

Notes on a Letter of  
Pisentius Bishop of Keft

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The Arabic text of this letter was published by A. Périer in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 19 (1914) pp. 79-92 and 302-323. Périer's article also contains a French translation, and a missing portion of the latter is included by him in an appendix on pp. 445-446.

Pisentius was Bishop of Keft (Coptos) in Upper Egypt in the 7th cent. and died before the Arab invasion. There are of course biographies of him in Coptic and Arabic and, in addition, a substantial correspondence that illustrates the importance of his position in society.<sup>1</sup> There is as far as I know no Coptic text of this letter, but there are four copies in Arabic written between the 16th and 19th cent., all of which are in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Périer's translation is of the 16th cent. text, Ms. 6147 fols. 39-56. The following contains notes on the document.

The writer of the text is identified only at the end as John, Pisentius' secretary, who is urged by the bishop on his sickbed to write down what he has just said and read it aloud before his funeral ( قبل ان يدفن ). It is a letter (رسالة) in which Pisentius prophesied (تنبأ بها) the fate of Egypt after the Arab invasion. Interestingly, the bishop receives word that the Arabs have taken 'Egypt' (مصر) before Keft: the name 'misr' is the name often used in contemporary Egypt for Cairo as well as the country itself. I suspect it refers only to the area at the apex of the Delta, always a major political centre in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The first couple of pages are addressed to 'fathers, brothers and sons', with instructions to keep to the true faith. Examples (fol. 41) of those who left the path of righteousness for short-term worldly advantage are given. One is named as 'Luqâniûs of the false habit' (لوقانيوس ذى الاسكيم الزور). I

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<sup>1</sup> See for example T.G. Wilfong *Women of Djeme* (2002) pp. 81ff.

<sup>2</sup> Between the ancient city of Memphis and the Fatimid city of Cairo is a distance of only 20 km and it was only over several thousand that the city moved further north, helped also perhaps by the shifting course of the river, cf. K. Lutey and J. Bunbury 'Nile on the move' *Egyptian Archaeology* 32 (2007) pp. 3ff.

know of nobody with that name, but I think it might be a reference to Cyrus the Bishop of Phasis, who seems to have been sent to Egypt in 631 as the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria to 'rein in' the recalcitrant anti-Chalcedonian Egyptians. In *The Coptic Life of Samuel*<sup>3</sup> he is called ΠΡΑΥΧΙΑΝΟΣ 'the Colchian', and I suspect that the initial ك of the Arabic version has become ج. This would suggest that the name derives from the Coptic version of the name rather than the more familiar Arabic مقوقس. In the same section there is an observation about the writing of the title of the Trinity, which appears to have been written by some as a set of names, as if they were in apposition to each other. Pistentius points out that the Coptic uses the preposition ΜΝ 'and' to join the names to each other and that it has been wilfully omitted here. Another possible indicator of the Coptic origin of the text. The whole passage is directed against those who do not have 'upright' ideas about the Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Pistentius delivers his own version of the Credo.

After long and repetitive injunctions to the faithful in general to behave themselves, more specific charges are made about unChristian behaviour: 'priests and lay Christians' who do/do not X will suffer grave consequences: the charges range from the 'lurid' (magic, murder etc.) to the more soberly social injustices (not helping one's fellow man in poverty). Offences such as bigamy and inappropriate relationships are also singled out for disapproval.<sup>5</sup> Women who consort with other women of low moral standards, fail to chastise their daughters and are negligent towards their families are also to suffer harsh penalties in the afterlife.

Pistentius, clearly overcome by weakness (fol. 45), stops (لزم الصمت), but sits up on his bed and continues, and this is where the visionary account of what is to happen to Egypt begins. There is of course no claim to factual historicity, rather an intriguing amalgam of historical material, some of it factual and some of it not.

Initially the remarks about the invaders are very complimentary in terms of their economically sound administration,<sup>6</sup> but it is clear that this will devolve into unprincipled greed. The misery occasioned by that greed will be compounded by low Niles and food shortages, followed by disease and death. Society will clearly begin to disintegrate. Someone called مامادونس ('the name of their prophet'), whose name arithmetically equals 666,<sup>7</sup> will stamp his personality on Egypt for the worse

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3 A. Alcock *Life of Samuel of Kalamun* (1983) pp. 6 and 9

4 One can only speculate how many Christians, having become familiar with the 'unity' of God taught by Islam, may have begun to have doubts about the Trinity.

5 I cannot recall having encountered this charge before.

6 And is probably realistically so. For examination of the documentary evidence on the subject cf. P. Sijpesteijn (ed.) *Papyrology and the History of Early Islamic Egypt* (2004)

7 This is supposed to be the numerical value of something like ΜΑΜΑΔΑΝΟΥΣ, but I am not sure how it is meant to work. 666 is of the course the beast of Revelation 13 and 17, probably 3 times 6, an imperfect number (e.g. Daniel

(fol. 49). People will be reduced to slavery and taxation will increase.

A nation will appear from the west (أمة من ناحية المغرب) to fight the king of Babylon, but this merciless nation will oppress Egypt even more.<sup>8</sup> These will be followed by the Turks from the east (من ناحية المشرق), who will continue the oppression.

The final section becomes interestingly imaginative. God will once again be mindful of His Christian (النصارى) servants and they will be liberated by a Roman king (ملك الروم)<sup>9</sup> from the children of Esau (عيسوا).<sup>10</sup> An Abyssinian king will come to speak to the Roman king about matters of faith. The Roman becomes an adherent of Leo and Chalcedon, while the Abyssinian king remains one of the upright (المستقيم). The Abyssinian Patriarch, who becomes the Patriarch of Alexandria, will act as an intermediary between the two opponents.<sup>11</sup> The two kings will be reconciled and Chalcedonian texts consigned to the fire. Constantine will be succeeded by 10 kings in 40 years.<sup>12</sup> The 11th king will be the predecessor of the Antichrist, who will be overcome by the two prophets Elijah and Enoch (اخنوخ وإيلياء), who have been able to re-enter their bodies because they ascended to heaven while still in them.

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3,1), for the sake of emphasis.

8 Presumably the Fatimids.

9 Later named Constantine

10 Married a daughter of Ishmael (Gen. 28,9)

11 Ethiopia remained largely Christian during the gradual Islamization of Egypt.

12 This might almost characterize the Roman Empire in the 3rd cent.