

**Review:**  
**Mariam F. Ayad, ed. *Coptic Culture and Community. Daily Lives, Changing Times*. Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2024, xvii + 328 pages with b/w-illustrations, ISBN: 978-1-649-03182-2**

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Under the editorship of Mariam F. Ayad, this publication attempts to examine the everyday life of the Copts from Late Antiquity to the present day in a total of fourteen articles. It is to be welcomed that the focus in this endeavor is on the “regular” people (2), who are often relegated to the background in favor of the monks, nuns, and ascetics in Egypt in research. This approach is broadened, in particular, by the frequent focus on women and the way in which they coped with their daily lives. The chapters are organized under four categories: “Daily Concerns and Challenges”, “Perspectives on Poverty and Power”, “On Identity, Persecution, and Resilience”, and “A Living Heritage: At Home and Abroad”.

In the first article (11–49), Lois Farag begins with a study of the *Paidagogos* of Clement of Alexandria in order to provide an insight into the “daily lives of Christians in Egypt” (11). However, since the *Paidagogos* is addressed to the rich upper class of Alexandria, it remains unclear to what extent the work can really be considered representative of the everyday life of the wider population, let alone for Christians outside the capital. For this, more in-depth comparisons, e.g. with Coptic homilies of subsequent centuries, would have been useful, but this cannot be reasonably demanded in the context of an article. On the basis of the three areas of sex, food and dress, Lois Farag shows with welcome precision the determining areas of everyday life that were regulated by Clement. Although a reference to the intensive analysis of the topic would have been desirable,<sup>1</sup> the author provides an excellent introduction to the topic of the collected volume, particularly by dealing with the gender dichotomy in Clement. Subsequently, Alanna Nobbs and A.D. Macdonald (51–65) use the archive of Paniskos in the period of Diocletian to show the extent to which wealthy Christian women, including Paniskos’s wife Ploutogenia, were able to achieve a certain independence and freedom of choice in Late Antique Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> Pujiula, *Körper und christliche Lebensweise*.

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In the section on poverty and wealth, A. S. Melika (67–109) offers interesting comparisons from the wisdom literature of the *Book of Proverbs* and the *Instruction of Amenemope*, which deal in their property ethics with the handling of wealth and of material goods as well as with the care for the poor. Particularly enriching are his lexical explanations in the area of “poverty” and the innovative structuring of the content based on the causes of poverty, which develop into oppression by fellow human beings/institutions, divine will and one’s own foolishness (70). The lines of connection established here are related to the Coptic *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the works of Shenoute, which express similar ideas. The article is inspiring in its careful examination of the sources and their evaluation, including many direct quotations. Unfortunately, the author does not explain why exactly the *Proverbs* and the *Instruction of Amenemope* were selected. Furthermore, the problems of drawing lines of content from ancient Egypt to the doctrine of the Copts, as insinuated by the author (68), should be borne in mind.<sup>2</sup> The reliable edition and translation of Shenoute’s sermon *Opus acephalum* A4, as offered by Samuel Moawad (111–136), are a highlight of the book. In addition to an introduction to the author and his ethics of property, he places this homily in the context of Shenoute’s oeuvre and presents a coherent picture of his teaching on wealth. The edition, based on the two extant manuscripts *MONB.Zf* and *MONB.WW*, provides an important contribution to the study of Shenoute’s extensive writings. In her contribution (137–166), the editor Mariam F. Ayad herself studies the petition of a widow to Bishop Pesynthios of Koptos in *SB Kopt. I* 295. Her detailed rhetorical analysis of all the components of the letter is enlightening, enabling her to demonstrate, on the basis of an original source, the interaction between a widow and the bishop as well as the everyday problems of a widowed woman in Late Antique Egypt. Unfortunately, a further contextualization of the letter in the important archive of Pesynthios is missing, which is made up for in the following chapter by Renate Dekker. It would have been helpful for the reader if the two contributions had been reversed. Renate Dekker (167–184) offers a digest of her highly regarded dissertation, published in 2018.<sup>3</sup> She sheds light on the pastoral work of the Theban bishops Abraham of Hermonthis, Pesynthios of Koptos and the hermit Epiphanius in the sixth–seventh century. Specifically, by reinterpreting the activities of Pesynthios and his advocacy for women, including widows, she correctly refutes the prevailing opinion, held since Terry Wilfong, of the bishop’s misogyny, which is not found in the documentary texts associated

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<sup>2</sup> See Eberle, *Ethos*.

<sup>3</sup> Dekker, *Episcopal Networks*.

with him (172–173). She views the actions of the two bishops and the ascetic in the context of the establishment of the Theodosian Church after Chalcedon in 451. However, since parallels can certainly be found with other clerics and preachers, e.g. with Shenute (fourth/fifth century), the question remains as to what extent Pesynthios, Epiphanius and Abraham are truly exceptional, or whether the source material was simply favorable to them. It is also necessary to determine whether they were, in fact, in continuity with earlier centuries regarding their teachings and actions.

Alanna Nobbs introduces identity (185–193) in the next section on Coptic by examining the everyday life of Egyptian Christians during the Diocletian persecution on the basis of three papyri, comparing reality with the reports of Eusebius and Lactantius and the imperial edicts. In two cases (*Papyri Oxyrhynchus* 33.2673 and 31.2601), she is successful in showing that churches were indeed closed and clergy possibly killed, or that Christians yielded to the pressure in their daily lives to avoid punishment. However, the inclusion of the Passion of Phileas according to *Papyrus Chester Beatty XV* as a “documentary papyrus” (191), which is supposed to reflect an actual court scene, is problematic. Although the Passion report in *Papyrus Chester Beatty XV* may be close to the actual court protocol, it is far from providing an equally reliable insight into reality as the previous papyri. Nicola Aravecchia makes a valuable contribution about the Christianization of Egypt (195–217), whose article includes the material culture of Late Antique Egypt by looking at the archaeology in ‘Ain al-Gedida in the Dakhla Oasis. In her report on the excavations carried out between 2006 and 2008, she concludes that Christianity was already well established in the Oasis area, even in smaller towns, by around 300 AD, as church buildings reveal. Subsequently, Christina Thérèse Rooijakkers (219–247) offers the reader a well-founded and historically extremely rich insight into the clothing regulations, *ghiyar*, that applied to Christians (and Jews) in pre-Mameluke Egypt. She brings together her numerous sources in a particularly helpful and illustrative way in a table (233) that displays continuity and change in the *ghiyar*. Next, Youhanna Nessim Youssef (249–260) briefly presents the life and work of the Miaphysite theologian Severus of Antioch and shows in a few bullet points that this bishop was frequently referred to in the Coptic Church. Helene Moussa concludes the thematic block (261–279) with a digression on the icons of Victor Asaad Fakhoury, who, by writing several icons from 2011 to 2017, describes the events surrounding the Arab Spring as well as the situation and hopes of the Copts during this time. For ten icons, accompanied by black and white images, she provides a comprehensive description and interpretation of the

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iconography, thus offering a new approach to the emotional world and situation of the Copts during the revolution that is not limited to historical descriptions.

In the final section, dedicated to the Coptic cultural heritage, the same author presents several canvases by the Coptic artist Marguerite Nakhla of the twentieth century (281–300). These show rural scenes of everyday life, such as the harvest, as well as scenes in the church. Particularly interesting is the painting of a Mary, whose depiction – and here Helene Moussa is proved right – is evocative of a modern adaptation of the Holy Virgin Mary. The person depicted (289) also appears to be pregnant, which would support Helene Moussa's interpretation of a reminiscence of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her contribution offers a remarkable insight into the art of a female Coptic artist. However, in view of the balanced picture descriptions, colour images would have been helpful to follow the author's explanations, as in the previous article. Carolyn Ramzy then (301–314) discusses the liturgical role of laywomen in the contemporary Coptic Church. She does this by addressing the controversial question of whether it is possible for women to sing formal or more informal religious songs and hymns (*alhan* and *taratil*). This question is closely linked to the issue of what roles women can play in the Coptic Church and whether they are allowed to serve as cantors or deaconesses. In view of current debates on the position of women in Christian churches, Carolyn Ramzy offers an insightful point of comparison and ecumenical link. Ihab Khalil concludes the volume (315–328) with an excursus on the Coptic Church in the diaspora, the inculturation of the church, for example, in US-American society and the less strict hierarchy in the diaspora communities that goes hand in hand with it. It is innovative that Gerard Hofstede's theories on power distance are applied to explain this discrepancy between the church structure abroad (low power distance) and in the heartland of Egypt (high power distance). At this point, however, a more detailed account of the Coptic Church abroad would have been welcome. The historical example he offers in support of his argument, namely the dispute between Origen and Demetrius, seems somewhat contrived and does little to explain the current situation.

The editor has succeeded in presenting the reader with a kaleidoscope of Coptic culture from ancient times to the present day, which deserves special recognition. Based on several thematic focuses that illuminate a wide range of facets, the reader is offered an interesting insight into the lives of "ordinary" Copts and their everyday concerns, their coping strategies, and the formation of their own identity in Egypt and abroad, conveyed through texts, archaeology and art. For anyone interested in the history and identity of Coptic laypeople in their

2000-year history, M.F. Ayad's collection provides a solid starting point for further research.

## References

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