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<td>Mediterranean world = 地中海論集・グローバル史, 16: 15-33</td>
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<td><strong>Issue Date</strong></td>
<td>2001-03</td>
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Conception of “Egypt” in the Pre-Modern Period: Preliminary Essay

Tetsuya OHTOSHI

Introduction

Being engaged for many years in scrutinizing historical materials concerning the Egyptian “City of the Dead” and its ziyāra (visits to the tombs) which flourished during the Middle Ages, I have come to believe that the discourses in the ziyāra guidebooks (kutub al-ziyāra) tended to converge into “Egypt”, and there was depicted therein an “Egyptian history” that the Egyptian people invented for themselves, even though unconsciously, rather than an official history as examplified by Arab chronicles. Yet, it has not been analyzed fully by using these texts concerning the existence of “Egypt” in the pre-modern period, the only exception being arguments concerning Egyptian regional sentiments and the position of the pyramids in Islamic history.

Here, this paper will undertake to verify this conception of “Egypt” from various facets, hoping to raise an argument about Egyptian ethnic situations during the pre-modern period. The period to be discussed in this paper covers the era from the beginning of the Arab conquest


(641 A.D.) until the Ottoman era, with most emphasis being placed on the period from the Tulunids (868-905) to the Mamluks (1250-1517).

I. The “Egypt (Miṣr)” as Reflected by the Early Islamic Geographical Sources

The concept of “Egypt” that we shall examine later corresponds with the Arabic term “Miṣr” (both in quotation) in many aspects. It is believed that Miṣr is the eponym of the land Egypt, and that he was the ancestor of the Berbers and the Copts. Early Islamic sources reiterated the genealogy indicating Miṣr as the son of Hām, the grandson of Nūḥ. At the same time, after the Arab conquest of Egypt, the term “Miṣr” began to be associated with the country (Egypt) and its capital, al-Fustāṭ.

Early Islamic geographers like al-İstakhri, Ibn Khurdādhbihab, al-Ya`qubi, al-Muqaddasi, Ibn al-Faqih, Ibn Rustah and Ibn Ḥawqal almost unanimously set the geographic range of Egypt, creating its borders based on its four offrontiers: from the southern Aswān to the northern Mediterranean coast, and also the eastern ‘Ansh or Ayla to the western Cyrenaica. Al-Muqaddasi, in addition, refers to the life style and mentality peculiar to the Egyptians as being dirty, full of dogs, fleas and bedbugs, having immoral women, and also as having Islamic religious leaders who were addicted to drink. Of course, he never forgot to add their amiableness and generosity.

We find definite geographical and cultural boundaries of Egypt as stated above. Yet it is clear that this definition also reflected non-Egyptian thinking in that this definition was recorded by geographers who were from outside Egypt and possibly had been biased by the descriptions of Greco-Roman historians. Some writers, as we have seen, then went further to note Egyptian manners and mentality, which was based on its own climate and history.

Starting in the tenth century, faḍā‘il literature mentioning the virtues and features of Egypt began to be written by authors such as Ibn al-Kindī, Ibn Zūlāq, Ibn Ẓahīra and al-Suyūṭī. Even as early as in the ninth century, Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s Futūḥ Miṣr (The Conquest of Egypt) had already included a portion describing the faḍā‘il of Miṣr. These faḍā‘ils are of

5 See Faḍā‘il Miṣr, Ibn Zūlāq, Ibn Ẓahīra and Husn al-Muḥāḍara. Cf.) U. Haarmann (“Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt”, pp. 56-58) states that “the faḍā‘il Miṣr prove an important source for the constituents of Egyptian national pride and sentiment in medieval Islam”. In this article, Prof. Haarmann dared to use the expression of “national identity” for the medieval Egyptian situation. However this expression needs a caution in using when we consider arguments about modern nationalism, even though his intention can be comprehended well. See also Ohtoshi, T., “Copts and Muslims as Reflected in the Ziyāra Books and Qurāṇ”, in Islam in the Middle Eastern Studies: Muslims and Minorities, eds. A. Usuki & H. Kato, JCAS Symposium Series 7, International Area Studies Conference 4, Osaka, 2001.
6 Futūḥ Miṣr 4 ff.
great significance in their ability to reflect a self-portrait of “Egypt” at that point of time.

These faḍāʾil texts are alike in their contents: they include statements concerning Miṣr’s excellency over other countries, Prophets who were related to Miṣr, and persons whom al-Qurʾān had mentioned. They also contained rulers, ṣaḥāba (the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad), ‘ulamāʾ (persons of knowledge), legal specialists, ascetics, caliphs, and poets, essentially all those who resided in or had arrived in Egypt. Finally, Egypt’s districts, revenue, topography, the Nile river, al-Muqattam mountain with al-Qarqaf graveyard beneath it, and its other features are praised.

These texts illuminate consistently Miṣr’s own history from the age prior to the Pharaonic age all the way through to the Islamic age. This Miṣr world was rather a self-completed image, and perfection of Semitic monotheist history, in which even Jesus and Moses were included as if they had been born in Egypt. As long as the Egyptians were to live in this praiseworthy country, travel to outside Egypt is not required unless the pilgrimage is to Mecca, as this land seems to be better than Baghdad or any other cities in the world, according to the faḍāʾils. It is here that native specialties and prominent persons were combined with this local history along with natural symbols such as Mt. Muqattam and the Nile river.

This Miṣr can be seen much closer to the conception of “Egypt” in later periods, and whose range may possibly have had some relationship with the region from which the Coptic Popes were selected, for the majority of its country folk still remained the Coptic Christians in the time prior to the Fatimids. On the importance of this period, I will write later.

II. “Egypt” as Portrayed by Ibn Riḍwān

Fatimid Egypt is still a disregarded period among scholars of Egyptian history, and I will not discuss the reasons for it here. But as for the conception of “Egypt”, this era is extremely significant, as denoted by the fact that al-Quḍāʾi wrote the “first national geography of Egypt (H. Halm)” during this period.

Ibn Riḍwān, a Fatimid Egyptian physician (d. 460/1067-8), wrote a treatise entitled “On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt (Kitāb Daf` Madārr al-Abdān bi-Ard Miṣr)”. Although the tract has been treated only as a medical work, from my point of view, it can be interpreted as also describing the climate of both its nature and its people, who were deeply influenced by its natural environment. In this chapter, I aim to depict the “Egypt” which Ibn Riḍwān has

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7 Ibn Zālāq fols. 33a–37a, Faḍāʾil Miṣr 22–23, 44–47.
8 I will detail on this topic in another article which will appear in the journal Rekishigaku Kenkyu. 2001.
9 H. Halm’s expression in El” (Miṣr) p. 164.
portrayed, and which has to date never been attempted^{10}.

For starters, we should confirm his position as an Egyptian: he was born in the village of Giza which was opposite al-Fustâţ. Later, at the age of ten, he moved to al-Fustâţ where he spent the rest of his life. M. Dols states that he “never appears to have left Egypt or even the neighborhood of Cairo.” We can consider him, therefore, as an Egyptian al-Fustâţ native^{11}.

Ibn Riḍwân clearly defined Miṣr as an entity that “designates the land (ard) that the Nile inundates”, by his recreation of four physical borders by accurately utilizing astronomical knowledge^{12}. When he depicts Egypt, he lists its origin by name, boundaries, peculiarities and climate, Mt. Muqattâm, the wind, its districts and their native specialties, and the Nile, etc.^{13} This style of description is nearly in accordance with earlier geographers. It is also worth noticing that his boundary restriction seems to have been influenced to some extent by the Greco-Roman scholars Hippocrates, Ptolemy and Galen^{14}. Therefore, Egypt itself is not self-existent in its creation; there was certainly a reflection of non-Egyptian perspective. Thus, he imaged Egypt as the land along the Nile, which was much narrower than the territory of the contemporary Fatimid dynasty, which governed from Libya to al-Ḥijāz and Greater Syria. The symbolism of the Nile river and al-Muqattâm mountain was also crucial in his conception of Egypt.

In Ibn Riḍwân’s view, because the climate decisively influences the mentality of its residents, a peculiar temperament was molded among the constituents of “Egypt”. He presumed that the predominant climate of Egypt is excessive heat and moisture, with a tendency to lose balance (in his words, “the air is changeable”). The character of Egyptians is therefore described as having “inconsistency and changeableness that dominate their natures, as do timidity and cowardice, discouragement and doubt, impatience, lack of desire for knowledge and decisiveness, envy and calumny,..., vile evils that spring from the baseness of the soul. These evils are not common to all Egyptians but are found in most of them.”^{15} Then his argument leads to the existence of Egyptian endemic disease and also its prevention and treatment^{16}.

Regarding another feature of Egypt, he states that residents shared their own culinary culture as shown in its edible materials, such as fermented fish, dates, colocasia and rumbling

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^{12} Ibn Riḍwân 2.
^{13} Ibn Riḍwân 2–4.
^{14} Ibid.
^{15} Ibn Riḍwân 8. cf.) Ibn Riḍwân 16.
^{16} Ibn Riḍwân 12ff.
vetch, as well as the way in which food was prepared. Their staple food, Egyptian bread, is different from the products of other countries. Even goods imported from outside Egypt changed their character owing to the Egyptian climate. Their drinking culture is fairly intricate, for various kinds of wine and fruit juices were recorded.

Many Fatimid Egyptian populations probably shared the illusion that their genealogy traced back to the same ancestor Misr, regardless of whether they were Muslims or Copts. Thus, Ibn Riḍwān’s “Egypt” has no relationship to the religion or language, and he never distinguished Egyptians by religion in this treatise. Although men such as Abū al-Ṣalt pointed out that most of the brilliant doctors of the age were Copts or Jews, in Ibn Riḍwān’s own personal life, he had a Jewish physician pupil and friend. He denoted many kinds of Egyptian wine, even recommending some of them for medical purposes. Moreover, he dissuade people from excessive fasting and thirst. It is worth remembering likewise that in this Fatimid period, Coptic superiority to Muslims in population numbers may have been reversed.

The next point of importance is that his “Egypt” itself also has subdivisions, being constituted by integrating diversity based on geographical and temperamental differences. That is, “it is evident that Egypt possesses many regions; each one is distinguished by special characteristics... The cause of the diversity is the country’s (length and) narrowness.” Then he goes on to divide Egypt into an Upper Egypt and a Lower Egypt, with al-Fayyūm being added as well. Upper Egypt produced date palms, acacia, papyrus, sugar cane, while in Lower Egypt there was colocasia, bananas, rumbling vetch and so forth. al-Fayyūm yielded reeds, rice, and flax. In Upper Egypt, heat and dryness are dominant over the temperament and inhabitants, therefore leaving their skin black, and hair kinky. Their circulatory system is more delicate and weak, he states. As Lower Egypt is much closer to the Mediterranean Sea, it is characterized by milder weather, humid, but neither hot or cold. It is therefore that their color is a lighter brown; their manners are mild and their hair is lank. While this subdivision of Egypt also depends on each districts’ specialties, difference in climate, temperament, and culinary tradition, it never is dependent on religions or races.

Among all these provinces, the pivotal position of a “capital big city” which was almost identical with modern greater Cairo is evident, and he detailed the environment of it, which consists of four regions: al-Fustāṭ, al-Qarāfā, Cairo, Giza. After strictly comparing many conditions of their living environments, places like al-Qarāfā were recommended for...
habitation. However, residents in polluted environment as al-Fustāt, are so afflicted that it has been said “cowardice and a lack of generosity characterize its inhabitants; rarely does one of them help another or afford shelter for the stranger. Envy (hasad) predominates among them...”

Notwithstanding the diversity that comprised “Egypt”, there was something to distinguish “Egypt” from the outside. According to Ibn Ridwān, foreigners (ghuraba’) who had no real living experience in Egypt, could never comprehend its climate, temperament, and illness. This lack of understanding upon entering Egypt would therefore make him easy prey.

So far we have outlined the “Egypt” that Ibn Ridwān has designed. His treatise can be read, from my point of view, as one of the earliest tracts arguing ‘the Egyptian character (al-shakhshīya al-Miṣrīya)’ by a native Egyptian, evidenced by such statements that Egyptians acquiesce to whoever governs them, and their resistance is weak. Ibn Ridwān had attempted the integration of Greek medical tradition with Egyptian historical geography, keenly detailing the environmental problems of the age and compound causes of it. The fact that this tract has been reproduced in Egypt until modern times shows its practicality and applicability for the Egyptians.

III. al-Muqattāṭam, the Holy Mountain, and the City of the Dead

Although al-Muqattāṭam, which stands eastwards of the Cairo=al-Fustāt area, is so low that is more appropriate to call it a hill, it could be seen from any point in Cairo’s surroundings during the pre-modern period. The massive rock named al-Muqattāṭam mountain was vitally important for both Copts and Muslims throughout the ages, and historically its foot was used interchangeably with al-Qarafā.

First, when we reexamine the historical relationship of the people with this mountain, the written history relating to Mt. Muqattāṭam can be dated back to the Pharaonic period. Many Islamic records asserted that there were constructions and dugout homes where people resided, although without archeological proof. In the Greco-Roman period, we find the Christian

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24 Ibn Ridwān 14–16.
25 Ibn Ridwān 16.
26 Ibn Ridwān 1, 12.
27 Ibn Ridwān 35.
28 Concerning this chapter, I have already detailed in other occasions. Please see historical materials indicated in following articles. Ohtoshi, T., “Visits to the Holy Tombs in the Egyptian City of the Dead”, pp. 5–6, idem, “The City of the Dead and the Conception of “Egypt”: The Visits to the Holy Tombs in the Muslim: The latest study concerning al-Muqattāṭam is conducted by the virtuoso of this subject; Rāgīb, Y., “La site du Muqattāṭam”, Annales islamologiques 33, 1999, pp. 159–184. Also, the latest trustworthy work concerning the City of the Dead is C.S. Taylor, In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyara & the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Later Medieval Egypt, Leiden, 1999.
legacy, such as al-Quṣayr Monastery at the southern part of al-Muqāṭṭam, Ṭurā, which commemorates St. Arsenius, who passed on there in 449 A.D. Al-Quṣayr Monastery thrived even during the Islamic period with ten churches and a graveyard, and a population of six thousand monks inside its mighty wall. Accordingly, monks and other inhabitants lived in al-Muqāṭṭam and the place formed a sanctuary.

At the stage when the rulers of Egypt changed from Byzantines to Arab Muslims, there is an important anecdote for Egyptians which, throughout the Islamic period afterward, was reiterated in most Egyptian historical materials of both Muslims and Copts. That is, Muqawqas (Cyrus), the Byzantine patriarch of Alexandria and civil viceroy of Egypt, proposed purchasing the area at the foot of al-Muqattam mountain to the Arab-Islamic general 'Amrū for an extraordinary high price, for the reason that the “sprouts of heaven are buried there”, i.e. the spot was their graveyard. The proposal was at first rejected, and the area was confiscated as a Muslim graveyard. Then, however, after furious protest from Copts, the southern part along Ḥabash lake was ceded to the Copts as their cemetery. The reason for the reiteration of sources seems to be based on Egyptians' mental need to reconfirm their process of adopting the Islamic faith and the whereabouts of their identity from Christianity to Islam, in a way that they could find a satisfactory explanation.

From the Tulunids to the Fatimids in particular, Muslim rulers had built mosques at al-Muqattam mountain and enjoyed visiting its Coptic monasteries, as expressed by such as Ibn Ṭūlūn, Khumarawayh and al-Ḥākim. In addition, common people inhabited that area. During the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, numerous ṣūfī men and women secluded themselves and trained in ascetic practices in the Muqattam area or the City of the Dead. Mt. Muqattam provided a refuge if pestilence widespread. People of all social levels also went there to perform mass prayer (duʿa') for abating pestilence or for the rising of the Nile. About this we will discuss later.

Three other features of the rest of the Muqattam legends can be concluded as follows. First, al-Muqattam was recognized as a part of a huge holy rocky range which includes the mountains of the Sinai Peninsula and Jerusalem. It is needless to say that this precinct was considered sacred by both Copts and Muslims. Second, legends depicted al-Muqattam through personification, normally as a pious monotheist. Or the mountain was illustrated as having moved by his own will. For Coptic history, al-Muqattam is famed for having saved the Coptic community by moving itself. The story has two major versions, both dating from the

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32 Abū Ṣāliḥ 146, Ibn al-Muqaffaʾ 2/2/205.
Fatimid period. In Muslim legends, the mountain moved himself and helped people making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Third, all the prominent people related to Egypt through all ages, such as Moses, Jesus, Maria, ‘Amrū, the Pharaoh’s daughter, were believed to have connections with al-Muqattam and the City of the Dead. Without doubt, “al-Muqattam is al-muqaddas (sacred)” as Abū al-Makārim (thirteenth century Christian) stated. There is further evidence to suggest that this Egyptian mentality has survived, and successfully transformed itself into a modern nationalistic symbol, evidenced by the Egyptian based newspaper issued under the British occupation named “al-Muqattam”.

On the other hand, the City of the Dead forms a huge cemetery area, to which, in this paper, I will include the Greater and Smaller Qarāfas and al-Šahrā’ area under its definition. These two al-Qarāfas extend from south of al-Fuṣṭāt towards the foot of al-Muqattam mountain, whereas al-Šahrā’ spreads out northward from the Citadel. In solemn examples of architecture, descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, sabāba, caliphs, sultans, Muslim saints and famous ‘ulamā’ have all been buried there. Therefore, it was primarily the Muslim sanctuary that masses of people visited, aiming to solve their difficulties through prayer; however, it also created “the most famous pleasure resort among them (al-Maqrlzi)” in the Middle Ages of Islamic Egypt.

Since I have already examined the City of the Dead in more detail from a Muslim perspective, I would rather gather historical materials from the Coptic standpoint here. First, it is attested by both Christian and Muslim sources that the Qarāfa area was a sacred place for Copts before the Arab conquest, it being quoted that “there (al-Qarafa) were many hermitages (šawāmi’), monasteries and churches comprising a lot of monks. Nevertheless, when Arab Muslims arrived with ‘Amrū Ibn al-‘Āṣ, they demolished these structures and diverted their remains into mosques (Abū al-Makārim)” Al-Qarāfa, however, continued to contain Coptic graveyards in the southern part even after the conquest. Also if we combine the Ṣurā area with al-Qarāfa, as did al-Shu’aybl, one of the ziyya book writers, al-Qarāfa can be seen to have embraced more Coptic monasteries and churches. In addition, Coptic
historical fragments in the form of oral traditions were left traces in al-Qarāfās, such as anecdotes of Muqāwqās’ relatives.

As a further example in scrutinizing the definition of “Egypt”, let us consider the dynasty rituals held at the City of the Dead=al-Muqattām mountain. Successive Islamic rulers mobilized bands of people led by government influentials to perform group prayers there for the swelling of the Nile river and for the abatement of the plague. On these occasions, not only Muslims, but also Copts and Jews attended with their own sacred books, and prayed as well as ate there together.

We will not detail examples of these mass prayers here, but to mention that the same mass prayers were reiterated all at the City of the Dead or its surroundings, as in 749/1349, 775/1373, 806/1403, 818/1416, 822/1419, 823/1420, 833/1430, 854/1450. Focusing on the role the Copts played, the following analysis is brought forward. Since the event itself was a dynasty ritual and not a popular festival, although both had common characteristics, many Coptic officials, therefore, must have attended. Yet the Coptic populace, non-officials, are also thought to have participated in it. Besides, in order to escape from natural disaster to the land of Egypt, the combined presence of Muslims, Copts and Jews was necessary. If one of them was lacking, the ritual itself would not have been effective and the total image of “Egypt” would not have been embodied.

Historically considered, although we can trace back prayer customs concerning the Nile river to the Pharaonic period, Copts also performed mass prayer and fasting for the Nile’s increase every year at churches. Further, they practiced several Coptic festivals along the Nile shore, and ritual prayers for the rising of the water by floating a box containing fingers of the martyr. Thus they were thought to have special knowledge and a relationship with the Nile river. In addition to this, what has to be noticed here is that it was reported that Muslim dynasties’ mass marches and prayers accompanied by dhimmīs at al-Muqattām range had already been established in the Tulunid period (9th century).

As another easily attracted holy place situated around the Cairo=al-Fustāt area other than the City of the Dead, the significance of the pyramids may be added. Various social classes of the Fatimid people had relished outings to ancient remains in Abū Shīr or Giza, and as noted in the Mamluk period, “tourism” to the Giza pyramids enjoyed popularity.

More so, evidence shows visits to the Sphinx in spring as a custom, making prayers with

42 Abū Ṣallāḥ 75–76, 220, Sulūk 1/941–943, Ḥiṣāṭ 1/68–70.
vows and offerings of special incenses and incarnations under the Ayyubid and Mamluk rule. During the same period, one Muslim šūfi, Muḥammad Ṣaʿīm al-Dahr, was known to have smashed the Sphinx’s face, which the people deemed as the cause of the heavy sand storm which assailed Cairo afterwards, ultimately resulting in his being attacked. Furthermore, after the Ayyubids, several tracts, including the shortened versions of the original work of al-Idrīsī, were composed concerning the pyramids.

Not only, however, does the reverence toward the pyramids face sharp confrontation with the Islamic faith, which denies idolatry, but it also is difficult to be conjunctive logically to Islamic history, despite strenuous attempts to make the correlation. In addition, although the pyramids won the reverence of the common people, as shown in the fact that some Muslim tombs were built in pyramid form, the pyramids possessed nothing to connect them to their relatives, masters, and famous historical heroes. Moreover, the pyramids did not provide nor create a grand leisure space as did the City of the Dead. Possibly rather to compensate for this lack of Islamic character and expansive leisure space, visiting the pyramids was set jointly with that of the City of the Dead. The visits to the pyramids, therefore, never surpassed the visits to the City of the Dead. Nevertheless, the pyramids were revived as a unique symbol of Egyptian unification after the Modern age.

IV. The Society of Cairo=al-Fustāṭ in the Period from the Fatimid to the Mamluks

In this chapter, I will attempt to shed light on the coexistence of Muslims and Copts, primarily in the Cairo=al-Fustāṭ region of this relevant period. First, in the course of changing dynasties from the Tulunids to the Mamluks, the attitudes of the ruling government towards the dhimmis such as Copts and Jews, shifted. During the Mamluk period, in particular, as the predominant religion of the Egyptian population had already turned from Christianity to Islam, there occurred collisions that until the end of the Fatimids the dynastic government could repress. Among other examples, the Muslim riot towards the dhimmis in 755/1354 is marked as “a turning-point in Egyptian religious history” in D.P. Little’s phrase. Additionally, in the riot of 721/1321 alone, sixty of the one hundred and twenty churches in Egypt reported

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48 Tuhfā 186.
49 Idrīsī 55 ff.
50 For more details of historical materials on which this chapter is based, see Ohtoshi, T., “Copts and Muslims as Reflected in the Ziyāra Books and Qarīgas.”
to have been raided and destroyed by the Muslim populace, the event occurred simultaneously in many different places. We cannot, however, assume this situation as having continued throughout Egyptian history, proven by the fact that the Coptic community still constitutes around ten percent of the current Egyptian population. And it would have to be concluded that the cause and course of these previously mentioned riots bear close resemblance to recent religious assaults; in breaking out by rumors, driven principally by mobs or common people, led and instigated by lesser religious leaders, motivated by the idea that Copts are economically superior and socially superior in occupying positions in governmental financial and taxation offices.

I turn now to focus on the intercourse and similarity among Muslims and Copts, by utilizing primarily the ziyāra books which offer us an access to evidences of common life that are not available in the chronicles. First, regarding the everyday intercourse of Muslims and Copts, the Book of ziyāra contains large numbers of biographies of Muslim saints and their karāma–īāt (virtue, miracle) stories. One of the categories by my classification is “Conversion Stories”, in which saints were told to perform many karāmāt, and lead many dhimmīs to conversion, or in which the main character of the story himself/herself converted to Islam. Among the saints, the prominent among them, such as Dhu’l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and al-Sayyida Nafīsa, were described as causing many Copts and Jews to convert at once. The anecdote may sound absurd, yet given that we recall the case of Qalyūb’s mass conversion in 755/1354, the story coincides with the chronicles to some extent and shows daily intercourse between Copts and Muslims. Also the karāma stories might represent wishes of Muslims that Copts should convert or had already converted by this intercourse or karāmāt.

Then we may ask, how did Copts and Muslims recognize each other in everyday life? In the settings of the Conversion Stories, Muslim saints were often said to have lived as neighbors of Copts and to have had intimate relationships with them. This circumstance is proved by the medieval documents, and even Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya’s Regulations for the People of Dhimma says that Muslims could visit dhimmīs on occasions of condolences, funerals, congratulations and medical treatments. Consequently, Muslim saints portrayed in the ziyāra tracts frequently succeeded in making their neighbors convert through their daily contacts or

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53 See, Ohtoshi, T., “Copts and Muslims as Reflected in the Ziyāra Books and Qurānīs”.
54 The term Muslim “saints” is used in this paper not in a narrower meaning that accords exclusively with the Arabic term awliya’, but in a wider sense including such as zāhlīm. Here, the author does not assert that only this usage of a wider meaning is correct, yet the wider concept is chosen for the aim of this paper.
55 For more detail, see Ohtoshi, T., Egyptian City of the Dead and Visit to Holy Graves: The Case Study from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries, Chapter 2.
56 Sulūk 2921 ff., Marshid l. 56a, Miṣbāḥ l. 210, cf.) Kawākib 32, Miṣbāḥ l. 18, Tathfu 132.
The Christians’ disguise or assimilation to the Muslims is another feature of Coptic and Muslim intercourse portrayed in the ziyyāra tracts. In these anecdotes, Christians used to pretend to be Muslims and have friendship with them: they costumed themselves the same as Muslims and even prayed in mosques. All these Christians that appeared in these contexts of ziyyāra tracts were finally led to conversion through the hands of Muslim shaykhs.

I would like to note that these settings, in which Christians disguised themselves, to some extent represent the actual social atmosphere of the era in which the ziyyāra treatises were written. In this period, the Coptic community was suffering harsh blows, and some Copts were compelled to behave like Muslims for self-protection or to live more freely. Besides, the ziyyāra tracts themselves had highly ideological, propagandizing, and of Islamic adherent character.

Turning now our perspective to a different side, there occurred assimilation of living manners and customs among Muslims and dhimmīs. Ibn al-Ḥājī, `alīm of fourteenth century, criticized Muslim women for renouncing work altogether on Sunday nights. Or, when the sun descended into Aries, the Muslim populace would go on outings that morning. Then, they would cut and gather the herb termed al-karkīs, and arrange it chanting strange spells to gain more subsistence. These customs were all denounced as Coptic influences. Similarly, Muslim women trended not to buy fish, take baths, or wash clothes on Saturdays owing to Jewish influences. Copts, on their side, attested to influences from Muslim society, that some of them tried to divorce or become polygamous, which was surely never permitted in the Coptic faith.

Moreover, ziyyāra tracts depict married couples of Muslim men with Christian women in some cases, and, on the other hand, Muslim chronicles also recorded adultery occurring among Copts and Muslims. These are more obvious proofs in explaining the circumstances of intercourse.

Secondly, let us focus on the customs shown in the ziyyāra texts concerning the City of the Dead. The assimilation of Muslim grave visiting customs with those of the Christians was reproached by shaykhs of ziyyāra. The seventh account of Muslim visit regulations clearly states: do not try to get the blessing of Allah by touching the tombs and kissing them or wiping them off. These are Christian habits, and no Muslim `ulamā’ will imitate...
Besides, the persistence among Muslims for the holy water which came from washing some saint’s body was supposed to have been influenced habits exercised by the Copts. Further, Muslim sufis’ ascetic practices may also bear similarities to Coptic monastic life. This secluded life can be counted as, in my categorization, one of the virtues of the Muslim saints.

Now let us go on to analyze the situation in the Egyptian city society of Cairo-al-Fustat. According to Abu al-Salt, the Andalusian physician who visited Fatimid Egypt, we see the coexistence of different ethnic groups, such as “Copts, Greeks, Arabs, Berbers, Kurds, Daylams, Ethiopians, and Armenians”, as well as Turks and Jews. Even Islam itself contained various sects such as Isma’ili, Twelver Shi’i, and Sunni just to name a few. Al-Fustat and Cairo themselves were home to Coptic and other Christian sects’ churches and Jewish synagogues. The Fatimid caliphs, in some cases, dared to allow them or financially supported the construction of new churches and the restoration of old ones.

There can be no doubt that Coptic festivals embraced Muslim attendance. They shared Easter, ‘Id al-Ghiṭās (Epiphany), Palm Sunday and many other Christian festivals, so that the very crowded festival of ‘Id al-Shahid at the Nile shore was eventually banned by the Mamluk government. In Muslim weddings, Christians also attended with recitations in Coptic and walked in front of the bride through the sqs and the streets. Also, every year on Christmas Eve, both Muslims and Christians lit candles, lamps and burned a great deal of firewood (13th century). Likewise, at times of Coptic festivals, people were told to cook special meals. Some Muslim schools were closed and lessons canceled. Teachers dared to collect coins or presents from the students and distribute them during those celebrations. Incidentally, Christians in Egypt, from their point of view, were afraid that their customs were being affected by Jewish ones.

The Copts were a part and a people that shared Egyptian society. As in 658/1261, 693/1293-4, 791/1389, 794/1391, 880/1476, they celebrated in the city of Cairo in precisely the

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64 Murshid f.11b, cf.) Kawākib 16.
65 Murshid f.127b, Kawākib 32, 207, 244–245.
66 Kawākib 116, Miṣrīh f.120, Tuḥṭa 247. cf.) Ohtoshi, T., “The Egyptian “Book of the Visit” as Historical Material: An Elucidation of the Text, and Its Implication on the City of the Dead from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries”, p. 152.
70 Abū Sa’īd ibn al-Ṣūrī 129. The case of Esna in Upper Egypt.
71 Madkhāl 2/322.
same manners as Muslims\textsuperscript{73}. Both Copts and Jews were mobilized in and towards public enterprises such as dredging canals and constructing irrigation dikes. They also participated in the dynastic ritual parade in Mamluk Cairo\textsuperscript{74}. We can recall when the Maghribi wazîr visited Egypt and censured the freedom the Copts had enjoyed, that they acted almost identical to Muslims\textsuperscript{75}. Most of the assaults on Egyptian coexistence were originally provoked from aliens to Egyptian society, as done by Ibn al-Ḥājj and Ibn Taymiya.

**Conclusion**

Although being based on the background of Islamic interpretation, the existence of the City of the Dead and the rituals there, as well as the ziyyâra texts, can be considered to represent and embody an “Egyptian” history from the Pharaonic to the Islamic period, including individuals and symbols. Whether true or false, people such as the following were thought to have been buried in the City of the Dead: brothers of Joseph (Yûsuf), Āsiya the wife of Pharaoh, the son of al-Muqawqas (Cyrus, the last Byzantine viceroy of Egypt), descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad such as Sayyida Nafîsa, ‘Amrû who was the leader of the Arab conquest, sovereigns such as Ibn Ṭûlûn, Kâfûr al-Ikhshîdî, Fatimid and 'Abbasid caliphs, sultans of the Ayyubids and the Mamluks, scholars such as al-Shâfi‘î, and prominent ṣûfîs like Dhû al-Nûn and Ibn al-Fâriq. This Egyptian history was acquired not only as book knowledge, but also through deep impressive anecdotes intimately narrated in, done face to face by the visiting leader (shaykh al-ziyyâra), prayers performed with rubbing the body of the visitor directly on the holy tombs, and also by being filled up with fragrances. Accordingly, this experience was memorized through five senses.

In addition, the common people themselves had participated in creating the discourses of the ziyyâra by vigorously rewriting epitaphs and building holy tombs as a result of vision dreams or skulls, resulting in the projection of their own views of Egyptian history towards the City of the Dead.

The visitors to the City of the Dead, consequently, were allowed to gaze at “the panorama of total Egyptian history” created by Egyptian natives; while listening to the edifying anecdotes and precepts, they were moved as if in their own performance. At this point in time, each tomb most eloquently told the anecdotes and history concerning those who were buried there, along with deep emotions that accompanied them to their death, which prompted visitors to behave more passionately. In this sense, it can be said that the graves revealed and functioned as a text of Egyptian history in a third dimensional form, complemented by and alongside the ziyyâra books. The visitors were able to reconfirm zealously their Islamic faith,

\textsuperscript{73} The difference was that dhimmi\textsuperscript{s} of Copts and Jews raised their own holy books respectively; Gospel and Torah. *Najûm* 7/109, 8/52, 12/13, *Ibn al-Furât* 9/1/95, 199, 235, 9/2/295, *Badâ’i‘* 1/2/430, 3/112–113.


We shall now look more in detail at the conception of Egypt. This “Egypt” reflected, to a certain extent, a geographic notion whose range has been almost stable from ancient times; this is a rare case in the world that ancient geographical borders still survive in locating those of the modern nation state. Yet in my opinion, it was an Egypt that the people living inside and also outside had conceived in a multivalent way, by exercising their various gazes in shaping it. That is to say, based on the sharing of certain life space inundated by the Nile, it was a sense felt as long as its constituents were sharing the same historical image, kinship myths, the Arabic language, which surpassed the Coptic language in every aspect by the tenth century, natural setting and the life style characterized by it, public properties, such as streets, cemeteries, baths, mosques and churches, and also symbols and cultural representations of the world they lived in. The coexistence of revealed religions in “Egypt” was assured within the predominant Islamic framework, while its constituents shared an emerging feeling of solidarity against the outside, as we have seen in the medical treatise on the Egyptian climate written by Ibn Riḍwān, a native Egyptian doctor of the eleventh century. Those outside, for their part, felt a sense of peculiarity and incongruity toward the Egyptians, as shown in travelers’ accounts which reiterated their discomfort with Egyptian customs.

The conception was pictured more straightforwardly in the faḍā’il tracts as stated above. In these tracts, “Egypt” is illustrated as having persisted continuously since ancient times and involved discourses concerning other monotheistic religions. It is the homeland’s image woven by its native figures, and varieties of monuments, including Pharaonic examples such as pyramids and ‘Ayn Shams, specialty products, historical events and topography (al-Muqattām mountain, The Nile river), etc. Not only in faḍā’il literature, this Egyptian notion frequently occupies places also in both Muslim and Christian historical sources of various kinds. Moreover, this conception is presumed to be conscious and maintained in al-Muqattām = City of the Dead, in the customs and the discourses which prevailed there.

In defining this “Egypt”, the following arguments appear to be suggestive, although we need to create the final concept inductively from inquiry into the Egyptian case. Namely, after distinguishing “Egypt” rigidly from “the nation states” (since these were “imagined” after the later part of the eighteenth century with strong correlation), this conception of “Egypt” seems closer to Benedict Anderson’s definition of “the embryo of the nationally
imagined community\(^\text{78}\). A more proximate exposition, however, can be found in A.D. Smith, who employs the notion of *ethnie* (ethnic community), which provided the ethnic basis for the construction of modern nations. Its chief features are reflected in a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity\(^\text{79}\). Yet a more systematic analysis is needed on this issue, particularly through a comparison with the ingredients of the modern Egyptian state.

Would it be then, effective to compare “Egypt” with “dynasty”, which is in accordance with B. Anderson’s notion of “the kingdom”. Along with “the religious community”, he presumed it to be a cultural system prior to nationalism. Although, under some historical circumstances, Egypt was included in a larger union, it never suffered the threat of being split, at least in the Islamic ages, and it continued to constitute a core of the territorial state (dynasty) after the Tulunids. This historical circumstance is, as mentioned above, extremely rare when compared with other countries. Successive dynasties generally boast of a wider domain than that of Egypt, as shown in cases of Tulunids, Ikhshids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and Ottomans.

Dynasties were the entities which covered and reigned over “Egypt”, and then preserved the multiplicity of “Egypt” when necessary. The ruling elites of dynasties were mostly non-Egyptians coming from outside “Egypt”, such as Tunisians, Kurds, Arabs, Turks, and Circassians, occasionally feeling that they were mentally isolated from Egypt, and *vice versa*. Further, dynasties were usually even more “secular” than “Egypt”, as exemplified well in the Fatimid case, the exception being the intolerant years in some parts of the Mamluk period in which they stressed the Islamic framework rather than “Egypt”, preferring Islamic elements, whether Egyptian or not. “Egypt” in itself was also secular, in the connotation that it stressed regional sentiments rather than religious differences, so that there was rarely the occurrence of religious persecution. Sometimes the dynasties did not agree with and even opposed to Islamic creed, as in examples such as the public drinking of alcohol, frequent visits to Coptic churches and monasteries and making prayers there, the slighting of the Arabic language, and in the introduction of the style combining mosques with tombs. This was so, even though the dynasties defined themselves as Islamic, and their rulers were Muslim. Dynasties went on to restrain intolerant activities toward individuals or groups in Egypt based upon religion. Hence, dynasties occasionally were confronted by Muslims of the common people, when they protected the minorities there.

As we have discussed so far, the importance of the Tulunids should be underlined. In this period, Egypt had escaped from the wide `Abbasid yoke, and had started to establish itself once again. After the Tulunids, the above mentioned *fa\'\i\s* began to be written; this gives


evidence that there emerged a certain group that needed to possess a history of “Egypt”, and
the re-creation of “Egypt”. Rulers of the Tulunids and the Ikhshids increased mosques and
monuments in the Mt. Muqattam area, and enjoyed visiting monasteries there. Ibn Tulun,
the founder of the Tulunid dynasty, is the first to have reported a visit to the City of the Dead
in public, and laid an aqueduct, which resulted in habitation there. Moreover, as stated
above, the ritual of the joint march to the foot of al-Muqattam by Muslims, Copts, and Jews
can be traced back to the Tulunid period. Indeed, al-Shu‘aybi of the seventeenth century,
mentioned significantly, “it was Ibn Tulun that first governed Egypt independently.”

Furthermore, even the “Egypt” represented in this paper changed subtly over the course
of time. In the Mamluk period, “Egypt” assumed a more Islamic aspect, as exemplified in
the non-Christian, non-Jewish, and non-Shi‘a self-images increasingly reflected in the ziyara
texts of the relevant period. Yet principles and elements which can be judged to be beyond
the Islamic creed from today’s viewpoint continued to be reiterated within the Islamic
framework in that period.

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