1 The Arab conquest of Egypt to the end of the Ayyubi dynasty, 639–1250

During the reign of Umar, the second caliph of the Arabs, Arab armies under the leadership of Amr ibn al-As invaded and conquered Egypt in 639 AD. Egypt was then a province of the Byzantine empire, ruled by a governor residing in Alexandria, the capital city. The inhabitants of Egypt, who were Monophysite Christians known as Copts, differed from the Melkite Christian Byzantines, who regarded monophysitical sects as heretical and treated them accordingly. The difference stemmed from disagreement over the nature of Christ. The Copts believed in his divine nature, while the Byzantines believed he was both human and divine. In consequence the Egyptians suffered from religious discrimination and persecution at the hands of their rulers, in addition to having to put up with a heavy burden of taxation to defray the expenses incurred through constant warfare between the Byzantines and their major rivals, the Sassanian empire. In brief, the population of Egypt resented the Byzantine domination of their country, and the burden of heresy that was laid upon them; they also resented the heavy taxation imposed upon them. Alienation of the population from their rulers was the hallmark of that period, as it was to be during successive periods due to differences in language, religion or ethnicity between rulers and ruled. Such alienation may not have mattered much to the population when government was efficient and administration just, but it was to become more important during periods of misrule and exploitation.

The Arab armies, numbering about eight thousand horsemen, found the conquest of Egypt an easy matter, for the native rulers cooperated with the new conquerors against their Byzantine overlords and helped open up the country to them. The Egyptians believed the Arabs would be more tolerant rulers than the Byzantines and would

impose a lighter tax burden on them. The Greek presence in Egypt was then relatively weak as the empire was busy fighting the Arabs on other fronts, and had already lost its Syrian provinces to the Arabs in 636. The major battle between Arabs and Byzantines took place at Heliopolis and was decisive in opening the rest of Egypt to the Arabs. Rather than sacking the country and enslaving the population – a common practice in those days – the country was made to pay tribute and the prisoners were released, for the caliph Umar said, 'Tribute is better than booty; it lasts longer.'

The Egyptians were offered a choice between adopting Islam as their religion, or retaining their religion and paying a poll tax. When they opted for the latter, an agreement was drawn up between the Arab conquerors and the population which read: 'In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate, this is the amnesty granted to the people of Egypt, to their religion, their goods, their churches and crosses, their lands and waters, nothing of which shall be touched or seized from them.' In return the Egyptians were expected to pay a land tax when the Nile waters reached a level that presaged a good harvest, that is when it reached 16 cubits; otherwise the taxes were remitted. The further obligation of offering three days' hospitality to Muslims was also imposed.

The Byzantine emperor repudiated the treaty between the Arabs and the Egyptians, but the local Coptic governor joined with Amr ibn al-As, the commander in chief of the Arab forces and the new governor of Egypt, against the Byzantines and in favour of the treaty. By 641 Byzantine attempts to recapture Egypt had failed and the whole of Egypt was incorporated within the expanding Arab empire. The majority of the population remained Christian and retained their own language, so that the process of Arabization and Islamization that eventually took place was to take several centuries. Egypt was now part of a large Arab Muslim empire. Gradually a new form of government and administration was imposed. The rulers of the country were aliens, speaking an alien language and worshipping an alien God, so that the alienation between rulers and ruled that char-

acterized the Byzantine period was to be continued under the Arabs and their successors.

Amr, the new governor of Egypt, ruled justly and efficiently. Because the Arabs had conquered an empire with immense speed they had not had time to develop an administrative apparatus of their own, and so adopted the form of government they found in each territory they conquered. It was only towards the end of the century that a new form of administration came into existence. The Byzantine form of government, a system which divided the country into provinces each ruled by a provincial governor who reported to a central governor residing in Alexandria, continued with a few minor changes. By and large that system, with minor modifications, was to be used throughout the history of Egypt. The capital was moved from Alexandria to a more central location, and a new city, given the name Fustat (the Tent) and located a few miles south of present-day Cairo, was built as the new capital. The central area of the new town housed a mosque, named the mosque of Amr, which remains to the present day though much rebuilt and altered.

At first the Egyptians tended to look down on the less refined Arabs. Amr, a man of wit and discernment, allegedly decided to teach the Egyptians a lesson. He gave a three-day banquet, to which all were invited. On the first day he served camels as the main course, much to the disgust of the Egyptians who were accustomed to more delicate fare, but the Arabs fell to with hearty appetites. The next day he served the delicacies of Egypt, and his men wiped the boards clean with an equally voracious appetite. On the third day he had his soldiers parade in battle formation while he addressed the crowd: 'The first day's entertainment was to show you the plain food of the desert Arabs; the second was to show you that we can also appreciate the finer things in the conquered lands; the third day is to show you that we still retain our martial valour.' The lesson was not lost on the Egyptians. Caliph Umar approved Amr's finesse and commented that the art of warfare depended on wisdom as well as on the use of force.

No spoliation was permitted the army by Amr, so that little destruction or devastation was incurred. The tale that he ordered the famous library at Alexandria burned is fictitious, appearing six hundred years later. No land was confiscated from the Egyptians, and Caliph Umar stringently forbade any Arab to own land in Egypt, for fear that through vested interests he would lose his fighting forces to other territories. Umar was so adamant that when Amr asked whether he could build a house for himself, he was refused.

The governor of Egypt was appointed by the caliph in Mecca, but the governor appointed three chief officials of the province: the marshal, the chief judge (*qadi*) and the treasurer. The marshal controlled the army and the police; the qadi applied the law; the treasurer supervised the collection of taxes. Frequently the treasurer was nominated by the caliph, for apart from collecting taxes the treasurer's function also included remitting funds to the governor to defray the expenses of the province and sending the surplus to the imperial treasury abroad.

The majority of the taxes came from the poll tax which was applied to wage-earning males only and excluded women, children, the aged, priests and religious dignitaries of either the Christian or the Jewish sects. The land tax (the *kharaj)* was imposed on a million and a half acres which formed the total cultivable land at the time. The population was estimated at 6–8 million men, which would give a total population of some 20–30 million people. Land production was increased through a series of irrigation projects carried out by Amr, and it seems there was a central body of officials who supervised all irrigation. Though each province was responsible for the upkeep of its dykes, dams and canals, the entire irrigation system was centralized. Corvée labour, which pressganged men, was the means of maintaining, cleaning and repairing canals and dams, the lifeline of the irrigation system. Amr reopened the ancient canal that joined the Nile to the Red Sea and facilitated the transport of grain to the Hijaz. Egypt became the granary of the Arabs. The canal remained in use for eighty years, until neglect once again allowed it to become totally clogged up with sand.

The Egyptians were content under Amr's wise rule, but Caliph Umar died in 644 and was succeeded by Uthman, who chose to replace Amr by his half-brother Abdullah, who raised the taxes, increasing the revenue but placing a heavier burden on the people. When Uthman pointed out to Amr the greater sums remitted to the capital saying, 'the camel yields more milk', Amr retorted, 'Yes, but to the detriment of her young'. Disaffection was sown among the population as a result of Abdullah's stringent policies. The people revolted and refused to admit Abdullah into the country when he returned from a journey to Palestine. The fight over the political control of Egypt was carried to Mecca. Caliph Uthman was eventually assassinated by a contingent of Arabs, stationed in Egypt but led by one of the Meccan aristocracy, who came to complain of Abdullah's policies in Egypt, but who also sought a more equitable share of political appointments in the empire.

After the assassination of Uthman, Ali, the prophet's son-in-law and cousin, became the fourth caliph. Muawiya, Uthman's cousin and the governor of Syria, then demanded revenge for his cousin's death and was helped by Amr. Due to Amr's astuteness Muawiya's demand for revenge was soon promoted to a rival claim to the caliphate. When Muawiya eventually succeeded Ali as caliph (thus founding the Umayya dynasty of caliphs), he granted Amr the governorship of Egypt and all its revenues. The province was then said to be so rich that when Amr died at the age of ninety in 664 he left what historians tell us was 2 *ardabs*, or 396 lb, of gold. Historians also add that Amr's sons refused to inherit that gold, deeming it earned in sin.

After the death of Amr and over the following two centuries Egypt was ruled by ninety-eight governors in a system that alternated mild and generous rule with severity and religious oppression, depending on the character and the whim of the governor appointed, his relationship with the people, his economic needs, and those of the imperial treasury. Various Arab tribes were allowed to migrate into Egypt, where they settled and intermarried with the population, thus hastening the process of Arabization. The previous law laid down by

Umar, that no Arab could own property outside the Arabian peninsula, was infringed, and Arabs now came to own land in Egypt and elsewhere in the newly conquered territories.

With the advent of the Umayya dynasty and especially during the reign of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685–705), the administration began to change. The language of the public registers was changed to Arabic from the previous Coptic, so that Copts, unless they learned Arabic, were perforce replaced in the administration by Arabs. The change of personnel was also accompanied by a change in coinage, which became purely Islamic and was minted at the capital of the empire, now Damascus. A regular postal service tied the provincial capitals more closely to the imperial capital. These fiscal and administrative changes were eventually to turn Coptic-speaking Christian Egypt into Arabic-speaking Muslim Egypt, with a small Christian minority, the Copts, who today form around ten per cent of the population. In time Coptic as a language faded away to become a liturgical language known only to priests and monks, although in the nineteenth century there was a revival of that language, but not a very successful one.

The conflicts, both sectarian and political, that had rent the Arabian peninsula, overthrowing caliphs and dynasties, found echoes in Egypt, which became plagued by a series of insurrections arising from conflicts between different groups of Muslim Arabs who had settled in the country. These conflicts raged among the orthodox (or Sunni) majority of Muslims, and those who followed the minority sect, the followers of Ali (Shii). The latter believed that leadership of the Muslims should go to Ali and to his descendants. On several occasions the Copts also rose in revolt to protest against oppressive taxation. Their uprisings were repressed with cruelty and severity, and with each wave of repression some Copts would convert to Islam in the hope of escaping future oppression. Others became Muslim in the hope of avoiding paying the poll tax, but this did not help them, for under the Umayya dynasty, except for a brief period of two years, they were forced to pay taxes even when they had converted to Islam. Still others converted for a variety of reasons common to all converts.

The policy followed by the Umayya dynasts was to avoid settling internal problems within the provinces of the empire, preferring the use of repression or of military expansion to divert attention from such problems. The root cause of conflict within the empire was thus never addressed and continued to fester. Conflict mostly resulted from unfair taxation and increased exploitation, especially when the Egyptian people had not identified with their Arab conquerors.

Under the Abbassi rulers (750–1258), who succeeded the Umayya, Egypt fared as badly, if not worse, for now ruthless and unscrupulous rulers abused the population and extorted monies from them illegally. The only protection the people now had against abuse of power was to appeal to the chief judge, the qadi. The qadi applied the law (the *sharia)* which was based on the Koran, the sayings of the prophet Muhammad and the customary practices of areas of the Arab empire. Four legal schools of jurisprudence eventually came to be recognized as having equal validity, although only three of them had any following in Egypt: the Shafii, the Maliki, and the Hanafi schools. The qadi protected the population from the rapacity of governors, for he determined whether a tax procedure was legal or not, and whether a new tax was permissible or not. Despite depredations on the part of the governors, the city of Fustat flourished and became a metropolis, a commercial and trading centre.

From 834 Egypt was granted in military tenure (an *iqta)* to members of the Turkish oligarchy which had seized power in Baghdad, then the Muslim capital of the Abbassi dynasty. The governors of Egypt thus changed from Arabs to Turkish military rulers, who were granted the province in tenure and therefore ruled it as though it were a personal possession rather than as a province that was part of an empire to be governed according to fixed and established rules. In one sense that personal form of government was to keep Egypt separate from the rest of the imperial provinces and to develop in it (some would say continue) some form of self-identity – a recognition of an Egyptian self – other than the greater identity belonging to a Muslim Arab empire. This is not to imply that Egyptians had developed a

national identity at such an early stage, but it is to point out that they have always identified themselves, from Pharaonic times, as inhabitants of a fixed and unchanging entity known as Egypt. At times that entity was incorporated as a province within an empire; at others it became the centre of an empire. Throughout its political and administrative vicissitudes the country remained the same territorial entity bounded by its natural frontiers, the deserts on either side of the Nile, which had in the past protected it from invasions, and the Mediterranean Sea to the north. While an inhabitant of Egypt identified himself as an inhabitant of a village or town, as a member of a religious community, and as being of a specific ethnicity – native Egyptian or Egyptianized Arab – he also recognized the existence of a fixed territory called Egypt to which he belonged.

One of the early Turkish governors sent to rule Egypt by the Abbassi government in 868 was Ahmad ibn Tulun. A man of ability, education and intelligence, he rapidly grasped the potential of the country. Because of its natural frontiers and its distance from the imperial capital (perhaps he also knew the growing weakness of the Abbassis), he determined to make himself the ruler of an autonomous state and even to expand his frontiers along the trade routes and conquer neighbouring territories. Thus ibn Tulun was the first in a series of rulers who were to turn Egypt *de facto* into an independent state ruled briefly by one opportunist governor after another supposedly subservient to the Abbassis, but to all intents and purposes independent of them, except for the mention of the caliph's name during the Friday prayers and the sending of a small sum as tribute. Mention of the caliph's name on Fridays and the minting of coins were the two prerogatives of kingship recognized at the time.

Once he had made sure of his absolute authority in Egypt, Tulun built a new capital city for himself. This was a city north of Fustat, which he named al-Qatai (the Wards) because each ethnic group in his army and each division among his retainers was settled in a separate quarter that was assigned to that specific group. The city was one square mile in size. It contained a palace surrounded by a vast

garden and another palace to house the ladies of the harem. A hippodrome, stables and a menagerie for wild animals which the ruler fancied, were also set up. A mosque, vast enough to contain the entire army within its precincts, was designed and built by a Coptic architect. The mosque, which still stands to the present day and is still used for prayers, is architecturally interesting for its use of brick as a building material, instead of the more common stone, and for its pointed arches which one historian describes as antedating similar arches in England by two hundred years. The gesso work on the arches and the coloured glass windows are remarkably beautiful. The outer wall of the mosque was surrounded by shops of various kinds. Business was said to be so flourishing then that the shops changed hands three times a day, going to different sellers, who could make enough money working for one-third of the day to satisfy their needs. Tulun carried out other public works, such as an aqueduct for bringing water from the Nile up to the palace and repairing the Nilometer, the gauge which measured the height of the Nile flood at the island of Roda.

A generous man, Tulun daily distributed alms to the poor and kept an open house, feeding any, of whatever estate, who came to his table. He was said to have spent nearly half a million dinars (the gold coin of the day) on building his new city, and soon had need for funds to support his various charities, his building programme and his army. He then diminished the sum remitted to the imperial capital as tribute, and when he later came into conflict with the caliph he cut out the tribute altogether. The revenue of Egypt was said to come to only 4,300,000 dinars a year, so that Tulun probably found other means for increasing his funds than the income from the territory itself. He forced the religious dignitaries who controlled vast estates to lend money, but he soon turned his thoughts to expanding his frontier in the direction of Syria, that is, along the major trade route into the country. Control of Syria was a sure means of enriching the treasury but it also brought him into conflict with the caliph, who sent an army against his vassal. The army never came close to the Egyptian

borders and was forced to withdraw for lack of funds with which to carry out the intended campaign. Another campaign along the Mediterranean littoral extended his dominion up to Barka. It was after the conquest of Syria that Tulun minted coins bearing his own name as well as the name of the Abbassi caliph. He also tried to extend his frontiers in the direction of Mecca but his forces were repelled and he was cursed from the pulpits for his heinous deed in attacking a holy city.

Under the benevolent rule of ibn Tulun the country prospered; agriculture and commerce flourished, for the ruler carefully supervised administration and saw to it that his tax collectors dealt fairly with the people. Peculation, which had been practised by the treasurers sent by the Abbassis, was strictly prevented. Taxes thus fell instead of rising as more new sources of wealth were tapped. The ruler's riches did not come at the expense of the population; rather the population shared in the new wealth. Tulun's generosity became proverbial, for he never turned away anyone who applied to him for assistance. He was however a hasty man who sometimes sentenced men of his entourage to death, but such actions did not affect the native population, which was content and quiescent under his rule.

When Tulun died he left a treasure of ten million dinars, a fleet of one hundred ships, which gives us an inkling of the extent of his commercial wealth, and a stud of three hundred horses, as well as thousands of donkeys, mules and camels. He was succeeded by his second son, Khamarawaih, so that the government of Egypt became transformed into a dynasty of rulers. Tulun's oldest son, for he had seventeen sons, had risen in revolt against his father when the father was fighting in Syria, and had in consequence been imprisoned for life. Good government however died with ibn Tulun, for his successors were profligate, incompetent bunglers, who fought each other over the succession and depleted the treasury. This was particularly evident after the death of Khamarawaih. Relations between the Tuluni ruler and the Abbassi caliph were strained even after Khamarawaih's daughter, Qatr al-Nada (Dewdrop), was married to the