

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06569-6 - A History of Egypt: Volume 6: In the Middle Ages

Stanley Lane-Pool

Excerpt

[More information](#)

A HISTORY OF EGYPT

UNDER THE SARACENS

CHAPTER I

THE ARAB CONQUEST

639—641

Authorities.—John of Nikiu, Ibn-'Abd-el-Ḥakam, el-Bilādhurī, eṭ-Ṭabarī. Later accounts from el-Maḥrīzī, Abū-l-Maḥāsīn, es-Suyūṭī.

MOHAMMAD, the prophet of the Arabs, died in 632. In a few years his followers overran Arabia, Syria, and Chaldaea, defeating the forces of the Emperor of Constantinople and the "Chosroes" or Sāsānian king of Persia; and in 639 the Arabs invaded Egypt. The caliph 'Omar yielded with reluctance to the urgent representations of the general, 'Amr ibn el-'Āṣī, and even stipulated that if a letter of recall should reach the army before it entered Egyptian territory, it was to march back to Medīna. The letter was sent, but 'Amr contrived to cross the frontier before opening it, and thus effected his purpose. He had visited Alexandria in his youth, and had never forgotten its wealth. The expedition was arranged whilst the caliph and 'Amr⁶³⁹ were together near Damascus on their return from

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06569-6 - A History of Egypt: Volume 6: In the Middle Ages

Stanley Lane-Pool

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Jerusalem in the autumn of 639, and 'Amr kept the Feast of Sacrifice (10 Dhū-l-Ḥiġġa, A.H. 18), 12 Dec., 639, at el-'Arish, the frontier town of Egypt.

The invading army mustered 3500 or 4000 men, but was quickly reinforced by a second body of 4000. They were almost all horsemen, armed with lances and
 640 swords and bows. The first opposition the Saracens met was at Pelusium (el-Faramā), where the Roman¹ garrison held out for a month, until the success of the besiegers was attained partly through the aid of the Copt or native Egyptian population, who were eager to welcome any prospect of release from the oppression of the eastern empire. The schism definitely opened at the council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 had established a sharp hostility between the national monophysite or "Jacobite" church of Egypt and the official "Chalcedonian" or "Melekite" church which the emperors of Constantinople supported in Egypt; and the Melekite persecution of the Jacobites, who formed the great bulk of the Egyptians, had alienated whatever trace of loyalty the people might have retained towards their distant sovereigns, and had prepared the way for foreign intervention. Indeed, the Persians had quite lately (616) conquered the country, and had only been ejected by the Romans a few years (626) before the Arab invasion. The Egyptians had served many foreign masters, and had suffered under all, so that a change of rulers signified little, and any change from Byzantine intolerance would probably, in their eyes, be for the better. This widespread disaffection contributed to the easy triumph of the Arabs. It was first seen in the taking of Pelusium, when the patriarch, called by the Arabs "Abū-Miyamin" (possibly meaning the banished Jacobite patriarch Benjamin), advised the Copts to support the invaders.

The Romans made a second stand at Bilbeys, some thirty miles from Miṣr, where another month was spent

¹ The term Roman is used throughout, in preference to Greek, for the east Roman or Byzantine empire. In Arabic the Byzantines are always called *er-Rūm*; in the sing. *Rūmī*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06569-6 - A History of Egypt: Volume 6: In the Middle Ages

Stanley Lane-Pool

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARCH ON MEMPHIS

3

in the siege¹; and after the fall of Bilbeys, 'Amr had again to fight the Romans at Umm-Duneyn, a village or suburb which stood near the present 'Ab'dīn quarter of Cairo. The Saracens were once more successful; but before proceeding further 'Amr appealed to the caliph for more troops, and a second reinforcement was sent, bringing the army up to 12,000 men.² Part of this force was on the west bank of the Nile, advancing upon Asyūt and Behnesa, and trying to penetrate into the Fayyūm, where they were opposed by Theodosius the dux of the Thebaid, and by the general John of Mārōs; but the main body was on the east bank, posted in the neighbourhood of the city of Miṣr, or "Babylon of Egypt," a northern extension of the ancient Memphis.³ The city was defended by a large Roman army, and guarded by a strong fortress, rebuilt by Turbo in 116, the remains of

¹ The romantic legend of the defence of Bilbeys by Armenosa, the daughter of the prefect George el-Muḳawḳis, rests only upon the authority of el-Waḳidī, and cannot be accepted without reserve. It may be read in Mrs. Butcher's *Story of the Church of Egypt*, i. 359, 360, or more fully in Quatremère's *Mémoires sur l'Égypte*, i. 53, 54.

² According to another tradition, ez-Zubeyr brought 12,000 men to reinforce 'Amr. The figures cannot be relied on, but the total force of the Arabs was evidently small.

³ Memphis itself existed, though in decay, at the time of the Arab conquest, but as it is never mentioned by the chroniclers, its inhabited portion must be intended when they speak of "Miṣr." There is much obscurity about this city of Miṣr at this period, which is increased by the word Miṣr being used also to signify Egypt. The Arabic writers speak constantly of Babylon (Babilyūn) as though it were a fortress and nothing else, and there is very little evidence for the independent existence of a city of Babylon or Miṣr apart from the fortress. It is only in John of Nikiu's chronicle that we find a distinction between the taking of Miṣr and the surrender of the fortress. In the sixth century, however, Hierocles and George the Cyprian both mention Memphis, but not Babylon; and there must have been an inhabited city representing the ancient Memphis, and probably forming a more modern and northern extension of it. One would expect to find it on the west bank of the Nile, but all the authorities concur in placing Miṣr on the east bank, in the neighbourhood of the fortress of Babylon. Ṭendūnyās, on the other hand, seems from John of Nikiu's account to have been on the west bank. Memphis was an immense city, and may have extended, with its suburbs of Miṣr and Ṭendūnyās, across the river as far as the fortress of Babylon.

which still stand under the name of *Ḳaṣr-esh-Shema*‘, “the castle of the candle.” ‘Amr divided his forces into three corps, one of which he posted to the north of Babylon, the second was stationed at *Ṭendūnyās* (apparently a fortified suburb on the west bank to the south-west of Babylon), and the third withdrew northwards to Heliopolis (On, ‘Ayn-Shems), in the hope of tempting the Romans out of their fortifications, upon which the other two corps were to fall on their rear or flank. The manoeuvre succeeded. The Romans marched out of their fortifications, and attacked the Saracens at Heliopolis, but, being themselves taken in rear by the other divisions, were routed and driven to the Nile, where they took to their boats and fled down the river. Upon this the Muslims occupied *Ṭendūnyās*, the garrison of which had perished in the battle, except 300 men who shut themselves up in the fort, whence they retired by boat to *Nikiu*. The taking of *Ṭendūnyās* was evidently followed by, or synonymous with, the taking of the whole city of *Miṣr*, except its citadel, which was blockaded; for John of *Nikiu*, from whose almost contemporary chronicle this account is taken, mentions no subsequent siege or conquest of the city of *Miṣr*, but only the later reduction of the fortress.¹ The defeat of the Romans at Heliopolis was so complete that not only *Miṣr*, the chief city of that part, fell into the hands of the Saracens, but even in the *Fayyūm* *Domentianus*, the praeses of *Arcadia*, secretly escaped from the chief town, deserted the Roman troops scattered about middle Egypt, and hurried down the Nile to *Nikiu*; whereupon the Arabs took *Medinet-el-Fayyūm*, *Asyūt*, and eventually *Behnesa*, with great slaughter.¹

¹ In the rubric of John of *Nikiu*’s chronicle the conquest of *Miṣr* is carefully distinguished from the conquest of the fortress of Babylon. The former is placed in *Anno Indictionis XIV.*, which corresponds to 1 Sept. 640—31 Aug. 641, and the fall of Babylon in *XV.* The latter date cannot be sustained satisfactorily, but the distinction between the two events, and the emphasis laid on the interval between them, are important. The rubric is the work of the Arabic translator, according to *M. Zotenberg*, but it may be assumed that he had earlier data to go upon, otherwise he would scarcely have used the *Indiction* chronology.

CONQUEST OF MISR

5

The Arabic accounts of the conquest of Miṣr conflict with each other, and with that given above, in many details, but confirm the main fact of the victory at Heliopolis (which must have taken place before the inundation covered the land, i.e., before September), and record the subsequent occupation of Miṣr during the inundation. They add various stories of negotiations, and even entertainments, between the Egyptians and the Arabs, which ended in a formal treaty. We read of a certain Abū-Maryam, a "catholic" (*ḡathalīk*) of Miṣr, who joined 'Amr's army, accompanied by a bishop, and endeavoured to arrange terms. 'Amr showed them goodwill; enlarged on the friendly disposition of the late prophet Moḥammad towards the Copts,¹ in virtue of their traditional kinship through Hagar, the Egyptian mother of Ishmael, the ancestor of the prophet; and offered them the usual choice—to embrace Islām or to pay the special poll-tax levied by the conquerors on all non-Muslims. Abū-Maryam and the bishop were anxious that the latter alternative should be accepted; but the Roman commander "Artabūn"² would not listen to it. He was killed in attempting to surprise the Saracens by a night attack; the battle of Heliopolis followed; ez-Zubeyr escalated Miṣr and opened a gate; and the Egyptians sued for peace. The treaty ran as follows, according to the Arab tradition recorded by Ṭabari: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, this is the amnesty which 'Amr ibn el-'Āṣī granted to the people of Miṣr, as to themselves, their religion, their goods, their churches and crosses, their lands and waters: nothing of these shall be meddled with or minished; the Nubians shall not be permitted to dwell among them. And the people of Miṣr, if they enter into this treaty of peace, shall pay the *ḡizya* (poll-tax), when the inundation of their river

¹ For the traditions see Abū-Šāliḥ, . 286, and Mr. Evett's notes and references.

² Also called by the Arabs el-Mandakūr (or Mandhafūr) ibn Kurkub and in Arabic nicknamed el-A'raḡ or el-U'eyriḡ, "the viper."

has subsided, fifty thousand thousand.¹ And each one of them is responsible for [acts of violence which] robbers among them may commit. And as for those who will not enter into this treaty the sum of the tax shall be diminished [to the rest] in proportion; but we have no responsibility towards such. If the rise of the Nile is less than usual, the tax shall be reduced in proportion to the decrease. Romans and Nubians who enter into their [the people of Miṣr's] covenant shall be treated in the like manner. And whoso rejects [the treaty] and chooses to go away, he is protected till he reach a place of safety or leave our kingdom. The collection of the taxes shall be by thirds, one third at each time. For [sureties for] this covenant stand the security and warranty of God, and the warranty of His Prophet, and the warranty of the caliph, the commander of the faithful, and the warranty of the believers Witnessed by ez-Zubeyr, and his sons 'Abdallāh and Moḥammad, and written by Wardān." (Ṭabarī i. 2588.)

The negotiation of this treaty of peace is attributed by most Arabic historians to a certain Girḡis (or G'ureyḡ) or George, son of Menas, el-Muḳawḳis, who has been magnified as the chief ruler of Egypt, and denounced as the supreme traitor to Christianity.² At first, indeed, he

¹ This is probably a slip for "pay the poll-tax [of two dīnārs a head] and fifty million dirhems in land-tax (*kharāḡ*)," for it would be the land-tax, not the poll-tax, that would be modified in proportion to the fertility dependent upon the extent of the inundation. Ibn-Khaldūn, quoting registers of the latter half of the 8th c., gives the land-tax of Egypt as nearly forty-four million dirhems. Abū-Ṣāliḥ says (f. 22a) that 'Amr imposed a yearly tax of 26½ dirhems (i.e. two dīnārs) on all, but two dīnārs and three *ardebbs* of wheat on all rich men; in this way the country produced twelve million dīnārs, as the population (he assumes), excluding children and aged men, was six millions. The dīnār, henceforward generally abbreviated as *D.*, contained rather more gold than our half-sovereign, and may be roughly called a half-guinea.

² A "Muḳawḳis" had certainly been in communication with the Arabian prophet in 628, and had sent him two slave-girls, a white mule, a pot of Benḥā honey, and other gifts; one of the damsels, Mary the Copt, of the curly hair, became the Apostle's concubine; but since Muḳawḳis is stated by the Arabic writers to be only the title of the successive Roman governors of Egypt (possibly a corruption of the

THE MUKAWKIS

7

opposed the Saracens, but after the fall of Miṣr, during which he and most of the troops are said to have retreated to the opposite island (afterwards called “the Island of the Garden,” G’ezirat-er-Rōḍa), he opened communications with ‘Amr, hoping to obtain easier terms if he could manage to conclude a treaty before the inundation subsided, which then hemmed in the Muslims; and peace was made on the basis of a poll-tax of two dīnārs (about a guinea) per head, excluding women and children and aged men, together with a moderate land-tax, and the obligation of three days’ hospitality to Muslims—apparently a form of contribution to the keep of the Arab army. The Egyptians accepted these terms, and the Romans were given the choice of acceptance or a retreat to Alexandria.¹ When the

Greek *μεγαλῆς*, “most glorious,” as suggested by Karabaček, *Mittheil. aus d. Samml. d. Papyr. Erzherzog Rainer*, i. 1-11), Moḥammad’s correspondent may have been a different person from the Muḳawḳis of 640. That ‘Amr had relations with a certain “George the prefect” is clear, for John of Nikiu states that, after the conquest of Miṣr and the Fayyūm, ‘Amr “sent orders to George the prefect to make a bridge over the canal of Ḳalyūb,” to facilitate further conquests in the delta, and adds that “it was then that they [the Egyptians] began to assist the Muslims.” This George, who may have been praeses of Augustamnica (Milne, *Egypt under Roman Rule*, 225), was probably George, son of Menas, the Muḳawḳis of the Arab traditions (though they make him the governor of all Egypt, ruling from Alexandria), and his assistance after the taking of Miṣr supplies a clue to the elaborate stories related by the Arabic chroniclers. ‘Amr’s orders to George imply previous relations, and as some one must have conducted the peace negotiations on the Christian side, and as it was more likely to be an Egyptian than a Roman, there is no improbability in the Arab tradition that el-Muḳawḳis was the negotiator.

¹ Probably it is this treaty that is referred to by Nicephorus, who says (28, ed. Bonn) that the patriarch Cyrus (perhaps the “bishop” of the Arabic traditions) was recalled to Constantinople by the emperor Heraclius, and censured for having agreed to pay tribute to the Muslims. Theophanes (518, ed. Bonn) also mentions a treaty, by which Cyrus agreed to pay ‘Amr 120,000 denaria, and did pay this tribute for three years; but he seems to refer to the second treaty on the surrender of Alexandria. In the confused accounts of the Greek writers there is a prevailing idea that the patriarch agreed at an early date to pay tribute to the Arabs. See J. B. Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, ii. 271.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06569-6 - A History of Egypt: Volume 6: In the Middle Ages

Stanley Lane-Pool

Excerpt

[More information](#)

emperor repudiated the treaty, the Muḳawḳis went to 'Amr, and said, though the Romans continued the war, he would stand by his word. He begged three things of the Arab general—that the covenant with the Egyptians should not be broken; that no peace should be made with the Romans until they were all made slaves, as they deserved, and their goods declared spoils; and that, if he died, he might be buried in the church of St. John at Alexandria. 'Amr agreed, and thenceforth most of the Egyptians, or Copts as they may now be called, abetted the Muslims in the war against the Romans, and helped in the transport and supplies.

'Amr's first proceeding after the taking of Miṣr was to make a bridge near the city so as to reopen communications with the west bank. The pontoon also served to arrest the procession of fugitive Romans down the river to Nikiu and Alexandria. Having got his men together, and brought the detachments from the west bank across to the east, he vigorously pressed the siege of the fortress of Babylon, which at length fell, on 9 April, 641.¹

⁶⁴¹ The Arabic historians relate various anecdotes of the siege of Babylon, which are chiefly interesting as representing current traditions as to the impression produced by the invaders upon the Romans and Egyptians. The simplicity of manners, devoutness, and heroic courage of the Arabs are chiefly dwelt upon. For example, it is told how an Arab dismounted one day from his horse to say his appointed prayers, when a party of Romans, richly accoutred, sallied out of the fortress to surprise him. As they drew near, he interrupted his devotions, mounted his horse, and charged upon them. Taken aback by his hardihood, they took to their heels, throwing down their arms and accoutrements in their haste. The Arab took no notice of these spoils, but

¹ This date is John of Nikiu's, who says it was the second day after Easter, though he gives the wrong year, XV. Ind., instead of XIV. (cp. Brooks, *Byz. Ztschr.* iv. 440). It is confirmed by the Persian version of Ṭabarī, which places the fall of Babylon in the month Rabi' II. of A.H. 20 (20 March—17 April, 641), but this is not in the Leyden edition of the Arabic text.

ADVANCE UPON ALEXANDRIA

9

after chasing them into the fortress, quietly returned to the spot where he had been disturbed, and finished his prayers. Again, when the messengers from the Muḳawḳis, after being entertained some days in 'Amr's camp, returned to their master, he asked them to describe the Arabs. They answered, "We found a people who love death better than life, and set humility above pride, who have no desire or enjoyment in this world, who sit in the dust and eat upon their knees, but frequently and thoroughly wash all their members, and humble themselves in prayer: a people in whom the stronger can scarce be distinguished from the weaker, or the master from the slave."

When the fortress of Babylon was taken, the Arab general prepared to march north as soon as the Nile had returned to its banks. After the victory at Heliopolis, he had sent several detachments to different parts, to the Ṣa'id (Upper Egypt) and the Fayyūm, as well as north towards Alexandria, Damietta, and Tinnis on the coast. They met with little resistance in most parts, and imposed the usual terms (poll-tax and land-tax) upon the submissive population; the Roman troops were concentrated in a few large cities. 'Amr himself, after establishing a strong force at Miṣr, and mooring a fleet of boats under the wall of the fortress, at that time washed by the Nile, marched down the east bank to engage Theodorus the augustal prefect. He found however, that the prefect and most of the Roman army had retired to Alexandria, leaving Domentianus at Nikiu, and Dares of Semennūd to guard "the two rivers." On the approach of the Arabs Domentianus fled from Nikiu and took boat for Alexandria. The Arabs then entered Nikiu unopposed on 13 May, 641 (18 Genbōt, Ind. xv. [*lege* xiv.] according to John of Nikiu), and are said to have massacred all the inhabitants and perpetrated atrocious cruelty throughout the "island of Nikiu," enclosed between the arms of the Nile. From Nikiu 'Amr pressed northwards, taking Athribis and Busīris, Damsis and Sakhā, anxious to subdue the whole of the delta before the inundation should check

operations. He was repulsed, however, at Damietta, and finding himself impeded by the canals and arms of the river, returned to Miṣr, whence he made a fresh start. Choosing this time the west bank, he marched by way of Terenuthis, fought three battles with the Romans, and reached Kiryawn, twenty miles south of Alexandria. The first attack was repulsed, but the capital was then torn by factions, "Blues" and "Greens," Byzantines and Nationals, Greeks and Copts, and was in no condition for resistance; Theodorus, the augustal prefect, was at Rhodes, and Domentianus was a poor substitute, and was at enmity with his colleague, Menas, the prefect of Lower Egypt. The distracted state of the city and the general panic can alone explain the surrender of a well-fortified stronghold which could be provisioned and reinforced at will by sea.

Accordingly, when the Arabs arrived near Alexandria, they found the enemy eager to treat. The report of a man who served under 'Amr at the taking of Miṣr and Alexandria has been handed down and preserved by Ṭabarī (i. 2581-3). This man, Ziyād ez-Zubeydī, said that after taking Babylon the Muslim army advanced into the Rif (delta) between Miṣr and Alexandria, and arrived at Belhib, where the governor of Alexandria sent to 'Amr, offering to pay the poll-tax on condition that the Roman prisoners should be surrendered. 'Amr replied that he must refer the proposal to the caliph at Medina; he wrote what the governor had said, and the letter was read to the troops. They waited at Belhib, during the armistice, till the caliph 'Omar's answer came. 'Amr read it aloud. It required the Alexandrians to pay the poll-tax; the prisoners were to be given the choice of accepting Islām or remaining true to the religion of their own folk; if they chose Islām, they belonged to the Muslims; if they held to their own creed, they should be sent back to Alexandria; but those prisoners who had already been sent to Arabia could not be returned. So they gave the remaining prisoners their choice, and when some chose Islām, the army shouted "*Allāhu Akbar*," "God is Most Great,"—