhira*) and Old Cairo (*Miṣr*) that no Christian or Jew should remain in service with an emir. And he ordered all the emirs to propose the faith of Islam to all the Christian secretaries they had, and to cut off the heads of all those who refused to embrace it, but to retain in their service all who did. He also gave orders to the governor to make the same offer to the stewards employed in the sultan's chancery, and to treat them in the same way.

An order was given to look for them, and they hid themselves; but the people forestalled them in their own houses, which they plundered, until the sack was general, both of the Jews' houses and of those of the Christians, one and all. They led away their women as captives and put to death a number of people with their own hands. Then the emir Baydarā, the governor, went to the sultan about the conduct of the people, and coaxed him until the prefect of police rode to Cairo and proclaimed that whosoever plundered the house of a Christian should be hanged. He also arrested a number of people and marched them about the city after having scourged them. They then stayed the plunder, after they had plundered the church of the Mu'allaqa in Old Cairo, and had put to death a number of people there.

Then the governor brought together a number of Christians who were secretaries of the sultan and of the emirs and placed them before the sultan, at a certain distance from him. The sultan ordered al-Shujā'ī and the emir of the armor bearers to take several of these men with them and to go down to the horse market under the citadel; and there to dig a large grave, to throw into it all the secretaries now present, and to light a fire of wood on top of them.

Then the emir Baydarā came forward and pleaded for them, but the sultan would not receive his plea, saying: “I will not have a Christian chancery in my government.” Yet the emir did not quit the sultan until he had consented to this—that those secretaries who had embraced the faith of Islam should be retained in their offices, but that those who would not, should have their heads cut off.

He therefore brought them out to the house of the governor of the city and said to them: “O ye, all of you: I have not been able to prevail with the sultan on your behalf except on one condition, which is that anyone of you who prefers his religion is to be put to death, but that anyone who prefers Islam shall receive a robe of honor and keep his position.”

Then al-Makīn Ibn al-Suqā’ī, one of the accountants, came forward and said to him: “O lord, which of us men high in office would choose death for this nasty religion? By God, a religion for which we should be killed and for which we would have to die would vanish. God would not have prescribed success to it. Tell us the religion you wish us to choose and to follow.” Then Baydarā burst out laughing, and said to him: “Woe unto you! Do we choose another religion but Islam?” Then al-Makīn replied: “O lord, we don’t know; do tell us, and we will follow you.”

Then he [Baydarā] brought in professional witnesses, made them Muslims, and wrote deeds of witness thereof, wherewith he went to the sultan, who clothed them in robes of honor; and then they went in them to the council of the vizier al-Şāhib Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn al-Sal’ūs [d. 693/1294]. Then one of those present addressed al-Makīn Ibn al-Suqā’ī and handed him a sheet for him to write on, saying: “O judge, our master, write on this sheet.” He answered: “O my son, it is not for us to decide.” They did not leave the council of the vizier till the evening, when the chamberlain came to them and took them to the council of the governor, where the judges were already assembled; and there the secretaries renewed their conversion in their presence.

And thus, from men despised, they became honorable through their embracing Islam. But they also began to despise the Muslims, and to lord over them with a violence which Christianity would have forbidden them to use. So that it was, in fact, as someone wrote to the emir Baydarā, the governor, saying:

The infidels have adopted Islam through the sword and by force,
But no sooner were they alone than they sinned.
They eluded a loss of gain and of life;
And now they are free, but not Muslims.

FURTHER READING

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