

Who are the copts

Contributed by Administrator
Monday, 20 July 2009
Last Updated Monday, 20 July 2009

Who are the Copts? Ancient Egypt Church History Coptic History Who are the copts back

The word Copt is an English word taken from the Arabic word Gibt or Gypt. The Arabs after their conquest of Egypt in 641 A.D. called the indigenous population of Egypt as Gypt from the Greek word Egyptos or Egypt. The Greek word Egyptos came from the ancient Egyptian words Ha-Ka-Ptah or the house or temple of the spirit of God Ptah, one of the major ancient Egyptian Gods. The word Copt or Coptic simply means Egyptian, however the Muslim population of Egypt calls themselves Arabs. In contemporary usage, the word Copt or Coptic refers to the Christian population of Egypt.

Ancient Egypt back
The Red Crown
& White Crown

The civilization of Ancient Egypt flourished for more than 3,000 years. In the predynastic period Egypt was divided into the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt, the King of Upper Egypt wore the white crown and the King of Lower Egypt wore the red crown. After years of bitter struggle between the kings of the north and the south, the north was finally defeated, Egypt was united under the Southerner, Menes, and the first dynasty was founded around 3100 BCE. The memory of a predynastic Egypt lived on in the pharaohs' title King of Upper and Lower Egypt. The most important periods of Egyptian history are divided into thirty two dynasties which extend from the beginning of the literate period, under the rule of Menes, until Egypt became a Roman province around 30 BCE. The successive pharaohs of Egypt were divided into these dynasties. Throughout her history Egypt passed through periods of turbulent political upheaval and times of peace, power and prosperity. The most stable and productive periods of Egyptian history are marked by the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. At the end of the New Kingdom Egypt suffered a series of foreign invasions and rulers and the great periods of Egyptian civilization went into decline. Nile River looking south in Upper Egypt (north of Esna).

Life in Ancient Egypt revolved around the towns and villages of Egypt which nestled alongside the River Nile. On either side of the river the lands were green and fertile but beyond these narrow strips of land the hot dry desert stretched as far as the horizon. Once the harvest had been collected even the fertile land became hard and dry under the hot desert sun. By late Spring, when the land was desperately parched, the River Nile began to rise. The waters rose gradually, slowly creeping over the land until the fields were hidden from view. When the waters began to recede, leaving behind a thick black layer of silt, villagers and workmen took up their tools and set to work on the land, clearing, digging, surveying, ploughing and planting. The land of Egypt could once more flower with new life, the people would be fed, the taxes paid and the royal granaries well stocked. Each year the land which had been dead was given new life, so at the time of the yearly flood the people celebrated the festival of Osiris, the god of vegetation. The pharaoh, the priests and the people sang, danced and performed plays in his honor, praying for a rich and fruitful harvest. Osiris would give new life to the land, he would also give new life to those who had died, for he was the god of the underworld and he welcomed the dead to his land, the Land of the West.

Until the Middle Kingdom the land of Upper and Lower Egypt was divided into forty two administrative areas known as nomes (maps of the nomes of Lower and Upper Egypt, 6Kb) each governed by a nomarch. The officials of each nome assessed and collected the taxes which were due on the lands which did not belong to the temples and sorted out any minor legal problems in the towns and villages. In theory, the pharaoh owned all the land in Egypt but he gave gifts of land to his favorite subjects. Every large town had at least one temple and the fertile temple lands were exempt from certain taxes and given many privileges. In addition, the king presented foreign booty to the temples and as a result the priesthood became both powerful and wealthy. Sometimes, particularly in the New Kingdom, the power of the priesthood threatened the power of the king himself. The temple was primarily the house of the god cared for by the priesthood and the position of priest was hereditary, though many of the priests had another profession. A doctor could be a priest of Sekhmet, goddess of disease and epidemic, and a lawyer could be a priest of Ma'at, goddess of truth and justice. Once trained these priests would return annually to the temple where they performed religious duties as well as teaching and debating in the universities attached to the temple. These educational institutions were known as the Houses of Life. Doctors, scientists, lawyers, mathematicians and scribes learned their professions alongside each other in the House of Life and religion was interwoven in all these subjects.

The Egyptians put great emphasis on education because it was a means of escaping dirty and often dangerous menial jobs. Before acquiring a profession it was essential to know how to read and write. Ancient Egyptian writing is known as hieroglyphs. Although schoolchildren spent endless hours copying out hieroglyphic literature it was only after training in the House of Life that the scribe could fully master the hieroglyphic script. The Egyptians worked out mathematical formulae for purely practical reasons. They had to know how to divide land and measure area, it was essential to keep exact measurements when the pyramids, tombs or temples were built. While the plans for a building were drawn up by the architects and mathematicians, the workers were busy quarrying the stones. The most common building stones were sandstone, granite and limestone. Since the River Nile was the main highway in Egypt the stones were placed on flat-

bottomed barges and floated up the river to the spot nearest the building site. The horse and chariot were not introduced into Egypt until the Middle to New Kingdom but even then the river was the best highway for heavy cargo. With the use of ramps, pulleys and roller sledges the enormous stones were eased up the river banks. The monumental tombs and temples took many years to build so the pharaoh would begin work on his pyramid or tomb during his lifetime. The pyramids were built in layers with the four sides tapering equally. Smooth pathways of earth were laid over stretches of stones so that the stones could be heaved up on sledges with rollers beneath. The Egyptians used the size of the human body to determine set lengths; the main measurement was the cubit, equivalent to a man's forearm from the elbow to the tip of the outstretched middle finger.

The desert edge and the eastern hills of Egypt were a rich source of stone which could be cut for use in monumental buildings, for statues or for delicate cosmetic dishes. Stone dishes, particularly alabaster dishes, were made mainly for burial in tombs whereas clay was the material for everyday domestic use. Often the Ancient Egyptians used minerals to paint pots, walls and coffins. For example, soot charcoal could be used for black paint, powdered malachite for green, iron oxide for pink and red ochre for the bright reds. The pigments were ground with a pestle on stone palettes and mixed with water and with glue, gum or egg for adhesive. The abundant clay of the River Nile was combined with water, straw and other vegetable matter to make bricks, the common building material for houses. Clay from the Nile and from the desert wadis was fired to make ceramic storage jars, pots and bowls. Many of the pots were simple, practical and unpainted, designed for use in the home. The Ancient Egyptians were particularly fond of jewelry for decoration in this life and the next. Necklaces, beads, earrings and amulets were made from gold, silver, shell, carnelian, turquoise, amethyst and other precious and semi-precious stones and metals. The "opening of the mouth" ceremony

Jewelry was worn by both men and women, particularly on festive occasions but the Egyptians wore very little jewelry and clothing for everyday work in the fields. Most peasants would have worn a small cloth girdle and frequently worked naked. Farming was an important source of labor in Egypt particularly for the people in small villages dotted along the Nile. There was also a demand for craftsmen in the villages or in government workshops. Precious stones were cut and carved to make jewelry for the nobles and the royal family, stonemasons were busy fashioning stones into statues, vases and bowls, carpenters carved fine furniture and statues for houses, temples and tombs. Everybody worked to provide goods for this life as well as the next. The Ancient Egyptians could not imagine the afterlife to be any different from this life. They thought they would still need food, furniture and clothing and to have someone else to plow their lands and prepare their food. So those who could afford it put servant statuettes in their tombs to carry out these tasks. Even the owner of the tomb was usually buried with a statue of himself in case anything should happen to his body. At the burial the officiating priest brought everything to life with sacred words and gestures, this ceremony was known as "the opening of the mouth."

The fertile land of Egypt was scarce and therefore very precious so the dead were buried on the outskirts of towns and villages. In the earliest times they were buried in shallow oval pits dug in the sand with a few goods which they would need in the afterlife: some food, bowls and jewelry. The sun was scorching hot and the sand extremely dry so bodies dried out very quickly. It is possible that sandstorms revealed dead relatives perfectly preserved, this may have been why the people believed that their bodies must be preserved in order to reach the next life. Ancient Egyptian burial became more and more elaborate as time went on. The dead were buried deeper often within a stone chamber and special buildings were put up to mark the grave. These buildings looked like long, low benches and are called "mastabas", an Arabic word for bench. Since the bodies were far away from the drying effects of the sun the skin would rot and eventually all that was left was a skeleton. A way of preserving the body was found through trial and error and the Egyptians learned how to dry out the body so that the skin and hair stayed as it had been in life. This process is known as mummification. During mummification the internal organs were removed by the embalmers through a cut in the lower left hand side of the body. The organs and the body were dried out with a special type of salt known as natron. They were then treated with fragrant spices and perfumes and eventually wrapped in bandages. Special prayers were said over the bandages because each bandage was important, charms were placed next to the skin and between the bandages. These charms are known as "amulets", an Arabic word which means "something which is carried". In life the Ancient Egyptians carried amulets to protect different parts of their bodies and they believed that amulets would ward off evil in the afterlife too.

The pharaoh was far greater than ordinary Egyptians, he was believed to be the son of the great sun god Re. At death the pharaoh joined the sun god in his day boat as he sailed across the sky. At night the sun god changed to his night boat which sailed through the underworld. The pharaohs of the Old Kingdom built huge pyramids of stone which some people thought were like shafts of light coming from the sky, others said it was the place where the pharaoh climbed up to join the sun god. The pharaoh was buried deep inside the pyramid surrounded by all the things he would need for the next life. The pyramids could be seen from great distances and were an easy target for thieves who could break into them at night. The later pharaohs wanted their burials to be safer so they cut their tombs deep into rocks in secret places but even so the thieves found ways of breaking into them.

The sun god Re was one of the most important and oldest gods in Ancient Egypt but there were many others, some were human, some animals while others had animal heads and human bodies. There were favorite gods who would be worshipped on special occasions or in special places. The jackal-headed god Anubis was the god of embalming and

guarded the burial place - the necropolis; Seth was the pig god, the evil brother of Osiris, who brought disease and violence; Thoth was the ibis-headed god, the god of writing and wisdom; Horus was the falcon god, son of Osiris and Isis. One god who had an important place in the everyday life of the Ancient Egyptians was the household god, Bes. Bes was depicted as a dwarf deity with 'leonine features and he was affectionately portrayed on bowls, head-rests, mirror handles and other domestic objects. The temple was the house of the god. Each temple was built in the style of the first temple, a simple reed shrine. Tall stone columns carved in the shape of lotus flowers or papyrus buds rose high above the officiating priests. The temples were dark, lit only by windows high up on the walls. The ceilings were painted with stars and the walls were covered in sacred inscriptions and carvings of the gods. The main god of the temple had his sanctuary at the back of the temple and each day the pharaoh or the high priest approached the god's sanctuary to perform the Daily Temple Ritual. The god was washed, fed and dressed and then offered prayers and incense. This important ritual was carried out three times a day in every temple in Egypt. The Step Pyramid, designed by Imhotep

The monumental temples of Egypt must have appeared daunting to the majority of ordinary people but popular cults did develop around architectural features of the temple. At Memphis, for example, there was a cult of Horus 'on the corner of the southern door'. Other popular cults grew around the posthumous reputation of famous people, for example, Imhotep, a renowned physician and architect of the third dynasty step pyramid at Saqqara was later worshipped as the god of medicine. Magic also played a central role in Egyptian religion for rich and poor alike. Ritual words, gestures and objects were believed to carry considerable power. Akenaten & his daughter. The sun-god Aten is in the upper-right

Throughout Egyptian history new gods were accepted into the extensive Egyptian pantheon. At times, however, the literature of the New Kingdom indicates the recognition of a central power behind these countless deities, a power which could be reflected in many forms. This was particularly evident after the reign of the 18th dynasty pharaoh Amenophis IV, who changed his name to Akhenaten and tried to introduce the worship of the Aten as the official Egyptian religion. The Aten's creative power was manifested in the disc of the sun and the pharaoh Akhenaten was his sole representative on earth. After Akhenaten's death there was a move back to traditional cultural practices.

Throughout Egyptian history the diversity of the Egyptian pantheon was welcomed by both the powerful and the humble. The gods permeated most areas of Egyptian life; they could help in sickness and in times of sadness, they could be a cause for celebration or be used as a political tool. Whatever their role they were an essential part of Egyptian life.

Church History back

The Founder: St. Mark, a disciple of African origin and the writer of the earliest Gospel, came to Egypt ushering in the dawn of Christian faith. The year of his arrival in the famous Capital of Egypt, Alexandria, cannot be established with certainty. Some sources put his entry in Egypt as early as 48 AD. Others put it in 55, 58 and even as late as 61 AD. However, the consensus of opinion puts the date of his martyrdom in Alexandria in 68 AD. In that short period St. Mark was able to win many converts and to found the Church in Egypt. Since that time, Christianity spread like fire throughout the country. The main reason for this was the fact that the Egyptian has always been religiously minded. The ancient Egyptian searching mind was always exploring the domain of religion, and ultimately arrived at certain tenets and beliefs, which were later identified with the theory and sublime teachings of the Christian religion.

Church Identity through Persecution: Under the Roman:

The Egyptians or the Copts accepted Christianity so very rapidly to the extent that the Romans had to exercise a series of persecutions in an attempt to suppress the growth of a religion, which openly defied the divinity of the Emperor. The edict of 202 AD decreed that Christian conversion should be stopped at all costs. The edict of 250 AD decreed that every citizen should carry at all times a certificate issued by the local authorities testifying that he had offered sacrifice to the gods. Those who refused to conform were tortured with unprecedented ferocity. Some were beheaded, others were thrown to the lions and others were burnt alive. All were subjected to even innovated veracious torture regardless of age or sex. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was closed by order of the authorities, though its members continued to meet in other secret places. At one time, the number of bishops was restricted by the State to three. The consummation of the age of persecution is considered by the Copts to be during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-305). So severe was the mass execution and the savage torture of the Copts that they took the day of Diocletian's military election as Emperor to mark the beginning of the era of the Coptic martyrs. That very day marked the start of the Coptic Calendar known in the Western world as Anno Martyrum (A.M.) or the year of the Martyrs.

It was in the midst of this ruthless execution and torture that Egypt's Church flourished beyond recognition until it assumed its definitive form in the course of the second century. In other words, the third century saw the Coptic Church with a great hierarchy ranging from the Patriarch in Alexandria down to the modest priest and the monks who lived out in the Eastern and Western Deserts. The rise of this great hierarchy contemporaneously with the Roman persecution resulted in

the identification of the Coptic people with their own Church in Alexandria. This tradition persisted and even became more prominent when, in a subsequent age and for other reasons, the Byzantines resuscitated Coptic persecution.

The Copts Under the Arab Rule:

a) Between Chalcedon (451) and the Arab Conquest (642): The first schism in the Apostolic Church occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The schism appeared to be the result of a theological dispute between the Eastern Churches (Orthodox) and the Western Churches (Roman Catholic) regarding the Nature of Christ. The Copts were branded as "Monophysites"; Rome and Constantinople as "Dioophysites." However, the real reason behind the dispute was more of a political nature rather than a theological one. The concealed reason was for the Western Church to transfer the Papacy from Alexandria to Rome. To be sure, the present dialogue between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox resulted in the agreement of the two Churches regarding the nature of Christ; although other theological developments are still being discussed (i.e. Purgatory, Immaculate Conceptions, etc.).

The aftermath of Chalcedon was one of the saddest periods in the history of Coptic Christian antiquity. The Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria was deposed and exiled by the Western civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The Byzantines installed an Imperial Byzantine Patriarch for the See of Alexandria. This infuriated the Copts and they retaliated by electing a native rival Orthodox Patriarch. Consequently, the See of Alexandria was split between two Patriarchs, the Melkite or the Royalist Chalcedonian from Constantinople, and the native Jacobite or Monophysite who does not recognize Chalcedon. The Byzantines, aided by the civil authorities, persecuted the Copts very severely massacring them even as they worshiped inside their churches. All attempts to reconcile the two lines failed until the Arab invasion of Egypt when a new chapter in the history of the Copts' oppression was about to be written.

b) The Arab Conquest (642 AD): Amr ibn al-A., the general of the Arab army during the Caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, after conquering Persia and taking over Syria in 636 and seizing Jerusalem in 638, turned toward Egypt to invade it. With 20,000 Arab horsemen, he was able to take over the eastern cities and the Byzantine strongholds in the Delta reaching to the fortress of Babylon. At that time Byzantia had appointed a man called Cyrus to be both civil governor and a Melkite (Royalist) Patriarch. He took over the Patriarchate from the Orthodox Patriarch Anba Benjamin who fled to the desert. When Cyrus heard of the Muslim capture of the eastern cities and found that the siege of Babylon was prolonged, he surrendered the fortress in 641. Shortly thereafter, the Arabs moved to the capital city of Alexandria. Cyrus was reinstated by Byzantia as governor of Alexandria. Through treachery, he surrendered that city as well to the Arabs hoping that he would be rewarded and be instated by the Arabs as Patriarch of the Coptic Church of Egypt. His dream did not come true.

By 642, Egypt had passed from the hands of the Constantinople Emperors, into the hands of the Arab Muslims, neither was Egyptian. The city of Alexandria with its 4,000 palaces, 4,000 public baths, 400 theaters and 40,000 rich Jewish settlers, was briefly recaptured by Byzantia from the Mediterranean Sea, but then taken back by the Arabs. To avoid such incidents in the future, Amr moved his capital from Alexandria to al-Fustat (Old Cairo) and ordered the city of Alexandria to be burnt. With it, the great library and Museum of Alexandria went into flames. It is fair to say that this particular incident is a controversial subject among historians.

Throughout these thirteen centuries, the Copts had survived under Arab rule all kinds of treatment, from considerable tolerance to severe persecution, depending on the ruler at the time. In the beginning of the Muslim rule and for many centuries afterwards, Coptic Christians were given the choice of either adopting Islam, or unconditional surrender and payment of tribute, or the sword (i.e. to be killed). The Copts had seen many of their own being martyred, or converting to Islam. Still however, by divine grace they overcame their tribulations with a strong faith and a zeal for spirituality and the service of God. The twentieth century has seen quite a renaissance in all aspects of Church ministry.

The Coptic Church in History:

All through history and particularly during the Coptic Era, the Coptic Church played quite a significant role in shaping and defining Christian thought and doctrines. The contribution of the Coptic Church to world Christianity can be briefly summarized in the following four movements:

(1) Theological Scholarship and the Catechetical School:

Before Christianity, Alexandria was famous for having the largest library and museum in the world. That compound was actually the headquarters of the well-known School of Alexandria. It housed millions of scrolls of papyrus, which were said to have held all the knowledge of ancient scholarship. It was established by Ptolemy Soter in 323 BC. In that school, seventy legendary scholars from the Jewish community translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek in 270 BC. It was a monumental work that stood the test of time and is known as the "Septuagint." Those scholars also established the order in which the books of the O.T., including the "Apocrypha", are arranged.

The school started as a predominantly scientific and literary institution. It then developed into a philosophical and theological university. The Catechetical School of Alexandria came in direct succession to it. This was the earliest

important institution for theological education in Christian antiquity. Its deans, teachers, and graduates were responsible for what could be called the philosophisation of Christian creed and for the most monumental works of exegesis. They defined Christianity in its final form for all generations to come.

The first known dean of the school was Pantaenus (died 190 AD), followed by Clement of Alexandria who made a real effort to successfully convert educated Greeks to Christianity. Next came Origen (about 215 AD) who was a biblical scholar and philosopher. He wrote lengthy commentaries on almost every book in the Old and New Testaments. His homilies are known to be the most ancient example of Christian preaching. Origen was succeeded by Dionysius of Alexandria (The Great) who later became the Patriarch of the Church (246-264 AD). Another distinguished dean of the School was Didymus the Blind. He lost his sight when he was four years old. However, this handicap did not deter him from acquiring the vision of the mind and the soul. He mastered grammar, rhetoric, poetry, philosophy, mathematics and music. He knew by heart both the Old and the New Testaments. Among his pupils were St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Jerome, Palladius and Rufinus the historian. In his care for educating the blind, he became the first one in history to devise a system of engraved writing. By the fourth century, Coptic Alexandria had indeed become the seat of Christian Learning for the whole world.

(2) The Ecumenical Movement:

Early in the fourth century, and amid the fierce storm of persecution of the Copts by Diocletian, the Coptic Church was subjected to another storm rising from within. This storm was more dangerous to the Church than the first. It was the Arian heresy. The Coptic Patriarchs ex-communicated Arius successively stripping him from his priestly office. However, he continued preaching his heresy and, through his eloquence, he won many converts including two Libyan bishops and the Nicomedian bishop Eusebius.

The Arian heresy spread throughout all Egypt, Libya, Palestine and Asia Minor, and reached the ears of Constantine. The quarrel between the old patriarch and Arius was blazing furiously to the extent that there was bloodshed in the streets of Alexandria and Nicomedia. The Emperor summoned all of the bishops (about 1800) to meet in Nicea, Asia Minor to discuss the dispute and settle it once- and-for-all. It was the first Ecclesiastical Council with imperial authority and sanction. Because the heresy had not yet reached Europe, only six bishops represented the Western Church. The rest of the 318 bishops came from the East including the Metropolitan of India, which was outside the Empire. It was difficult to overlook the signs of disfigurement and mutilation in many of these bishops who had been victims of the persecution of Diocletian, the predecessor of Constantine. The bishops of the Council represented all the varying traditions of Christianity.

The first order of business was to reach a verdict in the conflict between Abba Alexandros and Arius. Therefore Arius was called to present the nature of his beliefs. Having set them into chants and music, he unexpectedly started chanting accompanied by music and Alexandrian dance bands. Athanasius in turn, who was chosen by the Coptic Patriarch to reply, presented a close-knit argument, and in great eloquence stated step by step all the follies that result from the Arian folkloric lyric: "There was a time when the Son was not." Athanasius' argument swayed the Council members to the Orthodox position including the Emperor who commended him for the way he marshaled all his forces to present the Apostolic faith and to refute Arius' argument. After that heated debate a creed was called for. It was Athanasius again who formulated the text of the creed, which was accepted unanimously by the Council.

The Council of Nicea (325 AD) was the beginning of an era in the history of the Church that could be defined as the age of the Ecumenical Councils. As mentioned earlier, those Councils set the basis of the Christian Creed. In all of them, the role of the Copts was supreme and their theological and philosophical contribution to Christian doctrine and dogma was unsurpassed. The Ecumenical Movement ended with the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD).

(3) The Monastic Movement:

This particular movement is going to be dealt with in some detail as the general populace has very little knowledge of the roots of monasticism. Besides, there are some misconceptions about it in this day and age, especially in the Western world. Egypt is known to be the Motherland of Christian Monasticism. As Professor Atiya calls it "It is truly the gift of Egypt to Christendom." Monasticism sprang into existence in Egypt as early as the second half of the third century. In a few decades, it spread over the whole Christian world. The characteristics which shaped Coptic monasticism are:

- a) The urge to pray without ceasing,
- b) The hunger to meditate on the word of God, and
- c) The disciplining of one's self by fasting, vigils, celibacy, the subduing of fleshly desires, willful poverty and the renunciation of worldly concerns.

Most historians consider St. Antony (251-356) to be the first to renounce the world and retire to the eastern desert of

Egypt. It is true that, as a movement, monasticism was started by St. Antony. However, long before that, organized flights to the deserts of Egypt took place. Just as an example, “Acta Sanctorum” tells us that in the second century, a wealthy Alexandrian Christian called Frantonus decided to reject the world. He was able to persuade seventy others to accompany him. They all went to the Nytria desert and there they led a life of prayer and contemplation.

The main motive behind Coptic monasticism could be summarized in one word “LOVE”. When a person loves God with all his heart, he wants to be alone with him all the time. He would not concern himself with anything or anyone but Him (I Corinthians 7:32 - 35), In his love, he sacrifices all to enjoy his oneness with God, to attain the purity of heart and thus to reach perfection in God.

For some others, there might have been another motive, namely to suffer with Christ and for His sake. St. Paul taught: “for to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also suffer for His sake.” (Phil. 1:29). As he retires to the desert, the monk seems to be saying: “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” (Phil. 3:10).

Before the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, Christians were fought against, severely tortured and mass martyred for their faith. Now, after the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the Christians took on the fight themselves. The monks, torturing their bodies in the burning heat of the desert, and practicing severe ascetic disciplines, became the successors of the martyrs. One can almost hear them saying: “For your sake, we are killed all day long.” (Rom. 8:56). In this regard, St. John Chrysostom says that the “martyr is tortured for few days to win the crown of martyrdom, but the monk suffers severely from his self-inflicted ascetic torture all his life.”

The Development of Coptic Monasticism:

There are three stages in the development of Coptic monasticism:

a) Antonian Monasticism: This is the first stage whereby a pious Christian lives in seclusion, a life of asceticism and austerity, disciplining the body to elevate the soul.

There must have lived many hermits in the deserts of Egypt before St. Antony. However, the one that is well known is St. Paul of Thebes (Lurer) who entered the desert in about 218 AD. In a miraculous way, God fed him by means of a raven which brought him half a loaf of bread daily. St. Paul the hermit died a natural death at the age of 113 shortly after St. Antony met with him. This is a well-known story in monastic history. Nevertheless, the most defined monasticism is that of St. Antony whose biography St. Athanasius wrote himself. While still a young man of 19 years of age, Antony took to heart the words of our Lord to the rich young man: “if you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow Me.” (Matthew 19:21). He sold all his inheritance giving some to his sister and the rest to the poor. He then went to the eastern desert to attain perfection through a life of asceticism in complete seclusion. He kept pushing further and further into the desert with greater austerity and longer fasting. According to St. Athanasius, Antony’s combat with demons grew more spectacular. All through his life in the desert, he descended to the Nile Valley only twice. The first time was in 311 AD. It was enough for him to appear with his long beard and illuminated face among the tortured Christians during the time of Maximinus’ persecution to strengthen their faith and vanquish their fear. The second time was in 338 AD, to fight the remnants of the Arian heresy. St. Antony’s fame spread far and wide. This brought him many disciples who sought his spiritual guidance, and it led to the second stage of development of the monastic life.

b) Collective Hermitism or Semi-Anchoritism: St. Antony’s disciples continued to lead solitary lives in the neighborhood of his cave. As their number grew larger, there was a great necessity to have many settlements of anchorites in that area of the desert. Each settlement congregated around one of those great and rare holy masters for reasons of security both spiritual and physical. These settlements multiplied not only to cover a large area in the eastern desert toward the Red Sea, but they also spread westward and southward. However, the largest of them was the one around the cave of St. Antony who had attained the summits of personal holiness. In this development, the solitary and communal lives balanced one another. During the week, each monk lived alone in his cave or cell. On Saturdays and Sundays, they all congregated in the church for common prayers, vespers, Eucharistic liturgy, agape and lessons in spiritual life. This type of monasticism allowed for personal prayers, meditations and exercises in austerity, as well as corporate prayers and worship.

c) Pachomian Koinonia or Cenobitism: The third stage of development was not a natural evolvement from the second. While the second stage was progressing, and the number of settlements was being multiplied, a new chapter in the history of monasticism was being written by St. Pachomius (290-346). His life story is a most fascinating one. He was born a pagan and as a young man, he served in the army of Constantine. During his combats, he was deeply touched by the communities of Christians. They, in dedication and love, served the soldiers, washed their feet and gave them food in spite of the harshness with which they were treated by them. The goodness of those Christians won Pachomius to Christianity. He himself became an anchorite, a disciple of the famous hermit Palamon. This abbot trained Pachomius vigorously in the art of self-inflicted torture of the body to attain the purity of heart. The combination of his training in army discipline and in spiritual austerity, coupled with his belief that the aim of a monk is continual prayer, were the factors

which collectively led him to inaugurate the third and last stage in the development of Coptic monasticism, namely, the Pachomian Cenobitism.

By the time St. Pachomius died (346 AD), a large number of monasteries had been established accommodating communities of monks spreading to all other monastic centers and following the Pachomian rule. Hardy the historian estimates conservatively the number of monks in the Egyptian deserts at the end of the fourth century to be between 100,000 and 200,000 out of a population not exceeding 7.5 million inhabitants. The rule of St. Pachomius is indeed a landmark in the history of Christian monasticism. Professor Atiya, a distinguished historian writes in his book “History of Eastern Christianity” :

“The general trend of the Pachomian system showed the soldier and the holy man combined in one person. Every detail of the monk’s activity by day or night was prescribed by the legislator: the brother’s dress, his food, the hours and manner of his sleep, his travels, his hours of worship and a penal code to be rigorously enforced against the defaulters. Yet Pachomius was no inhuman giant who imposed a merciless regime on his followers. A monk must curb the body, but it was unnecessary for him to destroy it in pursuit of heaven.”

Coptic monasticism became known all over the world mainly because of the biography that St. Athanasius wrote about St. Antony. As a result, pious men from many parts of the world flocked to these cenobite monasteries to sit at the feet of those great spiritual giants and learn from them the art of monasticism. Among those were Greeks, Romans, Cappadocians, Libyans, Nubians, Ethiopians and many others. Each nationality was designated a special quarter in each monastery with a fellow citizen as an abbot guide. There were no barriers based on race, culture, color or language. The vastness of the Egyptian desert became but one school of Coptic spirituality and mysticism for the entire world. Some of the greatest personalities of that era were attracted to the Egyptian deserts to see these terrestrial saints and to follow in their footsteps. Among these were St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, Sts. Jerome and Rufinus the Italians, the Cappadocian father St. Basil the Great who introduced monasticism into Byzantia, St. John Cassian who carried Coptic Monasticism in France, and many others.

Someone said that monasticism for the Church is like the foundation for the building. The deeper and stronger the foundation is, the more the building can rise high and solid. Ecclesiastical history attests to this reality when it tells us that at times of monastic strength in Egypt, the Church was strong. Through their continual prayers, devotions and mediations, the monks make of their monasteries the powerhouse of the Church. It is a fact that the Coptic Church has suffered a great deal throughout its long history at the hands of Greeks, Romans, Muslims and western missionaries, but through God’s grace, the strength of Coptic monasticism has kept the Church still standing as a monument to original Apostolic Orthodox Christianity.

Coptic Mission:

Christianity is a missionary religion. The example and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, the preaching of the Disciples to Jews and Gentiles and the mere fact of St. Mark’s preaching in Egypt spoke to the Copts very emphatically about the missionary character of the Church. Therefore, the missionary movement began in Egypt early in the first steps of Christianity through the first converts. It followed three channels simultaneously:

a) Individual and Group Witnesses and Missionaries: Here the Copts excelled. The accounts of such individuals from St. Athanasius the Apostolic to the simple nurse accompanying the Roman Legions attest to the zeal and dedication of the Copts to spread the good news.

St. Athanasius, the Pope of Alexandria, was exiled five times because of his adamant opposition to the Arian heresy. Two of his exiles were in Europe, one began in Constantinople and ended in Trier and the second was in Rome. In each exile he preached Orthodox Christianity to both Christians and Gentiles, and he introduced to the West the highly developed monastic rule as well as the spirituality of the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts.

The story of the Theban legion (from Thebes, present day Lurer in Upper Egypt) is a spectacular example of witnessing to the Christian faith. Maximian, the second in command to Emperor Diocletian, ordered the legion to camp at the border of Gaul (France) in preparation to crush a rebellion there (285 AD). The legion camped in present day Switzerland. The night before the attack, Maximian ordered the legion to accompany him to the pagan temple to pray to the gods. The Coptic soldiers unanimously refused to obey and declared that they were Christians, a declaration that angered Maximian. He stood them in file and had them decimated (i.e. every tenth man killed) hoping to intimidate the rest. The remaining soldiers met together and wrote a letter to him, which they all signed. They wrote:

“Great Caesar - we are your soldiers, and at the same time we are God’s slaves. We owe you our military service, but our prime allegiance we owe to God. From you we receive our daily wages; from Him our eternal reward. Great Caesar, we cannot obey any order if it rum counter to God’s commands. If your orders coincide with God’s commands we will certainly obey; if not, ‘we ought to obey God rather than man.’ (Act 5:29) for our loyalty to Him surpasses all other loyalties. We are not rebels; if we were, we would defend ourselves for we have our weapons. But we prefer to die upright than to live stained. As Christians we will serve you. But we will not relinquish

our faith in our Lord, and this we openly declare. ”

This steadfastness of the whole legion infuriated Caesar and he ordered the Roman soldiers to wipe out the whole legion, which they did. Pere Cheneau the historian described the event in this way:

“Thus they were martyred…. It was a mighty holocaust; an unparalleled massacre, the plains were drunk with blood and the bodies strewn to the winds. But by being willing to make the supreme sacrifice, the men of the Theban Legion proved that their faithfulness to their Heavenly Lord and King surpassed their valor as soldiers in the army of the temporal ruler.”

An accompanying nurse named Verena witnessed all this. After a few days of prayers and meditation, she came to the realization that God, in His wisdom, had spared her to do His work as a missionary to those pagans. Therefore, she spent the rest of her life preaching Christ to the people of Switzerland. In addition, she taught them basic hygiene. To this day she is portrayed in her icon as having a water jug in one hand and a comb in the other.

Coptic missionaries reached as far as the British Isles long before the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury in 597 AD. Stanley Lane-Poole, the well-known historian, wrote:

“We do not know yet how much we in the British Isles owe to these remote hermits. It is more than probable that to them we are indebted for the first preaching of the Gospel in England, where, till the coming of Augustine, the Egyptian monastic rule prevailed. But more important is the belief that Irish Christianity, the great civilizing agent of the early Middle Ages among the northern nations, was the child of the Egyptian Church. Seven Egyptian monks are buried at Desert Uldith, and there is much in the ceremonies and architecture of Ireland in the earliest time that reminds one of still earlier Christian remains in Egypt. Every one knows that the handicraft of the Irish monks in the ninth and tenth centuries far excelled anything that could be found elsewhere in Europe; and if the Byzantine-looking decoration can be traced to the influence of Egyptian missionaries, we have more to thank the Copts for than has been imagined.

Ecclesiastical history is impregnated with captivating accounts of Coptic Christians who preached Christianity in north, west and south Africa, Arabia, Persia, India, and Europe. Archaeological findings support these accounts which were thought to be legendary tales by early historians.

b) Missionaries Appointed to Mission-Fields: Since the Church’s inception in Egypt, some early Coptic Christian converts were commissioned to mission fields. Tradition tells us that St. Mark, in his missionary trip from Alexandria to Pentapolis (the five northwestern nations of Africa), took with him some Copts to help him preach to the people of those nations.

Through the writings of the ecclesiastical historian Eusebins, bishop of Caesurae (260-340 AD) it becomes clear that missionary work was an organized movement in the Church and its Catechetical school. Missionaries were appointed and mission fields were assigned to them. He wrote:

“Now at that time there was a man of great zeal for learning named Pantaenus. He displayed such ardent love and zeal for the divine word that he was appointed as herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the East.”

In the course of the third and fourth centuries, and with the rise of monasticism, many Pachomian monks in the southern parts of Egypt were sent to Nubia as missionaries. Those, along with some Coptic Christians who fled from the Roman persecution, went southward up the Nile Valley to win converts to Christ. It is intriguing to know that the whole kingdom was officially converted to Orthodox Christianity in 559 AD

However, the most spectacular event in Coptic mission work was the Christianization of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) at the hands of Frumentius. He and his brother Aedesius were Coptic Christians residing in Tyre. On one of their trading trips to India, they had a shipwreck near Axoum, the Capital of Abyssinia. They were taken to the king who appointed Aedesius as his cupbearer and Frumentius as his personal secretary and the tutor of the young crown prince Aeizanas. Frumentius taught Aeizanas the four R’s (reading, writing, arithmetic and religion- Christianity). When Aeizanas became king, he was converted to Christianity and decreed Christianity as the official religion of the land. Immediately Frumentius went to Alexandria, to St. Athanasius the Patriarch asking him to send a bishop to establish the Church there. St. Athanasius chose Frumentius and ordained him, giving him the name of Bishop Salama. Since then, the Ethiopian Church looks at the Coptic Church as its Mother Church.

c) Pilgrims to the Alexandrian Church: As mentioned earlier, Christians from almost all the nations of the known world at that time, came to Egypt either to study or to sit at the feet of those spiritual giants, the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts. On returning to their lands, those students and pilgrims imported the spirituality, thought, dogma, practice and monastic rule of the Orthodox Alexandrine Church. There, they wrote books (like John Cassian) and established monasteries, churches, dioceses and even theological schools. In other words, those pilgrims became indigenous missionaries of the Coptic Church in their nations and among their people.

The Coptic Church at Present:

The Coptic Orthodox Church's clergy is headed by the Pope of Alexandria, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III and includes Bishops who oversee the priests ordained in their dioceses. Both the Pope and the Bishops must be monks; they are all members of the Coptic Orthodox Holy Synod (Council), which meets regularly to oversee matters of faith and pastorship in the Church. The Pope of the Coptic Church, although highly regarded by all Copts, does not enjoy any state of supremacy or infallibility.

Today, there are over 60 Coptic Bishops governing dioceses inside Egypt as well as dioceses outside Egypt, such as in Jerusalem, Sudan, Western Africa, France, England, and the United States. The direct pastoral responsibility of Coptic congregations in any of these dioceses falls on Priests, who must be married and must attend the Catechetical School before being ordained.

There are two other non-clerical bodies who participate in taking care of Church affairs. The first is a popularly-elected Coptic Lay Council, which appeared on the stage in 1883 A.D. to act as a liaison between the Church and the Government. The second is a joint lay-clerical committee, which appeared on the stage in 1928 A.D. to oversee and monitor the management of the Coptic Church's endowments in accordance with the Egyptian laws.

The Copts number about 10-14 million, and the Coptic liturgy is still celebrated in its original form. Three liturgies are used in the Coptic Church, the Liturgy of St. Cyril, the Liturgy of St. Basil and the Liturgy of St. Gregory. According to tradition, the Liturgy of St. Cyril is originally that of St. Mark. It was transmitted orally to the following generations and finally recorded by St. Cyril the Great in the Fifth Century. It is regarded as the greatest, the oldest and the most complete liturgical text in existence. As a work of religious literature, it is supreme.

The Coptic Church is experiencing this century quite a significant revival in many aspects of its life: in its ministry both at home and abroad, in education, and in ecumenism. Institutions have been erected in Egypt to present to the world facilities for research in the Science of Coptology. Youth movement and Sunday Schools have been working with great zeal to help both children and their parents to live in the world but not to be of the world. Two new bishoprics were established for these ministries, one for the youth, the other for religious and theological education. The number of the theological seminaries has increased tremendously all over Egypt and the curricula has been highly developed to reflect the advancement of research in the fields of Patristics, Religious Education, etc. and to discuss the new trends in today's theology. St. Didymus Institute for the Blind prepares chanters who constitute an important ministry in the celebration of the Liturgy. Moreover, other Coptic Orthodox theological seminaries were established in the USA and Australia. New ministries such as the "Diaconia" project have been introduced to cater to the needs of people in rural areas.

The Coptic Church's missionaries were sent in the past few decades to many African countries and a bishop was ordained to look after this ministry. It is noticeable that, with the fall of colonialism, the Africans look to Egypt for religious leadership and spiritual guidance, since it is the only indigenous African Church. Other churches are established in Kuwait, Libya, Lebanon, Europe, England, North and South America, the Caribbean Islands and Australia. At home new churches have been built and new monasteries and convents have been established. The number of monks and nuns has been on the increase in the past fifty years. The Church has come out of isolation to meet with other churches, both Catholic and Protestant in Ecumenical Councils. Dialogues between the Coptic Church and other Churches have been initiated and carried out by the Coptic Patriarch himself in brotherly love to work towards the achievement of the oneness of faith.

In conclusion, it is gratifying to note that many of the greatest universities of Europe and the USA have undertaken the study of many aspects of Coptic Civilization.

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A Monk at St. Pishoy monastery: The Story of St. Pishoy Monastery (in Arabic) "Qessat Deir El-Keddees El-Azeem El-Anba Bishoy"; Anba Rowais Press, 1990. Coptic History back

The Coptic people are the descendants of the ancient Egyptians. The known history of the Copts or Egypt starts with King Mina or Menas the first King, who united the northern and southern kingdoms of Egypt circa 3050 B.C. The ancient Egyptian civilization under the rule of the Pharaohs lasted for approximately 3000 years. Many Copts accepted the teachings of Christianity, possibly because the ancient Egyptian religions believed in life after death. This is evidenced by their elaborate efforts to preserve the bodies of the dead by embalming or mummification. Like other early Christians

throughout the Roman Empire, the Copts suffered from the persecution perpetrated against the new religion. Many Copts shed their blood in testimony for Jesus Christ. Saint Mina or Menas is one of the major Coptic saints. He was martyred 309 A.D. The Copts history continues through the present as Father Mina the Anchorite led the Coptic Orthodox Church, who was named as Pope Cyril the 6th 1971 A.D. He is considered to be a contemporary saint and among the great leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic or Egyptian history continues from circa 3050 B.C. through the present. Many contemporary Copts continue to carry ancient Egyptian names such as Mina, Ahmos, and Ramesses for men, Isis, Nofert, Nefertiti, and Nitocris for women. Two examples are noteworthy about the influence of the ancient Egyptian civilization on the western civilization. The first example is that the present western or Gregorian calendar has its roots in the solar ancient Egyptian calendar. The second is that the modern name of the science of Chemistry gets its name from the ancient name of Egypt, or "Chimie" in the Coptic language.

Historical Outline:Pharaohs Era:

The ancient Egyptian civilization evolved over approximately three thousand years. Thirty Pharaohic dynasties are known to have ruled Egypt. Egyptologists around the world continue to study and rediscover many of the facets of history and life in ancient Egypt. Dates prior to the Persian invasion are approximate and Egyptologists differ in their estimates of these dates.

Archaic Period, Dynasties I-II:

King Mina is the first historical king of Egypt. He unified southern and northern Egypt under his rule circa 3050 B.C. He founded a new city Memphis, and built a temple for the Ptah, the God of creation for ancient Egypt. The succession of females to the throne of Egypt was declared valid during the second dynasty. Early ancient Egyptian medical texts and the book of the dead were written as early as the time of the second dynasty.

Old Kingdom, Dynasties III-VI: Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom were known to be great warriors and builders 2663-2195 B.C. The kings of the 4th Pharaohic dynasty Kheops or Khufu, Khpheren or Khafre, and Mykerinus or Menkaure built the pyramids. Khafre is also believed to be the builder of the Sphinx. The Sphinx is hewn out of the living rock, but pieces of stone have been added where necessary. Originally there probably were ornaments on the head, the whole of which was covered with limestone and the face was colored red. E.A. Wallis Budge, the famous Egyptologist, indicated "the conditions of the sphinx deteriorated due to the savage destruction of its features by the Muslim rulers of Egypt". The last ruler of the sixth dynasty was Queen Nitocris, most probably the first female ruler all over the world. She enlarged the pyramid of Mykerinus and covered it with slabs of granite. The Old Kingdom was followed by the first intermediate period, dynasties VII-X.

Middle Kingdom, Dynasties XI-XII:

Egypt's prosperity and civilization continued under the Pharaohs of the middle kingdom 2066-1650 B.C. Thebes emerged as the capital of Egypt. King Amenemhat I built a temple for Amen Ra, the King of the Gods, at Thebes. During his reign examples of ancient Egyptian literature were written, the story of Senehet or Senuhi. Subsequent to the Middle Kingdom time, Egypt was weakened during the second intermediate period. This allowed invaders from Asia, the Hyksos, also known as shepherd kings to rule northern Egypt, dynasties XIII-XVII, 1650-1535 B.C.

New Kingdom, Dynasties XVIII-XX:

The Egyptian kings of southern Egypt ultimately liberated Egypt from the Hyksos rule. King Ahmose or Amosis defeated the last of the Hyksos, and initiated the 18th dynasty and the new kingdom 1550-1064 B.C. This is considered to be the golden era of ancient Egypt. During this era, Egypt ruled an empire that extended from Syria to the north to Nubia in the south. Several Pharaohs distinguished themselves both in military conquests and civilian achievements e.g. Thutmose III 1479-1424 B.C. and Ramesses II 1279-1212 B.C. King Akhenaten 1360-1343 B.C. established a monotheistic religion to worship one God Aten. Many people all over the world have seen the famous king Tut's treasures and golden funerary mask. King Tut or Tutenkhamun 1343-1333 B.C. was Akhenaten's son in law. He reversed his father in law's one God worship back to the worship of the ancient Egyptian gods.

Equality, Arts and Knowledge:

The equality of men and women and respect for the role of women in the family and society at large were evident in the ancient Egyptian culture, and continue at present in the contemporary Coptic culture. As indicated above women as well as men ruled Egypt. Queen Nitocris, the last ruler of the sixth dynasty was probably the first female ruler all over the world. King Ahmose's mother Queen Ahhotep II and his wife Queen Nefertari were major supporters of the liberation wars against the Hyksos. Achievements of Queen Ahhotep were recorded on a stele at Karnack. The stele praised Queen Ahhotep as the "one who cares for Egypt. She looked after her soldiers; she guarded her; she brought back her fugitives, and collected together her deserters; she pacified Upper Egypt and expelled her rebels". Queen Nefertari, Ahmose's wife was a key figure at the beginning of the 18th dynasty. Another famous Queen is Hatshepust who ruled Egypt 1472-1457 B.C.

Knowledge, arts, and literature flourished in ancient Egypt. The Egyptian temples were centers for both religious and secular learning and libraries, e.g. Ramesses II's library. Some scholars compared ancient Egyptian poetry to some of the verses of the book of psalms. This should come as no surprise, as history indicates a lot of cultural and trade exchanges between Egypt and the Israelites. The Old Testament shows the relationship in many of its books, e.g. the migration of Jacob and his sons to Egypt, the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt led by Moses, King Solomon's

marriage to an Egyptian princess, and the migration of the Israelites to Egypt after Jeremiah the prophet time. Subsequent to the new kingdom several dynasties ruled Egypt including Libyan and Kushite dynasties, the period is known as the third intermediate period, dynasties XXI-XXV. King Taharqa, a famous Kushite King ruled both Egypt and what is now northern Sudan 690-664 B.C. He built beautiful monuments both in Egypt and Kush. Taharqa conducted an active foreign policy against the then growing military power of Assyria. Also, the bible cites Taharqa's name in 2 Kings 19.9 and Is 37.9, as cotemporary to King Hezekiah of Judah and referred to the conflict between Judah and Assyria.

Late Period, Dynasties XXVI-XXX:

In the Saite period 664-525 B.C. many Greeks immigrated to Egypt to trade, learn or settle. King Psammetichus I hired Ionian and Carian Greek mercenaries for the Egyptian army. Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician and Herodotus the Greek historian visited Egypt to learn about the Egyptian knowledge and arts at the time of the Persian occupation of Egypt. Several alliances against the Persian incursions were concluded between Egypt and Greek cities such as Sparta and Athens. The Persians occupied Egypt 525-404 B.C. and later on 343-332 B.C. Some historians record atrocities committed by the Persian rulers against the Egyptians, however the Persians also appreciated the high caliber of the Egyptian art. They used many Egyptian artists to work on Persian palaces and temples. A statue for Darius I, the Persian King, was excavated from the ruins of his capital Susa, Iran. This statue shows the influence of Egyptian art and includes inscriptions in hieroglyphics.

Hellenic Era:

Alexander the Great 332-323 B.C. defeated the Persian Empire. He established a new great city in Egypt, Alexandria, to immortalize his name. The Greek Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt from 305-30 B.C. The Romans under Octavian Augustus Caesar defeated the last Ptolemaic Queen Cleopatra VII and her Roman husband Anthony. Egypt was annexed as a province of the Roman Empire 30 B.C.- 641 A.D. The Greeks followed by the Romans, though they ruled Egypt, were admirers of the Egyptian civilization, knowledge and culture. Greek and Roman rulers in fact rebuilt many of the pharaonic temples of southern Egypt in the Hellenic era. The Egyptian civilization influence was so great during the Hellenic era to the extent that the worship of Isis the Egyptian goddess had adherents all over the Roman Empire. Alexandria, Egypt became a major center for trade, learning and culture in the Hellenic Era.

The Library of Alexandria:

King Ptolemy I, on the advice of Demetrios of Phaleron created the ancient library of Alexandria and Museum circa 285 B.C. Among the famous scholars of the time were Eratosthenes, Euclid, the father of geometry, Aristomachos of Samos, the first astronomer who tried to measure the size and relative distance to the moon and sun, Strato of Lapsakos in the study of physics. Ktesibios of Alexandria designed remarkable pneumatic and hydraulic devices. Herophilos of Chalecedon, Ptolemy II physician made major discoveries in human anatomy, Dioskorides wrote medical treatise following the Hippocratic tradition, and Zopoyros a pharmacologist developed famous prescriptions. The medicine and sciences of the era as might be expected built on the pharaonic medicine and its great expertise in the human body thanks to centuries of embalming experience. Among the great achievements of the old library of Alexandria is the Old Testament's first translation from Hebrew to Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint, and was popular and used extensively by the early Christians.

Christianity in Egypt:

The bible tells us the story of the flight of the holy family to Egypt from Herod. The holy family sojourn in Egypt included several places in both northern and southern Egypt. Saint Mark the Evangelist introduced Christianity into Egypt. He was martyred at Alexandria, Egypt. Saint Mark is the first leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and was followed by his first convert in Alexandria, Annianus circa 62 A.D. An unbroken succession of leaders for the Coptic Orthodox Church starts with Saint Mark and continues to the present Pope Shenouda III. He is the 117th successor of Saint Mark.

Early Coptic Philosophers:

The early Christian Egyptians or Copts followed the ancient traditions of learning and established a theological school or the Catechetical School. Athenagoras of Athens was one of one of the professors at the library of Alexandria's museum, which was a major stronghold of intellectual paganism at Alexandria. He like many other pagan Platonic philosophers of his time was interested in Christianity and desired to expose its fallacies. He studied Christian writings to refute the new religion. However, his study led him to be convinced with the truth of Christianity. After Athenagoras's conversion to Christianity, he continued his philosophical teaching at the museum. He became a champion to defend Christianity and addressed his defense of Christianity or "Apology" to the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus circa 176-177 A.D. Pataenus and Clement of Alexandria were indicated to have studied with Athenagoras; and both like most Copts of their time had been well educated in all the learning of the ancients, as well as in the truths of Christianity. Under the rule of the Emperor Commodus, the newly established Coptic Catechetical School was led Pantaenus circa 190 A.D. Clement of Alexandria followed Pantaenus as head of the Catechetical school. Origen or Oreganos was one of the most celebrated and prolific Coptic philosophers who led the Catechetical school. These philosophers and others defended early Christianity against the pagan and later heretic teachings. For example, the Alexandrian Catechetical School also used the method of interpretation or "exegesis" developed by the pagan scholars of the Alexandrian library museum. Further more, Origen, whose name means, born of Horus the ancient Egyptian God, not only translated the bible and developed the Hexapla, he also ventured in philosophical speculations

that influenced Christian scholars and philosophers for ages. One of his philosophical speculations is that GOD has unlimited mercy to the extent that ultimately all creation, including non-believers in Christ and even Satan, will be saved. The Coptic and other Orthodox Churches did not follow the speculative interpretation of Origen on salvation, however the Roman Catholic Church belief in purgatory may have been to some extent influenced by Origen's interpretation. Another Coptic philosopher was Hepatia. She was a respected pagan philosopher known for her erudition and knowledge.

Hepatia met an unfortunate death at the hands of an unruly mob. Her murder occurred during clashes between Christians and pagans during the reign of the Roman Emperor Theodosius around 390 A.D.

Monasticism:

The ancient Egyptian religious traditions included temple devotees who led celibate lives of poverty, pursuit of knowledge and prayers. The story of Ptolemios and Harmais or Haremhab tells us about two devotees or monks who led celibate lives at the Serapeum temple. They were contemporaries of Queen Cleopatra. Following in the footsteps of the ancient Egyptians, Copts started Christian monasticism. Saint Paul of Thebes led a solitary life of prayer and asceticism in the Egyptian desert. Saints Amon followed by Saint Macarius led monastic lives in the desert valleys of Scetes and Nitria. Monasticism was introduced to Europe by Saint Athanasius's book about the Life of Saint Anthony.

Schism between the Churches and Efforts towards Reconciliation:

The Coptic Church of Alexandria worked with the Church of Rome defended the Christian faith against several early Christian heresies, e.g. the Arian heresy. The Nicene Creed, still used by most of the Christian Churches all over the world, was originally written by a Coptic young deacon, Athanasius of Alexandria. The Council of Nicea 325 A.D. adopted the creed. However, the council, Chalcedon, debated the nature of Christ in 451 A.D., and ended up in the schism of the Coptic Orthodox Church from the Churches of Rome and Constantinople. Different explanations are given for this schism, ranging from political motives, to inaccurate translation from Latin and Greek and visa versa, to clash of some of the personalities involved. Attempts to reconcile the views of the churches continued for centuries and almost succeeded at times but not quite. A 19th century Protestant scholar studied the issues of this schism. He concluded that both the Coptic and western churches believe in the same dogma, but the choice of words was problematic. It is heartening to witness that the contemporary movement for reconciliation and unity among the Churches in the late 20th century. The Coptic Orthodox Church joined the International Council of Churches, and friendly exchanges and dialogue were pursued. As the dialogue among Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches continues, there seems to be a common movement towards the unity of faith as contrasted with the unity of the Churches.

The Arabic and Turkic Eras:

The wars between the East-Roman Empire and The Persian Empire in the 6th and 7th centuries weakened both empires. The Muslim Arabs attacked both empires in the 7th century. After their conquest of the East-Roman provinces of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, they invaded Egypt in December 641 A.D. Egypt was one of the precious crown jewels of the East-Roman Empire. It was the breadbasket of Rome first then Constantinople. It was a fertile land that produced and exported wheat, corn, wine, oil, textiles, glass, cosmetics, and medicinal and chemical products of the time. The population Copts is estimated to be about 9 millions at the time the Arabs conquest.

The destruction of the Library of Alexandria:

Scholars differed in views on how the ancient library of Alexandria was destroyed. However, recent research by Luciano Canfora concluded that the Arab general Amer ibn Alass at the orders of the Arab Caliph Omar ibn Alkhatib did the destruction of the library. The story of the Arabs destruction of the library indicates that it took them six months to burn the books in about one thousand public bathes in Alexandria.

Arab and Turkic Dynasties, 640-1798 A.D.:

Several Muslim Arab and Turkic dynasties ruled Egypt from 640 A.D. to 1798 A.D. The French under Napoleon Bonaparte defeated the Ottomans and the Mamelukes rulers of Egypt in 1798 A.D. The Arab dynasties included the Umayyad (660-751 A.D.) and the Abbasids (751-880 A.D.) The Turkic dynasties include the Tulunides (880-904 A.D.) and the Akhshids (904-913 A.D.). They were followed by the Fatimites (913-1171 A.D.), a Shiite Arab dynasty. They were followed by Turkic, Ayubides (1171-1250 A.D.), the Mamelukes (1250-1517 A.D.) and the Ottomans (1517-1798 A.D.). After the Arabs conquest 641 A.D., the start of their rule was relatively mild. The Arab rulers primary interest was in exacting the maximum financial gain out of the rich land of Egypt. John of Nikiu in his chronicles indicates that Amer ibn Alass, after the conquest of Egypt, "increased the taxes to the extent of 22 batr of gold till all the people hid themselves owing to the greatness of the tribulation, and could not find the wherewithal to pay." The Ommyiads followed by the other dynasties instituted heavy taxes including poll tax or Algyzya, tribute and different exactions. At times the Arab rulers found it convenient to throw prominent Copts, e.g. a Bishop or Pope, in jail and request ransom to release them. The Umayyad Caliph Suliman ibin abed Almalek reflected this policy, in writing his appointed ruler of Egypt "to milk the camel until it gives no more milk, and until it milks blood". Though some of the Arab rulers were moderate, most were oppressive, cruel and committed a lot of atrocities against the Coptic population. The ultimate policy of the Muslim Arab rulers changed gradually from maximum financial gain to Islamization either through incentives of reduced taxation, or by outright violence and force. Arab and Turkic rulers from different dynasties continued to levy heavy taxation to impoverish the Copts, instituted policies to eradicate the Coptic culture, language, leadership, and

initiated violence and pogroms against the Coptic population.

Assault on Coptic Language, Culture, and Monuments:

The assault on culture that was initiated by the destruction of the Alexandria library continued by the Umayyads who decreed the use of the Arabic language instead of Coptic in the governance of Egypt. It took centuries for Arabic to replace Coptic as the spoken language of the land. The Coptic language continued in general use until the 13th century. Unlike the Greek or Roman rulers who maintained and rebuilt some of the ancient Egyptian temples, several Islamic rulers destroyed and pillaged the ancient Egyptian temples and Churches. The marble and porphyry pillars obtained by the destruction of many ancient temples and churches were used to build palaces, mosques, and at times just left a trail of destruction. Sultan El Aziz attempted to destroy the great pyramids of Giza circa 1193 A.D. He gathered a large labor force that attempted to destroy the pyramids for eight months. At the end of which, they succeeded in only destroying a part of the casing of the pyramid and made a small breach in one side. Fortunately the great effort needed convinced El Aziz to abandon the destruction of the pyramids.

Resistance for Oppression:

The Arab's oppression led the Copts to several rebellions, but these rebellions failed to break the yoke of oppression or achieve independence. The Copts in the eastern Delta fought against the Ommayyds oppression in 725 A.D. A large-scale Coptic revolt against the Abbasids took place circa 815 A.D. El Maamoun, the Abbasid Caliph, had to bring in a large army with elephants to conquer the Copts revolution of 815 A.D. Even as late as 1176 A.D. the Copts of the city of Koptos revolted against the oppression of the Turkic rulers. The policy of heavy taxation, pillage, and violence was also accompanied by forced migration of Copts to other parts of the Islamic Empire, and settlement of Muslim Arabs into Egypt. As a result, many of the Copts were forced into Islam to escape the continued oppression and heavy taxation. The forced Islamization policy was followed by most of the Arab rulers, and later on also by most of the Mamluks and Turkic rulers. Gradually, the population of Muslims increased and the Copts decreased. The population of the Copts decreased from 9 million at the time of the Arabs conquest 641 A. D. approximately 700,000 at the early 1900's.

Flourishing and Tribulations:

Though persecution of the Copts by the Arabs, Mamluks and Turks was the norm rather than the exception, most of these rulers needed the knowledge of the Copts to govern the country and collect taxes. The history of the Islamic era shows a vicious cycle in which the Muslim rulers hire Copts because of their knowledge, skill and honesty to administer the affairs of the government of Egypt. Accordingly, the Copts do well and prosper, and ultimately the Muslim rulers change their minds for different reasons and expel the Copts from government jobs, confiscate their property, put them in jail, and a times put them to death. As the affairs of the government become erratic without the Copts knowledge, the rulers return back to hire the Copts again and so on. Under the rule of the Fatimite dynasty, one of the rulers was in fact insane. El Hakem hired several Copts in his employment. El Hakem however, decided to either to force his Coptic employees into Islam or kill them. Two prominent Copts Fahed iben Ibrahim, and Yuhana iben Nagah, were among El Hakem's employees, who accepted death rather than converting to Islam 1004 A.D. During the reign of moderate rulers and peaceful times, many Copts managed to excel in literature and the arts. Among the famous writers during the Ayubide dynasty, were the Iben Al Asaal brothers. Though the rule of the Mameluks produced many beautiful monuments, they were bloodthirsty and extremely oppressive for the Egyptians both Muslims and Copts. It is not unusual to read about pogroms launched against the Copts during the Mamluks time. A supposedly devout unknown Fakir, who would instigate a Muslim mob after the Friday Muslim prayers to attack the Copts, their homes and businesses, usually started the pogroms. However, the Mameluks also needed the services of the Copts to run the affairs of the government. Ibrahim Algawhery was the Chief Clerk of the Mameluks Abuel dahab and Ibrahim Bey 1795 A.D. Effectively he was the prime minister of Egypt and he was so influential to the extent that the Muslim historian Algaberti wrote about him and his achievements. Later on in the early 20th century another prominent Copt Botrous Galli became the prime Minister of Egypt under the rule of the British rule.

Modern Era, After the Ottomans:

After the French left Egypt, the country returned back under the rule of the Ottomans and Mamlukes. An Albanian officer of the Ottoman army, Mohamed Ali, managed to become the ruler of Egypt under the Ottoman Empire 1805 A.D. Mohamed Ali was a smart though ruthless ruler. He managed to massacre the Mamlukes and get rid of the Ottoman occupation army. He introduced western style education, industry, and new crops. His rule did not care much about religion as much as about competence. He hired a lot of Armenians and Copts to help his government. He challenged the rule of the Ottoman Empire, but lost as the European powers intervened on the behalf of the Ottomans 1845 A.D. Egypt became semi-independent under the Ottomans Empire, then under the British Empire 1882 A.D. and was ruled by the family of Mohamed Ali through 1952. A group of army officers led a coup 'et'at that ended the rule of King Farouk, the last ruler of the Mohamed Ali family. The coup brought Nasser and his fellow officers to power. He pursued a socialist domestic policy, alliance with Soviet Union, and aggressive conflicts against the West and Israel. Nasser's socialist policies and conflicts with the West resulted in severe economic hardships for Egypt. After Nasser's death 1970, Sadat assumed the presidency of Egypt. Sadat reversed his predecessor's policy, expelled the soviet advisors, followed a more pro-western approach, and pursued peace with Israel. After a militant Islamic group assassinated Sadat in 1981, Mobarek assumed the presidency in Egypt until the present time. President Mobarek continues to follow a pro-western policy, and brokered several peace initiatives in collaboration with the U.S. between the Israel and the Palestinians.

Copts in the 19th and 20th Centuries:

The poll tax, Algyzia was finally abolished in 1815 A.D. This gave some relief to the Copts in the 19th century-mid 20th century. This period saw a modest revival and renewal. A Coptic leader, Pope Cyril 4th a reformist followed the ancient Egyptian or Coptic tradition of respect for knowledge and learning in the 19th century. He looked to the western knowledge for inspiration. He established two schools with a western schooling system, and imported a new printing press to disseminate information. He started an effort to collect and catalog Coptic music and hymns. The Coptic music has been handed down orally from the days of the ancient Egyptian temples. It is believed that the Egyptian Government agents poisoned him and he died in 1861 A.D., as they were concerned about his reformist movement. The Copts in the 19th and early 20th century worked together with their Muslim compatriots to achieve independence and democracy in Egypt. They participated in the revolt of 1919 against the British rule after WWI. Several political Coptic leaders participated in the short-lived democratic parliaments in the early to mid 20th century.

World War I resulted in the defeat of the last Islamic Empire, the Ottoman Empire. The last Caliph of the Muslims; the Ottoman Sultan was replaced by a secular president in modern Turkey. Though Turkey has and continues to progress as a secular nation, the impact of a superior western culture and influence was felt in many Muslim countries. A militant fundamentalist Islamic called the Muslim Brothers was initiated in 1920's. Other groups also followed, e.g. the society for Muslim Youth. These movements aimed at resisting the influence of the superior western culture. These movements espoused a more conservative interpretation of Islam, and many of them also espoused violence against the Copts that raged on and off for years. Nasser became President of Egypt shortly after an army coup in 1952. Though Nasser cared mostly about power more than religion, many of his protégés espoused the more fundamentalist Islamic teaching of the Muslim Brothers. The Nasser government followed a socialist regime and nationalized most of the private enterprises, which hit the Copts a lot harder as they depended on private businesses for their livelihood. The economic pressures and resurgent discrimination led many Copts to start immigration to countries such as the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia in the 1960's. Active and successful Coptic-Americans live at present at most of the large metropolitan areas of the U.S.A. The same applies for many of the large metropolitan areas in many of the western countries.

President Sadat was successful in establishing a peace treaty with Israel. However, in his struggle for power against the Nasserite factions, he encouraged the militant Islamic groups in Egypt. In the 1980s, the militant fundamentalist Islamic movement resurgence was accompanied by renewed and escalated assaults on the Copts in Egypt. The Militants instigated several violent episodes against the Copts and western tourists, attacked, sacked and burned churches and Coptic businesses. G. Kepel in his study of Muslim extremism in Egypt indicated that the Militants financed the assassination of President Sadat using gold robbed from Coptic-owned goldsmith stores. On the political side, the Islamic Militant groups called for changing the laws from the civil laws to the Islamic code or Sharia. Their claim is that the return to Sharia provides a solution instead of the western approach of democracy and free enterprise. It would return the Islamic countries to the glory of the medieval age Islamic Empires. However, the return to the Islamic code essentially deprives the non-Muslims including the Copts from equal rights as compared with the Muslims and subjects them to formal discrimination. In the 1990's attacks on Churches, property and businesses of the Copts have been on the increase. Abduction of young Coptic girls and forced Islamization increased. Pogroms have been frequent lately. In the early days of the year 2000 a pogrom was initiated by the militants Islamic groups resulted in the murder of about 21 Copts, and the destruction of many Coptic homes, businesses and a Church in the village of Al Kosheh in Southern Egypt. Similar incidents and persecution continues. Even obtaining permits to build or maintain churches is getting a lot more difficult. The sad irony is that the laws used to mire requests for permits for churches are rooted in the laws of the Ottoman Empire. Though the Ottoman Empire has expired after its defeat in World War I, the Egyptian government bureaucracy spurred by the militants teachings uses the defunct Ottoman law called the Hamayouni decree against the Copts free expression and practice of their religion.