

Chapter 6

Christianity and Islam as Nile Religions in Egypt: Syncretism and Continuity

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Introduction

The Nile has had an important role in all religions, from the ancient Egyptians to modern Muslims in Egypt. All religions in the desert became influenced and incorporated life-giving water into the respective religions' bodies of myths and rituals because "in these deserts the river was life itself. Had it failed to flow, even for one season, then all Egypt perished" (Moorehead 1960:vii). Everyone living in Egypt has been dependent upon the Nile. The river has had a life-giving role in society and religion throughout history, and many of the beliefs in the various religious traditions share the same fundamental aspects, which enable an analysis of how the Nile's structural properties in particular and water in general shape religious beliefs (fig. 1).

A distinction is often made between the Great and Little Traditions, or High and Low Religions (Redfield 1956), and both Christianity and Islam are high religions or great traditions. Therefore, it is of interest to see how the river itself transcends the various religions and creates notions of syncretism and religious dualism and multiple co-existing traditions (Insoll 2004a). "Syncretism" is often perceived and condemned as implying "inauthenticity" or "contamination" of a "pure" religion. However, it is important to highlight that it is very useful for analysing religious change because it describes "the blending or fusing of different religious traditions or elements" (Insoll 2004b:98). Therefore, in order to understand religion, one must assess "the development of religious syncretism, co-existence, adaptation and the development of popular religious traditions" (Insoll 2001:19).



Fig. 1. The Nile today in Cairo. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

Thus, the aim with this article is to analyse how and why the Nile shaped beliefs among the Christians and the Muslims, and how these traditions have a syncretic continuity with the ancient Egyptians through the Greeks and Romans.

The classical background

Homer gave the Nile the name Aigyptos, thus equating the river with the country (Macfarquhar 1966:108). The name “Nile” seems to first appear in Hesoid, where the river is called Neilos. An interesting feature with this name is the numerical value of the Greek letters (50, 5, 10, 30, 70, 200), which together equal 365 or the total number of days in a year, thus indicating that the Nile was everything (Lindsay 1968:39). Thales is believed to have been taught by Egyptian priests (Kamil 2002:5). In Thales’ philosophy everything came from water, and water was the prime substance the world rested upon (Dicks 1959:296). The classical Greek and Roman au-

thors had enormous admiration and adoration for the Nile. Herodotus is attributed with the phrase "Egypt is the gift of the Nile", but it most likely stems from Hecataeus of Miletus who travelled in Egypt almost a century before Herodotus (Darby, Ghalioungui & Grivetti 1977:32). Originally, Hecataeus probably described only the Delta. Strabo used the phrase to refer to the whole of Egypt, whereas Herodotus as Hecataeus most likely referred only to the Delta. In Herodotus' point of view the Nile-created land extended for three days' journey upstream, and the expression may have been borrowed from the Egyptians themselves (Griffiths 1966:59). Although Herodotus adorned the mighty river, he has apparently omitted the most important stage in the process, the actual inundation, and refers to the river merely as "being full" (Quincey 1965:10).

The Syrian writer Heliodorus wrote that the Nile is called "Horus", "the giver of life", "the saviour of all Egypt, both Upper and Lower Egypt", "the father of Egypt", "the creator of Egypt" and "he who brings new mud each year". The latter aspect, with regards to the silt which the Nile annually deposits, is also stressed by Seneca: "...it renders a two-fold service to the fields...Egypt owes to the Nile not only the fertility of the land but the very land itself". According to Philostratus, the gymnosophists of Egypt recognised this dual nature because they rendered "cultic worship to the Nile in particular, for they consider this river to be both earth and water" (Wild 1981:94). The whole of Egypt was made of the Nile, the silt created the land and the water gave it life – both qualities and outcomes of the flood, which created an extremely fertile environment. Theocritus emphasised that "No land produces as much as Egypt when the Nile floods", and Themistius proclaimed that the Nile was "the father of crops" (Wild 1981:93). The Nile was the most spectacular river in the world, and according to Diodorus; "The Nile surpasses all the rivers of the inhabited world in the benefactions to humanity". Seneca claimed that all rivers were "vulgares aqua", but the Nile was the "most noble" of all watercourses. Arnobius proclaimed that the Nile was "the greatest of rivers" and according to Ammianus Marcellinus it was "a river which is kindly to all" (Wild 1981:88).

Apart from general descriptions of the great benefactions, the Nile also had other qualities. Plutarch mentions one interesting aspect, which the Coptic Christians later would develop in other ways, and that is that the Nile contained everything, including Logos: "In the Soul [of cosmos], then, Mind and reason (Logos), the guide and lord of all the best in it, is

Osiris; and so in earth and air and water and heaven and stars, that which is ordered and appointed and in health, is the efflux of Osiris, reflected in seasons and temperatures and periods” (Plutarch 49.3).

Coptic Christianity

Upon the introduction of a new religion, the ancient Egyptian religion with regards to the Nile was Christianised at least on the surface. The Nile rose through the power of Christ or by the intercession of the Archangel Michael and the saints (Kakosy 1982:297). Coptic Christianity is truly syncretic, mingling remnants of Pharanic practices with elements of Hellenistic, Byzantine Egyptian and Arab civilisation as well as being one of the most ancient forms of Christianity (Cannuyer 2001:11). The word “Copt” is interpreted as an Egyptian Christian, although the word itself refers to all Egyptians, including both Christians and Muslims (Finneran 2002:62). The word itself comes from the ancient Hikaptah (“house of the ka or spirit of Ptah) (Kamil 2002:1). Today the government estimates that approx 6 percent of the population are Copts, or approx 3.5 million people. However, the church claims that the number is considerably higher, approx 10 million or more (Cannuyer 2001:110). According to Egyptian Christians, St. Mark who was Egyptian by birth was the first apostle of Egypt and arrived in Egypt in approx 60 AD. He became a martyr in 68 AD (Meindarus 2002:26-28).

A central core in Coptic Christianity is Jesus’ flight to Egypt. Jesus found refuge on the banks of the Nile with his family (fig. 2) who were fleeing persecution at the hands of Herod the Great, King of Judea, according Matthew (2:12-15): “And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod.” The Egyptian tradition makes a great deal of the holy family’s stay, and along the Nile there are many pilgrimage sites, including the Church of the Virgin at Daqadus, the church at Sakha, the crypt of Musturud, the balsam tree at Mataria known as the Tree of the Virgin, and the monasteries of Gebel el-Tair and Deir el-Muharraq (Cannuyer 2001:15).



Fig. 2. Way to the crypt of the Holy family under Saint Sergius Church where the family lived for some time during their stay in Egypt. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

The Coptic era begins on 29 August 284 AD, which is the date the Roman emperor Diocletian came to reign. Diocletian published four edicts of persecution, which struck the eastern Christians hard. The church in Egypt was so devastated that it later started the time era – The Era of Martyrs – with the tyrant’s reign (Cannuyer 2001:26). A soldier in service of the Romans named Menas met his death and became a martyr in 296 AD. On 11 November he was apparently executed for his Christian faith. According to legend, his body was miraculously transferred from his deathbed to a spot approx 20 km south of Alexandria. It is believed that he said his body should be placed on a camel and sent out into the desert, and that he should be buried at the spot where the camel halted. His remains were interred, and soon afterwards Menas’ fame spread among the Christians in Egypt. Around 324 AD the Roman empress Helena (c. 248 – c. 328) erected a shrine at his grave after her daughter had been cured of elephantiasis by drinking from a nearby spring (Cannuyer 2001:26). The grave became

an important pilgrimage centre, on which a small limestone church was built during the fourth century. In the fifth century a large basilica was constructed, but this was destroyed in the seventh century. The fundamental religious commodity at Abu Menas was water. The pilgrimage place was like an Egyptian Lourdes, and the water was believed to have strong curative properties. Long after the cult of St. Menas' decline, a large 150m square pool was the foci for the cult in the town of Abu Menas. Before leaving the town, pilgrims filled vessels or ampullae with this water to take with them, and water and sanctity is a common pilgrimage motif (Finneran 2002:87-88).

Other Christian groups developed other approaches to religion in Egypt. The movement of the "Desert Fathers" initiated by St. Anthony (251-356) consisted of Christian hermits living in isolation and extreme poverty resisting temptation. St. Pachomius (286-346) developed communal monastic settlements, which became monasteries in every sense of the word (Finneran 2002:21). "The Copts believe that monks in the desert are superior to virtuous men in the world. Even the novice monk is believed to surpass the virtuous man in righteousness" (Gruber 2003:38). The hardship in the desert and rewards were explained in this way by Thomas Merton, who was a great monastic figure of the 20th century western Church:

"He [the monk] withdraws from [the world] in order to place himself more intensively at the divine source from which the forces that drive the world onwards originate, and to understand in this light the great designs of mankind. For it is in the desert that the soul most often receives its deepest inspirations. It was in the desert that God fashioned his people. It was to the desert he brought his people back after their sin...It was in the desert, too, that the Lord Jesus, after he had overcome the devil, displayed all his power and foreshadowed the victory of his Passover" (Merton 1977:175).

One of these desert monasteries was the White Monastery. Although situated in the desert, water and the Nile had a prominent role. Shenoute was a Coptic abbot at the White Monastery from the latter part of the fourth into the third quarter of the fifth century, but the writings which are preserved from Shenoute are fragmentary copies made long after he died (Young 1993:17). The White Monastery was located close to today's Sohag. Although the copies are difficult to date, it is generally believed that

the various parts were written between the eighth and eleventh centuries (Young 1993:19). In approx 385, the monk Shenoute who was then in his mid-thirties became the third head of the White Monastery. He had been living in the monastery since he was seven years old, and is believed to have died in 464 at the age of somewhere between 115 and 118 years old (Krawiec 2002:3). Shenoute practiced for more than eighty years, and it seems that at one point his disciples numbered as many as 2200 monks and 1800 nuns. Although he is labelled as authoritarian, harsh and violent, Shenoute plays a crucial role in the history of monasticism (Veilleux 1983:v). Shenoute's hatred of paganism and heresy in all its forms resulted in attacks on the local deities and he played a crucial role in erasing these former religious traditions as he envisaged and established Coptic Christianity in all areas and sectors of Upper Egypt (Bell 1983:18-19).

In *The Angel of the Waters* Shenoute wrote about the tense wait for the annual flooding of the Nile. Shenoute called the annual inundation of the Nile God's "yearly mercy" (Bell 1983:107). Besa, who was his disciple and successor at the White Monastery (Bell 1983:3), writes in his *The Life of Shenoute*: "It happened one year that [the Nile] did not flood, and our father apa Shenoute knew from God the hidden reason for it. He also revealed the matter to the brothers with tears flowing from his eyes, and said to us: "Pray to God. I, too, will go into the desert and spend this week praying to the Lord. See that no-one at all comes to me" (Besa 1983:72-73). Shenoute said to his disciples; "You know what I said to you, that God has commanded that there should be no flooding of the land this year. Behold, then, I prayed to him, and he, as the good and merciful God, promised me that this year again he would cause the waters to come and cover the face of the land" (Besa 1983:73). Thus, water had an important role in the religious life and "Shenoute's self-proclaimed relationship with God gave him knowledge of what God required for salvation" (Krawiec 2002:56), which in daily life was water.

The coming of the flood was an important Christian event. The Copts call the star Sirius the "flood-bringer" due to the proximity of its rising and the yearly rise of the Nile (Gruber 2003:178-179). "As it appears, the monks intone the owshia, the special liturgical prayer which distinguishes each of the three Coptic seasons. A new Coptic year has begun... Undoubtedly, some form of it antedates Christianity in Egypt when a pharaoh or his priest might have actually invoked the star and the subsequent flood" (Gruber 2003:179). 11 September is New Year's Day (Gruber 2003:180): "Near the

end of October, forty days after the New Year has begun, the flood waters ordinarily begin to subside. The prayers of the Church turn to concerns about vegetation. Likewise, from the third week in January to mid-June, alternative prayers are chanted for the coming of seasonable winds, not so strong as to damage crops, but constant enough to assist pollenization and fruitfulness" (Gruber 2003:180). Thus, the Copts continued the Pharaonic calendar with three seasons of four months; the season of the flood, the season of the cultivation and the season of the harvest (Kamil 2002:33).

The feast of the Epiphany or baptism of Jesus is celebrated on 19 January, which was previously a great celebration of the Nile. Before most festivals there is a period of fasting and abstinence. During fast, no food or drink is taken between sunrise and sunset (Cannuyer 2001:107). The Feast of the Cross "was a procession from the church that used to tour the village before ending at the Nile, or its nearest tributary, with the throwing of the cross into the river...there is little doubt that this festival was related to the Pharaonic feast of the Bride of the Nile" (Bishop Thomas 2004:985). Hence, it also seems reasonable to interpret the *galaktotrophousa* or nursing image as a historic trajectory of ancient Egyptian beliefs and in particular the nursing Isis. This goes back to the Pyramid Texts where the white Nile was also seen as Isis' nursing breast milk: "Raise yourself, O King! You have your water, you have your inundation, you have your milk which is from the breasts of Mother Isis" [Pyr. 734] (see Faulkner 1969). Moreover, when Theodosius outlawed paganism and the temples were closed in 379, the Egyptians continued to see their beloved Isis and her son Horus in the images of Mary and Jesus (Kamil 2002:18).

The miracles of Virgin Mary's breast milk

Virgin Mary has a fundamental place in Coptic Christianity (figs. 3 & 4). "Mary's perpetual virginity is especially emphasized in all these feasts as a special means of her total dedication to God. She is thereby regarded as a favourite model of monastic holiness by the monks who celebrate her feasts" (Gruber 2003:182). The *galaktotrophousa* or nursing image has a crucial role in Coptic Christianity. *Galaktotrophousa* means "she who nourishes with milk" (Bolman 2004:1174). The nursing period in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine Egypt lasted normally for two or three years, and most often it was not the child's mother who nursed the baby but a wet nurse. Hence, this image, which is depicted in Coptic iconography in



Fig. 3. Saint Virgin Mary's Coptic Church or the Hanging Church in Old Cairo built on top of the Water Gate of Roman Babylon. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.



Fig. 4. Inside the Hanging Church: Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

monasteries, does not represent a symbol of mother and child intimacy as such (Bolman 2004:1176). Clement of Alexandria described in the second century CE the milk in Virgin Mary's breast as having its origin from God, and more precisely logos, since it has the same composition as the flesh and blood of Christ. The milk does not originate from the Virgin's own body, because this blood is "liquid flesh". The milk is, according to Clement, "the drink of immortality" (Bolman 2004:1177). Following Clement,

"What a surprising mystery! There is a single Father in the universe, a single Logos in the universe, and also a single Holy Spirit, everywhere identical. There is also a single virgin become mother, and I like to call her the Church. This mother, alone, did not have milk because, alone, she did not become a woman; she is at the same time virgin and mother, intact as a virgin, full of love as a mother; she draws to her the little children and nurses them with sacred milk, the Logos of nursing" (op. cit. Bolman 2004:1179).

Early in the fifth century, Cyril, another Alexandrian, followed this line and argued that Mary deserved to have the flesh and blood of Christ placed in her mouth since this milk is given "in the heavens". Heaven contained rivers of milk and honey, and milk was given as a reward to Christian martyrs. In Egypt the newly baptised infants were given a special Eucharist consisting of milk mixed with honey. Following the "Canons of Hippolytus", the baptismal Eucharist should consist of milk and honey since it is the flesh of Christ which "dissolves the bitterness of the heart through the sweetness of the logos". This understanding of Virgin Mary's milk as the nectar of immortality also has a parallel in an Egyptian tale called the "History of Aur", where a family of wealthy magicians addresses and asks her: "deign to give us a little milk from thy breasts, so that we might drink it and never die" (Bolman 2004:1179-80).

These depictions of the nursing Virgin Mary in monasteries may have had a political function from the seventh century and onward. While the Muslims claimed that Christ was simply a human prophet and not the divine son of God, the iconographic message would have underlined the divine aspects (Bolman 2004:1181-82). Moreover, although this practice of using milk and honey in the baptismal Eucharist was never established in Syria and declined in Rome after the sixth century, it continued in Christian Egypt and Ethiopia in an unbroken tradition at least until the

nineteenth century, and most likely into the twentieth century as well (Bolman 2004:1179).

The most interesting aspect of galaktotrophousa in this discussion is the explicit reference to milk being the cosmic logos which incorporates everything. The close relation to Isis is intriguing, and in particular the contemporary interpretations by Christians that the breast milk – the ultimate life giving water – was logos. Returning to Plutarch again, these were exactly the divine qualities he described. “In the Soul [of cosmos], then, Mind and reason (Logos), the guide and lord of all the best in it, is Osiris; and so in earth and air and water and heaven and stars, that which is ordered and appointed and in health, is the efflux of Osiris, reflected in seasons and temperatures and periods” (Plutarch 49.3).

Altogether, the number of miracles grew with time to a total of 316 (Six 1999:55). Virgin Mary’s breast milk was not limited to nursing Jesus, but the holy substance could cure any disease; among other things it could heal the blind. John Bakansi was a priest in Cairo. He was more than one hundred years old and had become blind in both eyes. In the church there was a picture of the Virgin Mary, and in a dream he saw her coming out of the painting, “And she drew nigh unto him and took out her breasts from inside her apparel, and she pressed milk out from them upon his eyes”, and straightaway his eyes were opened (Budge 1933:47-48). In Upper Egypt, she cured a blind girl by sprinkling “upon her from her breasts some drops of milk of healing mercy; and straightway the eyes of the maiden were opened” (Budge 1933:54). Her milk also cured a monk who suffered from lip cancer (Budge 1933:55).

The beliefs in breast milk originate in the Nile, and Virgin Mary’s power was believed to control the very flow of the Nile as well. During a famine which lasted for nearly seven years (1066-72 AD), the Egyptian Khalif sent an embassy equipped with valuable gifts to the King of Ethiopia, who was believed to be withholding the water. The Ethiopians accepted the gifts, and in the years following received tribute for sending the Nile waters. For centuries the Christians had kept alive the idea that the coming of the Nile was one of the miracles of the Virgin Mary (Six 1999:53). During a war between Christians and Muslims, the Virgin appeared saying that God had given the Christian Emperor Dawit of Ethiopia (1380-1412) the wisdom to divert the Nile. With this power, the Muslims became scared since they could not harvest without the Nile waters, and they declared that they were

not enemies of the Christians. When Dawit heard this news, he praised the Virgin (Six 1999:57). "Since that time it was commonly accepted, not only by the Egyptians but also by European rulers, that the Ethiopians were the masters of the Nile" (Six 1999:58). Thus, it has generally been believed that the Ethiopians could control the Nile flow (e.g. Donzel 2000), and droughts occurred when God "restrained the heavens" so it "could not rain" (Pankhurst 2000:26).

In the 19th century the "idea of diverting the Nile" was again seen as a Miracle of the Virgin Mary, a theme which had been a challenging topic in the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia since early times (Six 1999:68). The Miracle 268 of the corpus Tä'amrä Maryam [Miracles of Mary] concerns the Nile and Dawit, the King of Ethiopia:

"And on this day at Midnight Our Lady Mary, the holy twofold Virgin, bearer of God, appeared to the King of Ethiopia Dawit and she said to him: "O my beloved and beloved of my son Jesus Christ, and now I have asked my son on behalf of you that you will go and rescue my nation, the Christians, and thus He has granted and made even for you your way. Get up and go. And He will perform through your hand many miracles" ...And God gave him wisdom and he stopped the river [Nile], so it did not descend into the land of Egypt, because there are no rains in the land of the people of Egypt; unless the water of the [Nile], which flows from Ethiopia, reaches them, they do not plough, they do not sow seed and they do not get water at all...[King Dawit of Ethiopia said] Was it not said once: To restrain the water is like beginning a war, but the will of God, the Lord of the Christians, may come about" (Six 1999:66).

For the Muslims living along the Nile, it was intolerable that the Christians controlled the Nile and had the religious legitimacy of the precious life-giving water. Therefore, many of the controversies between the Christians and the Muslims were concerned with the Nile, both politically and religiously.

Nile Muslims

The Islamic invasion of Egypt took place in 639 AD. Apart from the Nile, there was little continuity from ancient to Islamic Egypt due to a double cultural break; first with the victory of Christianity and then three centu-

ries later with Islam. Hence, in the Islamic area the knowledge of the pyramids, rituals and symbols, and indeed the whole civilisation was gone (Haarmann 1996:606). Still, the almighty Nile shaped the beliefs of Muslims in Egypt.

Ancient Egypt was seen as the embodiment of paganism, and the ninth century book-dealer and bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm labelled ancient Egypt as the “Babel of sorcerers”. Nevertheless, there were scholars who aimed to integrate the pagan pre-history into the salvation patterns of Islam (Haarmann 1996:607). Moreover, the pyramids played a fundamental role in the Islamic eschatology. According to the Shi’i theologian Ibn Bābūyah (d. 991 AD), at the end of history the pyramids which had served as talismans against the inundations will be destroyed by the Twelfth Imam. In the Ottoman period, the cruel King Nebuchadnezzar, in the final days of the world, will use black powder to blow up the pyramids, ensuring that Egypt is open to the demise in the floods of the Nile (Haarmann 1996:608). The pyramids were also important in Islam with regards to another watershed in history: the Deluge which divided this period of paganism into two halves. Abū Ja’far al-Idrīsī of the thirteenth century worked on this treatise. He consulted twenty-two authorities on this question, of which eighteen favoured an antediluvian date, because as one of them said, “Otherwise their story would have been preserved”. Thus, the pyramids survived the flood, but not without damage, and the Deluge precipitated the Sphinx and broke it into pieces (Haarmann 1996:608-609).

Known in Arabic as the Ghitās, the most important Coptic Nile festival coincided with the rising of the waters, commemorating baptism and the unity with the Holy Spirit. The festival takes place shortly after the winter solstice when the Nile water is most pure. The most important ritual was submersion into the Nile, a rite of water purification. In 367 AH¹ the caliph al ‘Azīz prohibited the festival. Although he allowed the festival for a period of time, the Fatimid caliph al-Hākim banned the collective ritual of submersion, and in 403-405 AH ordered a banishment of Copts and Jews to Byzantine territories. Fourteen years later, the festival flourished under the patronage of the caliph who used it to articulate Fatimide authority, a tradition which seems to have lasted until as late as 517 AH (Lutfi 1998:259-262).

A very unusual event in the history of Islam is the participation of a Muslim governor in a Christian religious feast – the feast of baptism cel-

celebrated by the Copts every year on 19 January. al-Mas`ūdi described the event elaborately:

“I attended in the year 330 A.H. the feast of baptism in Cairo. During that time the governor of Egypt, al-Ikhshīd Muhammad ibn Turghj was in his palace, called al-Mukhtar, on al-Roda Island which is surrounded by the water of the Nile. He ordered that ten thousand torches be lightened on the island along the Nile shore of al-Fustāt. This was over and above the [number of] torches that the people had lightened in the city. Thousands of Muslims and Christians came to the Nile shore, others came in boats and others watched from their homes overlooking the river. Many on the shores of the Nile, who did not disapprove of eating and drinking in public, showed up in their gold and silver jewellery and played music to entertain themselves. During that evening the gates remained open and many people immersed themselves in the Nile claiming that it gave them protection from illness and prevented the spread of disease” (op. cit. Tagher 1998:91-92).

The rule of al-Hakim was harsh and cruel. In 400 AH Christian feasts were cancelled and celebration forbidden throughout the country. Three years later an order was issued to loot and destroy the remaining churches and monasteries in Egypt. Finally, al-Hakim came up with the last choice: death or conversion (Tagher 1998:103-104). However, the historian al-Antākī mentions that al-Hakim had attended the celebration several times in disguise (Tagher 1998:119), and “after dinner Christians and Muslims alike dipped into the water of the Nile. They claimed whoever dipped into the water that night would be safe from weakness of the body during that year” (Tagher 1998:120). When al-Zahir succeeded al-Hakim, he allowed the celebration of the feast in 405 AH. Maqrīzī writes:

“The emir al-Mu`aminīn [the Prince of the Faithful] al-Zahir li-`Izāz Dīn Allah, the son of al-Hakim, went to the palace of his grandfather al-`Azīz bi-Allah to look upon the al-Ghitās festival with his harem. It was announced that Muslims should not join the Christians when they dipped into the water of the river Nile on that night. [Even so,] the caliph ordered the torches to be lit at night, and there were a great many of them. The monks and priests carried crosses and candles, and prayed and sang hymns for a long time until they dipped into the Nile” (Tagher 1998:119).

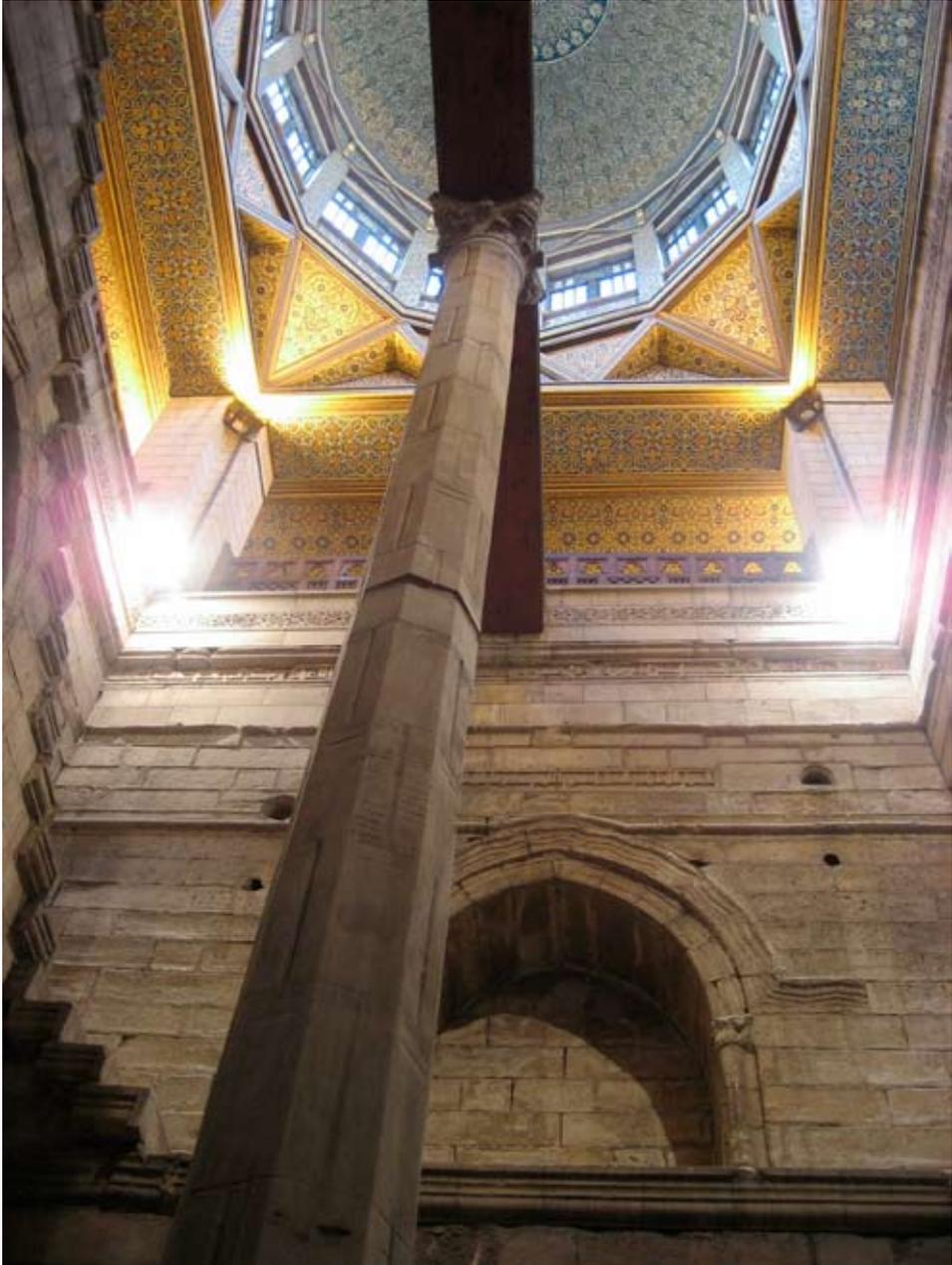


Fig. 5. The Roda nilometer in Cairo with records from 641 to 1890 AD. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

Muslims also worshipped the Nile and consequently two of the most controversial issues between the Christians and the Muslims were the Coptic festivals and who was in control of the Nilometer. As long as one follows the “true” religion, the land will prosper. The Copts were therefore deprived their privilege of announcing the rise of the Nile waters (fig. 5). “Measuring the Nile water became a tradition that was followed religiously by subsequent states, not the least of which was the Mamluk state” (Lutfi 1998:258). The Coptic Nile festivals in Egypt also mobilised collective social and religious reaction by the Muslims, and hence it was seen as a threat to the Mamluk leaders who had to recast it to accommodate dominant Muslim structures.

Based on Maqrīzī’s historical texts from fifteenth century Cairo, Huda Lufti has analysed how the Coptic festival as a social and cultural event and hence the Copts as an ethnic minority became marginalised in the official Mamluk narratives (Lutfi 1998). Rather than giving a full account of the Coptic Nile festival itself or analysing the suppressive means employed by the Mamluks, Lufti has emphasised how the Nile and the former rituals and perceptions even overpowered the Muslims. Maqrīzī constructs two cultures in tension; a hegemonic Arab-Muslim culture and a declining but nevertheless resilient Coptic culture. Maqrīzī starts his treaty of the Coptic Nile festivals with the famous story of the first Arab Muslim governor of Egypt who forbade the practice of sacrificing a female virgin to the Nile. However, due to this ritual sanction, the Nile did not rise for three month. The governor was in despair and wrote to the pious caliph ‘Umar I, asking him for advice. The caliph proclaimed that instead of virgins being sacrificed, the governor should throw a piece of paper into the Nile on which the caliph had inscribed (Lutfi 1998:256):

“Allah alone can cause the Nile water to flow. [The governor] threw the paper in the Nile, one day before the festival of al-Salīb, but in the meantime, the people of Egypt were preparing to depart, because their welfare rested only on the Nile. However, on the day of the Salīb festival, Allah, the Almighty, caused the Nile to flow, reaching 16 cubits in one night, thus preventing harm from happening to the people of Egypt”.

Later on the Copts used to throw a finger which belonged to a male Coptic martyr into the Nile. On this Maqrīzī comments: “The finger of the martyr

was taken in a box to al-Malik al-Sālih to be burnt in front of him in the maydān. He then ordered that its ashes be thrown in the Nile, so that the Copts would not be able to take it back. From that day on, 'Īd al-Shahīd was discontinued until this period. To Allah we owe gratitude and strength" (Lutfi 1998:268).

There are very few references to Mamluk state ceremonials of the Wafā festival. Wafā al-Nīl was the date when the Nile reached 16 cubits. Nevertheless, Maqrīzī gives an account of the state's celebration of such an event, constructing a glamorous picture of the Fatimids' celebrations: "Wafā al-Nīl was of great importance for them, and they celebrated it with excessive joy, for it was the cause of the land's prosperity and the creatures' harmony before Allah's grace. This explains why the caliph paid much greater attention to it than any of the other festivals" (Lutfi 1998:269). Koran reciters and the religious leaders of the most important mosques were ordered to spend the night in the Nilometer mosque, and when the Nile reached the 16 cubit mark, the ritual of anointing the Nilometer was performed, signifying a desire to bring life to the Nilometer, a ritual the caliph attended. In contrast to the Coptic festival of the Nile in the Mamluk period, the Wafā had undergone a fuller process of Islamisation (Lutfi 1998:270). "Thus Wafā al-Nīl seems to have been displaced as a Coptic festival, only to reappear as an official Muslim event. Notorious for their patronage of popular religious festivals, it is quite possible that it was the Fatimids who pushed for the Islamisation of the Wafā rituals" (Lutfi 1998:270). Rain prayers also took place, but only when the Nile failed and showed signs of drought.

"The communal performance of rain rituals may be said to express a collective desire to pass from a state of sin to a state of virtue in order to bring about forgiveness and mercy, thus effecting a reversal of the drought situation. Underlying the performance of these rituals is the common belief that natural catastrophes are caused by human transgressions of God's laws, which may be reversed only if people repent their sins" (Lutfi 1998:273).

Maqrīzī writes about a Nile decrease in 810 AH: "The Nile water stopped increasing for three days, beginning Thursday, and several amirs rode in order to attack the sites where people congregated for rejoicing. They were forbidden to commit abominations, so it started to increase on Sunday

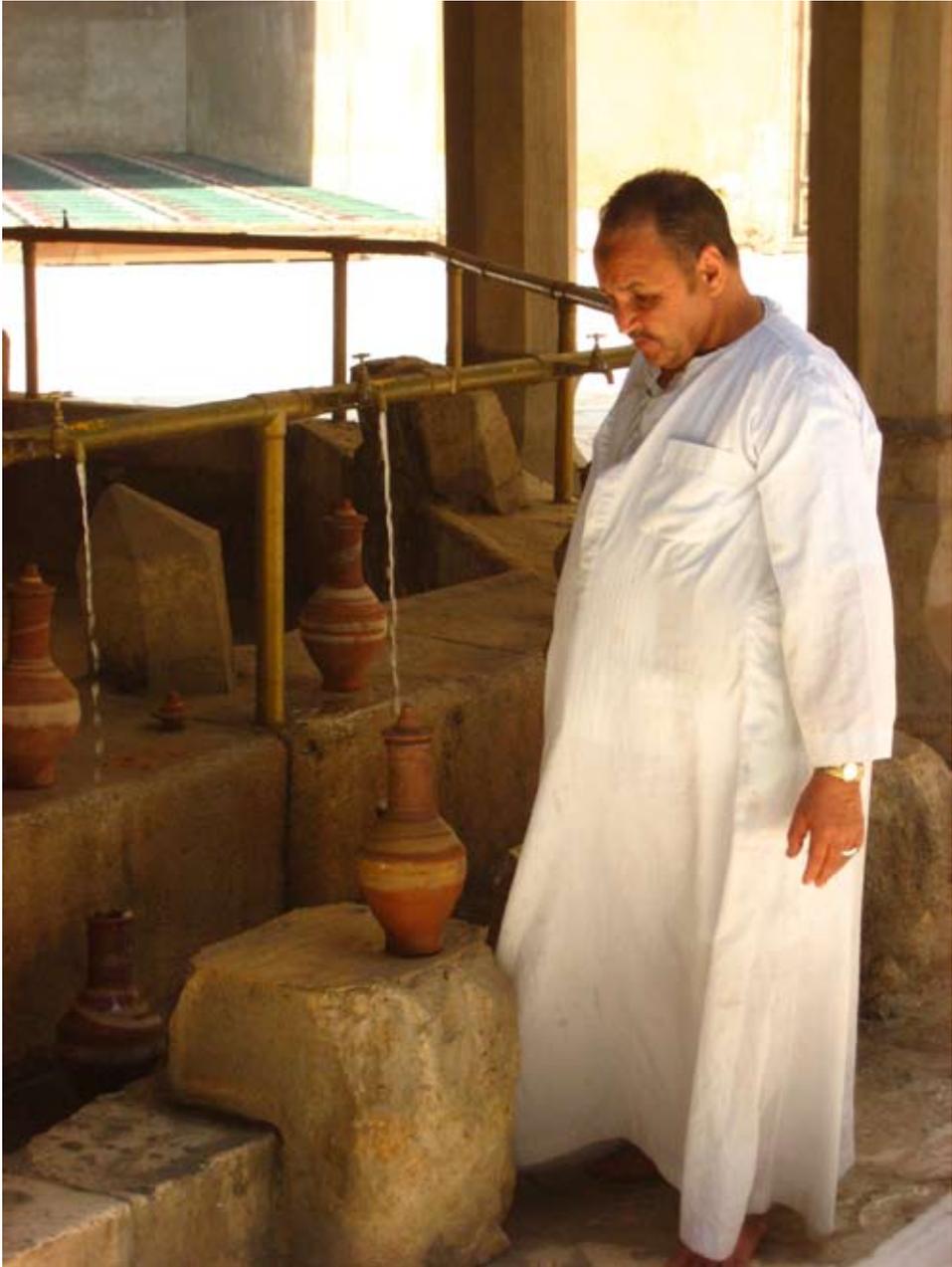


Fig. 6. A Muslim collects water in a Cairo mosque. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

and the increase continued" (Lutfi 1998:273). In 823 AH he reports of a drought:

"The Nile stopped increasing for several days. Grain prices rose and merchants stopped selling it. People's worry increased. They were called upon to stop committing what Allah forbade, and instead to commit themselves to virtue. They were asked to fast for three days and to go out to the desert. Many people fasted the next day, including the sultan. So it was announced that there was an increase of one digit" (Lutfi 1998:274).

The Muslim rulers had to control the Nile or, in other words, it should be in the hands of Allah and not the Christian God (fig. 6). Those who controlled the Nile controlled the people, and the story about King Dawit of Ethiopia stated clearly that Christian control was a threat to the Muslim people, their rulers and their God – Allah. Nevertheless, it was essentially the Christian rituals which became Islamised, and thus, Nile Islam was a syncretism of the previous religions and worship of the river, with roots going back to ancient Egypt.

The Almighty Nile

The almighty river Nile has formed society and religions throughout history, and the changing religions along the Nile's shore in Egypt illuminate how transcendental religions incorporate the physical environment and the water world in a desert. In Egypt where all life came from the Nile, the river became identical with these divine gifts since life is the blessing of God. Everything good came from the god, and in a desert nothing was more precious than the life-giving waters. This also has a scriptural basis.

Water has a crucial and divine role in both Christianity and Islam (Oestigaard 2005, *in prep.*). In the Hebrew Bible there are more than 580 direct references to water and many more references to rivers, wells, dew and rain (Hillel 1994:26), "for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). The importance of water in Islam is summed up in the Qur'an in this way: "We made from water every living thing" (21:30). The word "water" occurs more than sixty times in the Qur'an, "rivers" more than fifty and "the sea" more than forty times, whereas "fountains", "springs", "rain", "hail", etc. occur less frequently (Haleem 1999:29). Moreover, water has

been seen as a gift from Allah: "Consider the water which you drink. Was it you that brought it down from the rain cloud or We? If We had pleased, We could make it bitter: why then do you not give thanks?" (56:68-70). Statements concerning water frequently begin with "It is God...It is He Who...", and hence, it reminds humans that the origin of fresh water is from God and not humans (Haleem 1999:30) and the benefits of this divine gift are also stressed; "We send down pure water from the sky, that We may thereby give life to a dead land and provide drink for what We have created – cattle and men in great numbers" (25:48-49).

In the absence of rain, the Nile was almighty or a symbol of the Almighty's power. Hence, it necessitated that both Christians and Muslims incorporated the river into their religious picture. For the dominant Muslim majority in particular, this utmost source of wealth, health and prosperity could not be ideologically and religiously controlled by Christians. Moreover, this also shows how a particular topography with a specific water-world is incorporated into an overall corpus of texts and rituals, giving the respective religions a local and distinct expression of the divine presence and its gifts. A mighty river like the Nile was almighty and created life and prosperity for humans and husbandry, while absence or failure were seen as a penalty by which God punished his children or his enemies (cf. Tvedt 1997, Tvedt & Oestigaard 2006, 2009).

Conclusion

Even transcendental religions such as Christianity and Islam have not only been concerned with eschatology and soteriology, but have also incorporated the actual water-world into religious cosmology. The annual inundation and daily flow of the Nile have been the same parameters all inhabitants along the Nile have had to cope or struggle with, or praise and worship. Hence, this continuous flow of water has been the same source of religious elaboration, metaphors and rituals for the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians and the Muslims. As a result of the river's character, the different religions have shared many of the same basic structures and perceptions, and consequently there have been many syncretic beliefs and overlapping layers of meaning which combine rather than separate the respective religions. Nevertheless, because of the almighty character of the Nile upon which all life was dependent, it was of utmost importance for the respective religions and their state leaders to

claim authority over the Nile. Thus, the religious control and interpretation of the Nile was also a political one and a source of both theological and secular conflicts. Still, they all shared one thing: the continuity of the ever-flowing Nile, which has created religious syncretism.

Footnote

- 1) Year 1 AH in the Islamic calendar starts 622 AD, but the Islamic year which follows the moon is shorter than the year used in the Gregorian calendar.

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