

# NOTES

## ON A FRAGMENT OF A PRIVATE LETTER OF THE FIRST CENTURY A.H.

M.J. Kister

Papyrus 47 in *Arabic Papyri from Ḥirbet al-Mird*, edited by Adolf Grohmann (Louvain-Leuven 1963, Bibliothèque de Muséon, vol. 52, p. 57, Pl. XXI) is dated by the editor to the first century of the Hijra (seventh century A.D.). As the papyrus thus belongs among the earliest documents in Arabic, it is clearly crucial to make every effort to reach as correct and accurate a reading and a translation of it as possible. Grohmann's reading of the document, his commentary and his rendering are as follows:

### *Fragment of a private letter*

Mird 5, 2. 1st century A.H. (VIIth century A.D.).

Light-brown, coarse papyrus. 7 × 18,7 cm.

On the recto five lines are written in black ink parallel to the horizontal fibres in regular, thick somewhat slanting characters, pointing to the first century A.H. The verso is blank.

The papyrus is torn off at top and bottom, the original margins remain on the left and right sides.

Prototype: original (Phot. 40826).

..... [                    ]	١
وَأَنِّي أَسْأَلُ اللَّهَ أَنْ يَمْتَعْنِي بِكَ	٢
وَأَلَا يَوْمَكَ خَيْرٌ فَإِذَا جَاكَ	٣
أَلَا يَوْمَكَ خَيْرٌ فَإِذَا جَاكَ	٤
[.....] [بِي هَذَا]	٥

1. [                    ]
2. *And verily, I pray God that He may cause me to profit by you*
3. *and ..... and that He may not revile your day;*
4. *is your day not excellent? But when [thi]s*
5. *[my let]ter has reached you.....*

In his *Addenda* (on p. 105) Grohmann records a reading of two phrases suggested by G. Levi della Vida: *wa-an lā yadīna yawmuka illā bi-khayrin*, “and that He may not judge your (doom-) day save in the best way”: thus the word *yawmuka* in line 4 is considered redundant and should be deleted according to Levi della Vida’s correction; the word *khayr* is accordingly read *bi-khayrin*. The text as given: *alā* (or: *illā*) *yawmuka khayr* is explained by Grohmann: “one has to presume that the writer was not expert and that, therefore, errors in style and expression are by no means unexpected”.

But the reading and the corrections offered seem unsatisfactory. The verb in line 3 can neither be read *yadīna* referring to “the dooms-day”; nor can it be read *yudayyina* with the sense of “reviling”. It should be read *yudbira*. The word *yawmuka* in line 4 is in reality a verb to be read *ya’ummuka*. The text does not need any amendment or deletion and should be read:

١ [                      ] عا الله ك [                      ]  
 ٢ وإني أسئلك الله أن يمتعني بك  
 ٣ وبا [أحمه (?) وأن لا يدبر يومك  
 ٤ الا يؤمك خير فاذا جاك

and rendered:

1. [                      ]
2. and I beg God to let me derive pleasure from (being with) you
3. and ( ? ) and that your day should not turn its back
4. but that good (things, e.g. luck, prosperity etc.) should turn their face towards you. And when (my letter) comes to you...

## A NOTE ON THE CONVERSION OF EGYPT TO ISLAM

Yohanan Friedmann

In his article entitled “The conversion of Egypt to Islam”<sup>1</sup>, Professor Ira M. Lapidus provides the reader with an extensive survey of material relevant to the spread of Islām in Egypt from its conquest by the Arabs until the tenth century A.D. At the beginning of the article he observes that “the history of the conversion to Islam, in Egypt or elsewhere, remains a surprisingly obscure subject on which Arabic sources almost never comment”.<sup>2</sup> And,

<sup>1</sup> *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972), pp. 248-262.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 248.

indeed, the article presents more material about the relationship between the Muslim rulers of the country and the Egyptian population than direct information about the conversion process. The attitude adopted by the Arabs towards the churches of Egypt, aspects of Muslim jurisprudence in the country and the numerous Coptic rebellions are extensively dealt with. Referring to the rebellion of 216-217 A.H./831-832 A.D., Professor Lapidus maintains that the suppression of this outbreak "seems... to have set in train the movement of mass conversions to Islam". Al-Maqrīzi is said to have alleged that after this rebellion was crushed, "the majority of the villages of Egypt became Muslim".<sup>3</sup> The passage referred to in support of this argument reads: ... *intaqaḍa al-qibṭ fī sanat sitta 'ashrata wa mi'atayn fa-awqa'a bihim al-afshīn ḥattā nazalū 'alā ḥukm amīr al-mu'minīn 'abd allāh al-ma'mūn fa-ḥakama fīhim bi-qatl al-rijāl wa bay' al-nisā' wa al-dhurriyya fa-bi'ū wa-subīya aktharuhum wa-min ḥīna'idhīn dhallat al-qibṭ fī jamī' arḍ miṣr wa-lam yaqdir aḥad minhum ba'da dhālika 'alā al-khurūj 'alā al-sultān wa ghalabahum al-muslimūn 'alā 'āmmat al-qurā fa-raja'ū min al-muḥāraba ilā al-mukāyada wa-'sti'māl al-makr wa al-ḥīla wa-mukāyadat al-muslimīn.*<sup>4</sup> The phrase which was taken as indicating the conversion of most Egyptian villages to Islām is *wa-ghalabahum al-muslimūn 'alā 'āmmat al-qurā*. Indeed, a number of scholars understood the phrase in question in this manner. G. Wiet, whose following statement seems to be based on the passage quoted above, says: "Dès lors, écrit Makrizi, les Coptes furent obéissants, et leur puissance définitivement anéantie; aucun d'eux ne fut en mesure de se révolter ou même de résister au gouvernement, et les musulmans eurent la majorité dans les villages."<sup>5</sup> Following Wiet, A. Fattal writes: "Depuis, écrit Maqrīzī, les Coptes furent asservis sur toute l'étendue de l'Égypte et les Musulmans commencèrent à prévaloir en nombre dans la plupart des villages."<sup>6</sup>

These translations seem incompatible with the text. The expression *wa ghalabahum al-muslimūn 'alā 'āmmat al-qurā* cannot mean that the majority of the Egyptian villages became Muslim. *Ghalabahu 'alayhi* means: "He overcame him in contending for it; he took it or obtained it from him by superior power or force".<sup>7</sup> The passage in question therefore merely means that the Muslims suppressed the revolt, regained control over the rebellious villages and presumably resumed the collection of taxes. This interpretation

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Maqrīzi, *Kitāb al-mawā'iz wa al-i'tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa al-āthār*, Cairo 1270 A.H., vol. 2, p. 494<sup>2-6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> G. Wiet, *L'Égypte arabe de la conquête arabe à la conquête ottomane*. Paris 1937, p. 75. Cf. *idem*, *Qibṭ*, EI<sup>1</sup>, vol. 2, pp. 994b, 997b, 998b.

<sup>6</sup> A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-Musulmans en pays d'Islam*. Beyrouth 1958, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. *gh-l-b*.

is evident also from the latter part of the passage quoted above: it clearly says then when the Coptic rebellion was defeated, the Copts refrained from taking to the field and reverted to tactics of trickery and deceit. Al-Maqrīzī gives an identical description of these events in his general account of the Coptic rebellion. Having described how al-Afshīn crushed the revolt of 216-217 A.H./831-832 A.D., he says: *...fa-lam yaqdir aḥad minhum* (i.e. *min al-qibṭ*) *'alā al-khurūj wa-lā al-qiyām 'alā al-sulṭān wa-ghalaba al-muslimūn 'alā al-qurā fa-'āda al-qibṭ min ba'd dhālika ilā kayd al-islām wa ahlihi bi-a'māl al-ḥīla wa-al-makr.*<sup>8</sup> The reaction of the Copts to their defeat was not massive conversion to Islam, but a change in their opposition tactics.

In his reference to al-Maqrīzī's remark that "never has a people been so converted all at once"<sup>9</sup>, Lapidus has been misled by Fattal<sup>10</sup>. Al-Maqrīzī's passage quoted by Fattal is not taken from the description of Coptic rebellions in the ninth century A.D., but rather from a chapter on "the virtues of Egypt" (*faḍā'il miṣr*). The passage deals with events at Pharaoh's court during Moses' appearance there. It reads: "From amongst the people of Egypt were the magicians. All of them became believers in one hour. No community except the Copts is known to have embraced Islām within an hour... When they witnessed what they witnessed, they became assured that this (i.e. the miracle performed by Moses) is from heaven... and said : We believe in the Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.<sup>11</sup>... Tubayyi' said: "No group became believers within an hour like the Copts" (*wa-innahu kāna min ahlihā al-saḥara wa-ḡad āmanū jami'an fī sā'a wāḥida wa lā yu'lamu jamā'a aslamat fī sā'a wāḥida akthar min jamā'at al-qibṭ... fa-lammā 'āyanū mā 'āyanū ayḡanū anna dhālika min al-samā'*... *wa ḡalū āmannā bi-rabb al-'ālamīn rabb mūsā wa hārūn... ḡāla tubayyi': mā āmana jamā'a ḡaṭṭu fī sā'a wāḥida mithl jamā'at al-qibṭ*)<sup>12</sup>.

It is not the intention of this writer to venture an opinion on the substantive question concerning the process of the conversion of Egypt to Islām or on the dates marking important stages in the development of this process. However, if the ninth century A.D. is to be considered a period in which massive conversion to Islām took place, the argument ought to be supported by evidence other than that presented.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *op. cit.*, Cairo 1270 A.H., vol. 1, pp. 79 *infra* – 80 *supra*; ed. G. Wiet, Cairo 1911, vol. 1, pp. 334-335.

<sup>9</sup> Lapidus, *op. cit.*, 257, note 19.

<sup>10</sup> A. Fattal, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>11</sup> Sūra 20, v. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *op. cit.*, Cairo 1270, vol. 1. p. 25; ed. G. Wiet, vol. 1, pp. 102-103.