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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**On Body, Soul, and Popular Culture: A Study of the
Perception of Plague by Muslim and Coptic
Communities in Mamluk Egypt**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

Mohamed S. Maslouh

Under the supervision of **Dr. Amina Elbendary**

September / 2013

The American University in Cairo

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Abstract

The American University in Cairo

On Body, Soul, and Popular Culture: A Study of the Perception of Plague by Muslim and Coptic Communities in Mamluk Egypt

By: Mohamed S. Maslough Supervisor: Dr. Amina Elbendary

This thesis studies the Muslim and Coptic medical, theological, and philosophical perceptions of plague in Mamluk Egypt (1250-1517). It also details the responses to mass death caused by plagues in both popular culture and mainstream scholarly works. This is carried out by illustrating the various medical, and theological parameters which influenced the different understandings of plague. Attention will be given to the diversity of the medical traditions which coexisted and, sometimes, overlapped in medieval Egypt. This reveals the inadequacy of the convenient classifications and distinctions between the different medical traditions, which have been previously employed to explain plague in medieval Egypt. Also, this thesis will explore the communal reactions of the Coptic minority in Egypt to plague in contrast to the prevalent discourse which ignores non-Muslims in medieval Islamic states and societies. It also discusses the philosophical questions that have been raised in the time of plague concerning fatalism, salvation, and divine punishment. Finally, it explores the perception of plague in popular culture in Mamluk Egypt, and reexamines the previous studies on plague which debated its influence on inter-communal social relations, by asking if the increased hostility to religious minorities was a result of the prevalence of plague.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to study the Muslim and Coptic communities' perception of plagues in Egypt, during the Mamluk era (1250-1517). The study of these themes reveals much about this period which gave witness to the crucial cultural and religious changes occurring after the conversion wave that changed Egypt into a predominantly Muslim state. Also, during this era Egypt suffered from a series of epidemics and natural disasters which resulted in a decline in the economic and political roles of Cairo- Egypt's most influential Islamic cosmopolitan city. Many of the Mamluk narratives show that plagues occurred in repetitive cycles almost every six years.¹ For example, in the period from the first instance of the Black Death in Syria and Egypt to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1347-1517), historians documented a total of twenty-eight plague pandemics in Egypt alone.² These recurrent epidemics, accompanied by political turbulence in the years following the Black Death, had a deep impact on the Mamluk state as shown in al-Maqrizi's description the reign of al-Nasir Faraj (1399-1405):

An-Nasir was the most ill-omened of all the rulers of Islam, for by his mismanagement he brought ruin upon all the land of Egypt and all of Syria from the source of the Nile to the outlet of the Euphrates. And the tyrant Tamerlane invaded Syria in 803 (I400) and reduced to ruins Aleppo.... Famine struck Egypt from 806 (I403).... More than half of Cairo, its estates and environs, were ruined; two-thirds of the population of Misr died of famine and plague; and innumerable others in Cairo were killed in insurrections during his reign.³

This study examines the perceptions of the plague and its influence over the body, the soul, and popular culture. The first chapter examines the various explanations of the medical causes of plagues, and their treatment in mainstream scholarly works. This also entails a broad study of the medical traditions which shaped the perception of the medical causes of the plague, and a study of the religio-magical explanations and treatments. The

¹ Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.), p. 228.

² Ibid, p. 228.

³ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 39.

first two parts of the chapter are introductory ones detailing the medical traditions, folk medicine, magical treatment, and religious treatments of plague in the two communities and the parameters which influenced the different understandings of the causes of diseases in general, while the third part discusses how these medical traditions were employed in the understanding of the causes and treatments of plague in the Mamluk era. The second chapter of this thesis discusses the perception of plague on topics related to the soul in both Muslim and Coptic communities. This includes issues such as: moral causes of plague and mass death, individual and communal culpability of sins, salvation, and fatalism. The third chapter discusses three main themes. First, it discusses how different perceptions of the causes of plagues and famines influenced the Coptic and Muslim communities' inter-relations. Second, it briefly examines the Mamluk literature, and endeavors to reconstruct the communal reactions to the plague as reflected in literary works. Finally, it examines the eschatological and millenarian ideas, and manifestations of collective psychology which appeared in Coptic and Muslim communities in the wake of the plague era.

Massive and swift deaths resulted from these recurrent epidemics and the perception of the causes of these epidemics is the main focus of this thesis. Previous studies of this subject in medieval Middle East history suggest that the perceived causes, hence the reactions to these events, conformed to the teachings of *ahl al-Hadith* scholars. These scholars were seen as the representatives of mainstream Islam in this period. However, by examining the religious and medical literature of the Muslim and Coptic scholars, and popular reactions to plagues, it can be shown that there were differing views among both religious communities on the subject. Also, religious scholars, who are viewed in modern scholarship as representatives of "high Islam" and "high Christianity", did not control religious preaching as there were many channels of religious teaching during this era which influenced the common people's understanding of the plagues. While the harsh reality of the plague was discussed in many literary and medical genres, this thesis puts a special focus on the therapeutic manuals and plague tracts written by the scholars of *ahl-al-hadith*. These works were composed by theologians who mostly were not medical

practitioners, and were directed to the non-professional reader. Unfortunately, this ignored some major works written by practicing physicians and religious scholars during the period. This included the works of Ibn al-Nafis (d.1288), which, in modern scholarship, were also considered as a representative of high Islam. In addition, magical literature has been examined briefly in this thesis since many themes which existed in these religio-magical works were discussed in the plague tracts of *ahl al-hadith*.

This thesis demonstrates that the simple distinction between rational (i. e Galenic or Greco-Islamic) medicine, and irrational medicine (i.e folk medicine, magical practices, and religious healing), cannot be employed to describe the The perceptions of and reactions to the plague in this period in this period. The distinctions between these medical, magical, and religious traditions were blurred during this period, since these genres mutually influenced each other, forming a wide spectrum of overlapping medical literature. At the popular level, religious-magical remedies to plague were widely used by all social strata in both religious communities. The cultural diversity of the Egyptian community affected the manner in which this study was conducted as the variety of perceptions of the plague during this era in Coptic and Muslim societies could not be simply put in a comparative context. This text aims to study the various perceptions and reactions within each religious community without assuming that each community produced a uniform set of ideas. This approach was taken due to the shortage in Coptic sources. The fact that they were far apart chronologically limited this study, This posits a danger of falling into the presumption that there was no serious change of perception and reaction to the plague among Copts between the 13th and 16th centuries. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, plagues were discussed in vast major and various literatures throughout the medieval period which are out of the focus of this study. Thus, generalizations and assumptions that the findings of this study represent the Muslim and Coptic communities' perception of plague cannot be made. Finally this thesis has tried to emphasize the difference between the views of specific scholarly traditions or groups about the ideal conduct in times of plague versus the actual social and communal reactions, which were far more diverse.

Another point which this thesis highlights is the role of political and cultural realities in shaping the perceptions of both Muslim and Coptic scholars' perception of the plague. Both social and political realities reflected the developments which blurred the lines between the religious communities and changed the Egyptian social structure. This was exemplified by the conversion waves during the Mamluk period and the religious assimilation. The Copts especially embraced many of the Muslim habits and family practices. These changes in the social structure helped in diversifying the reactions to and perceptions of the plague. It also affected the perceptions of the religious authorities of the plague who endeavored to affirm their control over their followers by attacking practices borrowed from other religious communities, and suggesting that these practices were the causes of divine punishment and plagues.

Recently, scholars have debated whether or not the popular perception of the moral causes of the plague influenced the inter-communal relations in the East and intensified the hostility towards religious minorities in manners similar to the European experience. For example, Europe, during the Black Death era, witnessed the rise of the flagellant movement which resulted in the attacks on the Jews, who were accused of causing the plagues and poisoning the wells of Europe.⁴ Michael Dols was reluctant to accept Alexander von Kremer's conclusion that Muslim communities witnessed an organized persecution of religious minorities in the aftermath of the Black Death. Dols argues that Muslim communities did not witness millenarian movements or uncommon persecution of religious minorities or social outcasts, and criticized Von Kremer's approach as Dols believed that he "has attempted to minimize the differences between the reactions of Christian and Muslim societies to the Black Death. While von Kremer conceded that there was no persecution of Jews (or Christians) in the Orient, he uncritically associated the religious fanaticism of the flagellants in Europe with the dervish orders (i. e. Sufis) in Muslim society."⁵

⁴ David Nirenberg, *Communities of violence: persecution of minorities in the Middle Ages*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). p. 64.

⁵ Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977). P.294.

The two major works which studied the medical and religio-magical explanations of plagues, and the different Muslim-Christian communal responses to the plague in the medieval Middle East were: Michael Dols's work *The Black Death in the Middle East*, and Justin Stearns's PhD dissertation "Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Medieval Islamic and Christian Thought".⁶ Both failed to recognize the specificity of the different Muslim communities, and the historical development of the different perceptions of the plague. For example, Dols in his work, argued that each community reacted to plague in accordance with the religious roots of its culture, and approvingly quoted Lapidus who considered that:

In each epoch, the prevailing religions represented a different set of values and understandings, a different type of organization, and a different form of society; but in all ages, ancient, Christian, and Muslim, community life seems to have been inextricably bound up with religion. From religious teachings come the ideals and the norms of social action; from religious organization, the structuring of social life.⁷

On the other hand, Stearns rejected Dols's approach in discussing the social responses to the plague. He found "it is more useful and ultimately more accurate to focus on the parameters within which these traditions [on plague] debate and define ideas and concepts."⁸ However, he considered that the Muslim scholars' discourses on the plague were mainly influenced by their struggles to deal with "the theological implication of contagion."⁹ Both authors minimized the role of culture in shaping these traditions. Dols considered that all Muslim communities either in North Africa, the Middle East, or the Near East reacted in the same manner to the plague, and Stearns argued that the Muslim and Christian discourses on the plague were shaped by theological or philosophical interpretations of each religion. Because of this, it was necessary to examine Dols' argument based on the universal conception of Islamic societies, specifically in the case

⁶ Justin K. Stearns, "Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Medieval Islamic and Christian Thought", (PhD. diss., Princeton University, 2007), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT). Web. 12 Apr. 2012.

⁷ L. Carl Brown, ed., *Traditional Muslim Cities: Structure and Change, From Madina to Metropolis*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973) p. 57; Dols, *The Black Death*, p.285

⁸ Justin K. Stearns, "Infectious Ideas", p.294.

⁹ Ibid, p. 294.

of Mamluk Cairo. This thesis adopts a similar stance to Gilsenan who insisted that his “aim is not to persuade the reader to substitute a relativized and fragmented vision for one of global unity. Rather it is to situate some of these religious, cultural, and ideological forms and practices that people regard as Islamic in the life and development of their societies.”¹⁰

Previous scholarly works on the subject also failed to recognize the problematic task of defining “high Islam” in medieval Muslim communities. These works treated the writings of the scholars of *Hadith* or *ahl al-Hadith* as representative of orthodox or high Islam. For example, Dols drew his conclusions using the arguments of the same scholars who have been perceived to be the representatives of the “ideal” Islamic beliefs, and argued that the Muslim community’s beliefs and reactions to plague were shaped by or were it in line with the writings of the Muslim scholars. This orientalist approach was problematic in two ways. It overestimated the role of authoritative texts and religious authorities in shaping and motivating the reactions and consciousness of the Middle Eastern inhabitants. First, due to the absence of any institution to define orthodoxy and heresy in medieval Muslim societies, many traces of what would be considered to be deviations from the modern view of orthodox Sunni belief in can be found in the writings of these traditionalists or representatives of high Islam. Second, *ahl al-Hadith* did not control religious learning as there were many channels for Islamic teachings in the medieval Islamic cities. For example, Friday preachers, the *wu’āz* (street preachers), the *quşşas* (story tellers), and the Sufi saints all played an important role in transmitting Islamic sciences.¹¹ Moreover, it is hard to accept that the reactions of the Muslim masses in times of extreme stress were monolithically shaped in accordance to the Islamic jurisprudence. Thus, one of the main aims of this study has been to question the role of popular culture in shaping the communal understanding and responses to the plague. The term “popular culture” is used to indicate the culture of those “socially inferior to the

¹⁰ Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*, (London: I. B Tauris, 1992), p.19 quoted in Jonathan P. Berkey, “*Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 12.

bourgeoisie.”¹² Typically, popular culture is linked to the culture of illiterates, but the use of this term will not be confined by this, as it has been expanded to cover some non-institutionalized Sufi groups and the followers of popular preachers of this era. Moreover, the term popular culture may also indicate a shared understanding between different religious communities in an era when cultural assimilation blurred the line between the two religious communities.

Concerning the Coptic sources, this thesis has referred to three main Coptic works: the correspondence of the Coptic patriarch Yuhanna XIII (1484-1524 A.D), the correspondence of Anba Kirullus III (1235-1243), and the famous historical work the *History of the Patriarchs*.¹³ These works have given good insight into the Coptic community’s ideas and practices especially in the Mamluk era from which few Coptic historical writings survive. Also, the unpublished patriarchs’ correspondence has helped overcome the problem of the shortage of Coptic sources in the Mamluk period and the challenges of dealing with the available sources. For example, Coptic historical works appear to have been written for public circulation, and written in the language of their conquerors (i. e. Arabic) which put certain limitations upon the Coptic authors. However, the correspondence of the Patriarchs was circulated internally, which made these letters more valuable for historians. Also, Murqus Semeykah, in his catalogue of the Coptic manuscripts, discussed the lack of Coptic historical works from this era. He argued that the manuscripts were lost for many reasons such as the attacks on the churches’ libraries, and the fact that many manuscripts are held in the private libraries of the Coptic elites, or were sold to European travelers.¹⁴

¹² Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1993), p.7.

¹³ Mukātabāt Kirullus III. Old Patriarchate Library, MS Serial 217/Lāhūt 291.
Mukātabāt Yūḥannā XIII. Old Patriarchate Library, MS Serial 489/Lāhūt 301.
Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa‘, *History of the patriarchs of the Egyptian Church, known as the History of the Holy Church*, Trans. Yassā ‘Abd al-Masīh and O. H. E. Burmester. (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Francais d'Archeologie Orientale, 1943); hereafter *HoP*.

¹⁴ Murqus Simaykah, *Catalogue of the Coptic and Arabic manuscripts in the Coptic Museum, the Patriarchate, the Principal Churches of Cairo*, (Cairo: Matbu‘at al-Mathaf al-Qibti, 1939) Vol. 1, p. XXVII.

Finally, this thesis also aims to examine the Coptic community's responses and perceptions of the plague, in contrast to the prevalent discourse which largely ignores non-Muslims in medieval Islamic states and societies. Research indicated that this issue has not been explored in any scholarly work on plagues in the Middle East.

Chapter 1. Discourses on the Body

This chapter is dedicated to examining the medical scholarly perceptions of the plague in the Muslim and Coptic communities, and the parameters which controlled the development of these communities. This thesis shows that an analysis of the medical, and sometimes philosophical, and background of these communities reveals much about how the various perceptions of the plagues were reflected in the medical literature of the Mamluk period. Also, this thesis shows the variety of opinions and parameters which controlled the medical discourse on plagues for both Muslim and Coptic Egyptians. Previous works on the medical traditions in the medieval Middle East have shown that the Muslim medical tradition was influenced by three main factors. First, it was influenced by medical traditions of the ancient civilizations, especially Greek medicine which was viewed during this period as the medicine of the learned men. Second, some religious imperatives also influenced the medical traditions such as the prohibition of anatomy, and the denial of contagion as it negates the notion of causality which is to say that God is the Creator of each action on earth. Finally, Muslim medical literature also was influenced by the medicine practiced in Arabia, especially the medical practices which have been transmitted in the Hadith corpuses and attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵

The first part of the chapter studies how cultural borrowing played a key role in diversifying the Muslim medical traditions, and influencing the perception of plagues in medieval Egypt. It shows that Muslim theologians, and the Muslim community at large, in their discussion of disease, viewed the Prophet of Islam as a physician and exorcist, in the same way that Jesus was perceived in Christian literature. While the image of Muhammad as a physician has been traced to the ninth century, this tendency to consider the prophet as a physician was articulated in coherent works during the medieval era and came to constitute a distinct branch of science called “al-Ṭibb al-Nabawī”, originally the

¹⁵ Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), pp. 7-14.

creation of two Mamluk scholars: Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi (d.1348) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d.1350).¹⁶ Consequently, this tendency was reflected in the influential work of the famous theologian Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d.1448), which discussed the causation of plagues, *Badhl al-mā‘ūn fi faḍl al-tā‘ūn*. As is shown later, al-‘Asqalani promulgated the notion of the prophet as a physician, and synthesized the prophetic medicine with the Galenic one. Moreover, the notion of the prophet as a physician not only influenced the scholarly understanding of plagues, it also helped in substantiating the religio-magical healing within the Egyptian populace through the esoteric teachings of the Sufi groups and the competition between Coptic saints and Islamic Sufism.

The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the study of the development of Coptic medical traditions. It is well known that both Coptic and Muslim scholarly traditions accepted the Galenic medicine in both understanding disease pathology and curing methods.¹⁷ Thus, it was common to explain the plagues and the mass death in conformity with the Galenic medicine and the miasma theory which suggested that the plagues occurred as a result of an imbalance of the four bodily humors caused by the corruption of air. This similarity in understanding the causes of sickness was the pillar of Dols’ argument in his work *The Black Death in The Middle East* as he “aimed to emphasize the degree to which religion is able to shape and give significance to communal responses to the Black Death by stressing the differences between Christian and Muslim responses to the plague, while acknowledging that medical scholars in both Christendom and Islamdom shared similar understandings of the disease.”¹⁸

The miasma theory constituted the main theory which all medical explanations of the disease revolved around in both the Middle East and Europe. However, this chapter shows that despite the fact that Eastern Christians and the School of Alexandria played a significant role in transmitting and translating the Greek sciences to the Arabic language, Coptic medical literature and practice maintained distinctive characteristics of their own.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 73.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.43

¹⁸ Tilman Nagel. *The History of Islamic Theology*, quoted in Stearns, “Infectious Ideas,” p. 238.

The manuscript of the correspondence Coptic patriarch Yuhanna XIII reigned (1484-1524) suggests that there are traces of an unearthed Aristotelian/Hermetic medical tradition which influenced the Coptic understanding of disease along with mainstream Galenic medicine.

Significantly, this Coptic patriarch himself was born and served in the village of Sadfa in the Upper Egyptian town of Assiut, which was at this time the center of the scholarly Hermetic circles, possibly explaining why he was so highly influenced by the ideas of Hermes. However, Yuhanna XIII explained his theory in his public speeches and letters by giving the sense that it was general knowledge among the Coptic community and priests citing an unknown work titled the book of *Istamakhis*. After extensive research it appears that *The history of Ibn Khaldun* is only source which mentions this book. Ibn Khaldun suggests that the book of *Istamakhis* is a commentary on the works of Hermes by the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle containing “the religious [teachings] of the former [Hermes], and he mentioned in it that the people of the seven provinces worshiped the Wandering Stars. Each province worshiped a specific planet; they prostrated to it; made incenses; made oblations; and sacrificed to it, and the spirituality of this planet guided them as they claimed.”¹⁹

So, Ibn Khaldun’s description was mostly useful in contextualizing the ideas of Yuhanna XIII and linking it to the teachings of Hermes.²⁰ Unfortunately, this short description did not help much in determining which book the patriarch was referring to in

¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Introduction to History: The Muqaddimah*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited by N. A. Dawood, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), Vol. 2, p. 189.

²⁰ In late antiquity the character of Hermes, who was a central figure in “Greco-Egyptian magical literature,” was a fusion between the Greek philosopher Hermes and the Egyptian God of Wisdom, Thoth. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, p.68.

his letters. Also, it did not help in specifying if the unknown text was one of the surviving works of Aristotle or one of his many lost works!²¹

However, the Coptic patriarch seems to have been highly influenced by Aristotelian/ Hermetic teachings. On other occasions, for example, the patriarch referred to the Aristotelian theories found in some of his surviving works such as his description of the ether theory which might indicate that the patriarch was referring to the famous work of Aristotle *On the Heavens*.²² Furthermore, the patriarch, in some letters which are discussed in the next chapter, criticized some Hermetic philosophical ideas theorizing that they contradicted orthodox Christian teachings. However, the aforementioned theory of a malefic relation between the Wandering Stars and the seven organs of human body supported David Brakke's findings in his discussion of the newly discovered codices of Nag Hammadi which have shown a "presence of Hermetic circles in upper Egyptian cities, and among other scholarly developments, [which] have enabled scholars to imagine identities for early monks more sophisticated than simple Copts."²³ The

²¹ Also, It is probable that the book is mistakenly attributed to Aristotle.

The book of *Istamakhīs* should not be confused with the famous book *Kitāb Sir al-asrār: al-siyāsa wa al-farāsa fī tadbīr al-ri'āsa* which was also written by Aristotle to instruct Alexander the Great. An examination of this book has shown that it does not include the topics which are discussed by the Coptic patriarch in his correspondence. Sāmī Salmān al-A'war, in his introduction to the book, mentioned two lost works of Aristotle in which he discussed the influence of spirituality of the wandering stars on human destiny perhaps indicating that he is referencing the book of *Istamikhīs*. Aristotle, *Kitāb Sir al-asrār: al-Siyāsa wa al-farāsa fī tadbīr al-ri'āsa*, ed. Sāmī Salmān al-A'war, (Beirut: Dār al-'Ulūm al-'Arabiyya, 1995)

²²Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 157 b: "It is proven by the mathematical sciences with decisive evidence that the heavens are spheres, and the water and earth are spheres in its center, surrounded by the invisible elements which are fire and air. And those four elements are created as a result of the celestial movement by the orders of the Creator. And it mixes and mingles so the earthly creatures like: animals, plants, materials, and [...] are created out of it, by the influence of cosmological bodies, which have been created by the divine wisdom."

"و قد ثبت في العلوم الرياضيه بالبراهين القاطعه أن السموات كرهيه و أن الماء و الارض كريان في وسطهما يحيط بهما العنصران الخفيان اللذين هما النار و الهوى و أن هذه العناصر الأربعة متولده عن دورة الفلك بأمر الخالق تعالى وأنها تختلط و تمتزج و يكون عنها الكائنات الأرضية كالحيوان و النبات و المعادن و السابحات بتوسط تأثير القوى الفلكية الصادره عن تدبير الحكمة الألهيه."

Aristotle, *On the Heavens (De caelo et mundo)*. Ed. and trans. W.K.C. Guthrie. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press; London: W. Heinemann, 1971).

²³ David Brakke, "The Making of Monastic Demonology: Three Ascetic Teachers on Withdrawal and Resistance," *Church History*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Mar., 2001), p. 21

Coptic patriarchs' letters have shown that Hermetic teachings continued to play an active role in Christian teachings during the late Mamluk period.²⁴

Seeking the help or consultation of astrologers and diviners was common practice in the medieval period for many reasons such as “to determine the cause of an illness and what the outcome would be: whether recovery would occur soon or only after much suffering, or whether the illness might even bring death.”²⁵

1.1 Muslim Medical Traditions

Medieval Egypt witnessed a shift from the unanimous acceptance by Muslim scholars of Galenic medicine to the synthesis between the prophetic medicine (essentially Arabic Bedouin medicine) and the Galenic one. This tendency to include the prophetic traditions within the medical literature and portray the Muslim prophet as a medical authority affected the Muslim scholarly works on the plague from the tenth century onwards. Naturally, Prophetic traditions were often quoted in medical works and in plague treatises. However, these prophetic traditions were instructive rather than descriptive of the disease pathology and etiology, and were not systematized till the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

While Prophetic medicine was largely perceived in modern scholarship as an irrational type of medicine, this perception has been substantially altered in recent scholarly works. Iremeli Perho, for example, in his influential work, *The Prophet's Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars*, showed the influence of the Galenic theories on the formation of the Prophetic Medicine:

The 8th/14th century texts of al-Dhahabi, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziya and Ibn Muflih, represent the latest stage of the development. The authors combined the Prophet's medical sayings with the teachings of Graeco- Islamic medicine in their

²⁴ Hermetic teachings promoted the notion of the “connection between planetary movements and human actions which first emerged in the aftermath of Alexander's conquest, through a fusion of Greek with Egyptian and Babylonian ideas effected principally by the Stoics.” This relation was explained by suggesting the existence of sympathetic correspondence, or ‘chains’ between all the worldly materials and creatures. “They maintain affinities between the most disparate areas of the natural realm, so that each animal, plant, mineral or even part of the human or animal body corresponds to a particular planet or God.”; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp.78-91.

²⁵ Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, p. 154

descriptions of aetiology, prevention and treatment of illnesses . . . they seem to have been the first ones to systematize the Prophet's medicine in this manner.²⁶

Despite the significant difference between the writings of two Damascene scholars: Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Dhahabi, and the later major work of the Egyptian scholar Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, those scholars accepted the Galenic explanation of the causation of diseases and the miasma theory. These explanations were unanimously accepted among the Muslim physicians, philosophers, and theologians.

The miasma theory was accepted even among traditionalist scholars such as Ibn Hajar who denied miasma only as a means of transmission, while accepting the humeral pathology and treatment after being internally pierced by the stabbing of the Jinn.²⁷ Almost all medieval scholars constructed their opinions based on a shared understanding of the nature of diseases that:

[it is] not an independent entity, but an imbalance of these humors, and because the balance of each person's humors was different, illnesses and diseases were thought to manifest themselves differently in each person. Pestilential sickness, in which many people were simultaneously afflicted, was widely linked to the corruption of the air, the only common factor that practitioners could identify as being shared by the sick. And yet, during the 14th-15th centuries, it was generally not the air itself that was thought to bring the disease into the body, rather that the air represented an influence that caused the balance of the body's humors to become corrupted.²⁸

Alternatively, the recent plague studies have based their arguments on the assumption that prophetic medicine has a universal nature. Stearns, for example, emphasized the significant influence of the teachings of *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars in understanding plagues, considering that “previous discussions that differentiated between scholarly and administrative conceptions of contagion are flawed, and that the response of medieval

²⁶ Iremeli Perho, *The Prophet's Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars*, p.63 quoted in: Stearns, “Infectious Ideas,” p. 9

²⁷ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma‘un*, p.104

²⁸ Stearns, “Infectious Ideas”, p. 157.

Muslim administrations to transmittable diseases was in fact in accord with, if not based on, the writings of the ḥadīth folk (*ahl al-ḥadīth*).²⁹

However, even the term Islamic/prophetic medicine:

Has acquired different socio-political characteristics [in the Muslim world]. For example, it does not mean the same thing in India where it is called *Unāni tebb* (lit. Greek medicine) and in Iran where it is termed *tebb-e sonnati* (traditional medicine). Perhaps the relationship between Greek medicine and Islam is best illustrated in the term *tebb-e sonnati* that is used in Iran to designate Galenico-Islamic medicine, insofar as *sunna* (or *sonnat*) refers to the customs and manners or the sayings of the Prophet that are the foundation of Islamic law and jurisprudence.³⁰

Also, cultural borrowing and the competition between the Muslim and Christian asceticism played a key role in creating a variety of opinions within the genre of prophetic medicine. Scholars of *ahl al-ḥadīth* adopted the notion of mirroring Jesus' image as a physician, saint, and healer on the prophet of Islam in their formation of this genre. As Dols shows:

Unlike the New Testament, the Qur'ān says nothing about miraculous healing and exorcisms, except, ironically, for relating Jesus' healing of the blind and leprosy as well as his raising of the dead. Muḥammad was not a miracle-worker, much to the consternation of his followers, who wanted some evidence of his prophethood, and much to the comfort of his enemies. Once, when asked to work wonders, Muhammad replied simply: 'Glory be to my Lord! Am I aught but a mortal, a Messenger?' He is never portrayed in the Qur'ān as a paradigmatic healer like Jesus.³¹

While Irmeli Perho, in his discussion of the topic, suggests that the prophetic medicine evolved in response to the Sufi perception of the doctrine of relying upon God in explaining epidemics and plagues. Even traditionalist scholars were influenced by the

²⁹ Ibid p. 9.

Also, one exception is the Andalusian physician Ibn al-Khatib (d. 776/1374) who held a more experimental approach in studying plagues, most of the Muslim scholars were bound to the teachings of *ahl al-ḥadīth*. However, even Ibn al-Khatib in his treatise on the epidemic *Muqni'at al-sā'il 'an al-marad al-hā'il* (That Which Satisfies the Questioner Regarding the Appalling Illness) approaches the theological aspect of plagues, and argues for the existence of contagion based on his interpretation of two prophetic traditions including: "The sick [camels] should not be watered with the healthy ones;" Ibid, p. 6.

³⁰ Hormoz Ebrahimnejad, "The Development of Galenico-Islamic Medicine: Assimilation of Greek Sciences Into Islam," *Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, 2004, p.2.

³¹ Dols, *Majnun*, p. 45

Sufi concepts such as the *Kashf* (divine inspiration) and magical practices as well. Al-Dhahabi argues that:

The ultimate origin of medical knowledge has to be revelation and inspiration of God, adding the statement: ‘ this much is certain: experiences (al-tajarib) and analogy (al-qiyas) are insufficient for it [the development of medicine].’ Yet it is analogy with the folkloric behavior of animals that is the basis for some of his medical theories, as, for example, the statement that physicians use fennel to treat weak vision because snakes emerge after winter having poor eyesight and seek out fennel to eat, with the result that their eyesight is improved.³²

Finally, the discussion of the Muslim medical traditions which existed in medieval Egypt showed that the lines between the different medical genres were blurred so that it was impossible to understand the perception of the Egyptian community based on the writings of only one school. *Ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars’ medical writings were indeed a product of diverse ideas whereby it was not possible to assume that the social reactions and perceptions were in accordance of the understanding of one school of thought. Rather, clear elements of popular and folk medicines, and popular religion (i. e. sufism) can be traced in the writings of the traditionalist scholars.

Prophetic medicine took a significantly different approach from the Galenic medicine in perceiving the causes of the plague. For the scholars of *ahl al-ḥadīth* plague was caused by supernatural forces either from within the body or by the agency of external forces. As has been shown in detail in the third part of this chapter, the explanations of these forces varied either by suggesting that the plague is caused by conscious forces (i.e. Jinn), or unconscious ones (i.e. evil spirits). Unlike the belief that the plagues are caused by either conscious or unconscious forces, Galenic medicine strictly adhered to miasma theory in explaining the plagues. Also, both medical traditions explained the susceptibility of humans to the plague differently. Galenic medicine presented many factors which controlled the susceptibility of people to the plague (including dietary habits, modes of sleep, ventilation, etc), while for the scholars of Prophetic medicine,

³² Al-Dhahabi, *Prophetic Medicine*, pp.13, 234, quoted in: Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, p. 73.

these factors were not considered to have much effect on the matter. Rather, *ahl al-hadith* suggested that prayers might help in lowering the susceptibility to plague.

1.2 Coptic Medical Tradition

The few remaining samples of the pre-Islamic Coptic medical papyri did not indicate or at least discuss any systematized medical theory or show continuation of Byzantine medicine. However, Coptic physicians after the Muslim conquest of Egypt accepted and promoted Galenic medicine since the Syriac and Arabic translations of Greek medicine depended heavily on the materials of the school of Alexandria.

The fact that the few remaining samples of the Coptic medical papyri do not indicate or at least discuss any systematized medical theory or show a continuation of Byzantine medicine, might be explained by a rift between Coptic and Hellenized culture despite their coexistence in one political entity.³³ Thus, “Christian Egypt came to have two distinct and potentially rival components: one located in Alexandria, the seat of the patriarch who ruled his compact diocese with all the organizational and intellectual resources of the Hellenized church; and the other located in the desert, the seat of the monks who ruled the same diocese with all the emotional resources of the Egyptian peasantry.”³⁴ The Egyptian Coptic Church, from the sixth century until the renaissance of Coptic culture in the tenth and the eleventh centuries, did not manifest an interest in the philosophical or medical aspects of religion. The Coptic monks maintained a tight

³³ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, (1986; reprint, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.15

³⁴ Noticeably, Patricia Crone suggests that this rift always existed between the Hellenistic culture and Coptic culture for many reasons. On the one hand, the universal nature of the Hellenistic culture helped in the inclusion of the Coptic ethnicity within the Greek empire without imposing its culture upon the Egyptians. While the Egyptians and Greeks constituted a united polity, the two ethnicities were able to each maintain their distinct culture. Crone explains this by suggesting that: “the elevated concern of philosophy with the cosmos implied a tendency to be above politics [...]. The result was that Hellenistic monarchy could not be a national polity [...] the centers of the polis became citizens, not of Hellas, but of the cosmos; and their communal bond gave away, not to ethnic solidarity, but to the brotherhood of man.” On the other hand, Herodotus attributes that to the nature of Egyptian people who tend to “keep the ancestral laws and none other. They avoid the use of Greek customs, and generally speaking the customs of all other men.”

Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world*, (Cambridge, 1977), p.53.

relationship with the Egyptian countryside and adhered to artisanal professions. Crone harshly describes this tendency within the Coptic Church by suggesting that: “The intellectual keynote of the Coptic church was not Alexandrian philosophy but peasant boorishness: Cyril was the last Alexandrian theologian of note, John Philoponus the last philosopher, the surviving Coptic literature is as intellectually dull as it is emotionally vibrant.”³⁵

This dichotomy was also reflected in the medical traditions of the Coptic medicine. The surviving Coptic literature discussed the treatments of many ailments such as diseases of the spleen, constipation, for which purgatives are recommended, and of course the endemic eye diseases.³⁶ However, these treatments to a large extent were similar to Ibn Khaldun’s description of the Bedouin medicine, which was not based on humeral pathology.

Galenic medicine also had the prime influence over the medical practice and theory of Coptic physicians. Yet, the manuscript of the correspondence of the Coptic patriarch Yuhanna XIII shows that the Coptic community also adhered to a different understanding of the causation of disease than the miasma theory which attributed sickness to the corruption of air.³⁷ Yuhanna XIII adhered to astrological approach³⁸ to medicine in perceiving the causes of diseases as he presented a theory of a malefic relation between human body and the Wandering Stars, citing the mysterious book of *Istimakhis* as his reference:

³⁵ Ibid, p. 53

³⁶ *The Coptic encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, c1991), p. volume 5, 1578.

³⁷ This manuscript of Yuhanna XIII’s correspondence was used, to my knowledge, in two earlier studies. The first one is Magdi Guirguis’s study of the Coptic law *al-Qaḍā’ al-Qibṭī fī Miṣr: Dirāsa Tārīkhiyya*, (Cairo,1999). And the second one is Tamer el-Leithy’s PhD. dissertation “ Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293-1524 A.D.”, (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005). Also I would like to thank Dr. Magdi Guirguis for generously sharing this manuscript with me, in addition to his valuable help in conducting this study.

³⁸ Many tracts and medical handbooks were dedicated to employ astrology in answering consultation concerning medical problems as well as other form of divination. The dependance on astrological medicine was debated among the physicians of the Islamicate world. ‘Ali b. Ridwan (d.1067), and al-Razi (d.925) for example advocated the use of astrology in medicine, while the famous physician Ibn Sina (d.1037) criticized this medical literature. see Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, pp. 154-155.

The book of *'Istamakhis'* confirms that each one of the spiritualities (*rawḥāniyyāt*) of the seven planets channels in the human body. The spirituality of the sun runs through seven vessels in the brain. And the spirituality of the moon runs through seven vessels in the [...] ³⁹ and the throat. And the spirituality of Jupiter runs through seven channels in the heart. And the spirituality of Mercury runs through seven vessels in the gallbladder. And the spirituality of Saturn runs through seven vessels in the spleen. And the spirituality of Venus runs through seven vessel in kidneys. And the veins of theses organs are connected with each other, and intercalated with each other. ⁴⁰

Indeed, there is a dearth of information on the nature of the “medical traditions” practiced by the Coptic community. Unlike their Muslim counterparts, the education of the Christian physicians was not discussed clearly in their biographies. For example Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a (d.1270) in his famous work *'Uyūn al-anbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, described in detail the education of the Muslim physicians who lived in Egypt in the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods such as Alhazen and 'Ali b. Ridwan, including all the books that they read, while he did not approach the subject when discussing the lives of some of the influential Christian doctors despite the long description of their careers. ⁴¹

One important example is Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a’s narration of the biography of the Christian physician Abu Ḥulayqah (1195-1277) who was repeatedly questioned by the Sultan who asked him to explain his methods in treating the patients. One narrative described Abu Ḥulayqah’s treatment of one woman close to the Sultan even though the Sultan’s private physician considered her a hopeless case. When the Sultan asked Ibn Ḥulayqa how he knew that the woman would recover, unlike the other doctors, Ibn Ḥulayqa gave a vague answer “by knowing her humors and the times of her sickness.” ⁴²

³⁹ Unclear word.

⁴⁰Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 212 b

” و قد شهد كتاب الأصطمماخيس ان لكل واحدا من روحانيات الكواكب السبعة مجاري في الأجسام البشرية فروحانيه الشمس تجري في سبعة عروق من الدماغ و روحانيه القمر تجري في سبعة عروق من الرئه و الخلقوم و روحانيه المشتري تجري في سبعة عروق من القلب و روحانيه المريخ تجري في سبعة عروق من الكبد و روحانيه عطارد تجري في سبعة عروق من المراره و روحانيه زحل تجري في سبعة عروق من الكلاه و قال أن عروق هذه الأعضاء متصله بعضها ببعض و متداخله بعضها في بعض و ذلك مماثلا لترتيب العالم الأكبر و الفلك الأعلى و لهذا سمي الانسان العالم الأصغر.”

⁴¹ Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a, *'Uyūn al-anbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, (Cairo: al-Matba‘a al-Wahbiya, 1882), Vol. 2, pp. 95, 99.

⁴² Ibid, p.125.

Finally, a noticeable aspect of the Christian doctors' knowledge in medieval Egypt is a family tradition, unlike Muslim scholarship which depended on the typical master-apprentice mode of transmitting sciences. This increased the mystery of the Coptic medical theory, due to the inability to identify any institutional teachings, or the readings that Coptic doctors depended upon in their medical practices. Unfortunately, the correspondence of Yuhanna XIII does not present an opportunity to theorize or systemize the Coptic medical theory. Rather, it gives us an insight into the Coptic literature in the medieval era.

The explanations of the physicians who practiced astrological medicine of the causes of the plague were to a large extent similar to those who practiced Galenic medicine. However, they argued that the corruption of air occurred due to celestial causes rather than the changes in the seasons as suggested by Galenic medicine. Also, they believed the susceptibility of humans to plague was controlled by the positions of the stars and planets, in addition to the personal characteristics of each person.⁴³ Both medical traditions also used similar treatments, however, lunar associations and zodiac decided the suitable times of treatment in astrological medicine.⁴⁴

Finally, the influence of Galenic medicine on Coptic physicians should not be underestimated. As shown earlier, in the medieval Middle East and Europe, the miasma theory remained the most influential medical theory, and was as widespread as:

All of the medical practitioners writing during these centuries adhered to some form of the Galenic understanding of health as rooted in a balance of the four humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile).⁴⁵ Also, on the level of daily medicinal practice, in urban centers, Galenic medicine was the main source of healing treatments in opposition to what Ibn Khaldun described as “civilized Bedouin” medicine which is “not based upon any natural norm or any conformity (of the treatment) to the temper.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, p. 154.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 154, 156.

⁴⁵ Which stood in relation to the four elements (fire, air, water, earth).

⁴⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, vol.3, p.150.

Rather, this thesis suggests that both medical traditions coexisted among the Coptic Community and medical practitioners.⁴⁷ However, astrological medicine was also employed in magical treatment in medieval Egypt. This was also due to the extinction of the medical theory, while the practices themselves, as is shown in the next part in this chapter, did not fade away.

1.3 Religio-Magical and Medical Perceptions of Plague in Medieval Egypt

In this part, the scholarly perceptions of magical healing and the supernatural causes of plagues are discussed. Mainstream religious authorities in the Muslim and Coptic communities have been shown to have either presented or tolerated the notion of attributing plagues to supernatural causes. Also, religious or magical remedies were frequently used in this era by highly-esteemed religious scholars.

Yuhanna XIII's correspondence shows that dependence on miraculous healing and magic was widespread in the medieval era especially when dealing with mass death. As Dols notes:

Seeking the help of the magicians was not bound to a specific class, or the poorer strata in the community. Rather, it was a prevalent norm which cannot be linked to ignorance as a modern reader would assume.⁴⁸

So, it is not surprising that, as Tamer el-Leithy shows in his study of this correspondence, almost four percent of Yuhanna XIII's letters are dedicated to discussing magic and astrology.⁴⁹ Yuhanna XIII, in his letters, tolerated some of the magical/esoteric theories which have been accepted in the Coptic culture. The Patriarch's

⁴⁷ The existence of a non-Galenic Eastern Christian medicine is not entirely a new concept. Jason R. Zaborowski, in his study of the biography and hagiography of the Christian physician Muwaffaq al-Din Abu Shakir (d. 1216), notes that “[i]n Jerusalem the Eastern Christian population had a deeply-rooted local medical tradition that had begun back in the Byzantine period, it is nonetheless impossible to ‘separate Muslim medicine from Eastern Christian medicine’ in most of the Arab world.”⁵ Furthermore, he considered that the same conclusion can be extended to the Egyptian Christians since Abu Shakir's father, Abu Sulayman Dawud ibn Abu al-Mana Ibn Abu Fanah (d. post-1187), the well known physician and astronomer migrated from Jerusalem to Cairo and practiced medicine there; Jason R. Zaborowski, “Arab Christian physicians as inter-religious mediators: Abu Shakir as a model Christian expert,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations Vol. 22, No. 2*, April 2011, p. 187

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.183.

⁴⁹ El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion”, p.370.

emphasis on the role of astrology in influencing the life of human beings was an accommodation of deep-rooted Coptic pre-Christian beliefs. As mentioned earlier, the dependence on astrological approach to medicine seems to be more common among the Coptic physicians, than their Muslim counterparts. Moreover, this tendency was influenced the magical practices of the Coptic community as well. Al-Maqrizi, for example, in his description of the Egyptians' pre-Christian religious beliefs suggested that the Copts were inclined to practice astrological rituals because of their pagan past:

The Copts were the followers of the famous sect of al-Sabi'a (the Sabian), and they had temples named after the planets [...] and their priests approached the planets as they considered them the source of their sciences and they reveal the future to them, and they teach them the esoteric sciences and the glorious hidden names. So, they made the famous talismans, and the sublime manners [...] And every temple had a master priest which are the magicians, and whoever worships the seven wandering stars for seven years is called 'Baher', and whoever worships it for forty nine years is called 'Qatir' [...] And every priest dedicates himself to the worship of one of the seven wandering stars, and he is called the 'slave of the planet' so they said 'the slave of the sun, the slave of the moon, the slave of Mercury, the slave of Venus, Mars, the slave of Jupiter, and the slave of Saturn' [...] So, when the giants controlled Egypt, then the Pharaohs, then some other ethnicities, the sciences of the Copts declined gradually till they converted to Christianity and adopted its norms.⁵⁰

Thus, the Coptic patriarchs did not condemn the dependence of the population upon astrological/magical practices per se. Rather, the patriarchs Yuhanna XIII and Kirrulus III accepted it, but by presenting the church as God's agent, and the magicians as the agents of Satan. The church perceived the magicians as a threat to its authority over the Coptic population and struggled to affirm its authority over them. In reality, Coptic priests used the same talismans and wordings as the satanic magicians. Dols described the relationship between the priests and the magicians in antiquity, and it can be argued that it can be extended to medieval Egypt as well; the priests "shared the same demon infested world with the magician."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Al-Maqrizi, *Akhbar qibt misr*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, (Hildesheim; New York: Olms, 1979), pp. 3-4

⁵¹ Dols, *Majnun*, p. 190.

Magicians and priests used the same wordings and the same formulas in casting magical charms as they both “never invoke Satan and the forces of evil. They remain within the sphere of the good, invoking God, the angels, holy martyrs, the holy oil, and the like.”⁵² One example of this is an old magical charm preserved in a papyrus from the pre-Islamic era, intended to harm a certain Maria and used almost exact formula of the healing charms which are found in the writings of medieval Coptic patriarchs:

The poor Jacob adjures God the Almighty, Sabaoth, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, the God of the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the creator of the sun, the moon and the stars, also the seven Archangels, the other Angels, the three holy men of the burning furnace, the four animals, the blood of Jesus Christ and the 24 presbyters to do every evil to Maria, the daughter of Tsibel. He wishes her illness and to her family too. Put her in the hand of an evil daemon who tortures her, day and night!⁵³

Unlike the Muslim scholars’ medical works and plague treatises, the writings of the Coptic patriarchs did not mention the miasma theory in discussing sickness etiology or treatment. Yuhanna XIII, for example, strictly adhered to the popular theory of sickness, by attributing it to astrological causes. However, he rather articulated it in a religious context to affirm the church’s power over the population by presenting Christ as the physician and the healer in contrast to the magicians’ practices which put the human body under the control of the demons. In most of his letters, he presented Baptism as the only way to clean the seven organs and vessels from the evil demons, and the Eucharist ceremony as the tool to cast away the seven demons which inhabit the organs of the human body and replace these evil spirits with the holy ghost.⁵⁴

In contrast, Muslim scholarship tended to accept supernatural causes of sickness specifically in the case of plagues in medieval Egypt and Syria especially among *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars. Acceptance of supernatural causes of the plagues was also shown in the

⁵² *The Coptic encyclopedia, volume 5, (CE:1499a-1509b)*, s. v. “Magic,” Originally published in print by Macmillan, accessed 11 September 2012 <http://ccdlib.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cce/id/1239>, p. 15

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁴ *Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII*, fol. 46 a

work of one of the earliest scholars who promoted Prophetic medicine, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751/1350). Ibn al-Qayyim argued that the plague is caused by the evil spirits as expressed in his book *Zād al-mi'ād fi hady khayr al-'ibād*. Giving, to a great extent, a similar understanding of the causation of sickness to Yuhanna XIII's beliefs by considering it as a result of the turbulence caused by evil spirits:

Physicians have no reason to deny that these symptoms which they understand about the plague should be caused through the mediation of spirits (*arwāh*). For the influence of spirits upon the body's constitution, its illnesses, and its eventual destruction, is only denied by people who are quite ignorant of spirits and their influences and the reaction they produce in bodies and constitutions. God, praised be He, can give to these spirits power over the bodies of the sons of Adam, during the occurrence of an epidemic (*al-wabā'*) and through corruption of the air. In the same way, He gives them power to act in the predominance of unhealthy substances, which produce an evil condition for souls, especially in the disturbance of blood, black bile, or semen. Now the satanic spirits have a power working upon the person who is affected by these conditions in a way which they cannot regarding others. Their power continues as long as they are not repelled by some defense stronger than their causes, such as *dhikr* and prayer, supplication and entreaty, almsgiving and recitation of the Quran. These deeds will invoke the angelic spirits who can conquer the evil spirits, make void their evil and repel their influence.⁵⁵

Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani also gave a supernatural explanation of the causes of the plague considering it a result of the piercing of the human body by an evil jinn. Nevertheless, Ibn Hajar's argument was different from Ibn al-Qayyim in that the former considered the plague to be caused by an external agent (i.e. jinn) while the latter argues that it resulted from the imbalance of spirits inside the human body. However, both scholars accepted the Islamic-Graeco medical theory, but denied contagion as the mode of transmission of plagues. Alternatively, they suggested that the imbalance of the spirits or the piercing of the jinn, made the human body susceptible to the influence of the corruption of air. This corrupt air imbalanced the fluids in the body. Muslim scholars in the Mamluk period succeeded in circumventing the well established and well

⁵⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād al-m'ād fi hady khayr al-'ibād*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut and 'Abd alqadir al-Arna'ut (Kuwait: Maṭab'at al-Manar al-Islamiyyah, 1992.) Vol.4' p. 39; I am using Penelope Johnstone's translation of Ibn al-Qayyim's work; Penelope Johnstone, *Medicine of the Prophet*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998) p. 29.

documented Islamic medical literature, by appealing to a much older and more authentic authority which was the Prophet who was portrayed as the most knowledgeable physician. As Ibn al-Qayyim put it:

We must make clear that the relationship of the medicine practiced by physicians to the medicine of the Prophet is like the relationship of medicine practiced by village healers to the physician's medicine, and this is acknowledged by most experts and leaders among physicians.⁵⁶

Similarly, Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani’s theory was substantiated by attributing it to the Prophet. Noticeably, Ibn Hajar’s theory of considering the agency of jinn as the mode of transmission of disease became the most accepted theory among Muslim scholars of later generations till the nineteenth century which was, in part, due to increased belief in the prophetic medicine. Ibn Hajar clearly refuted the miasma theory as being the cause of the plagues, while he did not try to negate the foundations of the concept of corruption of air as a mean of causing sickness altogether. He pointed out the plagues couldn’t just be caused by bad air, that is miasma theory, because the plagues frequently occurred during the best seasons of the year and also were common in cities which were known to have had the most fresh air. He also pointed to the fact that plagues did not infect all human beings and creatures even though they all breathe the same air. So, he concluded that the plague is not a sickness in the first place since “all illnesses inflicted by God have a cure,”⁵⁷ while physicians have admitted that plague did not have any cure except God’s grace.

However, Ibn Hajar’s belief in a supernatural causation of plagues did not refute principles of Galenic medicine since, as he explains it:

some of the pains in plague might occur due to the imbalance of humors, which does not contravene that it is caused by the piercing of the Jinn since it is probable that the imbalance was caused as result of the pierce. Thus the body of the pierced gets upset [sick], and his blood erupts, and the bad symptoms, which

⁵⁶ Justin Stearns, “Infectious Ideas,” p. 193

⁵⁷ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma‘un*, p.106

are diagnosed by the physicians, occur to him according to their rules. And this does not contravene the first cause [of plague which is the jinn's piercing.]⁵⁸

Furthermore, it seemed that attributing sickness to the agency of the jinn was to some extent accepted by the Coptic community. In an interesting letter the patriarch Yuhanna XIII combined both Ibn al-Qayyim's and Ibn Hajar's separate theories of disease transmission. After he blessed a sick woman he wrote his wishes that:

[God] ease her pain, and heal her sickness. And entirely clear out the spirit of sickness. And heal her as he healed the Canaanite's daughter and [...]. And heal her from every magic, talisman, and every bad thing. And heal her by His healing power. And grant her cure and salvation in every matter. And cast away every malicious spirit with every [...], and [...] [...], every evil power, [...], every evil spirit, and every impure spirit. And [cast away] the spirit of the day, the spirit of the noon, the spirit of the evening, the spirit of the night, the spirit of the air (*al-hawā*), the spirit of drowning (*al-gharaq*), and the spirit of the Jinn who are underground.⁵⁹

Fowden explains the inclusion of this Islamic belief in jinn by suggesting that in the religio-magical realm, Copts had integrated these Islamic terms and perceptions into their pre-existing beliefs. So, what Fowden called the “durability of Egypt” led to the

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 108

⁵⁹ Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 29 b, I used dots for unclear words in the manuscript.

” يطرح عنها روح الأمراض بالكلية، ويشفيها كما شفا ابنة الكنعانية،...، ويشفيها من كل مرض، ومن كل سحر ومن كل رقاء، ومن كل شئ ردي، ويشفيها بقوته الشفية، ويهبها الشفا والخلص في كل شئ، وليبتعد عنها كل روح خبيثة وبكل فعل و كل (...)، و كل (...)(...)، و كل قوة باطلة، (...)، و كل روح ردي و كل روح نجس، و روح النهار، و روح الظهيرة، و روح المساء، و روح الليل، و روح الهوى، و روح الغرق، و روح الجان الذين تحت الأرض.”

inclusion of the Islamic beliefs, but without losing its Coptic roots and identity.⁶⁰ Also he pointed out to the nature of “ Hellenistic and Roman magic [which] was designed to harness the unpredictable divine powers that filled the universe, making nonsense out of generally accepted theories of causation, and breeding all manners of fears, anxieties and insecurities in the human mind,”⁶¹ and suggesting that the Coptic spell or magical practices of the medieval era preserved the same traditions, and included one of the “Islamic demons” into their supernatural beliefs. Moreover, it seems that Coptic magical spells always contained traces of different cultures and religions. “Elements of different creeds—Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, Christian, Gnostic—may be found together in the same text. In a purely pagan text where Isis appears, the end reads, ‘It is me who speaks, the Lord Jesus who gives recovery.’ This spell is from the seventh or eighth century, to judge from the handwriting.”⁶²

The tendency of attributing plagues to supernatural causes was widespread throughout Muslim scholarship in Egypt and Syria during the medieval period. In contrast, since the Copts did not openly discuss the issues of contagion and plagues, or produce religio-medical literature in the medieval era, the correspondence of the Coptic patriarchs remain some of the most important documents that have given us insight into the Coptic community’s culture. In his letters, Yuhanna XIII showed an understanding of the

⁶⁰ Also, Coptic scholarly literature in medieval Egypt was assimilated to the Muslim culture in many aspects. From the tenth century onward, Copts adopted the Arabic language in their writings. However, perhaps more significantly, cultural borrowing shaped many aspects of Coptic thought. Coptic laws, for example, were constructed based on the Islamic principles of jurisprudence. Al-Ṣafīyy b. al-‘Assal’s major Coptic legal work *al-Majmū‘ al-ṣafawī* makes the analogy between Muslim and Coptic jurisprudence by considering that: “the Bible is the *naṣṣ* [text, in place of the Qur’ān and ḥadīth]; the Synods correspond to the sunna of the Prophet; the consensus of the Patriarchs comprise *ijmā‘*; and analogy is used as the operative form of legal reasoning (*qiyās*). In these and other legislative categories, Ibn al-‘Assal uses the precise terms of Islamic law.” Furthermore, he abandoned the classical Byzantine classification of practices where all human actions fall within the binary system of licit and illicit, and adopted the Islamic classification of practices instead: “whereby the forbidden occupies one grade of seven possible grades (*ḥarām*; *maḥzūr*; and *manhī‘ anhu*), while permissible acts are classified into four different levels: blameworthy or reprehensible (*makrūh*); licit or indifferent (*mubāḥ/ jā‘iz*); recommended or meritorious (*mandūb*; *mustaḥab*); and, obligatory or duty (*wājib*; *fard*).” Assimilation to Muslim culture can be traced in many other aspects. The two patriarchs Yuhanna XIII and Kirrullus, also adopted the Islamic style and terminology, and quoted Arabic legal terms and Arabic poetry in their correspondence. El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 441; See for example, Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 29 b, Mukātabāt Kirullus III, fols. 17a-17b.

⁶¹ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, p.78.

⁶² *The Coptic encyclopedia*, s. v. “Magic,” p. 15.

causation of sickness similar to that of the Muslim scholars Ibn Hajar and Ibn al-Qayyim. By contrast, the Muslim scholars and the Coptic patriarch expressed different concerns while discussing their ideas. The fact that the plague was incurable constituted the main reason to shift from the Graeco-Islamic medicine to theorizing the popular belief in supernatural causes of sickness. As a result, Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Hajar, in their discussions of the plagues, were concerned with substantiating their unprecedented ideas. By doing so, Prophetic medicine helped in synchronizing supernatural beliefs with the mainstream medical theory of this era.

The patriarch used his theory of the causes of sickness to affirm the authority of the church over the Coptic community which as is illustrated in the next chapter. This was a repetitive theme in his discussions of causations of mass death. The focus of Yuhanna XIII's correspondence regarding the issue of whether or not to seek the help of the magicians suggested that the Coptic community had become more inclined towards magical practices and healing in the fourteenth century compared with the earlier correspondence of Kirullus III who rarely addressed the topic. Thus, Yuhanna XIII did not need to fight the Coptic deep-rooted belief in magic and the effects of the planetary movements on human life. Rather, he emphasized that this relationship was controlled by God's power. In one letter, for example, he refuted the 'absolute' power of the stars by stating that:

Our fathers, in their Canons, said that a Christian must not go to a magician, ask him something, or listen to him. If he [the magician] said to him [the Christian] do a specific ritual when the sun rises, or [do this ritual] while looking to the moon. Or [the magician advises you] when the sun rises put water under sun light and wash the patient with it. [...] If the sun and the moon have the ability to help us without the command of God as the magicians suggest, why do they disappear behind the clouds upon God's order, and why they do they move in His service like slaves?!⁶³

⁶³ Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 43b

“وقد قالوا الآباء في قوانينهم، لا يجب لنصراني يمضي إلى سحر، ولا يسأله عن شيء ولا يسمع قوله، إذا قال له تأمل الشمس إذا صعدت افعل الشيء الفلاني أو تأمل القمر، أو إذا أشرقت الشمس دع ماء أمامها وحم المريض منه، (...)، إذا كان الشمس والقمر يعينوننا حسب قول السحرة من دون الله فلماذا الشمس والقمر يغطيهما السحاب بأمر الله، و أيضا يسيرا في الخدمة مثل العبيد.”

Egyptian Muslim scholars also produced religio-magical literature starting from the late twelfth/ early thirteenth centuries. The famous scholar al-Buni (d. 1225) wrote one of the most important works of this genre, *Shams al-ma'arif al-kubra* (The Great Sun of Knowledge) which founded the basis of the Muslim magical plague treatments in the following centuries such as the famous magical cells.⁶⁴ “An example from al-Buni's manual may be helpful. Two of the divine names of God, "the Giver of life and death" (al-mumīt wa al-muḥyī), al-Buni states are particularly effective in warding off plague. The two names should be recited or written on a square made of gold, silver, or parchment.”⁶⁵

Many works used the occult sciences such as the Hellenistic *Khassiyat* “sympathetic qualities” of nature as an integral part of their treatment as “it was believed that all objects were in relation to one another through sympathy and antipathy—as is evident in the mysterious forces of the magnet—and that diseases could be caused and cured, good and ill fortune be brought about as a result of the relations of these tensions.”⁶⁶ Additionally, Muslim scholars extended this concept to cover letters and Qur’anic verses, and gave them the power to cure illnesses.

This chapter aimed to emphasize two main issues which influenced the previous studies of the plagues in the medieval Muslim world. First, it highlighted the role of the ancient beliefs in influencing the Egyptian communities’ perception of the pathology of diseases. It showed the invalidity of the conclusions of the previous scholarly works on plagues which tried to reduce the communal reactions to plague as being in line with the scholarly literature, and fail to recognize the extent in which these magical practices were integrated in the daily Egyptian life since:

Magical and folkloric practices, as well as astrological medicine, formed part of the medical pluralism and reflected ancient beliefs and customs that long predated

⁶⁴ Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, p. 148; The book of *Shams al-ma'arif al-kubra* has a very negative stigma in modern Arabian culture while it does not seem to have such stigma in the medieval era. Also, the circulation of the book is prohibited in some Middle Eastern countries in recent years.

⁶⁵ *Shams al-ma'arif al-kubra*, p. 75 quoted in Dols, *The Black Death*, p. 124.

⁶⁶ M, Ullmann "Khāṣṣa." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2013. Accessed in 28 March 2013 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/khassa-SIM_4227>

the advent of Islam. The reliance at times on astrology and magic can be seen at all levels of society. Magical and astrological techniques, moreover, were an integral part, to one degree or another, of all medical practice whether learned or traditional⁶⁷

Secondly, it showed the variety of the medical traditions which influenced perceptions of disease in medieval Egypt. For example, Michael Dols, in the most influential work dedicated to the study of the communal reactions to the Black Death in the Middle East and Europe, could not appreciate this polyethnic tradition which existed in the medieval era, and based his argument on the assumption that both societies adhered to the same medical tradition. So, he mistakenly argued that the communal reactions to plague differed because each society reacted in accordance to the religious roots of their culture. Conversely, this paper shows that the discourses on and perceptions of the influence of the plague on the human body, and its causes in both communities were shaped by various medical and magical traditions. It also shows the invalidity of discussing the medieval medical traditions from the conventional modern classification while the boundaries between these traditions were not as clearly defined as a modern reader would assume. The dichotomy of rational and irrational medicines is rather misleading, as exemplified by the medical writings of the traditionalist scholars who were widely perceived as representative of “high Islam” and yet were actually influenced by Galenic medicine, magical practices, and the views of Sufi teachings. In contrast, the surviving Coptic literature showed that astrological medicine played a significant role in shaping the Coptic community’s understanding of the causes of illness.

⁶⁷ Pormann and Emilie Savage Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, p. 145.

Chapter 2. Discourses on the Soul

This chapter discusses the philosophical and theological perceptions of plagues in the writings of mainstream scholarly works in medieval Egypt. While the notion of plague being a divine punishment has dominated the discourses in both Muslim and Coptic communities, the scope of concern of the Coptic Church was different during the medieval era. As mentioned earlier, the medieval era was a period of transformation in Egyptian demography because during this period Egypt evolved to being dominantly inhabited by a Muslim population. Subsequently, after the mass deaths caused by plagues and famines both Muslim and Coptic religious authorities carried out a regulatory process in response to the deviationist beliefs and practices in the two communities. Opportunistically, religious authorities used the popular belief of plague being a divine punishment to reaffirm their authority over their followers. Also, after studying the social context in which the perceptions of scholarly literature on plagues were developed, this chapter will show that cultural and political realities played a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and reactions of religious authorities to many philosophical issues such as: fatalism, divine punishment, and death.

Defining what were the orthodox or high Christian discourses for the Coptic part of the study was an easier task, to a great extent, than doing the same for the Muslim literature for two reasons. First, this was due to the existence of an institution that defined the orthodox beliefs and their deviations. Second, it is due to the locality of the Coptic Church and its existence within relatively limited geographical boundaries which helped in affirming the church's control over preaching and the production of religious literature. Nevertheless, the Coptic Church's authority to define the orthodox beliefs was contested several times during the medieval era. Not surprisingly, excommunication was frequently used to maintain the Church's monopoly over public preaching. A good example of this is in the case of the blind priest Murqus Ibn al-Qanbar who challenged

the authority of the Coptic patriarch Markus III (1116-1189) who consequently had him excommunicated.⁶⁸

The Coptic Church also maintained its monopoly over literary production in the medieval period by propagating scholarly works written only by scholars who were closely attached to the church. Starting from the twelfth century, Coptic scholarship witnessed what can be considered a renaissance of Coptic literature, at the hands of many intellectuals who occupied positions in its ecclesiastical hierarchy such as the sons of al-‘Assāl (al-Mu‘taman, al-Ṣafī, al-As‘ad)⁶⁹, Bulus al-Bushi (d. 1250), and Ibn Kabar (d. 1324). Yet, the works of these scholars were mostly dedicated to the study of Canonic laws and jurisprudence, Christology, and apologetic/ polemic literature directed at debating other Christian or Jewish sects rather than discussing philosophical issues such as the causes of the plague.⁷⁰

In contrast, Muslim scholarship, which did not have such an institution that defines high Islam, depended heavily on using previous religious authorities as a reference in order to validate a given point of view. Anti-*bid‘a’s* discourses in the medieval era, to some extent, played a similar role to Christian religious institutions in defining orthodox Islamic practices. Nevertheless, the prevalence of esoteric teachings in medieval Egypt, whose origins were attributed to one of the Prophet’s companion ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, made it harder to carry out such a task. Rather, it was more like a competition between those who presented themselves as representatives of high Islam such as Ibn al-Hajj al-‘Abdari (d.1336) and Ibn Baydakin al-Turkumani (a late thirteenth/ early fourteenth scholar), and the Egyptian popular culture. Moreover, as was shown in the previous chapter, many of the works of the influential Muslim scholars in the Mamluk period contained what might appear to be deviations from orthodox Islam to the modern Muslim reader. However, this chapter will focus on the writings of the traditionalist school (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) which

⁶⁸ Wadī‘ Abū al-Līf, *Dirasah ‘An al-Mu‘taman Ibn al-‘Assal wa kitabihi “Majmu‘ Usul al-Din” wa Tahqiqihi*, (Cairo, Jerusalem: Matba‘at al-aba‘ al-Fransiskan, 1997).

⁶⁹ Thirteenth century scholars.

⁷⁰ Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 211-214.

are considered in the modern era to be the representatives of high Islam. Studying the divergence of these scholars from what is currently considered as high Islam made a better understanding of the cultural atmosphere and, sometimes, of the personal characteristics and views of those scholars.

Also, the writings of the Coptic patriarchs Yuhanna XIII and Kirillus III are used in this chapter as it is clear that these sources have provided us with good insights into the institutional perception of popular beliefs and practices.⁷¹ For example, in consecutive letters, Yuhanna XIII followed the same form of the Muslim plague treatises, starting what might be considered an epistle on plague. He started by quoting the biblical narrative of the plague inflicted upon the Egyptians during the lifetime of Moses, and how God saved the Israelites who made animal sacrifice and imprinted its blood upon their doors to protect these same Israelites from the plague. Moreover, he mentioned the same narrative which Ibn Hajar started his epistle on plague with; recalling that the plague inflicted upon the Israelites in the lifetime of the King David which led to the death of seventy-thousand persons.⁷² Finally, he discussed many topics related to plague such as the causation of sickness, fatalism, nature of death, and divine punishment.

⁷¹ Also, I will give some references in the footnotes to some earlier Coptic works which discussed plagues such as the correspondence of Anba Besa (a fifth-century monk) the third abbot of the White Monastery (Dayr Anba Shinudah) since it is rarely discussed in modern scholarship. So, I believe this would help in contextualizing the ideas discussed in the Mamluk period. Anba Besa's collection of letters and sermons is occasionally referenced in Coptic literature, and has been copied several times in the middle ages till it was compiled and translated by K. H. Kuhn in 1956. Anba Besa's highly respected reputation is clear in references to him in Coptic liturgy, accompanied with Anba Shenute, in Coptic Synaxarium. The importance of Besa's work came from his adherence to the traditional beliefs of the Orthodox church as "revealed by his frequent references to the commandments of "our fathers" as well as by quotations from Athanasius and Antony." Moreover, the letters of Besa address many topics which this thesis is concerned with, such as: repentance, strife of the Coptic community, lack of food and famines, individual responsibility for sins, and the sinfulness of the community. Anba Besa, *Letters and Sermons of Besa*, edited by Kuhn, K. H, (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, L Durbecq, 1956). *The Coptic encyclopedia, volume 2, (CE:378a-379a)*, s. v. "Besa," Originally published in print by Macmillan, accessed in 26 September 2012 <http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cce/id/1239>

⁷² Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma'un*, p.85; Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fols. 152a.

2.1 Philosophical Perception of Plagues In Islamic and Coptic Scholarly Works

In this part of the chapter, the historical parameters which shaped Muslim and Coptic scholarly perception of plagues and famines in medieval Egypt, and the philosophical questions accompanying it concerning: communal and individual culpability of sins, divine punishment and plans, and fatalism are discussed.

Muslim and Coptic scholarly works presented a variety of opinions in discussing the plagues and famines. However, sometimes they fell in contradictions while discussing the mass death which resulted from plagues. Many Muslim scholars, especially from the school of Ahl al-Hadith, accepted the notion that any Muslim who died suffering from plague was to be considered a martyr. Moreover, some scholars like Ibn Hajar, went so far as to consider plagues a blessing to the Muslim community.⁷³ From an opposite point of view, other Muslim scholars argued that the plague was a divine punishment for the community.⁷⁴

Coptic scholarship in the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras approached the subject by suggesting that the meaning of death has changed after the crucifixion of Jesus. Also, they presented another explanation by suggesting that death is a divine test. Furthermore, Coptic scholarly works aimed to deny the notion of fatalism which was considered as a byproduct of the belief in the influence of the stars on human life. Finally, the notion of plagues and natural disasters being a collateral punishment in Coptic scholarship, however rarely presented by their religious authorities, aimed to render political goals, or to maintain the communal solidarity has been illustrated.

⁷³ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma'un*, p.78.

⁷⁴ Ibn Hajar for example argued that plague might be a bless and punishment in the same time. Ibid, pp. 209-218.

2.1.1 Scholarly Perception of Death and Divine Punishment

Christian authoritative works such as the Bible and its exegeses suggested that natural disasters especially plague was a form of divine punishment to the community for its sins. One of the most famous narratives which induced this understanding of the causes of natural disasters was the story of the ten disasters that befell ‘the Egyptians’ in the Exodus. This understanding was widely accepted in Western Christianity which led to the emergence of many organized repentance groups across Europe such as the flagellants. Biblical plagues were perceived on multiple levels as was reflected in the writings of many influential Western Christian scholars. A synthesis between the concept of plagues as divine punishment and the air miasma was presented as the cause of the most biblical plagues. The plague of Egypt, for example, was perceived to be caused by the death of the frogs which made the earth stink (i.e corruption of air).⁷⁵

However, these biblical punishments were not similarly theorized in Eastern Christianity. Unlike their Western counterparts who developed a “belief in plague as a divine punishment for men's sins [which] was preached by clergymen deeply committed to the idea of original sin and man's guilt arising from his essential depravity, Coptic scholarship did not develop a sophisticated philosophy concerning divine punishment as well as a fundamental contempt — both Christian and Stoic — for this world. Indeed, original sin [in Western culture] was interpreted as the cause of human degeneration; it inclined mankind towards sin and thus provoked divine punishment in the guise of an appropriate disease. The ultimate threat of disease, death, was the final punishment for the Christian for having been born in sin.”⁷⁶

Coptic religious authorities produced contradictory views concerning the tenets of collective punishment, and individual culpability for sins. Also, their explanation of the

⁷⁵ Exodus (14:8), Stearns, “Infectious Ideas,” p. 79

⁷⁶ Dols, *The Black Death*, p. 296.

nature of the community's sin which evoked God's anger upon them varied according to the political and cultural challenges they faced.⁷⁷

In the medieval era, Egyptian patriarchs' perception of such existential issues differed due to the changes in the political challenges they faced.⁷⁸ Tamer el-Laithy in his discussion of the conversion waves of the Copts during the medieval era, showed that the Coptic cultural conversion [to Islamic culture] was manifested by adopting Muslim family practices. First the Coptic elite led this conversion, and were later followed by the Coptic community at large. For the Coptic community, he argued, the 14th century conversion wave affected "more than their personal religion. In the long term, this conversion wave restructured the range of desires and possibilities of even those Copts who had remained Christian".⁷⁹ The correspondence of the both patriarchs, Kirillus III and Yuhanna XIII, showed the great extent to which the Coptic community adopted the Muslim marital practices such as polygamy, and the keeping of concubines.

⁷⁷ As early as the fifth century, the writings of the abbot of the White monastery, Anba Besa, are a clear example of the Coptic scholarship's contradictory views concerning the notion of the individual culpability for sins. This can be seen in his discussion of many of the sins and errors that occurred during his leadership of the White monastery such as fornication, vanity, and theft. Anba Besa in his many letters which were directed to the evil-doers, clearly propagated for the individual responsibility for sins. However, when discussing natural disasters such as the "great Calamity [which] had occurred in the whole land with famines and diseases," Besa argues that God delivered to them "every tribulation, namely death and famine and every affliction" as a punishment for their sins. The writings of Anba Besa show how communal and political challenges shaped the understanding of the Coptic religious leaders of the reasons of communal condemnation and mass punishment. Besa considers that disunity, communal clashes and turbulences were the main reason for the communal strife, while as I will show later, Yuhanna XIII believed it is fornication instead. Besa's teachings were influenced by the civil clashes within the community between the Christians and pagans, and the clashes within the Christian circles between the Nestorian and Orthodox beliefs. These events shaped Besa's perception of the causes of the divine punishment and repentance. Thus, Anba Besa's explanation of God's rage revolved around the mistreatment of human beings such as "striking your neighbors without restraint, without fear of God, until God curses those who do these things and delivers them up to their own devices," while evils such as unbelief and fornication were to be punished individually. Thus, communal repentance was by "depart [ing] from these pointless contentions, quarrelles, and hatred." *The Coptic encyclopedia*, s. v. "Besa" Also see Anba Besa., *Letters and Sermons of Besa*, p.15, 26, 40.

⁷⁸ Sometimes such topics were not widely discussed due to the political challenges as well. For example, in examining the manuscript of the correspondence of Kirillus III(the seventy-fifth patriarch of the Orthodox church), most of the letters were directed to running the administratives and regulating the activities of the church, especially that the pabacy was empty for nineteen years before his enthronement. However, some theological and philosophical issues were addressed in his letters which had the imprint of al-Safi Ibn al-'Assal, the famous Coptic scholar.

⁷⁹ El-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion," p. 363.

Furthermore, some members of the Coptic community obtained divorces by seeking the intervention of the Islamic courts.⁸⁰

Coptic religious authorities responded to the new threat on more than one level. For example, Yuhanna XIII made radical changes to Coptic family laws in response to the new social realities as the number of Copts was drastically reduced due to the conversion wave. Since the opportunity of securing purely Coptic marriages became less probable, he allowed first cousin marriage for the first time. The famous Christian scholar, al-Safi Ibn al-‘Assal, justified the need to change the Coptic law by stating that Copts:

became dhimma [i.e. dhimmīs] and their number fell in most of their lands, such that young men and women could not find spouses among their relatives from the seventh or more births [i.e. more distant than third cousins]. This risked corrupting those who fell prey to (carnal) desire, possibly leading them to leave the faith [i.e. convert to Islam]. [So,] it is permitted for religious authorities to allow and prohibit [certain acts] according to [what promotes] the social good (*al-maṣlaḥa*), while not infringing on the religious law.⁸¹

Also the new social realities in the medieval era, mainly conversion and adoption of Muslim social practices, occupied the Coptic religious authorities explanation of the causations of natural disasters. This anxiety pushed Mattā’us I (the eighty-seventh Coptic patriarch, d. 1409) who reigned directly after the Black Death, to state on his deathbed that:

And any of the people used to mix together, and they became defiled with the impurities of the Cairenes (al-Miṣriyyīn). And this father used to sigh and to weep for the evil which had befallen the Cairenes (al-Miṣriyyīn), so that from the excess of his weeping, he began to admonish his people, saying “Be vigilant, O my sons, and beware of that day in which vengeance will come upon the Cairenes (al-Miṣriyyīn); because in that day there will descend fire from Heaven burning all the dwellings of the Cairenes (al-Miṣriyyīn), so that the smoke of that city will rise up, and they then shall lament over it: ‘Today, Babylon the Great, Mother of all the Miṣriyyūn, is fallen’⁸². And whenever this father addressed (us) with this

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 453.

⁸¹ Mukātabāt Yūḥannā XIII, fol. 197a.; Tamer el-Leithy’s translation, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 375.

⁸² Apocalypse 7:5.

word, we paid no heed, and we increased only in transgressions and shamelessness without fear of God.⁸³

Similarly, unlike earlier Christian authorities, Yuhanna XIII considered *zina* as the cause of the ordeals befallen upon earth, and considered fornication one of the reasons which led to the conquest of Egypt and the control of Muslim authorities over the Copts:

All of the strikes which hit the earth as a result of the anger and rage [of God] occurs because of the sin of fornication (*zina*). And there is no sin makes you distant from God and [...], and makes you prisoners between the hands of your enemy (i.e under the control of Muslim rulers) like impurifying the body with fornication.⁸⁴

Even events less tragic than plagues and famines were given moral interpretations. A prime example was the locus infestation of 1222, which has been interpreted as a divine punishment for the Ayyubid confiscation of the monasteries' money.⁸⁵ However, Coptic scholars did not endeavor to theorize the notions of divine punishment, and individual culpability of sins as both views existed in Coptic authoritative works. It was the political and social contexts which directed the religious authorities selective approach in explaining natural disasters and understanding.

However, a change in this perception between the early Coptic writings such as in the speeches of Anba Besa (fifth century monk) and the medieval ones such as the correspondence of Anba Kirillus III (d. 1243) and Yuhanna XIII which did not emphasize this understanding of the causation of plagues can be traced. Moreover, the medieval religious authorities, did not completely denounce the perception of plagues as divine punishment and were more inclined to consider death in general as a trial. Nevertheless, the tenet that God might cause plagues or natural disasters in general as a

⁸³ *HoP*, Vol. 3, part. 3, p. 267.

⁸⁴ Mukātabāt Yuhanna XIII, fol. 25a

”كل الضربات الحائلة على الأرض غضبا وحنقا في علة الزنا، لأن ليس خطية تبعد من الله وتمنع من (...)، وتجعل الإنسان أسيرا بين يدي أعداءه مثل نجاسة الجسد بالزنا.

⁸⁵ El-Leithy, “*Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in 14th-century Upper Egypt*,” Edited by A. Sabra and R. McGregor. *Sufism in Mamlūk and Ottoman Egypt*, (Cairo, 2005). p. 99.

divine punishment was not entirely ignored in Coptic scholarship. For example, Kirullus III explained God's actions as akin to a children's educator (discipliner) who hits the child by a stick to teach him better — an example which also has been given in one of the letters in the correspondence of Yuhanna XIII.⁸⁶ However, Coptic discourse, except in few cases where the religious authorities tried to warn or prevent the community from a specific practice, propagated the notion of individual responsibility for sins and denounced the whole notion of mass punishment.

Similarly, Muslim scholarly works also gave contradictory explanations for the causes of plagues and natural disasters. Many scholarly works implied that plagues are a divine punishment to the community as a result of the spread of adultery. Nevertheless, Muslim scholars such as Ibn Hajar consider that plagues are not punishment, rather a blessing of the Muslim community as implied by the title of his epistle on plague, *Badhl al-ma'un fi faḍl al-ṭa'ūn* ((An Offering of Kindness on the Virtue of the Plague)).⁸⁷ As Dols put it: "There is an obvious incompatibility between the beliefs in plague as a divine punishment and as a divine reward. Within this spectrum of beliefs, there was also the deterministic view, which finds support in the Qur'an, that plague was a calamity decreed by an unknowable God. The latter interpretation was most consistent with the historical accounts and represented the consensus of the jurists and popular attitudes. As for the unique theological claim that plague was a mercy and martyrdom, it may have been both comforting and confounding for the distressed Muslim; it had the virtue of preserving the belief in a compassionate and merciful God."⁸⁸

2.1.2 Fatalism

Most recent scholarly works on the Muslim perception of plague have agreed that Muslim scholars took a fatalistic approach in discussing the subject. This fatalistic approach also can be traced through the Muslim scholarly literature of medieval Egypt.

⁸⁶ Mukātabāt Yūḥannā XIII, fol. 155 a; Mukātabāt Kirullus III, fol. 43 b.

⁸⁷ Justin Stearns's translation, "Infectious Ideas", p.213.

⁸⁸ Dols, *The Black Death*, p. 290

This fatalistic understanding of famines and natural disasters was manifested in many aspects. One example was the controversy over the question of whether it was permissible to flee the towns inflicted by plague or not. Ibn Hajar, in his discussion of the subject quoted a prophetic tradition which suggested that fleeing the inflicted towns is prohibited:

Any Muslim in whose town a plague occurs, if he remains in it steadfastly and does not leave his town knowing that he will only face what God predestined for him, will have the reward of the martyrs.⁸⁹

He explained the Prophetic tradition by stating that “the rewards of the martyr will be given to those who did not flee from the town inflicted by plagues. And that he stays aiming for God’s rewards, believing in His promises. And he must believe that if he was inflicted by plague that it is coming from God”⁹⁰ So as Marie-Hélène Congourdeau puts it:

If God is the author of all the evil and good, it is He who sends pestilence and there is nothing to do to escape...the interpretation of the plague not as a punishment but as a mercy can lead even in this ‘fatalism’ to an extreme form of trust.⁹¹

Furthermore, the question of fatalism was reflected in Muslim jurisprudence during this period. For example, Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, in his book *Badhl al-mā‘un*, wrote a chapter about the jurisprudential rulings of “writing the wills” during the plague time. This question posed itself since some *fuqaha’* considered the plague to be a ‘sickness causing a fear of death’ (*marad mukhawwif*). Thus, according to most jurists, *al-muwsī* (the will writer) is confined to conduct only one-third of his/her possessions, unlike, the normal state in which the non-terminally ill person can conduct his/her money as he/she wishes. However, they extended the ruling to cover the whole population of cities which were inflicted with plague, even entirely healthy persons. Ibn Hajar,

⁸⁹ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-mā‘un*, p. 200.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 200.

⁹¹ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau and Mohammed Melhaoui, “La perception de la peste en pays chrétien byzantin et musulman”, *Revue des Études Byzantines*, v. 59 (2001), 95-124, 110. quoted in: Stearns, “*Infectious Ideas*”, p. 238.

attacked these circulating ideas, considering that only the one who is inflicted with plague is considered to be in a “*marad mukhawwif*” state, not the entire city.⁹²

By the same token, noticeably, the notion of the God controlling all human actions and destiny was presented in Coptic scholarship to counter the belief in fatalistic ideas which were driven by the belief in the influence of the stars on human life. Coptic scholarly works tried to dissociate the “close link between fate and the stars; for it was the opinion of Hermetists that all of the forces and energies just spoken of, and to which the whole of sublunary creation was subject, were derived directly from the heavenly bodies. ‘the overthrow of kings, the insurrection of cities, the sudden fluctuations of the sea.’”⁹³ Coptic religious authorities such as Yuhanna XIII, and the thirteenth century scholar Yuhanna Ibn Abu Zakariyya Ibn Sibā‘ presented the stars as the false god, and the Church as the representative of the all powerful true God.

Ibn Sibā‘ in his book *Kitāb al-Jawhara al-nafīsa fi ‘ulūm al-kanīsa*, considered that the prophets such as Moses were sent to confront the false beliefs in the influence and worship of planets which was practiced in Egypt.⁹⁴ He notes the many miracles, powerful talismans, and magical spells which were attributed to the powers of the planets while they were in fact the works of the devil. Also, he argued that Christ sent seventy apostles to preach and heal which is the same as the number of the spirits that are influenced by Saturn.⁹⁵

Equally, Yuhanna XIII criticized this fatalistic belief in the influence of the stars and presented the church as the breaker of the chains of fatalism:

It is written that prayers when they ascend from the houses of worships (churches), it stop what had been destined by astrology. As some holy saints said ‘standing in front of the King’s door corrupts the provisions of astrology.’ This is because by the escalation (spread) of the incense in the church, the sins of the

⁹² Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma‘un*, p. 339.

⁹³ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, p. 78.

⁹⁴ Yuhanna Ibn Abi Zakariyya Ibn Sibā‘, *al-Jawhara al-nafītha fi ‘ulum al-kanīsa*, (Cairo and Jerusalem: Matba‘at al-Aba‘ al-Fransiskan, 1997), p. 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 44.

attendants will be wiped out. And when that happens, God's rage will be wiped out also and replaced by grace, mercy, blessings, and forgiveness.⁹⁶

Also, in his answering the question do human beings have death time predestined? he considered that:

The astrologers might say that everything which occurs on earth, like: impairments, diseases, being rich, or poor, happens under the influence of planets. The clear evidence on refuting this is that we find cities that were besieged by armies and conquered. Then, the [army] kills the old people [of the city], its young people, its women, and its kids. And [the army] loots its money; and [...] its livestock in one day..... And all of them happen to die on the same day even though they were not born on the same day.⁹⁷

Fatalistic ideas and the belief in predestination were attacked by many influential religious scholars such as Ibn al-Makīn (d. 1273) and Yuhanna XIII (1524.) Ibn al-Makīn stated that:

It is shown that the belief that the human lifespan, morals, and God's giving, are predestined is not the belief of true Christians. And the Prophet [David] did not intend by his words to imply that there is a predestined time of death and that it is impossible to add [time to the humans' lifespan] or shorten it.⁹⁸

Also, Ibn al-Makin criticized the views of the non-Christians who believe that "every action in life either good or evil comes from God, and this necessitated that God is the author of evil"⁹⁹ However, Kirullus III did not deny that God can be the author of the evil

⁹⁶ Mukātabāt Yūḥannā XIII, fols. 20 b, 21a.

"لأنه مكتوب أن الصلوات إذا صعدت من بيوت العبادات حللت ما عقده الأفلak كما قال بعض الآباء القديسين أن الوقوف بباب الملك يفسد أحكام الفلك، لأن برفع البخور في البيعة، يرتفع عن الشعب الحاضر خطاياهم، وإذا ارتفعت خطايا، ارتفع الغضب عنهم و حل عوضا عن ذلك النعمة والرحمة والبركة و الغفران."

⁹⁷ Besa's birth and death dates are not specified. However, he died after the year 474 as he succeeded the famous Saint Shenute.

"قد يقولوا أصحاب أحكام النجوم أن كلما يحدث في العالم من العاهات و الأفات و الأمراض و الغناء و الفقر فمن جهة الكواكب فمن الدليل الواضح على بطلان هذا الأمر و نسخه هو أننا نجد العدو قد حاصر مدينه ما ففتحتها و قتل مشايخها و شبا و نسايتها و صبيانها و نهب أموالها و ساق مواشيتها في يوم واحد و أيضا نجد جماعه كثيره يركبون سفينه و يقطبون في ساعه واحده و أتفق ان هلكوا في يوم واحد و قد كانت مواليدهم دلت على خلاف ذلك ."

⁹⁸ Ibn al-Makīn, *Mukhtṣar al-bayān*, p. 134

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 141.

action. Although it seemed that Kirullus III implied that God only may punish individuals for their sins while natural disasters occurred naturally:

The catastrophes may occur with a specific divine will (intended to influence the personal life of an individual) or by the nature of the universe with general (not directed towards a specific person) divine will. And the first case may occur as a vengeance, so God inflicts it in this world since it is better to endure the temporal pain in this life than the perpetual punishment in the afterworld.¹⁰⁰

Finally, Muslim and Coptic scholarship in medieval Egypt was preoccupied with the notion that God is the Creator of everything. Nevertheless, this idea resulted from two different discourses and had different implication on the belief of the causation of natural disasters and plagues. Muslim scholarship developed from the long debate between the *mutakallimūn* and *ahl al-ḥadīth*. The latter group's attribution of every action to God meant that He was the creator of plagues. So, they propagated the idea that death by plague is a form of martyrdom for the believers to maintain the belief in the goodness of God. Conversely, the Coptic scholars tried to confront the Copts' fatalistic belief in the influence of the planets. Also, Coptic scholars were reluctant to consider God the creator of evil. Hence, they did not try to systemize a theory of plagues being divine punishment. Nevertheless, some religious scholars used this explanation to confront the political and cultural challenges which faced the Coptic community such as civil strife or the cultural conversion and adoption of the Muslim practices.

¹⁰⁰ Mukātabāt Kirullus III, fol. 42b

Chapter 3. Popular Reactions and Perceptions to Plagues

This chapter examines the perception of the plague in medieval Egyptian popular culture by focusing on three main topics which were previously raised in secondary works about the plague in the Middle East which clearly need to be reexamined more closely. First, this chapter discusses whether plague recurrences influenced the relation between the hegemonic Muslim community and religious minorities in medieval Egypt. On this point, Dols argues that the anti-*dhimmi* sentiment, and violence of the Muslim masses against the Coptic community during the Mamluk period did not suggest the existence of a social mass hysteria, or organized persecution of the religious minorities:

The unassimilated communities were tolerated in medieval Muslim society and, in this instance, were not held responsible for the ravages of the pandemic. However theoretical, the legal tenet against contagion of plague would have militated against the accusation of minorities. In no case is there a direct causal relationship to be found between the Black Death (or subsequent plague epidemics) and the active persecution of minorities, as in Europe.¹⁰¹

So, Dols perceived the nonexistence of Muslim movements or groups which articulated a coherent theory of salvation, or accused the religious minorities of causing plague, similar to the flagellants movement in Western Christian communities, as evidence that plagues did not influence Muslim-*dhimmi* relationships. However, he did not try to explain the increase of social violence and hostility towards *dhimmis*, particularly the Copts, in medieval Egypt. On the other hand, von Kremer in his work *Ueber Die Grossen Seuchen Des Orients Nach Arabischen Quellen*, argues that Sufi orders in medieval Egypt practiced organized persecution against the Copts, in a manner similar to the flagellants movement in the European experience.¹⁰²

Next, this chapter reexamines the targeted violence against the Coptic community in Mamluk Egypt and its relation with the advent of the plague. It shows that while there is

¹⁰¹ Dols, *The Black Death*, p. 296

¹⁰² von Kremer, *Ueber die grossen Seuchen*, p. 102.

plenty of evidence that Sufi orders in particular were hostile to the Copts, there was no direct cause and effect that links this hostility to the pandemics. Rather, the economic difficulties which usually accompanied the pandemic recurrences caused a simultaneous increase in the hostility against Copts in particular. However, there was no causal relationship to the advent of plagues.

The second point which this chapter discusses is the moral interpretation of the causes of plague, and the manifestations of collective psychology within the Egyptian community during the plague era. It also examines the social reception of the recurring plague and questions if it can be linked to the rise of eschatological expectations and messianic preaching in the Muslim and Coptic communities.

Finally, this chapter examines briefly the popular reception of plague as reflected in Mamluk literature. It shows that the normative works of Muslim theologians, which were the focus of previous studies of the plague in the Middle East, failed to describe the actual reactions of the Muslim community to the plague. Rather, they reflected the ideal or puritanical views of those religious scholars.

3.1 Plague and Inter-Communal Social Relation

Coptic-Muslim relations in medieval Egypt have received considerable attention in the scholarly works. It is widely accepted that the Copts, during the periods before the rise of the Mamluks, enjoyed the tolerance of the Egyptian rulers, especially in the Fatimid period (358-567/969-1171). This was considered the golden age of the Coptic community under the Muslim rule, with a few exceptions such as the case of the reign of the Fatimid ruler al-Hakim (996–1021).¹⁰³ Also, the Copts enjoyed a prominent position in the rulers' courts as a result of their administrative and medical skills, and held many

¹⁰³ Nevertheless, al-Hakim had three Christian vizirs (Fahd b. Ibrāhīm, Manṣūr b. ‘Abdūn and Zur‘a b. Naṣṭūrus). Also, he himself, at the end of his reign, retracted his measures, and his successors until the end of the dynasty restored the previous tradition of an extremely broad tolerance. Even the Ayyubid conquest, which adversely affected the Armenian community, hardly impaired the administrative position of the Copts. The restriction of *dhimmīs* in special quarters in Jerusalem was an exceptional move on the part of the Fāṭimids, and was intended to ensure their safety.” s. v. “Fāṭimids,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012. accessed 06 November 2012 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/fatimids-COM_0218; Carl Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Volume 1: Islamic Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University press, 1998). p. 168.

responsibilities at the time such as collecting taxes, administering the treasury, and surveying agricultural lands. However, in the wake of the Crusades, the suspicion towards the Coptic clerics that they will betray the Muslims in favor of their coreligionists shook their position in the Egyptian administration. Thus, in the late Fatimid and early Ayyubid era, Asad al-Din Shirkuh, the chief minister (*Wazir*) of the last Fatimid Caliph, decreed an edict which prohibited appointing non-Muslims in administrative positions.¹⁰⁴ However, this decision did not last long as it was annulled by Saladin, the first Ayyubid Sultan, who depended upon many Coptic clerics and entrusted two Coptic architects to complete the fortification of the walls of his citadel in Cairo.¹⁰⁵ Also, to some extent, the Copts enjoined considerable prosperity during the rest of the Ayyubid era (564-648/1169-1250) in that they occupied military positions and controlled the military expenditure.¹⁰⁶

However, the Coptic bureaucrats' position in the Egyptian administration fluctuated in the Mamluk era (648-922/1250-1517). At times, Coptic bureaucrats were indispensable to the Mamluk authorities who depended on their experience in administrative works. While at other times, as a result of the clear anti-Coptic sentiment among the Muslim populace and the many anti-*dhimmi* campaigns which aimed to exclude Coptic clerics from the government, Mamluk sultans were put under pressure to limit the existence of Coptic clerics in their administration. The social pressure, and, in many incidents, violent riots, forced the Mamluk sultans to carry out many regulatory edicts such as the ones issued in the years (1260, 1265, 1279, 1283, 1301, 1321, and 1354).¹⁰⁷

Also, during this period Egypt witnessed increased hostility towards *dhimmis*, particularly the Copts. The Muslim crowds followed a pattern similar to eighteenth-

¹⁰⁴ Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the patriarchs of the Egyptian Church, known as the History of the Holy Church*, Trans. Yassā 'Abd al-Masīh and O. H. E. Burmester. (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Francais d'Archeologie Orientale, 1943) v.3 p.63

¹⁰⁵ Atiya, A.S.. s. v. " Ḳibt." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online , 2012. accessed 08 November 2012 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/kibt-SIM_4358>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Perlmann, "Anti-Christian propaganda", p. 852.

century English crowds who were the subjects of E. P. Thompson's study where he concluded that:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimizing notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference.¹⁰⁸

The Muslim crowds accused the Coptic scribes, who administered the taxation and treasury, of being the cause of the difficult economical situation which faced the community in the aftermath of the famines and epidemics which swept medieval Egypt. Famines and plagues had a destructive influence on the Egyptian economy as a result of the existence of two contrasting spheres of economy; the tributary sphere in which the elite depended on the distribution of grains by the Sultan and the urban economy which was based on goods exchange.¹⁰⁹ As a result, the Egyptian population was sensitive to any change in prices especially since they depended on the urban market on a daily basis. This dependence was described by Ibn Khaldun: “[Egyptians were] dominated by joyfulness, levity, and disregard for the future. They store no provisions of food, neither for a month nor a year ahead, but purchase most of it (daily) in the market.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the tributary system which governed the Egyptian market, endorsed the image of the Mamluk Sultans as a source of relief rather than being a part of the problem. This image of the Mamluk authorities has been studied by Boaz Shoshan who concluded that the grain riots in medieval Cairo followed the moral economy model proposed by Thompson in his study of eighteenth century England. Shoshan's study argued for the existence of a consensus among the Egyptian population in general of an understanding of the “just market transactions” which guided the crowds in their revolt. He believed

¹⁰⁸ Thompson, “The Moral Economy”, p.78.

¹⁰⁹ Sabra, *Poverty and charity in medieval Islam*, p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *The Introduction to History: The Muqaddimah*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited by N. A. Dawood, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 175.

that this understanding was not bound to a specific religious community, or ethnic group.¹¹¹

However, this thesis argues, that in the wake of the plagues and the accompanying economic difficulties, the Muslim community held their distinctive consensus in the accountability of the Copts for their economical difficulties. As Tamer el-Leithy puts it:

The abuses of the Coptic officials are explained [by the Egyptian Muslim masses] as occurring outside the purview (much less the direction) of the *Umara'*, and certainly outside the knowledge of the sultan. Deflecting the criticism to lower echelons of the government (Coptic officials) shielded upper classes by presenting them ignorant of the predations of their agents.¹¹²

The portrayal of the Coptic community, as a whole, as the cause of these ordeals was a much complicated process. All anti-*dhimmi* treatises which emerged in the Mamluk period constructed their arguments against the Coptic scribes by accusing them of misappropriating the treasury, stealing the endowments' money, humiliating Muslims, and elevating their social status by imitating the Muslims by riding horses and owning slaves. Moreover, the anti-*dhimmi* discourses did not explain the dishonesty of the Coptic scribes due to their greed or deceitful character. Rather, Coptic scribes were portrayed as “the agents of retaliation” of the Coptic community.

For example, al-Qalqashandi explained what he perceived to be the Copts' logic behind their appropriation of treasury's funds by putting the words in the mouth of an imaginary Coptic scribe:

Our labours and the taxes we pay make us the owners of this land, which the Muslims took from us by force; whatever we do [...] is just retaliation for what they have done to us; nay, it is as nothing compared with the death of our chiefs and kings, slain in the days of the Muslim conquest. Therefore, whatever we appropriate of the wealth of the Muslims, and of their kings and caliphs, is no more than our due, since it is merely a portion of what is owing to us from them.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 65.

¹¹² El-Leithy. “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety”, p. 97.

¹¹³ Perlmann, “Anti-Christian propaganda,” p. 848.

In addition, some authors like Ibn Durayhim, extended the conclusion that Coptic individuals even participated in lowering economic production: “And it has reached me that the Christian in the Egyptian villages is the reason for the ruin of the countryside and its desertion by the inhabitants and the embezzlement of its wealth. He hurts the men and does all he can of wrongs. And this [caused] huge destruction and great corruption.”¹¹⁴

Finally, the same argument can be traced in the writings of the influential scholar Jamal al-Din al-Asnawi. Perlmann in his study of the unpublished treatise of al-Asnawi shows that the accusation of Coptic clerics of intentionally destroying the Egyptian economy was reflected in the writings of al-Asnawi. This was specifically illustrated when al-Asnawi stated that:

The Copts declare that this country still belongs to them, and that the Muslims evicted them from it unlawfully. Then they often steal as much as they can from the state treasury, in the belief that they are not doing wrong. As to the possibility of confiscation and punishment, torture, they hold that the chances of these happening to them are about equal to that of falling sick; that is to say, sickness does sometimes come upon a man, but is not likely to be frequent. They will deposit those funds in churches and monasteries, and other such institutions of the unbelievers; for they hold that so long as they, the Copts, are successful they are more entitled to these funds than are the Muslims. When they are put to torture they urge one another to bear the agony with fortitude, and display steadfastness. When they are compelled to pay they bring to light the smallest possible sum, hand over a portion of it, and pay some of it away in bribes until they are set free. Now, is it right to put in charge of public affairs people with such beliefs and capable of such acts? Moreover, they will appropriate much of the property of the Muslims, the land which is a source of income to the Sultan, or the fiefs of the emirs and the troops, as well as many of the endowments for poor Muslims.¹¹⁵

The Muslim populace blamed the Copts for the impoverishment of Egypt during a period which witnessed consecutive famines and plagues. During which time al-Maqrizi reported that “ those who cultivate and plow the land, most of them have perished as a

¹¹⁴ Ibn Durayhim, *Manhaj al-ṣawāb fī qubḥ istiktāb ahl al-Kitāb* quoted in el-Leithy. “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety,” p. 97.

¹¹⁵ Perlmann, “Anti-Christian propaganda,” p. 847.

result of the calamities of the years we have mentioned.”¹¹⁶ Noticeably, with the exception of a few cases, most of the mobs’ attacks were directed only against Coptic individuals and churches. It was only in the case of the riots of 1301 that it was reported that violence had extended to other religious communities.¹¹⁷ In his description of the civil violence of the 1301, in which all religious minorities were attacked, Joseph Sambari (writing in 1673) argues that the Muslim attacks on the Jews were the result of the hostility to the Copts which ignited the violence and attacks on non-Muslims:

The accursed Christians were too extravagant, used to walk with a proud gait, dress in silk attire . . . ride on horseback like the Muslim emirs, passing *Azhar* on horseback. They also had built many churches.¹¹⁸

Moreover, even conversion to Islam was met with a suspicion from the Muslim populace for many reasons. The new converts maintaining their relation with the Coptic community, sometimes only the head of the family converted to Islam while his offspring maintained on their original religion, and on many occasions the Copts reconverted to Christianity after embracing Islam. This practice was so wide spread that the Coptic church invented a special sermon, “the sermon of the Jar,” in order to be able to reintegrate the converts into the Coptic community.¹¹⁹ As expected, these practices did not help in easing the persecution of the Coptic community. Rather, they endorsed the image of the Copts as deceitful people with a hidden agenda to destroy the Muslim community from within.

Al-Maqrizi noted about the mass conversion of the Coptic scribes that “when the Christians’ affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam

¹¹⁶ Allouche, *Mamluk Economics : a study and translation of al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah*, p. 75; Nevertheless, Maqrizi’s work did not blame the Copts of causing such ordeals. Rather, he showed that the merchants’ greed, the failing of the Nile to reach suitable plenitude for agriculture, and the bad administration manifested in “the fluctuation of currency.”

¹¹⁷ In the year 1301, the Coptic community was attacked as a result of accusations directed to a Coptic scribe that he rode a horse (which is not allowed according to the pact of ‘Umar I) and humiliated the Muslims. However, the attacks were extended to other religious minorities which forced the Mamluk authorities to issue an edict prohibiting the hiring of Copts, and strictly applying the conditions of the pact of ‘Umar. El-leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 256.

¹¹⁸ Perlmann, “Anti-Christian propaganda”, p. 843

¹¹⁹ El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 127

(following the pressures of 1354).¹²⁰ Moreover, he lamented the change in the Muslim community as a result of these conversion waves, “from that point, genealogies became mixed in Egypt. Those who displayed Islam in the rural areas married Muslim women, and had children by them. These children then came to Cairo and rose to become the judges, witnesses and ‘ulamā’. Now whoever knows their personal histories, and the power they now hold over Muslims, becomes aware of that which I dare not openly state.”¹²¹

Also, earlier conversion waves were attacked by various Muslim scholars. Sometimes this took place during the sermons of the Friday prayers, which played a considerable role in constructing the masses’ perception of just administration, and in articulating “the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs.”¹²² For example, in a Friday sermon from the year 1301 (the year which witnessed social violence against Copts and another regulatory decree against Coptic scribes), the preacher attacked the Coptic converts:

Now look at those who embraced Islam and inquire; Do you find any one of them in any mosque? People do not talk of them, but just remain silent. If you say they became Muslims-where is the fruit of their Islam? Has any of them gone in pilgrimage to the holy house of God? Has any of them a pilgrim's cloak? Has any of them been proved to fast in Ramadan? Has any of them entered a mosque to join behind the imam? Or else-you say-they are not Muslims. Then why is poll-tax not exacted.¹²³

Furthermore, Muslim masses created a collective “notion of just governing” through “a selective reconstruction of the paternalist one.”¹²⁴ Muslim scholars, preachers and, and the Sufis promulgated for the application of an old customary covenant, which was the pact of ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, “a text, existing in a number of versions, in which ‘Umar

¹²⁰ A Zettersteen, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mamlukensultane*, p. 84 quoted in: Perlmann, “Anti-Christian Propaganda,” p. 859

¹²¹ Al-Maqrizi, *al-Sulūk li ma‘rifat duwal al-muluk*, vol. 2, p. 927 quoted in: el-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p.124.

¹²² Thompson, “The Moral Economy,” p.78

¹²³ Perlmann, “Anti-Christian Propaganda,” p. 859

¹²⁴ Thompson, “The Moral Economy,” p.98

receives the submission of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to the Muslims and formally sets out the rights and obligations of both parties.”¹²⁵ The earliest versions of this pact which existed in the histories of al-Ya‘qubi (d.897) and Ibn al-Batriq (d.940), did not contain the humiliating conditions which existed in the later versions of the pact. Rather, it was a letter from ‘Umar I to the people of Jerusalem to assure them that they will not be harmed under the Muslim rule unless they publicly defy the Muslim’s authority.¹²⁶ However, the later versions of the pact contained what Muslim scholars called the “conditions of ‘Umar,” a detailed list of rules which *dhimmi*s are bound to follow throughout the Muslim world, not just in Jerusalem.¹²⁷

Despite the questionable chains of transmission of the historical accounts which contained the “conditions of ‘Umar,” Muslim scholars in medieval Egypt chose the versions of the pact which justified the public demand of excluding the Coptic scribes from the administration. Noticeably, even a Hanbalite scholar¹²⁸ like Ibn Taymiyyah, in his construction of anti-Coptic fatwa, used a questionable version of the pact of ‘Umar, which justified many anti-dhimmi practices.¹²⁹

From another point of view, Von Kremer in his discussion of medieval plagues, suggests that these violent events were instigated by Sufis. Indeed, Tamer el-Leithy and M. Perlmann each shows that Sufis (sometimes referred to as the *fuqara*’) played pivotal roles in organizing and articulating social demands.¹³⁰ Also, el-Leithy in his study “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in 14th-Century Upper Egypt” also shows that Sufis played a crucial role in instigating the inter-faith hostility in the

¹²⁵ Levi Della Vida, G.; Bonner, M. s. v. " 'Umar (I) b. al-Khattāb." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online , 2012. accessed 11 November 2012 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/umar-i-b-al-khattab-SIM_7707>

¹²⁶ Shafiq Mahmud, “Al-‘Uhda al-‘umariyya,” *Majallat al-Jami‘a al-‘Islamiyyah fi al-Madinah al-Munawwarah*, Vol.62,No. 1(1984), pp. 1,2.

¹²⁷ The first appearance of the “conditions of ‘Umar” was in Ibn ‘Asakir’s history.

¹²⁸ Hence professed in the science of Hadith

¹²⁹ Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiya, *Majmu‘ al-Fatawa*, (Riyadh: Saudi Government press, 1966), Vol. 28, p.651

¹³⁰ “As members of a literate class (albeit often at the lower end of that stratum), Sufis also constituted a crucial link between the discursive fields of regulatory discourse and its more socially inclusive active expressions.” El-Leithy. “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety,” p. 113.

fourteenth-century Egypt. He describes them as the “agents of violence.”¹³¹ While el-Leithy stressed the role of Maghribi Sufis in instigating the social violence, Coptic sources also noted the influence of some minor Sufi groups as well in inciting the hostility towards the Coptic community such as the Qalandariyya group.¹³²

The Sufis had even greater influence over the Egyptian countryside, especially in the absence of manifestations of the Mamluks’ authority outside the main urban centers. So, the Sufis, whether it was the salaried ones who accused the Copts of stealing the endowments’ money, or the Sufis of the countryside who were highly influenced by the Mamluk administration blamed the Copts. Moreover, Copts were accused of causing these economic difficulties by the minor religious scholars, and Friday prayer preachers who were an effective tool in forming the consensus among the Muslim community of the notion of justice.¹³³

Recent scholarly works also suggested that these events are indirectly linked to the recurring plague. For example, Haarmaan noted that this era witnessed an increased superstitious hostility towards the Pharaonic and the Coptic cultures which was reflected by the repetitive attacks on Coptic and Pharoanic monuments. “The movement reached its peak between the middle and the end of the fourteenth-century, and contemporary observers seem to have been fully aware of the mounting crisis. The age was marked by anxiety fed by frequent natural disasters such as famines, inundations, and by the

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 105.

¹³² *HOP*, Vol. 4, part. 2, p.244.

Al-Maqrizi also notes that organized Sufis (who belonged to Khanqahs and received stipends) were harshly affected by the economical difficulties. In his categorization of the Egyptian populace during the periods of inflation, al-Maqrizi divided the society into seven categories, the fourth being “the majority of legists and students of theology, legal witnesses, most of *ajnad al-halaqah*, and those of similar situation who receive a landed property or a stipend from the Sultan or from another source: these are either dead or wishing death because of the calamity that has befallen them.” While al-Maqrizi continued his argument showing the influence of currency depreciation on the lives of the members of this category, according to anti-*dhimmi* treatises the Sufis were impoverished because Christian scribes were appropriating the *awqaf* money. However, even al-Maqrizi pointed out to the role of Copt in appropriating the Muslim treasury as he reports that “Yalbuga as-Salimi once told Maqrizi that as vizier, he knew that through *mukus* the Copts rob Egypt of seventy-thousand dirhams daily.” However, he did not put that the center of his explanation of the causes of the deterioration of the Egyptian economy as al-Asnawi and al-Qalqashandi did, for example. Allouche, *Mamluk Economics*, p.75. See also Perlmann, “Anti-Christian propaganda,” p. 857.

¹³³ El-leithy, “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety,” pp.105-107; Perlmann, “Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda,” p. 850.

recurrent visitations of the plague which undermined Egypt's flourishing economy.”¹³⁴ While it was unlikely that all Muslim participants in these bouts of destruction considered these edifices supernatural in power, there were — as late as the fourteenth-century — various accounts of ancient magic nestled in Upper Egypt. A direct correlation existed in the popular imagination, as in the religious discourse between medieval Copts and Pharaonic civilization.”¹³⁵

An early narrative revealed the competition between the Muslim culture and the Coptic tradition. Muslim scholars adopted an altered version of Coptic tradition which was attributed to the second Caliph, ‘Umar I, who banned a Coptic celebration of the Nile when he wrote a paper “ordering the Nile to keep flooding with God’s order”. This paper was thrown into the Nile instead of throwing the finger of Coptic martyr which they believed would secure a sufficient Nile plentitude in the flood season.¹³⁶ Then the narrative reported triumphantly that the “Islamic talisman” prevailed over the pagan/Christian traditions.¹³⁷

Similarly, during the medieval period, the belief in the magical powers of the Pharaonic monuments made them the center of ritualistic practices by both Muslim and Coptic individuals. For example, it was commonly believed that burning expensive aromas such as milk-thistle and safflower, while uttering certain magical words, in front of the sphinx, would make it fulfill their wishes.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the assimilation of Coptic religious practices increased the hostility of the puritanical Muslim scholars towards the Coptic culture as was reflected by the Maliki scholar and traveller Ibn al-Hajj al-‘Abdari in his anti-*bid‘a* treatise that attacked the Muslims assimilation to the Coptic norms. These included examples such as Baptism which “continued to attract many an

¹³⁴ Ulrich Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment,” p. 62.

¹³⁵ El-Leithy. “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety,” p. 117.

¹³⁶ Huda Lutfi, “Coptic Festivals of the Nile: Aberrations of the Past?”. In *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*. Edited by Philipp, Thomas//Haarmann, Ulrich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 264.

¹³⁷Ulrich Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment,” p.63.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 62

‘ignorant’ Muslim woman who would, about the time of epiphany, conduct her child to the bathroom, hoping that such immersion would ward off evil.”¹³⁹

The Muslim assimilations to Christian practices, especially during festivals, ignited the hostility of the famous scholars who considered these assimilations religious innovations and tried to further emphasize the evil nature of these practices. Moreover, for puritanical scholars such as Ibn Baydakin and Ibn Taimiyyah, the link between these festivities and Sufi practices was unmistakable. Noticeably, these attacks aimed at getting rid of the stigma of assimilation to non-Islamic practices and eventually paid off in good results, especially among the Sufis who carried out most of the attacks. These iconoclastic attacks varied from symbolic ones, such as in the incident held by a certain Sufi scholar, Qutb al-din al-Qasṭallānī (d. 686/1287), who slammed the sphinx with his shoes¹⁴⁰, to carrying out vandalistic attacks on it.¹⁴¹

As Haarmaan notes, “the vitality of the Coptic-pagan undercurrent in the popular beliefs of Egypt could not simply be denied, even by theologians. And in an age of affliction, the people were particularly prone to turn back to the familiar old idols and symbols which promised comfort and protection, especially the rural populace for whom saint-worship had always remained the normal and natural expression of religious sentiment.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibn al-Hajj, *al-Madkhal*, p. 61 quoted in: Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, (Mouton, the Hague, and Paris: Mouton & Co, 1976), p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Ulrich Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment”, p. 65

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.62

However, In the thirteenth century, some Muslim scholars endeavored to Islamize the Pharaonic culture such as Jamil al-Din al-Idrisi who lived during the reign of the Ayyubid ruler al-Kamil (1218-1238). Al-Idrisi in his book *Anwar 'uluww al-ajram fi al-kashf 'an asrar al-ahram* defended the idea that Muslims should preserve the Pharaonic wonders, arguing that the Prophet's companion (i. e the first generation of Muslims who conquered Egypt) did not try to vandalize these monuments. Moreover, al-Idrisi tried to imply that the Pharaonic culture is the source of the Egyptian unity and wisdom in a pre-national (Shu‘ubi) sense as “ he takes up the familiar alchemical idea that the dust of two places when mingled together may yield surprising results. Relying on a certain *Kitab Masisun al-Rahib* on the science of the talismans, he claims that the dust of Giza and the dust of Antinoe/Ansina, the capital of the [old Egyptian] sorcerers, together with the dust of any third Egyptian locality, constitute a talisman which gives the Egyptians their legendary sagacity.” Ibid, p. 61

¹⁴² Ibn Zahira, p.176 quoted in: Ulrich Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment,” p.65

3.2 Plague in Egyptian Popular Culture

In this section, the reactions of the Coptic and Muslim religious communities to plague and the ideas which arose in the wake of plague era in the popular level are discussed. Previous studies of the subject suggested that the Egyptian Muslim community's reactions to plague were shaped by the views of the scholars of *ahl al-hadith*. As Dols puts it:

The deterministic view, which finds support in the Qur'an, that plague was a calamity decreed by an unknowable God. The latter interpretation is most consistent with the historical accounts and represents the consensus of the jurists and popular attitudes.¹⁴³

Dols also mistakenly argued that “the Arabic sources do not attest to the striking manifestations of abnormal collective psychology, [...], and they never allowed the plague to interfere with their religious usages.”¹⁴⁴ However, in this part of the thesis it has been shown that the Egyptian community's reactions to the plague and natural disasters were not confined by the religious roots of the Islamic religious tenets. The continuous stress upon the Egyptian population made them vulnerable to many apocalyptic, messianic, and magical ideas. Most of these ideas were in no way compatible with the views of Islamic scholarly works which have been studied in the previous chapter.

So, this shows that Dols's conclusions should be reexamined since he overestimated the influence of scholarly writings on the Egyptian masses. Moreover, Dols also abandoned many incidents in which the Egyptian communities showed eschatological expectations and mass hysteria. One striking example of this attitude appeared in his discussion of a historical incident narrated by Ibn Taghribirdi and is worth mentioning in full:

On Friday, Shawwal 9. A strange thing happened: The people had rumored that men were all to die on Friday, and the resurrection would come. Most of the

¹⁴³ Dols, *The Black Death*, p. 290.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 293.

populace feared this, and when the time for prayer arrived on this Friday, and the men went to prayers, I too [Ibn Taghribirdi], rode to Azhar Mosque, as men were crowding to the baths so that they might die in a state of complete purity. I arrived at the Mosque and took a seat in it. The muezzins chanted the call to prayer, then the preacher came out as usual, mounted the pulpit, preached, and explained traditions to the people; when he had finished his first address he sat down to rest before the second sermon. He sat a long time, and people were worried, until he arose and began the second preaching, but before he had finished his address he sat down a second time and leaned against the side of the pulpit a long time, like one who had fainted. As a result the crowd, because of the previous report that men were all to die on Friday, was agitated; they believed the rumor was confirmed, and that death had made the preacher the first victim. While men were in this condition someone called out, "The preacher is dead." The Mosque was thrown into confusion, people cried out in fear, wept with one another, and went up to the pulpit; there was much crowding against the preacher until he recovered, rose to his feet, came down from the pulpit, and entered the prayer niche; he recited the prayer inaudibly, and abbreviated it until he had completed two bows. A number of biers then arrived, and the men prayed over them, led by one of their number. Then while they were praying for the dead, the crowd cried out that the Friday service was not valid, since the preacher who had prayed after his ritual purity, secured through ablution, had been interrupted when he fainted. Then one of the men came forward, stood up, and recited the noon-prayer, four bows. After the one who recited the four bow prayer had finished, a number of others stood up, and at their order the muezzin chanted the call to prayer in front of the pulpit; A man mounted the pulpit, recited two sermons according to custom, and came down to lead in prayer; but they prevented him from advancing to the niche, and brought the prayer leader of the regular five daily prayers, took him forward, and he led them in the Friday service a second time.¹⁴⁵

Dols considered that “ [Ibn Taghribirdi’s] description vividly illustrates the Muslims' obsession with ritual purity.....[However] In general, the events in al-Azhar Mosque should be associated with the belief in the coming of the Last Judgment, which is a central teaching of Islam; they should not be interpreted, despite a certain element of mob hysteria, as part of any millennial expectations like those found in Europe during the Black Death!”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ibn Taghribirdi, *al-Nujum al-zahira fi muluk misr wa al-qahira*, vol. 8, pp. 149-150 quoted in Dols, *The Black Death*, pp. 244-245.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 245.

Moreover, Shoshan shows in his book *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, messianic preaching spread in the fourteenth century and fifteenth century Cairo during the same era. One striking example, is a case which occurred in 1416, where “ a man inhabiting a desolate tomb in the vicinity of Bāb al-Qarāfa, by the large cemetery of the city of Cairo, was summoned to one of the Sultans tribunals to defend his claim of performing heavenly journeys. During these heavenly journeys, the man maintained, he used to see God ‘in person’.”¹⁴⁷ The peculiarity of this event was that it is one of a few incidents in which narrator admitted that this man had followers. Another case occurred in the years following the Black death , a Muslim man started preaching calling himself “an illiterate prophet” (one of Muhammad’s epithets) and calling for the killing of the infidels.¹⁴⁸ However, narrative did not clarify how successful his call was, or whether he had any followers.

Another example was that in the events of the year 1301, a man declared himself al-Mahdi, the awaited Messiah in Cairo, claimed that he is a descendant of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, and preached for repentance before the Judgment Day.¹⁴⁹ While this incident might appear as an individual case, some sources revealed that this man was the famous Sufi saint Abu al-‘Abbas al-Mulatham which indicated that his call found resonance among the Egyptian population. Another example, in the year of 1321, al-Maqrizi noted that during the fires which hit Cairo, eschatological expectations spread among the Egyptian populations.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 107.

¹⁴⁹ Abī Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Aybak al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa jāmi‘ al-Ghurar*, (Cairo : Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmīyah, al-Ma‘had al-almānī lil-Āthār bi-al-Qāhirah, 1969), Vol.7.

¹⁵⁰ Tucker, “Natural Disasters and the Peasantry”, p. 223.

The rise of messianic ideas were influenced by some other factors such as the fall of the Islamic Caliphate in Baghdad in the middle of the thirteenth-century influenced messianic for example. A whole genre of *Jafr* (divinations) and *malahim* were developed in this period and even influenced the writings of the mainstream historians. Ibn al-Dāwādārī (d.1247) in his major historical work *Kanz al-durar wa jāmi‘ al-ghurar* portrays al-Malik al-Nāsir Muhammad b. Qalawūn as a semi-messianic figure with many prophecies that he will defeat the Mongols and free the famous Islamic capital Baghdad. Ibn al-Dāwādārī, describes the birth day of al-Nasir as being marked with the appearance of three tailed-comets in the Mosul and a star in the east, which has been interpreted that he will live for ninety years. Dāwādārī, *Kanz al-durar*, p.273.

These many incidents revealed that the Egyptian community was susceptible to what Dols described as “striking manifestations of abnormal collective psychology” as a result of plague recurrences. Moreover, a careful reading of the sources of the scholars of *ahl al-hadith* showed that the Muslim community’s reaction to these calamities was not in accordance with their writings in the first place. For example, Ibn Hajar refers to the mass hysteria in discussing the refusal of the Muslim populace to visit the houses of those inflicted with the plague.¹⁵¹ The issue of contagion was the focal point of Justin Stearns’s work as he discusses the theological and medical traditions on contagion and concluded that all Muslim scholars, except the Andalusian scholar Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1372), rejected the theory of contagion till the nineteenth century.¹⁵² Similarly, Dols considered that the issue of contagion manifested a clear distinction between the Muslim and Western Christian social reactions. He concludes that Muslims “did not declare that plague was God’s punishment; they did not encourage flight; and they did not support a belief in the contagious nature of plague — all of which were prevalent in Christian Europe.”¹⁵³ However, Ibn Hajar shows that the notion of contagion was highly debated among the Egyptian community. For example, he reports that some Egyptian physicians prevented the healthy people from visiting the plague victims. These ideas were widespread that al-Qāḍī Tāj al-Dīn notes that almost all the Egyptians ceased to visit the diseased persons, “we have seen the masses (*al-‘amma*) ceased to do that [visiting the sick] that they do not visit who is inflicted by plague. And what I say about that: if two just (‘*adlān*) Muslim physicians testified that [visiting the plagued person] may harm who intermingles [with the sick person], ceasing to visit him is permissible or even better than this.”¹⁵⁴ However, as discussed earlier, Ibn Hajar rejected the whole notion of contagion, considering that the physicians who give such testimony should not be accepted as witnesses, and argued that the sensory evidence denied contagion as well since plague

¹⁵¹ Tucker, “Natural Disasters and the Peasantry”, p. 341.

¹⁵² Stearns, “Infectious Ideas,” p. 213.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 337.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 341.

hits some persons in a house while the rest of the family remains healthy even though that they intermingle with the ill.¹⁵⁵ Also some historical accounts attested that Egyptian population fled the areas inflicted with plagues. For example, Ibn Taghribirdi notes that the Mamluk Sultans and the elites used to move to the countryside in the area of Saryakus during the plague epidemics.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, in the plague of the year 1503, the Egyptian elites, Mamluks and even the Hanafi judge escaped to the mountains of Sinai to avoid the plague.¹⁵⁷

3. 3 The Reactions of the Coptic Community

The reactions of the Coptic masses were largely ignored in the Muslim and Coptic historical works. Poverty and impoverishment were the common description of the whole community during the medieval period. Also, the thirteenth and fourteenth century's conversion waves of the Coptic elites were devastating for the lower stratum in the Coptic community which depended mainly on the charitable acts of the wealthy scribes and archons for relief from the high taxation of the Mamluk authority.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, plague and famines worsened the situation of the community which already suffered from the over taxation of the Mamluk state. The exhaustion of the state's treasury due to recurrent famines, the over taxation and confiscation of Coptic scribes

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 342.

¹⁵⁶ Qasim 'Abdu Qasim, *al-Nil wa al-mujtam' al-masri fi 'asr al-salatin al-mamalik*, (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1978). P. 77.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 77.

¹⁵⁸ "The significance of the poll tax appears in its inclusion in marriage contracts. Payment for children's tax appears in several agreements between lower-class spouses, for example, that of a Palestinian couple in 1133 A.D. where, in return for the husband's pledge to pay his wife a fixed maintenance sum of 20 dirhams a month, she agrees to pay the poll tax. In another case (submitted to Maimonides at the turn of the 7th/13th century), a wife accused her husband of spending his income on himself and his mother, without providing for either her or their children, including payment of their jizya. The amount was significant enough for this single mother to list the poll tax alongside the basic maintenance costs of food and clothing. And in ca. 1230 A.D., another Jewess from Aden (present-day Yemen), had to mortgage her house for 30 Maliki dinars (roughly 10 Egyptian dinars) to pay the poll tax of her two sons who were away on business voyages"; E-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion," p. 42.

Covering aged parents' taxes is also documented: in a Geniza document from 1232 A.D., a man undertook to provide for his father. He listed food and drink and "above all, the money for the poll tax, either reduced, as it was paid then [indicating the family was poor], or in full." This last clause about the poll tax appears three times in the document (Mediterranean Society 5: 122). The care with which parents recorded their children's date of birth—according to more than one calendar—may obviously related to claiming their exemption, i.e. related to the age at which the tax was collected from boys; quote in: el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion," p. 43

wealth, and the conversion of the Coptic elites, put the Coptic populace between two hard options which were conversion or accepting the hard realities.

While the Coptic populace expectedly gave moral interpretation to their ordeals, their voice was almost impossible to detect in all the sources examined. All the historical accounts that have described these events, end with a brief sentence usually indicating the start or the end of “rough time” upon the Coptic populace.

In very few cases, we find narrations that show the defiance of some members of the Coptic community. For example, in 1321, the Copts were accused of causing the fires which spread across the Muslim quarters in Cairo. Al-Maqrizi reports that Coptic monks were caught while carrying the oil while trying to set a mosque on fire.¹⁵⁹ However, we cannot find a trace of mass reactions till the era of the eighty-seventh pope, Mattā’us I (d. 1409 A.D.), when the Coptic community started a symbolic resistance to the Mamluk authorities, and Islamic hegemony. This era witnessed a “martyrdom wave” in which Coptic persons willingly sacrificed their lives by showing up in Cairo and blaspheming against the Islamic religion and the prophet of Islam.¹⁶⁰ Interestingly, Muslim judges gave them the chance to renounce their blasphemy but they refused to do so and chose the certain death. So, unlike the earlier cases of the Coptic Martyrs, whether in the Byzantine era, or during the reign of the Fatimid ruler al-Ḥākim, they were not put in a situation where their faith or property were at risk.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ E-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 365; “However, Anbā Mattā’us (the Abbot of Dayr as-Suryān) reproduces the historian’s accusation that Christians retaliated by setting Cairo on fire—but quickly absolves the Copts of this in a section entitled, “The Innocence of Cairene Copts from the Crime of the Fire of Cairo” where he argues that the culprits were Melkites (Silsilat Tārīkh...[2nd ed., Cairo, 2001] 31 and 34). Similarly, he relates the arrest of Christian monks red-handed with oil intended for arson, but then explains that their arrest in Dayr al-Khandaq shows that “they were not Copts of course, for the and Syrians had churches in that monastery” (ibid. 33) quoted in: Ibid, p. 365.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.112.

¹⁶¹ The personal character of the Coptic pope played a considerable role in shaping these events. As we can see in his representation in the book of *the History of the Patriarchs*, Mattā’us I has been portrayed as the revivalist of the church’s power. He was: the Shepherd who faced and scared the wild animals in the desert; the miracle-maker who resurrected the dead, mediated to God not to punish recently died Copt, and who talks to the Virgin Mary directly. Also, in many other occasions, the Patriarch stood alone in the face of the Muslim mobs, and protected the church from being destroyed and confronting the Muslim unjust Sultan and officers. This rise of the Coptic spirit was accompanied with symbolic sacrifices which were mentioned earlier. see *HOP*, p. 150, p. 253.

However, as Tamer el-Leithy notes, this martyrdom wave also can be shown to relate to the advent of the plagues. For one reason, this movement had started in the year of 1379, on the period where Egypt were still suffering from minor plague recurrences in the aftermath of the Black Death. Also, the biographies of some those Coptic martyrs showed that they came from areas which were highly inflicted with plagues. For example, two of those martyrs came from the city of Sunbat, a city which had suffered high mortality rate from the plague to the extent that some peasant communities were totally exterminated.¹⁶² So as Tamer el-leithy describes the motives of those two Coptic martyrs, Ya‘qub and Yuhanna:

Amid such morbidity and rampant extortion, it is perhaps not surprising to learn of Ya‘qūb and Yuhanna’s long journey to Cairo where they stood before Muslims judges and heaped one abuse after another on Islam until they secured their deaths for a cause they knew was worthier than passively enriching the Treasury, and one that was better commemorated than a quiet death by the plague.¹⁶³

3.3 Popular Reactions as Reflected in Literary Works

This part discusses the perception of the plague in Mamluk literary works. This topic was previously discussed in Dols’s work the *Black Death in the Middle East*. However, Dols focused on the description of the disease etiology and mortality rate, while this work will try to shed light on the communal perception of the causes of plague, and their reaction to it by examining the Mamluk literature. Presumably, these literary works, unlike the medical and jurisprudential ones, were directed to a wider audience which make them important sources to study this topic. These works reveal much about the actual popular practices and perceptions of the subject, in contrast to the plague treatises which emphasize the theoretical and theological aspect of the perception of plagues. However, some literary works which are dedicated to discussing the plague also adopted the views of *ahl al-hadith* in explaining the causes and remedies of the plagues. Two important *maqamahs* (rhyming prose), of special interest, were written by Zayn al-Din Umar Ibn Mudhaffar b. al-Wardi (d.1349), and the famous theologian al-Suyuti. The

¹⁶² El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. 108.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 108.

former was an eyewitness of the Black Death in Aleppo, and his *maqamah Risalat al-naba'* 'an al-waba' was included in Ibn Hajar al-Asqlani's work *Badhl al-ma'un*. Both *maqamahs* described the communal reactions to and perception of plague. Ibn al-Wardi, for example, shows that people tended to try various remedies for the plague without making any distinction between the different religious communities. However, he clearly pointed out that the higher social classes used more sophisticated remedies extracted from the medical works as he mentioned many expensive remedies using Armenian mud, certain aromas, and gemstones.¹⁶⁴ The *maqamah* of al-Suyuti also reveals much about the communal reactions to the plague. For example, he shows that the Egyptian people used to move to the district of al-Rawda to be in a place with fresh air which might eliminate the influence of miasma. So, Al-Suyuti argues that the common people did not understand the principles of Greek medicine since living near water increases the human susceptibility to the plague in accordance of miasma theory.¹⁶⁵

Finally, the question of the medical causes and remedies of plague was discussed in poetry. For example, al-Suyuti in his work *al-Hawi fi al-Fatawa*, gave his answer to a 'rhymed question' concerning the causes of the plague.¹⁶⁶ Notably, the questioner, whose name is not cited, mentioned the three explanations of the causes of plague which were previously discussed in this thesis. They are the: miasma, celestial conjunctions, and the piercing of the jinn. Also, the moral interpretation of the plague (i.e. plagues are divine punishment) was not disputed at all in the question and in al-Suyuti's answer as well. The question was posed as follow:

أظن الناس بالآثام باءوا فكان جزاءهم هذا الوباء

I believe people committed too many sins, so they were punished by this epidemic.

أسيد من له قانون طب بحيلة برئه يرجى الشفاء؟

¹⁶⁴ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma'un*, p. 375.

“قد تنغص عيشهم الهني، مملوحة مسلم الطينة الطين الأرمني. و قد لاطف كل منهم مزاجه و عدل، و بخروا بيوتهم بالعنبر و الكافور و السعد و الصندل. و تختموا بالياقوت.”

¹⁶⁵ Al-Suyuti, *Maqamat*, (al-Qusantiniyyah: Maṭba'at al-Jawa'ib, 1880), pp. 70-71.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Suyuti, *al-Hawi fi al-Fatawa*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Alamiyyah, 1983), V. 1. p. 381.

Oh master, who has medical knowledge which can give us hope that we can be cured [from the plague]?

آآجال الورى متقاربات

بهذا الفصل أم فسد الھواء؟

Is the predestined times of death of people really close during this season, or is this due to the corruption of air?

أم الأفلاك أوجبت اتصالا به في الناس قد عاث الفناء؟

Or the celestial conjunctions affected the peoples' lifespan so that mass death prevailed?

أم استعداد أمرجة جفاھا جمیل الطبع واختلف الغذاء؟

Or did this occur due to the imbalance of humors or is it a result of an alteration of diet?

أم اقتربت على ما تقتضيه عقائدنا فللزمان انقضاء؟

Or is it the end of time as is mandated by our creeds?

And, al-Suyuti answered him following the same poetic metre and rhyme:

سألت فخذ جوابك عن يقين فما أوردت عندهم هباء

You asked me, so take my answer with certitude. Those you are quoting are worthless.

فما الطاعون أفلاكا ولا إذ مزاج ساء أو فسد الھواء

Plague is not caused by the orbits, the imbalance of humors, nor the corruption of air.

رسول الله أخبر أن هذا بوخز الجن يطعننا العداء

The Messenger of God told us that this happens by the stabs of the enemy from the jinn.

يسلطهم إله الخلق لما بهم تفشوا المعاصي والزنا

The Creator gave them [the Jinn] the authority when sins and adultery prevail among humans

يكون شهادة في أهل خير ورجسا للألى بالشرباءوا

It is martyrdom for the people of goodness, and

abomination to the wrong-doers.

Conclusions

This study examined the various perceptions of the plague in the medieval Egyptian community at a time when social relations underwent major changes. These changes included the conversion waves of the Mamluk period and the exceptional circumstances as a result of the ravages of epidemics. So, as Berkey put it: “true history of a religious tradition is to be sought in moments of tension which arise as a result of its collision with contingencies of historical circumstance and development.”¹⁶⁷.

This thesis aimed to fill the gaps in the previous studies of the perception of plagues and famines in the Middle East, and questions some of their findings by studying these perceptions in the Egyptian community. Such a study allowed us to compare the general conclusions drawn by Michael Dols’ influential work on the subject, about the perceptions of plague in “the Islamic communities,” and in the specific case of Egypt. This comparison showed many flaws in Dols’s approach such as the inaccurate assumption that the writings of the Muslim scholars reflected the communal understanding of the plagues, and the overestimation of the influence of the writings of scholars who were considered as the representatives of “high Islam” on the lower strata in the Muslim communities.

Muslim plague treatises endeavored to normalize grievances and “to channel the strong emotional reactions of bereaved parents into legitimate religious modes of mourning”¹⁶⁸. These treatises emphasized the importance of accepting disasters as a divine decree, and to portray the plague or death as a positive event by promising the bereaved parents a guaranteed happiness in the afterlife, or in the case of the plague, considering the death as martyrdom. However, these treatises also betrayed the actual popular responses to plagues and famines. The Muslim literature, as always, put emphasis on the ideal reactions to the plague while disregarding the actual practices of

¹⁶⁷ Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p.8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 368

the Muslim populace. Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, for example, did not mince words when attacking the notion of contagion and the practice of fleeing from the cities inflicted with plagues. However, historical accounts have shown that it was common practice during the times when the plagues spread to escape the inflicted areas. Also, fleeing from towns inflicted by plague was a habitual act for practical reasons as in the cases in which peasants emigrated from the countryside to Cairo to receive aid from the Mamluk authorities.

Another point which needs to be emphasized concerning popular reactions to the plague is that superstitious fear from intermingling with the plague victims was widespread. However, no clear mechanism for disease transmission was presented by Egyptian scholars. Ibn Hajar's work showed that many Egyptian physicians were persistent in propagating the contagious nature of epidemics. Nevertheless, those physicians did not produce any surviving literary works.

This paper has tried to highlight the variety of perceptions and reactions to plagues, and mass death in medieval Egypt. It has shown that the writings of this period were a product of the polyethnic culture of medieval Egypt. This diversity was manifested in many aspects such as medicine, magic, philosophy, theological imperatives, and the influence of the ancient cultures. Furthermore, it showed that the sharp divisions between popular culture and "high Islam" in modern scholarly works do not better describe their actual relation in medieval Egypt.

Prominent Muslim scholars such as Ibn Hajar, Ibn al-Qayyim, and al-Suyuti (1445-1505) for example, used the Prophetic traditions to accommodate the popular belief in supernatural causes of plagues. This was seen in Ibn Hajar's inclusion of folk tales in his argument such as the aforementioned incident in which he reported that a certain person heard a conversation between two jinn arguing about stabbing humans with the plague.¹⁶⁹

In contrast, the Coptic Church's perceptions and explanations of the causes of plagues or mass death were not bound to theological or philosophical imperatives. Rather,

¹⁶⁹ Ibn Hajar, *Badhl al-ma'un*, p.155.

different explanations were presented to explain the reasons behind the community's ordeals depending on political and social challenges being faced. While moral interpretation, such as fornication, always existed in both Muslim and Christian literature, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were the most disturbing period for the Coptic churches due to the cultural assimilation of Muslims practices such as divorce, taking concubines, and polygamy. The condemnation of these practices became the focus of the Coptic Patriarchs such as in the aforementioned cases of Mita'us I and Yuhanna XIII. During this period the Coptic cultural conversion to the Islamic practices were widely witnessed. As Yuhanna XIII puts it:

The blessings of the archons become scarce till they became [poor] like the slaves because of their violation of the religious laws. And the children become orphans and women become widows because of the violation of the religious laws, and the most difficult diseases are inflicted upon you because of the violation of the religious laws. And death, hunger, and famines are inflicted upon you because of the violation of the religious laws.¹⁷⁰

Coptic patriarchs aimed to fight, or regulate pre-Christian beliefs especially in magic. Also, the pre-Christian pagan past in which they worshiped the Stars, and the adoption of astrological medicine, blurred the gaps between magic and medicine; priests, and magicians. The Coptic patriarchs tried to maintain and exercise authority over the Coptic population, especially in the countryside where the Copts were more attached to their pre-Christian beliefs, and where magic was substituted for religious healing.

Regarding the influence of plagues on inter-communal relations, it seems that poverty and natural disasters played a key role in stirring social unrest in the Egyptian community especially between the Coptic and the Muslim communities where the Copts were often blamed for the hard economical situations during this period. Various factors influenced the Muslim-Coptic relations in medieval Egypt, and indeed, the economic factor was probably the most influential one. The Muslim community's reaction to the extra-burdensome taxation imposed by the Mamluk authorities was crucial in defining Muslim-Coptic relations in medieval Egypt. Tax collectors, who were mainly recruited

¹⁷⁰ Mukātabāt Kirillus III, fol. 293b.

from among the Coptic scribes, were accused by the Muslim masses of impoverishing the Muslim community. Both Muslim masses and intellectuals, appealed to the Mamluk authorities to relieve these injustices, demanding the application of the centuries-old covenant attributed to the second Caliph Umar I which organized relations between the Muslim and *dhimmi* populace in newly-conquered lands.¹⁷¹

The Muslim community in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries committed targeted violence against the Coptic community, demanding the restoration of an imagined ideal social stratification based on religious affiliation where Copts cannot be vested with authority over the Muslim populace. Noticeably, these attacks were usually led by Sufis who were harshly affected by economic difficulties. Furthermore, the Muslim society equated the return to this traditional Islamic social order with economic reform. Thus, in a sense, they reacted in accordance to what E. P. Thompson termed the “moral economy” in which they tried to use violence to impose the regulatory acts upon the authority to restore what they believe as the just economic order.¹⁷² However, the Muslim community’s perception of the just order was constructed based on an imaginary notion of the ideal Muslim-dhimmi relation, unlike the situation of eighteenth century England where the old paternalist market regulations were replaced with “new political economy [...] disinfested of intrusive moral imperative.”¹⁷³

Finally, this thesis also showed that cultural specificity played a role in shaping the reactions of each community. The eschatological ideas varied between the Muslim and Coptic communities. For example, the Muslim masses were influenced by the Islamic concept of the signs of the end of time (*ahdath nihayat al-zaman*). So, many claims of being the Islamic messiah al-Mahdi appeared, and the idea that the world will come to its end will occur on Friday. Alternatively, the Copts were influenced by the long history of

¹⁷¹ Pact of ‘Umar is “a legal tradition consisting of stipulations *dhimmi*s had to abide by under Muslim rule. While it appears in a coherent form in the 3rd/9th century, it was projected back to the second caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644); it varied in content and enforcement by region and historical period.” el-leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion,” p. xvii.

¹⁷² E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, No. 50 (Feb., 1971), p.98.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p.90.

Coptic martyrdom. They initiated a new “martyrdom wave” during the years of the Black Death in which they willingly sacrificed their lives as they travelled from the countryside to Cairo, and blasphemed against Islam in public.

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