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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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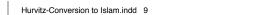


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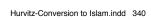
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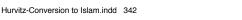
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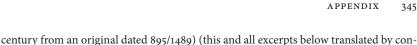
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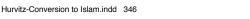
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46

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

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

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-Magrīzī 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 Khalīl

(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-Shujā 'ī [d. 693/1294] was held in wonderful honor in the days of al-Malik al-Manşūr 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-Mansūr [Qalāwūn] was dead and his son al-Malik al-Ashraf Khalil [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 'Ayn 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 Ahmad b. Tūlūn, 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







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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 Muʿallaqa 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-Shujāʿī 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.

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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-Makin Ibn al-Suqā'i, 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-Ṣāḥib Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn al-Salʿūs [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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