

## Coptic Feast Days

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In the work generally referred to simply as *Topography or Description of Egypt*<sup>1</sup> by western scholars the Muslim historian Taqi al Din Ahmed Ali ibn al Maqrîzi (1364-1442) included a small section on Coptic religious feast days. This work was published with French translation by Robert Griveau in 'Les fêtes des Coptes' *Patrologia Orientalis* 10 (1915) pp. 314-343 as part of a larger article, in which the descriptions of other Christian feasts<sup>2</sup> are also edited and translated by Griveau. The page numbers in brackets are those of the PO text.

Proper names of important figures are usually followed by a pious wish such as 'May God be pleased with him' or 'Peace be upon him'. Constant repetition of them seems to me cumbersome and not particularly helpful for largely non-Muslim readers. As always, names in Arabic form are different from those in the form of European languages, which of course differ from language to language

The longest section of this relatively short text is devoted to the feast known Naurûz ( نوروز known in the text also as نبروز ). This name, as far as I know, does not occur in Coptic. There are two ways of designating the Nile in Pharaonic Egypt: the 'great waters' (*jtrw ʿ3w*) and 'Hapy' *hʿpj* referring to the river or a personification of it. If the plural form of the article is attached to the first of these, it produces a form in Coptic such *ΝΙΕΡΩΟΥ/ΝΙΑΡΩΟΥ* (according to dialect). A hymn to the Nile was probably composed in the Middle Kingdom (2nd millennium BC), and copies have survived from a later date, but it does not seem to have been part, let alone to have been a core element, of a ritual devoted to the celebration of the inundation.<sup>3</sup> Strange as it may seem, the word may be a survival of a Persian word, albeit one that does not survive in Coptic. As an argument to support this suggestion I would two relatively well attested words from Persian that have survived in Coptic for no reason that strikes me as obvious: *ΑΒΛΘΕΙΗΝ* (glass) and *ΣΑΡΑΘΟΥΩ* (hare). The periods of Persian occupation of Egypt (6th cent. BC and 7th cent. AD) are so brief that linguistic 'borrowings' of comparatively unnecessary words are striking. Naurûz might fall into this category. It may be worth mentioning that the name is not used in the Coptic Synaxary for the first day of the year.<sup>4</sup> It was, of course, not a religious feast devoted to a

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1 Ar. *الخطط*, which means something 'plans'.

2 Al Birûni on Melkite feasts and a calendar of Maronite feasts by Ibn al Qula'i.

3 Pascal Vernus and Jean Yoyotte (tr. D. Lorton) *Book of the Pharaohs* (2003) s.v. Nile. For a brief but comprehensive survey of research on Pharaonic Nile celebrations see *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (ed. W. Helck and E. Otto) vol. 4 p. 931.

4 R. Basset 'Le synaxaire arabe jacobite' *Patrologia Orientalis* 1 (1907) pp. 223 ff.

figure or event prominent in Christianity, but still one might have expected the name to have been used.

For the sake of convenience I attach a list of Coptic months in Bohairic, Sahidic and Arabic, together with the corresponding dates of the Julian calendar. These are not the only spellings in Coptic. As Till<sup>5</sup> points out, the Gregorian calendar introduced in 1582 (used, of course, in the contemporary Coptic Church) inevitably has different dates.

Bohairic	Sahidic	Arabic	Date
ΘΩΟΥΤ	ΘΟΟΥΤ	توت	29.viii
ΠΑΟΠΙ	ΠΑΟΠΕ	بابة	28.ix
ΛΘΩΡ	ΖΑΘΩΡ	هتور	28.x
ΧΟΙΑΚ	ΚΟΙΑΖΚ	كيهك	27.xi
ΤΩΒΙ	ΤΩΒΕ	طوبه	27.xii
ΜΕΧΙΡ	ΜΩΙΡ	امشير	26.i
ΠΑΡΕΜΖΑΤ	ΠΑΡΜΖΟΤΠ	برمهات	25.ii
ΦΑΡΜΟΥΘΙ	ΠΑΡΜΟΥΤΕ	برموده	27.iii
ΠΑΧΩΝ, ΠΑΦΩΝΣ	ΠΑΦΩΝΣ	بشنس	26.iv
ΠΑΩΝΙ	ΠΑΩΝΕ	بؤونه	26.v
ΕΠΗΠ <sup>6</sup>	ΕΠΠ	ايبب	25.vi
ΜΕΣΩΡΙ	ΜΕΣΩΡΕ	مسرى	25.vii

### Notice of the feast days<sup>7</sup> of the Copts among the Christians in the regions of Egypt

Yûnis<sup>8</sup> tells us that 'Umar al Khattâb said: 'Avoid Jewish and Christian feast days, for their assemblies are places of discontent. Do not learn their gibberish,<sup>9</sup> for if so you will

<sup>5</sup> W. Till *Koptische Grammatik* (1961) p. 87, essentially the source of this list.

<sup>6</sup> For another name of this month cf. W. Vycichl *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Copte* (1983) p. 36: Sahidic form **ΤΑΠΣΟΤΕ** 'the one of Spd (Sirius)'

<sup>7</sup> Two different words are used for 'feast day': **عيد**, as here and **موسم**

<sup>8</sup> Griveau refers to C. Brockelmann *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (1898) p. 99, who says this person, possibly of Aramaean origin, was from Jabbul (between Wasit and Baghdad) and seems to have been concerned, like other members of so-called Basra School in the 8th cent. AD, with grammar.

<sup>9</sup> Griveau translates 'language', but the word used here seems to be relatively pejorative.

adopt their habits.' Ibn Abbâs,<sup>10</sup> commenting on *And those who will not witness vanity, but when they pass near senseless play, pass by with dignity,*<sup>11</sup> said that this meant the feasts of the polytheists.<sup>12</sup> It was said to him: 'Is this not about false witness ?' and he said: 'No, rather the verse that testifies to false witness: *Follow not that whereof thou hast no knowledge. Lo ! The hearing and the sight and the heart, of each it will be asked.*<sup>13</sup>

Know that the Christian Copts of Egypt profess the Jacobite teaching, as we have mentioned. Currently there are fourteen feasts of theirs known in the districts of Egypt celebrated annually in the Coptic year, (317), seven of them named 'great' and seven 'small'. The great feast days among them are the Annunciation, Feast of Olives, Easter, Thursday of the Forty, Pentecost, the Nativity and the Immersion; the small ones are the Circumcision, Lent, Thursday of the Covenant, Saturday of Light, Sunday of Limits, Transfiguration, and Feast of the Cross. They also have other feast days that are extra-canonical but are customary, for example Naurûz. I will give information about these feast days which you will not find them gathered together outside this book, and this agrees with what I have extracted from Christian books and Muslim histories.

## I The major feasts

**1. The Feast of the Annunciation.** This Christian feast has its origins in the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary of the birth of Christ. Jibrîl is known to Christians as Gabriel, Maryam as Lady Mary and Christ as Jesus. The feast is celebrated by Egyptian Christians on the 29th of Baramhât.<sup>14</sup>

**2. The Feast of Olives.** Known among them as the Feast of Sha'ânîn, which means 'praise'.<sup>15</sup> It happens on the seventh Sunday<sup>16</sup> of their fast and it is their tradition to

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10 Uncle of Muhammad

11 Sûra 25, 72. ( version of Marmaduke Pickthall)

12 المشركين 'polytheists' means Christians here.

13 Sûra' 17, 36.

14 March 25

15 Wehr p.467 translates the word as 'palm branch'

16 Griveau refers to John Selden *De synedriis veterum Ebraeorum* (1679), but the only copy of this I have been able to consult is divided into three books, each with its own pagination, and Griveau's 'p.1299' is not among them.

bring palm branches out of the church and to tell the story of the day when Christ on a foal, that is a donkey, rode into Jerusalem<sup>17</sup> and entered Zion, he riding and the people before him praising him, and he was ordering amicability, urging them to do good works, forbidding them to do wrong and keeping them away from it. The Feast of Sha'ânin is one of the Christian feasts in which they decorate their churches. On the tenth day<sup>18</sup> of Rajab in 378 AH (989 AD) al Hâkim bi 'Amr Allah<sup>19</sup> forbade Christians to decorate their churches and carry the branches according to their custom and arrested a number of those found with anything of the sort and ordered the seizure of church property<sup>20</sup> and transferred it to the state treasury<sup>21</sup> and ordered<sup>22</sup> the same for all the districts and burned the crosses at the door of the Ancient Mosque and the Police.<sup>23</sup>

**3. Easter.** This is the great feast of the Christians. They believe that Christ, when the Jews plotted against and conspired to destroy and kill him, arrested him and brought him to a wooden structure to be crucified on it with two thieves. And for us it is the truth that God on high took him up, that he was not crucified or killed and that the one crucified on the cross with the thieves was not Christ but one made to look like Christ. They also say that his clothes were divided among the soldiers and the land was covered in darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour of the day of Friday the 15th of the month of Nîsân of the Hebrews and the 29th of Baramhât and the 25th of Adhâr of the year (blank space).<sup>24</sup> The lookalike was buried that evening in the grave and covered by a large stone, the leading Jews having sealed it and set a guard there early Saturday morning so that no-one would steal the body. They believe that the one buried there arose from the grave in the early hours of Sunday. Peter and John the disciples went to the grave and saw the garments that had covered the deceased but no corpse. There was an angel of God at the grave wearing white robes and he told them of the resurrection

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17 The Ar. name القدس is used to refer to the physical place. 'Jerusalem' seems to be more common for the spiritual place.

18 The word in the text is خلون, which I am unable to find in Wehr or Edward Lane's dictionary.

19 A commonly accepted date for al Hâkim's accession is 996 AD.

20 Ar. محبس refers to 'inalienable property, the yield of which is devoted to pious purposes' (Wehr p. 153)

21 Ar. الديوان

22 Lit. 'wrote'

23 Griveau provides no location for the mosque, and I can only guess that it is the mosque of Amr ibn al 'As in Old Cairo, the first to be built by the invaders. On the various police forces in Fatimid Fustat and Cairo cf. J. W. Meri (ed.) *Medieval Islamic Civilization* (2006) vol. 2 note on 'Police' p. 622

24 Griveau says that there is a blank space here in all the texts

of the one buried in the grave. They also say that on that Sunday evening Christ came to see his disciples, blessing, counselling and instructing them. It is recorded in their gospel. This feast of theirs takes place three days after the Feast of the Crucifixion.

**4. Thursday of the Forty.** Known among the Syrians as Ascension.<sup>25</sup> It is also called the Ascension. It is on day 42 from the breaking of the fast. They believe that Christ, forty days after his resurrection, went forth to Bethany.<sup>26</sup> He raised his hands, blessed them and ascended to heaven, aged 33 years and 3 months. His disciples returned to Jerusalem, which means Beit al Quds.<sup>27</sup> He had promised them the spread of their teaching and more besides. which is acknowledged among them. This is their belief in how Christ left the world. *Who is more true in statement than Allah ?*<sup>28</sup>

**5. Pentecost.** This is Whitsuntide,<sup>29</sup> which they perform fifty days after the Resurrection. They believe that ten days after the Ascension and fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ the disciples gathered on top of Zion and were visited by the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire and were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in all languages and many signs appeared before them. And the Jews persecuted them and imprisoned them. And He rescued them and they came out of prison. They went their separate ways into the world, calling people to the religion of Christ.

**6. The Nativity.** They believe that it is the day on which Christ was born, a Monday. And they keep a vigil on the eve of the birth. They usually have many lights in the churches and they decorate them and celebrate it in Egypt on the 29th of Kihak.<sup>30</sup> It is still within the confines of Egypt one of the best-known festivals. In the days of the Fatimid state one used to distribute to the official leaders, leading teachers, the princes who wore necklaces,<sup>31</sup> state secretaries and others goblets of Cairene sweetmeats, bowls

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25 Ar. المسلاق, which seems to be a calque of a Syriac word. The Ar. word for 'ascension' is given in the next sentence: الصعود.

26 Ar. Beit 'Aniya (بيت عنيا)

27 cf. fn 11

28 Sûra 4 87, 4

29 Ar. العنصرة.

30 According to the Gregorian calendar this would have to be Jan. 7

31 Adj. used here is made from الطوق, a necklace.

with cakes, waterskins of rose water, plates of doughnuts and the fish known as *burî*.<sup>32</sup> It is a Christian custom during the Nativity to play with fire, and the following is one of the prettiest things said of it:

*Fire play in the Nativity is not silliness*

*But for Islam it is a matter of poetry*

*For in it Christians declare<sup>33</sup> that their Lord*

*Jesus, son of Mary was created and born.*

(322) We understand the Nativity in Cairo, Misr<sup>34</sup> and all of Egypt to be a solemn occasion in which coloured lamps and charming dolls are sold for much money. There is no-one, whether important or not, who does not buy some of them for his children and family. The lamps were called *fawânîs* (pl. of *fânûs*).<sup>35</sup> They were hung in the market shops, something that went to excess in terms of quantity and attractiveness. People were caught up by a feverish desire to raise the price of them, and I understand that one of them sold for 1000 dirhems or 500 dirhems of silver up to seventy *mithqâl*<sup>36</sup> of gold. I know beggars in the streets in this festive time who asked God to grant them a *fânûs*, and they were given small ones costing a dirhem or so. Later, because of deteriorating conditions in Egypt and taxes on luxury goods, the manufacture of these lamps for Christmas fell into disuse, and there is little of them that survives.

**7. The Immersion (Epiphany).** This feast takes place among the Christians on the 11th of Tûbah.<sup>37</sup> Yahya son of Zakaria, known to them as John the Baptist baptized Christ, that is washed him in the Jordan. When Christ came out of the water, the Holy Spirit (323) communicated itself to him. This is why Christians immerse their children in water on this day and descend into it all together. It happens only when it is very cold. They call it the day of Immersion. It was the greatest feast in Egypt. Mas'ûdi says: 'The

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32 The Mediterranean fish 'mullet'. Taken over from the Coptic ⲃⲟⲣⲉ

33 The word used here seems to have elements of amazement and deceit in it.

34 The distinction between Cairo and Misr is presumably between the newly founded Muslim city and the older area south of it still known as Old Cairo.

35 Gk. φανός

36 Lit. 'weight'. According to H. Wehr *Dictionary of Modern Arabic* (1961) p. 104 it is 4.68 g.

37 Jan. 20

evening of the Immersion in Egypt was a great affair with its people, when nobody slept. It was the evening of the 11th of Tûbah. In 330 AH (941AD), on the night of the Immersion, the Ikshid Muhammad al Tughj<sup>38</sup> was in his palace al Mukhtâr at Misr, on an island surrounded by the Nile.<sup>39</sup> He lit a thousand candles on the banks of the island and Fustât in addition to the lamps and candles lit by the people. There were thousand of people on the banks of the Nile that night, Muslims and Christians, some in boats and some in the houses nearest to the river and on both banks. There was nothing lacking: food, drink, clothes, objects of gold and silver, jewels, distractions, music and revelry. (324) It was the most beautiful night to be seen in Misr, the most pleasurable. The streets were not closed that night. Most of the assistants plunged into the Nile, claiming that it was preventive against illness and disease.

Al Masihi<sup>40</sup> records in his description of events in 367 (978) that Christians were forbidden to engage in traditional displays of Immersion, to assemble and go into the water and enjoy themselves. An edict was published that anyone who disobeyed would be banished immediately. The same writer says that the feast was celebrated in 398 (998), with tents and pavilions, with seating in various places on the banks of the Nile. Divans were set up for Fahd Ibrahim the Christian, secretary of Bargawân<sup>41</sup> and candles and lamps lit in his honour, and there were actors and singers. He sat with his family and began to drink until it was time for Immersion. He then took his bath and withdrew. Masihi adds that in 401 (1011), on the 28th of Jumâda I, which fell on the same day as the 10th of Tûbah, Christians were forbidden to immerse themselves, and nobody went into the river. He reports in a following chronicle for 415 (1025): 'The night of Wednesday, the 4th day of of Dhu al Qa'adha, the Immersion took place. It had become a widespread custom to sell fruit, mutton and other delicacies. The Prince of the Faithful (325), al Zâhir li-l zâz Din Allah,<sup>42</sup> came down to the residence of his grandfather al Aziz bi-Allah to see the Immersion, with his harem. Muslims were

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38 882-946 AD

39 This sounds like Roda, an island off Old Cairo, but I can find no mention of al Mukhtâr

40 A Persian Christian who wrote extensively on medicine d. 1000 AD

41 For the two people mentioned here cf. Maqrizi's work *Khitat* chapter on al Hâkim. Bargawân is given the title "ustadh", which often indicates a certain social and educational standing.

42 1021-1036 AD

forbidden to mingle with the Christians entering the water. Badr al Dawla,<sup>43</sup> the black slave, in charge of both police forces, set up his tent near the bridge and took up his position there. The Prince of the Faithful had all the lamps and candles lit to provide illumination all night. Monks and priests came bearing crosses and candles. They officiated<sup>44</sup> for a long time until the Immersion.'

Ibn al Ma'mun<sup>45</sup> also speaks of the Immersion in 517 (1123) and adds: 'The government distributed, as was customary for officials, citrus fruits, oranges, boats<sup>46</sup> of sweet limes, sugar cane sticks and mullet.<sup>47</sup> Each received his share according to the divan.<sup>48</sup>

## II The minor feasts

**1. The Circumcision.** This feast took place on the 6th of Baûnah, the day on which Christians say that Christ was circumcised, eight days after the Nativity. Unlike other Christians Copts practise circumcision.

**(326) 2. The Forty.** This feast celebrates for the Christians the entry of Christ into the Temple. They say that Simeon the priest brought Christ in with his blessed mother and blessed him. It is celebrated on the 8th of Amshîr.<sup>49</sup>

**3. The Thursday of the Promise.** This feast takes place three days before Easter. A basin is to be filled with water, formulae spoken over it and the feet of all Christians washed in it, for which they are blessed. They claim that Christ did the same for his disciples to teach them humility. He then made them promise not to separate and always be humble in their dealings with each other. The people of Egypt call it the Feast of Lentils because they prepare sieved lentils. The Syrians called it Thursday of rice or

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43 On this person cf. Yaacov Lev *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (1991) p.47

44 The verb (فسيسوا), Hans Wehr *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (1961) p. 762, seems to be related to the noun form meaning a 'priest' and so presumably mean 'officiate as priest', but this is not the meaning given by Wehr.

45 Son of a Fatimid vizier, so presumably in a position to gain easy access to information cf. for example Tsugitaka Sat *Sugar in the Social Life of Medieval Islam* (2015) p. 59

46 Wehr, p. 357 gives the meaning of this form of the word as 'boats', but there is another form that means 'carriage'.

47 cf. above p.321

48 ديوان is an elastic term that can mean a collection of poems or government office

49 Feb. 2



eggs, the Spanish the Thursday of April, the name of one of their months. Under the Fatimids 500 dinars were struck on this day and distributed as a bonus payment to each member of the administration, as described in the article about the fortress of Cairo on the subject of the Mint (327) in this book.<sup>50</sup> Lentil Thursday is still one of the biggest feasts in Cairo, Misr and other provinces. Countless numbers of coloured eggs are sold in the markets of Cairo. Slaves, young people and others use them in games of chance. The *muhtasib*<sup>51</sup> attends these games to keep order if necessary. Christians exchange gifts and give Muslims different sorts of fish, sieved lentils and eggs. It fell into disuse when there were difficult times among the people. Little of it remains.

**4. The Saturday of Light.** It is before Easter. Christians claim that on this day fire appears on the grave of him they call Christ in the Church of the Resurrection at Jerusalem and all the lamps of the church are lit. But those who research such matters have concluded that this is a clever piece of manipulation by Christians. It is celebrated in Egypt on the third day after Lentil Thursday. It is followed by

**5. The Sunday of Limits.** This comes seven days after Easter, the first Sunday after the end of the Fast (328) because the previous Sundays fall in Lent. On this day utensils, furniture and clothes are renewed and normal everyday life is resumed.

**6. The Feast of the Transfiguration.** It is celebrated on the 13th of Mesôri.<sup>52</sup> Christians claim that Christ appeared to his disciples after his ascension, when they asked him to bring them Moses and Elijah. He brought them in the prayer house<sup>53</sup> of Jerusalem and then ascended to heaven and left them.

**7. The Feast of the Cross.** It takes place on the 17th of Thoth.<sup>54</sup> It is a recent feast, inspired by the discovery of the cross by Helen, the mother of Constantine reported at length in their annals. The following is a summary of the story of Constantine:

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50 cf. Paula Sanders *Ritual, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (1994) p.87

51 Chief of the market police

52 Aug. 6

53 The Temple was not destroyed until 70 AD.

54 Sept. 14

Constantine was the son of Constantius, son of Archimius, son of Dakbûn, son of Claudius, son of 'Ayâsh, son of Katbyân-A'aseb.<sup>55</sup> He was called the Great and surnamed Caesar. He was the first emperor to establish Christianity in his empire, to order the destruction of idols and temples and build churches and believe in Christ. His mother Helen was from Edessa,<sup>56</sup> where he grew up with his mother and was educated. He was always (329) successful, happy and victorious in all his battles. At first his interest was in the Magi<sup>57</sup> and he opposed Christianity, which he rejected. The reason for his conversion was the leprosy that appeared on him. It was a great affliction. He assembled the most skilful doctors. They agreed to treat him with certain medicines and, after he had taken them, they made him take a bath in the blood from the bodies of babies while they were being suckled. He had many babies gathered together and ordered them to be strangled in a bathtub so that their blood would be fresh. The babies were assembled and he appeared in person to give the order. But when he heard the mothers crying, he took pity on them and returned their babies to them. 'I would rather bear my misfortune than have so many human beings killed.' The women gratefully departed with their children. The following night, while sleeping, Constantine saw an aged man in a dream: 'Because you took pity on the babies and their mothers and preferred your suffering to their death, God has taken pity and has granted you a cure from your affliction. Send for a Christian named Silvester who has fled from fear of you. Do what he tells you and adhere to what he advises you, and you will (330) be cured. He woke in fear and sent to Bishop Silvester asking him to come to him. Silvester thought that Constantine wanted to kill him because he knew of Constantine's cruelty to the Christians and his hatred of their religion. When he saw that Constantine received him with kindness and learned what he had seen in his sleep, he told the Emperor about Christianity and they spoke with each other in a long exchange of information, which is recorded among them. Constantine sent for all the bishops, in exile or in hiding, and accepted Christianity. God cured him of his leprosy. Constantine protected the religion

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55 This lineage has undoubtedly undergone such transformations that it is longer recognizable: Constantius Chlorus was the son of Eutropius and Claudia

56 Her birthplace is unknown, but the town of Drepanum in Asia Minor was renamed Helenopolis by her son.

57 I would speculate here that there was a distorted tradition in Arabic writings arising from Constantine's *Oratio ad Sanctos* (17), in which Constantine is at pains to illustrate the difference between ancestral piety and true religion: at the end of the passage he refers to the misguided attachment of Cambyses to the Magi, and how he later regretted this and condemned the Magi to death.

and announced his belief in the religion of Christ. But there was trouble at Rome and people rose up against him. He left the city and founded Constantinople with great splendour and gave his name to it. He took up residence there and it became the capital of the empire. Since the reign of Nero, who killed the apostles, and his successors, Christians had been continually put to death, imprisoned or driven out. But when Constantine was established at Constantinople, he gathered Christians about him and showed favour to them and contempt to idolaters. The people of Rome rebelled and refused to obey him and chose (331) another emperor, which made him angry. Many things happened between Constantine and the people, and these are related in the annals of Roman history. He left Constantinople to march on Rome. The Romans prepared to engage him, but as he approached they relented and submitted to him. He entered Rome and stayed there until he went off to fight the Persians. After defeating them, he became ruler of the largest part of the kingdoms of the world. In the twentieth year of his reign the Persians attacked some of his territories, and he responded by driving them out. It was then that he saw in a dream what resembled a cross, rising up and saying to him: 'If you wish to overcome your enemies, put this sign on your coat of arms and coins.' When he awoke he told his mother Helen to leave for Jerusalem to look for the relics of Christ and build churches there and organize pilgrimages. She did so. It is said that Bishop Macarius guided her towards the Cross (believed to be the one on which Christ had been crucified) and told her how the Jews had treated Christ. She began digging and found a grave in which there were three wooden structures in the form of a cross. They claim that if the three crosses are placed one after another on a corpse, the corpse comes back to life when he comes into contact with the third cross. Christians established it as (332) a feast day and called it the Feast of the Cross, celebrated on the 14th of Ailûl and the 17th of Thoth<sup>58</sup> after the Nativity in year 328. Helen had a gold box made and built the Church of the Resurrection at Jerusalem, which they claim to be is above the grave of Christ. She had a number of disputes with the Jews, recorded in Christian texts. She returned with the Cross to her son, who reigned for twenty-four years. His successor was Constantine the Younger.

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58 Sept. 14 and 15, respectively

The Feast of the Cross was celebrated at Misr with great solemnity. There was a large procession to Beni-Wa'el outside Fûstât. All manner of abominable excess happened there. When the Fatimids ruled Egypt and built Cairo and made it their residence in the caliphate of Al Aziz bi'illah, on the fourth of Rajab, the day of the feast, in 381 (992)<sup>59</sup> it was forbidden to go to Beni Wa'el and the roads were guarded. In the following year, (333) the feast fell on the 14th of Rajab, everybody went to Beni Wa'el and amused themselves in the customary fashion. On the 7th of Safar in 402 (1012), a proclamation by al Hâkim bi Amr-Illah was read aloud in the Old Mosque<sup>60</sup> and the streets forbidding Christians to assemble for the Feast, wear jewellery on that day, attend church and preventing them from doing those things. It has become so neglected that almost nobody in Egypt knows the date of it.

**8. Nairûz.**<sup>61</sup> The first day of the Coptic year together with the first day of the month of Thoth. Christians usually light fires and go bathing. It has been and still is a day of rejoicing for Egyptians. According to Wahb,<sup>62</sup> the fire became cold on the night when Abraham was thrown into it and in the morning it happened over the whole earth so that it was not possible to use fire during that night or the following morning. For this reason Christians spend that night near fire. They leap over it, exposing themselves to its smoke. They call it Nairûz, a Syriac word meaning 'feast'.

(334) Ibn Abbâs was asked why there was a feast on the night of Nairûz. He replied that it was the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one, when people thought it convenient to offer their monarchs rare gifts and the custom was taken over by foreigners. This tradition is cited by al Hafiz Abu'l Qasim 'Ali bin Asâkir in his *History of Damascus*.<sup>63</sup> a tradition transmitted by Ibn Abbâs: 'Pharaoh said to the leaders of his people: *This magician is clever*.<sup>64</sup> They ordered magicians to be found. Pharaoh told Moses to arrange a meeting and to bring Aaron and the magicians would come. Moses

59 Cairo was founded in 968 AD

60 Perhaps the mosque of Amr ibn al 'As in Old Cairo. The oldest mosque in Fatimid Cairo is al Azhar (970 AD)

61 It is difficult to avoid speculating that this section is so long because it affords Maqrizi the opportunity of displaying his knowledge of other Arab writers, which he has so far been unable to do.

62 Wahb ibn Munabbih, a prolific writer, with extensive knowledge of Judaism, who may have died in 728 AD. The 'historiola' reference, according to Griveau is to Sûra 2, 260 and 21, 69.

63 1170 AD

64 Sûra 26,33

replied that the meeting would be on the day of ornament.<sup>65</sup> Ibn Asâkir adds that this day was a Saturday, the first day of the year, Nairûz. It is also said that the magicians told Pharaoh to arrange a day with him, and he replied that the day of ornament, the day of their greatest feast, was agreed on. This day was the Sabbath. Everybody came out and prepared for that day. He also says that Nairûz was the first day of the Persian year. It falls on the 14th (335) of Adhâr<sup>66</sup> and in the month of Baramhât. He who instituted it was called Jamshîd, a Persian king who reigned over the seven climates.<sup>67</sup> When he became sole ruler and had no more opponents, he chose the day of the year for a feast and called it Naurûz. The same feast is said to have been established by Solomon son of David, who appointed the day when his seal was returned to him. Others say that it was the day on which Job was healed:<sup>68</sup> *Strike the ground with thy foot. This (spring) is a cool bath and a refreshing drink.* He established a feast on this day and the custom of throwing water was introduced. It is also said that there was a tribe of Israelites in Syria that suffered from the plague and emigrated to Iraq. The king of Persia heard of them and built an enclosure where they took up residence. Once inside they all died, 4,000 of them. God the Almighty inspired a prophet of the time by saying to him: 'Do you see this nation. Make war on it with such and such.' He replied: 'Lord, how can I lead them into battle, since they are dead?' God then revealed to him that he would bring them back to life. One night he sent down rain and in the morning they were all alive. It is of them that God says:<sup>69</sup> *Bethink thee of those of old, who went forth from their habitations in their thousands, fearing death, (336) and Allah said unto them: Die; and then He brought them back to life. Lo! Allah is a Lord of Kindness to mankind, but most of mankind give not thanks.* The king of Persia was told what happened to them. He then said: 'Rejoice on that day and sprinkle each other with water.' That day was Naurûz, which is still the case. The Caliph al Ma'mûn, when asked about the sprinkling custom, replied: 'When God said, *Bethink thee of those of old, who went forth from their habitations in their thousands, fearing death, and Allah said unto them: Die; and then He brought them back to life,* he meant that a nation had expired. So and so has died of exhaustion. On that day rain fell and

65 According to Griveau a feast day ('jour de foire et de fête')

66 Heb. אָדָר. Day when Purim (פּוּרִים) was celebrated cf. Esther 9, 26

67 A legendary monarch, who also figures in the story about the discovery of wine-making.

68 Sûra 38, 42

69 Sûra 2, 243

revived them. Their earth became fertile, God having revived them with rain, which is why rain is called 'life'.<sup>70</sup> The custom of sprinkling with water was established, and there is still blessing to this day.'

It has also been reported that those leaving their country did so because of a plague. It is also said that they were told to wage a holy war and that, fearful of dying in battle, they fled from their country, but that God brought about their death to show them that nothing could save them from death. He then recalled them to life through the agency of Ekeziel, one of the Israelite prophets, a long story that can be found among the commentary writers.

(337) Ali bin Hamza of Isfahan states in his book about Persian feasts that Naurûz was instituted by Jamshîd., also called Jamshâd, one of the first Persian monarchs. The word means 'new day'. It was a Persian feast on the day of the spring equinox, like that of the autumn equinox, Mihrajân, instituted under Afridûn,<sup>71</sup> the first Persian to celebrate after he had the Laughing One, Bewarrasp<sup>72</sup> murdered. This day became a feast day known as Mihrajân. The institution of this feast is 2020 years later than that of Nûrûz.

Ibn Wasif Shah, telling the story of Manûsh the son of Maqûsh, the ancient Egyptian king, relates that this monarch was the first to celebrate Nûrûz in Egypt. Seven days were devoted to eating and drinking in honour of the stars.

According to Ibn Redwan<sup>73</sup> the Nile was the main reason for the fertility of Egypt, and the ancient Egyptians, especially those living at the time of Claudianus<sup>74</sup> made it the start of the year (338) at the beginning of autumn, when the inundation was completed, a matter of the greatest importance. And they made their first month Thoth, followed by Bâbah and Hâtour, and so on in the well-known succession.

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70 Griveau has a reference to a passage in a text called *Fiqh al Lughah* that equates rain with life.

71 Legendary Persian king, whose name goes back to Avestan, the language of Zoroastrianism.

72 The name in Arabic seems to be Bewarrast

73 Physician of al Hâkim

74 Other mss., more plausibly, have the name Diocletian, whose accession year is the start of the Coptic era, viz. 284 AD Year of the Martyrs.

Ibn Zûlâq<sup>75</sup> writes that in 363 (974) the Prince of the Faithful Mu'izz li Din Illah forbade the lighting of fires in the streets during Naurûz and sprinkling water. He further says that in 364 fires were lit and water sprinkled as much as they had always been. People ran through the streets doing this, and then they went out to Cairo,<sup>76</sup> where they indulged in the same pursuits, loathsome and bejewelled in the market places. Mu'izz ordered them to desist from lighting fires or sprinkling water. He had many people imprisoned and paraded them through the streets on camels.

Ibn al Ma'mun also reports that the feast of Naurûz occurred on the 9th of Rajab in 517 (1123): the clothes of honour, with special clothes from Tirâz<sup>77</sup> and from the port of Alexandria, with accessory objects of gold, silks and single-coloured cloth.<sup>78</sup> The clothese were distributed as decided (339) for men and women and objects of value. There were all sorts of specialities for the feast distributed according to type and recipient, such as melons, pomegranates, bunches of bananas, fresh dates, baskets of dried dates from Qûs,<sup>79</sup> baskets of quince, portions of chicken, mutton and beef in all sorts of mixtures, and melons. He adds that there was an official in charge of the customary distribution, gold coins and paper money, clothes and other gifts. 4,000 dinars of gold and 15,000 dirhems of silver were distributed and a large quantity of textiles from Dabiq,<sup>80</sup> gilded or silken, women's veils, multi-coloured headwear for women, cloth of red silk gilded and padded, silk handkerchiefs of Dabiq. As for the money and the clothes, they went only to employees of the palace and the vizier, schoolmasters, minor officials, state employees, captains and crew of boats. No emir, (340) whatever his rank, shared in this largesse. As for the various sorts of melons and pomegranates, fresh dates, bananas, quinces, grapes, pastries, everything mentioned was included. Emirs wearing the turban and necklace received a portion, as well as anyone else of importance in the state.

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75 991-998 AD

76 Suggests that they started in Misr (Old Cairo)

77 A type of embroidered cloth. Griveau notes that the textile mill was at Tinnis.

78 The only word I can find for this is ساذج, which is slightly different from that in the text.

79 There is a town in Egypt, Qûs, at the Nile end of the Red Sea route, but whether this is the place intended here I do not know.

80 N. Syria

Al Qâdi al Fâdil<sup>81</sup> relates in his chronicle of 584 (1189): 'Tuesday the 14th of Rajab was the day of Coptic Naurûz. It is the 1st of Thoth the first month. In ancient times, under the former dynasty,<sup>82</sup> it was a solemn occasion for them, one of the feasts of their error. Horrific and unworthy actions were committed in public. An emir of Naurûz was appointed, with a large court and an authority appropriate to his rank.<sup>83</sup> He and his entourage processed on camels before the houses of the dignitaries. He wrote open letters and summoned all those he claimed to be under his jurisdiction, all by way of amusement, and he was satisfied by their gifts. The singers and immoral women gather (341) at the foot of the House of the Pearl<sup>84</sup> to be seen by the sultan, with instruments in their hand, crying aloud and drinking wine and beer in public. The same was done in the street. In the crowd water or water mixed with wine or unclean water was sprinkled. If by some misfortune an honest person was leaving the house, there was always someone to sprinkle them with water and ruin their clothes, without any regard for propriety. One had to pay a ransom or submit to this outrage. Water was sprinkled in the streets and disreputable acts committed in the houses of profligates.'

He adds in his chronicle of 592 (1196) that water was thrown as usual, but with the added custom of pelting each other with eggs and leather straps. Passers-by were unable walk unmolested, and anyone caught was doused in dirty water and his clothes ripped off.

Naurûz continued to be celebrated, as we have just said, by throwing water at and striking each other with skins and other objects until 780 (or so, when the government passed into the hands of Barqûq<sup>85</sup> before he (342) ascended to the throne and became Sultan. He forbade the games of Naurûz, even in Cairo, and threatened to punish those who practised them. But there was still a little celebration of the near the canals, reservoirs and other places of recreation, and once in the empty markets of Cairo when

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81 A leading official in the Fatimid and Ayyubid caliphates. The work cited here is often known as *Mutajaddidat*.

82 Fatimid

83 This is an element that calls to mind the celebration of 'Karneval' as it is still practised in Germany, where a 'Karnevalsprinze' is appointed to preside over the festival in those regions where it is celebrated.

84 This seems to have been a place from which the Caliph was able to witness the final stages of the inundation cf. P. Sanders *Ritual Politics* p. 112

85 Founder of the Burgi Mameluk dynasty in 1382 AD



nothing was being bought or sold. People gave themselves over to pleasure and play, when restraint was abandoned for excesses of debauchery and libertine behaviour. Naurûz seldom passed but that somebody was murdered, often more than one. But people no longer have feasts that require this and their pastimes no longer make these demands of them. How pleasant are the words of one poet:

*How can you celebrate Naurûz, my home ?*

*I am in harmony with everything in it*

*That is in harmony with me*

And another:

*People celebrate Naurûz*

*And I do too,*

*But with my tears.*

*Their fires burn brightly*

*While the flame is in my heart.*

And another:

*When Naurûz, comes, my beloved,*

*And you vex, avoid and reject me,*

*At night you send the fire of passion into my loins*

*And in the morning I 'naurûz<sup>186</sup>*

*With tears on my face*

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86 The Ar. has made a verb from the noun

