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POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION IN
THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
COPTIC COMMUNITY AND
MUSLIM AUTHORITIES OF
MEDIEVAL EGYPT**

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TRAITS OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION IN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COPTIC COMMUNITY AND MUSLIM AUTHORITIES OF MEDIEVAL EGYPT²

In the course of the Middle ages, the Copts experienced a variety of drastic changes in the attitude of Muslim rulers towards them, from confidence to disgrace. The latter included not only the increasingly rigorous tax policies, but also social and domestic constraints, which can be surely defined as religious discrimination. Though the Copts managed to regain the trust of the authorities by their profound skills in administrative and courtly functions and, of course, compromise in terms of religion, which allowed them to enjoy high ranks and other benefits of their proximity to the Egyptian court. This, in its turn, made them an outstanding social group and can be considered “positive discrimination” in contrast with the definitely negative discrimination based on confessional conditions.

The question of the balance between positive and negative discrimination as an instrument of regulating intrastate social cooperation can be crucial for understanding the specific of these relationships during the described period. So, the main goal of this work is to trace historical precedents which can be considered either negative or positive discrimination, and their suppositional influence on the Copts’ turning into a minority.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Egypt, Islam, Middle ages, Copts, religion, Arabic culture, history, islamization

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Introduction

Since the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 active development of the religion-state relations began. The evolution of these relations was simultaneous to the changing confessional situation in the country, being as well a process of transformation of the Copts into an ethno-confessional minority.

After the conquest of Egypt by the Muslim Arabs a new period started in the history of the Copts. Arab rulers did not prohibit the Egyptians to profess Christian faith, which, for the Egyptian Christians, meant the end of persecution of their church. The Coptic “elite” ranked fairly high positions in the administrative apparatus of the Muslim Egypt and had a significant economic impact in the country. But the Copts did not have all the civil rights enjoyed by Muslims and also were required to pay the *jizya* and *kharaj*.

On the one hand, the Coptic Church was granted broad internal autonomy. But on the other hand, the integration of the representatives of the Coptic community in the social and political structure of Egypt occurred on the condition of administrative posts being kept by representatives of the Muslim community.

In the course of the Middle ages, the Copts experienced a variety of drastic changes in the attitude of Muslim rulers towards them, from confidence to disgrace. The latter included not only the increasingly rigorous tax policies, but also social and domestic constraints, which can be surely defined as religious discrimination. Though the Copts managed to regain the trust of the authorities by their profound skills in administrative and courtly functions and, of course, compromise in terms of religion, which allowed them to enjoy high ranks and other benefits of their proximity to the Egyptian court. This, in its turn, made them an outstanding social group and can be considered “positive discrimination” in contrast with the definitely negative discrimination based on confessional conditions.

The problem of complex relationships between the Muslim authorities and the Coptic community has not yet been viewed in the context of the discourse opposition of “positive and negative discrimination”, where “negative discrimination” is to be defined as treatment of an individual or group, based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category, "in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated", including deprivation of civil rights, restrictions in the performance of acts of worship and application of force while implementing the above. “Positive discrimination” can therefore be defined as a complex of measures that give advantage to the discriminated minorities, subsequently or simultaneously to measures of negative discrimination.

So, the main goal of this work is to trace historical precedents which can be considered either negative or positive discrimination, and their suppositional influence on the Copts' turning into a minority.

The target of research for this paper is the complex relationship between Muslim authorities of medieval Egypt and the Coptic community of the latter, the subject of research being the dynamics of intrastate relationships involving the Copts. The chronological framework of the inquiry are the Middle ages, from the conquest of Egypt to the middle of Ayyubid reign, approx. VII to XIII centuries. The following tasks were pursued during the following research:

- dividing the selected time span into separate periods, comparison between which will be the basis of the research;
- clarifying the specific of intrastate socio-political relations between the Muslim authorities and the Copts;
- highlighting periods of negative and positive discrimination of the Coptic community inside the selected time span;
- tracing the dynamics of the forementioned periods and their role in socio-political station of the Copts.

The following range of research methods was employed during the study:

- selection of the facts relevant to the research topics;
- critical analysis and comparison of information, taking into account the factors affecting accuracy (subjectivity in assessments, functionality of the works used as primary sources);
- determining causal relationships, generalization and synthesis of the information received;
- statistical analysis of the major semantic units of a manuscript.

This study does not claim to comprehensive coverage of the issue, but the question of the balance between positive and negative discrimination as an instrument of regulating intrastate social cooperation can be crucial for understanding the specific of these relationships during the described period.

Primary sources

This work is an introductory study based on a variety of scientific works by Russian and foreign authors, with three Arabic chronicles used as primary sources. The first is *A Short History of the Copts and their Church* by al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), a Mamluk era historian who had a keen interest in the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty and its role in Egyptian history [Walker, 2002:

164]. The second is *The history of Coptic community* by Ya'qub Nakhla Rufayla, one of the most famous Coptic chronicles in Arabic among the many published in Cairo in the XIX century. The last, but not the least, is the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic church of Alexandria* by Severus ibn al-Mukaffa', the most famous chronicle of the Coptic Church and also the root of Coptic historiography itself. Coptic sources are known for being "subjective", but thanks to his "subjectivity" they give the view of how the Coptic Church itself assessed its role in Egyptian society and in public policy. They also allow us to touch such an important area as national memory stored in the Coptic tradition. And this memory, in turn, makes it possible to better understand the nature of church-state relations and the station of the Coptic community. The special value of the Coptic sources is that they are based on church archives, as well as documents and manuscripts in Coptic monasteries of Egypt.

Historical background and precedents of discrimination of the Copts in medieval Egypt

In 641 Egypt was conquered by the Arab military commander of Caliph 'Omar – 'Amr ibn al-'As. The Arabs came to calling the local population "*qubt*", derived from the Greek word *Aigýptios* modified to Arabic. Gradually, the term "Copts" grew to be assigned to the Egyptian Christians, contrasting them with the Muslims and Christians of non-Egyptian origin.

The extremely quick and relatively easy conquest of Egypt by the Arabs (639-642) was due to several factors. In addition to the weakening of the Byzantine Empire in the VII century, the support from the Coptic population was also an important reason for the successful completion of the campaign. Copts were considered heretics by the Byzantine Orthodox church, and so, suffering from political and religious persecution by the Byzantines, they mostly supported the new conquerors, who offered them protection and nonintervention into religious matters in return for a certain loyalty to Muslims and taxes payment.

Rapprochement between Arabs and Egyptian Copts was encouraged by liberal religious and economic policies of the Muslim authorities. As 'Amr forbade looting for the army, several cases of destruction of churches that have taken place at the beginning of the Arab presence in Egypt have not affected the religious life of the Egyptian Christians. Monasteries also enjoyed the patronage of Arabs. At first the monks did not pay the capitation tax, and monasteries and monastic land were also not taxed, as well as the land of Muslim religious institutions (*waqf*). Thus, the Church (as an institution) enjoyed a special position, while all the non-Muslims had to pay the poll tax (*jizya*), apart from the land tax (*kharaj*) that was mandatory for all.

This policy of tolerance changed by the middle of the VIII century, under Caliph Marwan II(744-750), whose reign was marked by particular cruelty to the Egyptian monks. The reasons for persecution of Christians were uprisings, caused, in turn, by the tax burden. The first Coptic uprisings, in 725 in the Delta area and in 739 in Upper Egypt, were brutally suppressed. A total of six major uprisings between 725 and 773 has been reported. The failure of these revolts led only to increase in the authority of the conquerors, and thus, that of the number of Coptic converts to Islam. The burden of taxes, in particular, *jizya* and *kharaj*, the collection of which often implemented iniquity and violence, as well as frequent additional fees introduced by some rulers, forced Copts to accept Islam.

According to the Coptic sources, "...some of the Copts, to be rid of requisitions and gain privileges enjoyed by the Muslims, embraced Islam" [Rufayla 1898: 71]. However, this led to a significant decrease of state treasury income, and so some rulers imposed poll tax on the Egyptian monks who initially had tax immunity.

Conversion to Islam opened the possibility of integrating into the privileged Muslim class and avoiding heavy additional levies and restrictions on tax-paying population. However, "when the Umayyad rulers realized that the Copts convert to Islam to avoid paying *jizya*, they decreed that those who accepted Islam would not be freed of *jizya* and must continue paying it" [Rufayla 1898: 71]. So, it was only the first two years through all the Umayyad period when the Christians who converted to Islam were free from the poll tax.

Meanwhile, the islamization of the Christian population was quite intensive. This was also enhanced by mixed marriages between Muslims and Christian women, as children born to them became Muslims. Consequently, the arabization naturally led to islamization. At the same time the number of the Arab immigrants from Arabia settling in Egypt kept increasing.

While speaking about the intensity of this migration it should be said that the very frequent statement of Arabic sources about the mass conversions of Copts to Islam in the first decade after the Arab conquest is not supported by historical facts. By 725, 98% of Egyptians continued practicing Christianity [Vatikiotis 1969: 15]. But in 740 the first mass conversion of Copts to Islam occurred, caused by the brutal suppression of the first two uprisings and leading to mass persecution of the Egyptian Christians[Raymond 2007: 23]. It was probably the IX century when the Copts had ceased to be a numerical majority (in fact, in this century, we find the last mention of the Coptic uprisings) [Vatikiotis 1969: 7].

Processes of Islamization and Arabization of the Egyptian population were greatly aided by the gradual acceptance of Arabic as the working language of local administrative bodies. In 706, 'Abd Allah ibn' Abd al-Malik (705-709) signed a decree on administrative documents to be

recorded in Arabic. According to the French historian André Raymond, the first papyrus in Arabic is dated 709.

Through the adoption of Arabic as an official working language of the local administration the governor ‘Abd al-Malik sought to plant the Arabic administrative system in Egypt. This was caused by the fact that the Copts, due to higher cultural level, managed to take prestige social niches in Muslim Egypt, including those in administrative apparatus. Occupying the positions of scribes, officials, record managers, doctors, doing jewellery business and trade, the Copts competed with the Muslims in these areas, monopolizing a number of fiscal, notary and direct administrative functions. When ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Malik stripped the Copts of their assigned positions of scribes in the *diwans* [Raymond 2007: 25], translating official correspondence and paperwork into Arabic, Copts had no choice but to learn it.

According to Rufayla, “the administrative and financial affairs were conducted by the Copts. And when they found out about all these changes, a great concern overcame them because they might lose their important position in the government. Then they decided to learn the Arabic language with diligence, and achieved the desired goal and perfectly mastered the art of writing and counting in it” [Rufayla 1898: 68].

Religious and political conflicts that shook the Arab caliphate and led to the replacement of the Umayyad dynasty by the ‘Abbasids echoed in Egypt. ‘Abbasids ruled Egypt with the same heavy-handed regime as the Umayyads. ‘Abbasid governors of Egypt introduced informal fees despite the official taxes being very high. Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa’ notes on this: “...for the Copts had been robbed of every thing time after time by the adversaries who hated them” [al-Muqaffa’, p. IV, ch.XIX]. In response to the tax oppression, the Copts repeatedly raised revolts and uprisings, which were violently suppressed. However, these persecutions were isolated and determined not by a deliberate policy of the dynasty, but by the will of specific rulers.

Against the background of socio-political unrest caused by frequent changes of ruling dynasties in medieval Egypt, the persecution against Christians was rather a display of feudal oppression, than religious persecution. According to some researchers, these are isolated cases of persecution, which developed into a stable trend along with the decline of the caliphate [Panchenko 1998: 9].

Al-Muqaffa’ writes on the times of political unrest after the death of Harun al-Rashid: “In those days Harun al-Rashid had died at Bagdad; and his son Muhammad, called Al-Amin, sat in his father's place. The cause of offence was that Harun ar-Rashid before his death had assembled the chief personages of the empire, and said to them: «After me, the caliphate belongs to my son, the lord Al-Ma'mun.» But when Muhammad al-Amin heard of this, he was filled with anger, and gathered a host together, and made war upon his brother. But Al-Ma'mun killed Al-Amin, and

sat upon the throne of the empire. When the strife broke out between the two brothers, a certain rebel arose, and assembled an innumerable army, and kept the road between Egypt and the East. And he robbed those that were journeying to Misr or Upper Egypt or Abyssinia or Nubia of all their goods; so that travelling was interrupted on the roads and all the tracks through fear of him. This attack upon Egypt lasted long on account of the disturbed state of the government of Bagdad. And the insurgents rose against the government in Egypt, and gathered the taxes for themselves" [al-Muqaffa', p.IV, ch. XIX].

The outstanding connoisseur of Islam and Muslim culture V.Bartold also notes that "in times of political unrest the rights of Christians and all other gentiles are violated more than any other ..." [Bartold 1998: 25]. The social status of Christians was unequal to the position of Muslims in the Egyptian society. Therefore, due to their active participation in trade and usury, they often become victims of social and economic oppression. Although, of course, during the times of political turmoil Muslims got the very same level of economical oppression as non-muslims. The main reason for conflict were violations of the system of rules regulating the coexistence of Muslim and non-Muslim communities, which has been developed with Muslim law and living practice and based on a number of mutual obligations. In exchange for the commitment of the Muslim community to "provide protection" (*dhimma*) to some heterodox groups, the latter were required to maintain loyalty to the Muslim authorities, to pay the poll tax(*jizya*) and comply with a number of social and domestic constraints. In the course of time, the list of restrictions imposed on non-Muslims was slightly enlarged. According to V.Barthold, "[in the second] half of the IX century the standing of Christians in Muslim countries is getting worse than before ... However, the standing of Christians did not always meet the requirements of the Qur'an on the payment of taxes 'in humiliation' and the requirements of the so-called contract of Omar on distinctions in clothing. Christian officials dressed as noble Muslims and behaved as arrogant with the crowd; this caused protests against the 'dominance' of Christians, sometimes leading to violence" [Bartold 1998: 24-25].

So, despite the relative tolerance that prevailed in the Egyptian society under Tulunids (868-905), Ihshidids (935-960) and Fatimids (969-1171), there was a period of mass persecution of non-Muslims under Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021). According to al-Maqrizi, at that time "there was such deprivation which no Christian ever experienced. This happened because some of them continued to hold positions of the viziers, had a great influence, enjoyed honors, occupied a high position and posts in the state and had an abundance of their riches ... Al-Hakim was so angry that he could not control himself with rage" [Maqrizi 1873 ch.V]. He beheaded several high-up Copts, and then restored the old law requiring Christians to wear certain clothes. It is quite

significant that in the first decade of his reign religious minorities enjoyed traditional religious freedom.

The peak of repression occurred between 1008 and 1015. At first only the Sunnis were persecuted, and then the repressive policy spread to Christians and Jews. Christians had to wear heavy wooden crosses on their necks. Church fetes and bell-ringing were prohibited; images of crosses were removed from the outer walls of the churches, any traces covered. Numerous churches were destroyed.

Besides that, Christians lost their high positions in the Egyptian administrative apparatus [Meinardus 1977: 10]. Fear caused by inexplicably cruel oppressions on non-Muslims has prompted many noble Christians, who wanted to maintain their position and status, to convert to Islam. Their example was followed by many commoners. After 1015 the prosecutions were discontinued, and the successors of al-Hakim totally restored the tolerant attitude towards Christians and Jews. This suggests that the extremes of al-Hakim's religious policy were rather an exception to the general rule of relative tolerance that flourished in the Medieval Egyptian society. His successor, al-Zahir (1021-1036) allowed those converted to Islam by force to return to their former faith. The reign of al-Hakim was the turning point of Egyptian history: the beginning of the mass adoption of Islam by Christians and their inclusion in the Fatimid political system.

In general, the Fatimids showed remarkable tolerance toward Christianity. According to a specialist in socio-political history of the Coptic community Otto Meinardus, such favorable attitude of the Fatimid rulers to the Copts came down to their affiliation to the extreme Shiite movement of Ismailism that Egyptian Muslims never accepted, remaining Sunnis and generally maintaining their religious freedom [Meinardus 1977: 11]. Therefore, the Fatimids tolerated both the Christians and the Egyptian Sunni Muslims, while not finding absolute spiritual and religious unity with any of these groups. At the same time, they patronized the Copts, which is partly due to isolation of the Fatimid dynasty from the Muslim population of the country. Fatimid rulers took part in feasts and ceremonies of the Coptic community, and willingly accepted the Copts to public service. Under Caliph al-'Azeez (975-996), Christians were even allowed into the family circle of the Caliph – al-'Azeez had Christian relatives-in-law.

Under the Fatimid reign the process of ethnogenesis and synthesis of the two subcultures - Coptic and Arabic, - has generally come to an end. Local political elites began to emerge from the local population and not from the arriving Arabian tribes. In general, during this period, Egypt has ceased to be a purely Christian country.

The invasion of the country by Turkic commander Shirkuh (1169), uncle of Salah ad-Din, ended the rule of the Fatimids and started the new era of Ayyubid dynasty (1169-1252). This

period was not marked by persecution or violence of the rulers against Christians. However, the Crusades that occurred during the Ayyubid reign influenced the increase of interreligious tension in the country. Crusaders challenged the Islamic authorities, but the Copts, like other Eastern Christians, maintained neutrality, playing the role of loyal Christian subjects. The Copts did not consider Western newcomers as liberators, especially since the Crusaders themselves despised Eastern Christians as “schismatics”. Prolonged wars fought between the Ayyubids and the Crusaders did not, in general, bring harm to the standing of the Copts in the state. However, Egyptian Christians fully experienced the effects of the Crusades. The “defenders of the Christian faith and Christians” robbed villages, killing their inhabitants and taking women captive. Their cruelty induced hate towards Christians in the hearts of Muslims, without any distinction between Catholic, Orthodox or Monophysite.

Such tense situation has also created unlimited opportunities for various kinds of provocations and denunciations against the Copts. E.g., they have been repeatedly accused of secret assistance to the Franks, which entailed both expropriation of church property, and difficulties in the appointment of the patriarch [Rufayla 1898: 159], as for the approval of a new patriarch permission of the Muslim authorities was needed.

Thus, the position of the Copts under the Ayyubids was largely similar to that which they occupied under Fatimid caliphs. Having gained the trust of the authorities under the Fatimids through dedicated service to Egyptian rulers, the Copts as well kept enjoying the protection of the Ayyubids. During their reign the country prospered and the community generally retained comfort.

The Mamluk (1250-1517) coming to power significantly influenced the fate of Egyptian Christians. It is remarkable that the Mamluk reign interrupted the bonds between Egypt and southern European Mediterranean, striking a line between the Greco-Roman and Islamic eras of Egyptian history [Zelenev 1999: 100].

It is worth noting that the post of vizier, who traditionally had a great influence at the court of the Mamluk sultans, was usually occupied by Egyptians, often Copts who formally accepted Islam, in fact secretly keeping their Christian faith. Sometimes the vizier took a Muslim name, while remaining a Christian. The diwan administrators that formed the structural basis of the Mamluk bureaucracy were subordinate to the vizier. Nevertheless, between 1279 and 1447 Mamluk rulers destituted Copts from high administrative posts eight times.

Crucial reduction in the number of Coptic population by the XIV century was largely due to Christian conversions to Islam. The last mass acceptance of Islam by Copts was as a result of the incident that took place in 1321, making a crushing blow to the Copts. Shams al-Riasa Abul Barakat ibn Kabar, a former secretary of the Sultan Rukn al-Din Baibars al-Jashnakir (1309-

1309), was captured by the Egyptian authorities for his arrogant and insolent treatment of a crowd of Muslims [Meinardus 1977:11]. He was saved from death by a Mamluk emir, who took him into his service. However, the repression subsequent to these events that caused the indignation of the Muslim population forced many Christian scribes in the service of the sultan and emirs to accept Islam. Moreover, “the scribes who converted to Islam were able to retain their posts, and those who did not do so were beheaded” [Makrizi 1873 ch.V]. Notary certificates on the conversion to Islam were being drawn up and after that the Copts once again announced accepting Islam in the presence of *qadi* [Makrizi 1873 ch.V]. Perhaps this was done to avoid the above-mentioned cases of formal adoption of Islam. Though, presumptively, this procedure was of moral character and was aimed to calm the Muslim population and mitigate its resentment.

However, in contrast to the damage done to Egyptian Christianity as a result of these events, the Coptic officials were not badly affected. Maqrizi gave his assessment of what happened: “From the despised people they became respected and honored... They converted to Islam for the sake of benefit and peace, however, once free, they did not become Muslims” [Makrizi 1873 ch.V].

These events took place during a period of political instability, exacerbated by a plague epidemic, which was accompanied by a loss of cattle and hunger. In 1347-1349 the plague claimed the lives of one third of the Egyptians. Between 1348 and 1513 there were 18 outbreaks of plague, which led to a reduction in the total population number. In turn, this led to a sharp decrease in cash inflow to the public coffers. So a growing number of informal taxes emerged, which led to riots and revolts among the population [Raymond 2007: 155].

However, the resentment of the Christian population met particularly brutal massacre, which was due to the low social status of Coptic population. By the middle of the XIV century the repressive measures against the Copts applied by the Mamluk Sultan al-Salih ibn Qalawun (1351-1354) reached an extreme rate: churches and monasteries have been destroyed, their land property expropriated, taxes doubled. Those who resisted were executed [Raymond 2007: 160]. Terrible plague epidemics completed the picture of the disaster, upon which the act of the tragedy of the Egyptian Mamluk Empire, which resulted in a bloody feud between two Mamluk factions in 1495 [Zelenev 1999: 148,151].

Religion-state relations in medieval Egypt naturally reflected the political and socio-economic interests of both sides in a relatively liberal religious climate in the country and serious restrictions of economic independence of the Church by the Egyptian authorities. Coptic Church, in spite of its considerable powers, continued to depend on the will of the rulers in a number of vital issues, e.g. the appointment of the patriarch and restoration of the ecclesiastic buildings.

Repercussions of the coptic-muslim relationships in Coptic chronicles

For this part of the study it was decided to use the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic church of Alexandria* by Severus ibn al-Mukaffa', the most famous chronicle of the Coptic Church and also the root of Coptic historiography itself. Coptic sources are known for being "subjective", but thanks to his "subjectivity" they give the view of how the Coptic Church itself assessed its role in Egyptian society and in public policy. They also allow us to touch such an important area as national memory stored in the Coptic tradition. And this memory, in turn, makes it possible to better understand the nature of church-state relations and the station of the Coptic community. The special value of the Coptic sources is that they are based on church archives, as well as documents and manuscripts in Coptic monasteries of Egypt.

The chronicle consists of an introductory part containing four prefaces and a chapter named "The priesthood of Christ", an apologue used as an epigraph for the chronicle. This introduction is followed by the chronicle itself, consisting of four chapters in which the events are distributed according to the order of the patriarchs elevated to the rank. Such organization of the manuscript is very convenient for comparison of different chronicles and further analysis.

Of the four parts of the manuscript the most relevant to us are chapters III and IV, as they describe the periods of 661-767 and 767-849, which correspond to the early period of Coptic-Muslim relationships in Egypt.

The work of Ibn al-Mukaffa' was continued by his numerous successors, e.g. Michael, bishop of Tinnis, Mawhub ibn Mansur ibn Mufarrig, deacon of Alexandria and Pope Mark III of Alexandria. Further chapters cover the biographies of Coptic patriarchs up to 1927. Thus, this account will focus additionally on the parts VI to IX covering the events up to the year 1216.

The "History of the patriarchs..." gives a detailed account of the conquest of Egypt by 'Amr Ibn al-As and even mentions the *dhimma* treaty, though calling it "The Law":

After fighting three battles with the Romans, the Muslims conquered them. So when the chief men of the city saw these things, they went to Amr, and received a certificate of security for the city, that it might not be plundered. This kind of treaty which Muhammad, the chief of the Arabs, taught them, they called the Law; and he says with regard to it : «As for the province of Egypt and any city that agrees with its inhabitants to pay the land-tax to you, and to submit to your authority, make a treaty with them, and do them no injury. But plunder and take as prisoners those that will not consent to this and resist you». For this reason the Muslims kept their hands off the province and its inhabitants, but destroyed the nation of the Romans, and their general who was named Marianus. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XIV]

This information does totally agree with the accounts of these events in Muslim sources, e.g. al-Baladhuri's "Kitab futuh al-buldan": " 'Amr made the citizens of the town dhimmis and

laid jizya and kharaj upon them.<...>and while they obey this letter, the Muslims will not harm them” [al-Baladhuri, 97-98].

It is very peculiar that while describing the rivalries between Muslims and Byzantines al-Muqaffa’ indicates the latter as “infidels” or “misbelievers”, and simultaneously praises the justice and nobility of Amr b.As:

When Amr took full possession of the city of Alexandria, and settled its affairs, that infidel, the governor of Alexandria, feared, he being both prefect and patriarch of the city under the Romans, that Amr would kill him; therefore he sucked a poisoned signet-ring, and died on the spot. But Sanutius, the believing duke, made known to Amr the circumstances of that militant father, the patriarch Benjamin, and how he was a fugitive from the Romans, through fear of them. Then Amr, son of Al-Asi, wrote to the provinces of Egypt a letter, in which he said : «There is protection and security for the place where Benjamin, the patriarch of the Coptic Christians is, and peace from God; therefore let him come forth secure and tranquil, and administer the affairs of his Church, and the government of his nation». Therefore when the holy Benjamin heard this, he returned to Alexandria with great joy, wearing the crown of patience and sore conflict which had befallen the orthodox people through their persecution by the heretics, after having been absent during thirteen years, ten of which were years of Heraclius, the misbelieving Roman, with the three years before the Muslims conquered Alexandria. [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XIV]

Basing on the further accounts by al-Muqaffa’, it can be stated that the coexistence of the two fractions was quite peaceful, from the point of view of the Copts. For example, under the reign of governor Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan ibn al-Hakam (685-705) several churches were built and many other improvements were made, including the restoration of the city of Alexandria. In their turn, the Copts, led by patriarch Simon, were doing their best to avoid conflict between Christians and Muslims:

And after three years Abd al-Azīz dismissed the bishops to their sees, and commanded them to build two churches at Hulwān. And the bishops spent of their own means upon the building of them; and the governor deputed Gregory, bishop of Al-Kais, to superintend the building of them. Now the Amir loved building, and therefore he built Hulwān, and constructed reservoirs there; likewise at Misr he built houses and market-places and baths; and so he did in every town on the river from Misr to Alexandria. He commanded also to dig the canal of Alexandria on the north of the city near the pool of Nicetas; and he ordered that milestones should be set up along it as far as Alexandria. So also he did in the city itself, for he restored her streets after they were ruined.<...> . Meanwhile this holy man Simon was striving all his life to prevent difficulties between the Christians and the Muslims, so that none might suffer loss through him. [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVI]

Abd al-Aziz hoped that his son, al-Asbagh, would succeed him as governor of Egypt, and thus gave him a wide authority over the country, including the collection of taxes. But al-Asbagh was a cruel ruler and despised Christians, and the following account of his deeds makes it possible that in the eyes of the Copts, the period of persecution started even before the infamous

rule of Caliph Marwan II. This account also contains the first evidence of the poll-tax being extended upon Coptic monks:

“...Al-Asbagh was a hater of the Christians, a shedder of blood, a wicked man, like a fierce lion. And he did not shrink from any cruelty that he could inflict upon the Christians. For as the damned heretics were in the habit of calumniating the Christian monks and saying that they did nothing but eat and drink, he sent one of his trusted friends, named Yezīd, accompanied by another, and mutilated all the monks in all the provinces and in Wadī Habīb and on Mount Jarād and in other places. And he laid a poll-tax upon them of one dinar from each individual, and commanded that they should make no more monks after those whom he mutilated. Now this tax of the infidel Al-Asbagh was the first poll-tax paid by the monks.” [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVII]

The neighboring paragraphs of the chronicle also mention that “he forced many persons to become Muslims, among them being Peter, governor of Upper Egypt, and his brother Theodore, and the son of Theophanes, governor of Maryūt, and a body of priests and laymen not to be numbered on account of their multitude”, which contributes to the fact that it was under the Umayyad rule when mass conversions of the Copts to Islam had begun. Soon after these events, in 717, Caliph ‘Umar came to power, and this is what Severus accounts on his reign:

Omar, son of Abd al-Azīz, though he did much good before men, acted ill before God. He commanded that there should be no taxes upon the property of the church and the bishops, and began to set the churches and bishops free from the impost on land; and he abolished the new taxes, and rebuilt the ruined cities; and the Christians were in security and prosperity, and so were the churches. But after that he began to do evil; for he wrote a letter charged with sadness to Egypt, in which were written the following words : «Omar commands saying, Those who wish to remain as they are, and in their own country, must follow the religion of Muhammad as I do; but let those who do not wish to do so, go forth from my dominions». Then the Christians gave him all the money that they could, and trusted in God, and rendered service to the Muslims, and became an example to many. For the Christians were oppressed by the governors and the local authorities and the Muslims in every place, the old and the young, the rich and the poor among them; and Omar commanded that the poll-tax should be taken from all men who would not become Muslims, even in cases where it was not customary to take it. But God did not long respite him, but destroyed him swiftly, and granted him the government no longer, because he was like Antichrist. [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVII]

This fragment clearly illustrates the concept of interchanging measures of positive and negative discrimination being a dominant way of Muslim authorities to conduct intrastate relationships.

Al-Muqaffa’ gives a thorough and presumably eye-witnessed description of the first Coptic uprising in 725, under the rule of Caliph Hisham, who was first considered by the Copts “the deliverer of the orthodox” for permitting them to elect a patriarch, and the de facto government of Ubayd Allah Ibn al-Habhab, who doubled the taxes, which, in turn, caused major confrontations between Christians and Muslims, and “much blood was shed in the land of Egypt between the two factions, and “first of all in the city of Banā and the city of Sa and the city of

Samannūd and their neighbourhood, and in many places in Lower Egypt; and there was likewise fighting on the roads and mountains and by the canals” [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVII].

A mass transition of Copts to Islam is reported by both Muslim and Coptic chronicles around 740, and Severus is not an exclusion. But due to the specifically emotional nature of the Coptic sources en masse and the History of the Patriarchs itself, we find that the Coptic Church and its leaders did despise those who abandoned their faith:

And Hafs commanded that everyone in the provinces of Egypt should pray according to the laws of the Sunnite ritual, and proclaimed that all those, who would give up their own religion and become Muslims, should be exempted from the poll-tax; for that was an impost due from all of them. By means of this procedure Satan did much harm to many people who gave up their religion; and some of them enrolled themselves among the soldiery. And the patriarch, Abba Michael, saw these things with sadness and tears, because he beheld men denying the Lord Christ. And for these causes the bishops left their sees, and departed into the desert, and entered the monasteries, where they humbled themselves before the Lord in prayer. [al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVIII]

There is also a peculiar fragment dating back to the reign of governor Abu Awn Abd al-Malik ibn Yazid (755-758), describing a miracle caused by Christian prayers – the rise of the Nile. Though being not an actual deed of the Copts, it still caused some positive change in their position and gave them some years of security, accompanied by measures of positive discrimination.

Then Abu Aun ordered that the people of Misr should be tried, and bad the crier proclaim that the Muslims were to go out to the mountain to pray. And on the morrow they all issued forth. And the Jews and the Samaritans went out the second day; but the water neither rose nor sank, but remained as it was. So Abu Aun, the governor, remained in sadness and without faith. But he said : «So that I may see the end of the matter»; and he remained in perplexity, saying : «By the prayers of the Christians the water rose, and at our prayers it sank.» Then he ordered on the third day that no one at all should go out, and that none should ascend to the mountain nor pray. And the water did not rise during the three days at all. After that he gave orders to bring the Christians who were at Al-Fustāt, and certain tribes whose names we do not remember; and he commanded Abba Moses to pray, him and his people. So they recited the prayers, and gave thanks to God till the sixth hour of the day, and went down and walked round Misr, and came to the bank of the river, and prayed for the rest of the day. And that night the river rose three cubits, so that altogether it completed seventeen cubits. Then all the people rejoiced greatly, and thanked God and glorified his name.

And as for Abu Aun, for this reason he increased his benefits towards the Christians and their churches, and lightened their taxes. And from that day the Father Patriarch and the bishops, with those who were baptized and the whole Church, lived in security and peace, in great joy and gladness, in the land of Egypt and the Five Cities and all the places under the see of the evangelist, Saint Mark, because of the miracles of the Church which the governor beheld, and her mighty works.[al-Muqaffa’, ch. XVIII]

Al-Muqaffa' also notes a story that took place during the Arab-Byzantine wars, circa 780, about Christian captives who were forced to become Muslims:

And they continued to make raids from Egypt, as they had done elsewhere, upon the islands of the Romans, plundering them, and bringing the captives to Alexandria, and selling them as slaves. Therefore when our father Mark saw these captives, he was grieved because human beings were sold, as if they were cattle; moreover many of them became Muslims. And because his heart was compassionate he redeemed many of them, such as monks and priests and deacons and virgins and mothers of children, until he had bought as many as six thousand souls. When he purchased one of these prisoners, he wrote a deed of emancipation for him on the spot, and gave into his hand a letter which set him free. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XIX]

Generally, the History of the patriarchs does not note any particular violence or persecution during the Abbasid reign, paying more attention to inner problems of the Church. Nevertheless, the taxes were still in place and unjust policies of certain governors and caliphs are mentioned, for example, this account of caliph al-Mutawakkil's reign:

It came to pass soon after this, that the hater of good (Satan) did not wait, but he began to sow tares of evil in the heart of the king of the Muslims, namely Ga'far al-Mutawakkil. He (al-Mutawakkil) brought down upon the churches in every place innumerable afflictions which were that he ordered all the churches to be demolished, and that none of the Orthodox Christians, Melkites, Nestorians, or Jews should wear white garments, but that they should wear dyed garments, so that they might be distinguished among the Muslims. He ordered that frightful pictures should be made on wooden boards and that they should be nailed over the doors of the Christians. He forced most of them (to embrace) al-Islam, and ordered that Christians should not serve in the employment of the Sultan at all, but only Muslims and those who had gone over to al-Islam. In consequence of this, love and patience were diminished in the hearts of many, so that they denied the Lord Christ; some of them denied (Him) on account of the worldly positions which they loved, and others, on account of the poverty they suffered. He dismissed the Christian ministerial secretaries from the diwan of the Sultan and substituted Muslims in their stead. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XXI]

Surprisingly, soon after this al-Mutawakkil appointed a new governor of Egypt, Yazid ibn 'Abdallah al-Hulwani, who stopped these measures and convinced the Caliph to restore some cities:

This (man) dealt well with men, and the land of Egypt was at rest. The merchants exposed (for sale) corn, and blessings and good things increased in every place, and affliction was removed from men. The souls of the inhabitants of the land of Egypt found pleasure and saw many good things. This was in the days of Ga'far al-Mutawakkil 'ala Allah. This king turned his attention at that time to the cities which were in the land of the East and (in that part of) Egypt which is near the river, because the Greeks (Rum) had plundered Damietta in his day. Then he gave the money for the expenses of building the walls at Tinnis and Damietta, as also at the great city of Alexandria, and for all the works at al-Burullus, Asmun, at-Tinah, Rosetta, and Nastaruh, through fear of the Greeks (Rum). He completed them as was necessary, and erected fortresses and many memorials in the land of Egypt in place of what was done to the Christians, and (he practised) justice and upright rule. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XXI]

Besides some brief periods of tax oppression (which is claimed to have been equally hard for the Muslim population), the period of time from the late Abbasid rule up to the middle of the Fatimid dynasty reign was quite peaceful, and the chronicle does not mention much persecution against the Christians. This passage illustrates that well:

He (Christ) said to them the well known commandment in the Gospel and He said to them at the end of it: 'Freely you have received, freely give, that is, you have received this grace without a price, demand not then from him to whom you give it a price'. The patriarchs of the Copts and their fathers did not cease from acting according to this commandment up to the time of the oppression by the authorities of the Muslims from Ahmad ibn Tulun [A. D. 868-884.] up to the days of al-Hakim [A. D. 996-1021] (in addition to) other things which, if we were to describe them, the description would be long. Necessity caused them to do what they did in this (matter) on account of what was demanded of them in the way of money and of what they undertook in the way of burdens. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XXIII]

The authors of the History of the patriarchs give a very explicit account of caliph al-Hakim, his reign, his personality and his deeds. This very much corresponds to the fact that al-Hakim has a distinct place in the national memory of the Copts, as no other caliph has as many passages and even pages describing him. The following is just one of the many descriptions the chronicle gives:

This king (al-Hakim) did deeds which it was unheard of that any of the kings before him had done the like. He did not adhere to one opinion or to one belief. His aspect was as (that of) a lion, and his two eyes were large (and) of a blueness in colour. If he (al-Hakim) looked at a man, he would tremble owing to the greatness of his awe (of him). His voice was loud and fearful. He used to observe the stars and (study) the false science. He used to serve the star called Saturn, as he imagined, and he used to continue turning round the eastern mountain at Misr at night, and with him there were three riders. Satan used to take on for him the likeness of that star, and he (al-Hakim) used to converse with him (Satan) about many matters, and he used to offer to him (Satan) sacrifices. He gave up the attire of kings on account of this, and he wore a black woollen garment. He let his hair grow till it descended to his shoulders. He gave up riding on dromedaries and marked race-horses and decorated mules, and he rode a black ass. He used to walk alone in every place and often he took with him (only) a single rider. He used to walk in the streets at night also and to listen to what men said about him in their houses. He had many spies and informers going around night and day who brought to him information, and who did not hide from him anything of what happened in all the lands of Misr. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XXVI]

As for the persecutions and regulations he imposed on the *dhimmis*, the chronicle also gives a very detailed account, and clearly, those measures were unprecedentedly heavy, which underlines the fact that al-Hakim's reign was the final turning point in the process of the Copts' transformation into a discriminated minority.

...he ordered that the crosses which were upon the domes of the churches should be pulled down, and that the crosses which were upon the hands of the people should be erased. Then he ordered that the Christians should have a belt fastened round their waists and that they should wear black turbans on their heads and that they should ride with wooden stirrups and that none of them should ride with iron stirrups, and that they should wear crosses a span in length, then he

ordered again to make them (the crosses) a cubit and a half (in length). (He ordered) that the Jews should dye the borders of their turbans and that they should wear belts and that they should make (for themselves) a wooden ball in the form of the head of the calf which they worshipped in the desert, and that none of the Christians and Jews should enter a bath with Muslims. He (al-Hakim) set apart for them baths and he placed (upon) the door of the bath of the Christians a wooden cross and upon the door of the bath of the Jews a wooden log.

Then he (al-Hakim) ordered that the crosses of the Christians should be of wood, and each cross weighing five Egyptian ratl (and) stamped with a leaden seal upon which was the name of the king, and (he ordered) that they should hang it about their necks with ropes of palm fibres. Likewise, the weight of the ball which was about the necks of the Jews should be five ratl. He among them who was found without a seal should be contemned and should pay a fine for the offence. Many of the Christians and the Jews from their chiefs (down) to the lowest of them denied (their faith) on account of this, and they did not endure patiently this disgrace and affliction. [al-Muqaffa', ch. XXVI]

It is widely known that al-Hakim's successors applied measures of positive discrimination to Christians and other *dhimmis*, but the History of the Patriarchs gives a surprising account of the time around 1019-20, just before the Caliph's mysterious disappearance:

Then the king al-Hakim came to them and he brought an important decree (authorizing) the (re)opening of all the churches which were in his kingdom and their restoration, and that there should be returned to them (the Christians) the timber, pillars and bricks which had been taken from them, and the lands and the gardens which belonged to them in all the land of Misr. The demolition of the churches was in the year seven hundred and twenty-seven of the Martyrs, and they were opened and their restoration was allowed in the year seven hundred and thirty-six of the Martyrs. In this decree he (al-Hakim) exempted them (the Christians) from wearing the ghiyar and from wearing the cross, and (allowed) them to strike the nawakis in all the churches in every place, as was their custom. O what joy was it on that day for all the Christians who were in the land of Misr In the year in which there was deliverance and the allowance to undertake restorations in the churches, a wonderful thing was manifested. [al-Muqaffa', ch.XXVI]

Al-Hakim was succeeded by his son al-Zahir, whose reign is described as a time of prosperity, security and respect to the Coptic Church:

He did not interfere in anything of the affairs of his father, and there was in his days great tranquillity and peace, and he remained king for sixteen years. The religion of the Christians was in a good state and its people respected. In his (Az-Zahir's) days the churches were (re)built till they returned to the state (in which) they had been, and (were even) better. The (re)building in them (the churches) did not cease and the restoration was continued till the year in which this biography was written, and it is the year seven hundred and sixty-seven of the Martyrs [A. D. 1050-1051]. [al-Muqaffa', ch.XXVI]

Basing on the accounts given by this chronicle, it can be stated that interchanging periods of positive and negative discrimination were one of the main features of the relationships between the Coptic Church and Muslim authorities of Egypt in 7-11 centuries. Severe taxation and other measures caused many Copts to abandon their faith and become Muslims, so during the described period the Coptic community significantly sank in numbers, which could not but

influences their identity. The descriptions in the chronicle also confirm the theory of the Copts having an opportunity of self-selection between identities, because though experiencing grief, the Church and its fathers did not impose any sanctions on those who were forced to become Muslims. One of the main commandments of the Coptic church was to humbly accept what was given to them by God in terms of trials or kindness, and so they did, trying to maintain the balance in the church-state relationships and developing diplomacy in order to avoid conflict.

Content analysis of the dynamics in social station of the Copts (basing on Coptic historiography)

In order to refine the analysis of the dynamics of socio-political situation around the Coptic community in medieval Egypt content analysis was employed to the text of the *History of the Patriarchs*. As it has been mentioned before, the chronicle is divided into chapters, each covering the events of a corresponding period. The chapters relevant to the described period are chapters III to IX, and the dating goes as follows: Chapter III – 661-766; Chapter IV – 767-849; Chapter V – 850-880; Chapter VI – 881-1066; Chapter VII – 1067-1102; Chapter VIII – 1103-1167; Chapter IX – 1168-1216. In the following text the chapters are referred to as “periods” III to IX for the sake of simplification.

Content analysis [Fedotova 2001: 9] is a form of fusion of qualitative and quantitative approaches to the analysis of texts and consists of several stages: the first stage - selection of individual semantic units in the body of the text, defining their values and relationships, - is qualitative; the second stage - frequency count of the semantic units or calculation of the volume that they occupy in the text, - is quantitative, and the third stage - interpretation of the results - is again qualitative. The key feature of the content analysis is that by means of it documents can be studied in their social context.

In our study the categories of the analysis were as follows: 1) religious; 2) political; 3) economic; the semantic unit of the analysis was a word; the unit of account was a mention of a single word, counted by positive integers in absolute terms; the context unit - a separate chapter of the chronicle.

The distribution of the semantic units and their mentions in the text made it possible to acquire the following characteristics (Table 1): 1) prevalence (frequency of occurrence in any given period); time-dependent trends.

Table 1. Results of the semantic units (words) count in the text of the chronicle

		Results of the count (mentions in the text) by context units						
Category	Word	Ch. III	Ch. IV	Ch. V	Ch. VI	Ch. VII	Ch. VIII	Ch. IX
Religious	Copts	7	3	0	6	8	11	9
	Islam	3	3	9	17	3	3	24
	Muslims	67	16	29	21	11	21	81
	Churches	188	298	132	161	208	78	32
	Monasteries	75	30	43	47	123	51	26
	Christian	72	25	77	67	46	52	36
	Orthodox	49	40	15	18	5	10	3
	Infidel	4	2	1	1	0	2	1
Political	Tyrant	1	4	5	0	0	0	0
	Persecution	4	4	4	4	0	0	0
	Oppression	4	4	7	2	5	3	9
	Trials	17	13	30	2	0	0	0
	Torture	11	0	3	7	2	0	3
	Destroy	20	15	13	9	3	4	16
Economic	Taxes	35	21	41	10	28	5	13
	Taxation	2	0	6	0	2	0	0
		Frequency of occurrence, % by context units						
Category	Слово	Ch. III	Ch. IV	Ch. V	Ch. VI	Ch. VII	Ch. VIII	Ch. IX
Religious	Copts	16	7	0	14	18	25	20
	Islam	5	5	15	27	5	5	39
	Muslims	27	7	12	9	4	9	33
	Churches	17	27	12	15	19	7	3
	Monasteries	19	8	11	12	31	13	7
	Christian	19	7	21	18	12	14	10
	Orthodox	35	29	11	13	4	7	2
Political	Infidel	36	18	9	9	0	18	9
	Tyrant	10	40	50	0	0	0	0
	Persecution	25	25	25	25	0	0	0
	Oppression	12	12	21	6	15	9	26
	Trials	27	21	48	3	0	0	0
	Torture	42	0	12	27	8	0	12
Economic	Destroy	25	19	16	11	4	5	20
	Taxes	23	14	27	7	18	3	8
	Taxation	20	0	60	0	20	0	0

The diagram below visualizes the data presented in the table (Figure 1), reflecting the change in the frequency of occurrence of semantic units in the time series on the context units.

This chart allows us to make a preliminary conclusion that the social situation of the Copts was the worst in period V: the word "copt" is not mentioned even once, and the maximum frequency of occurrence for the words "taxation", "tyrant" and "oppression" are observed. This corresponds with the facts mentioned in the historical overview above, due to the exceedingly violent financial and social policies of the Abbasids during the times of the decay of the

Caliphate. The term “persecution” occurs the most in periods III to VI, which illustrates the fact that the struggle of the Copts with the violent religious policies was more intensive in the first two centuries of Muslim reign. Period III also contains the most mentions of the words “infidel” and “torture”, underlining by this the facts of forced transitions of the Coptic population to Islam and the particular violence of religious discrimination accompanied by severe financial policies during the reign of the first Muslim rulers. The most mentions of the word “muslim” refer to periods III and IX, probably meaning that the religious confrontations between the two fractions were the most intense right after the conquest and during the Crusades, which induces many provocations and denunciations against the Christians, causing cruelty and discrimination upon them. This is also supported by the frequency of the word “oppression” which is as well at its highest in period IX.

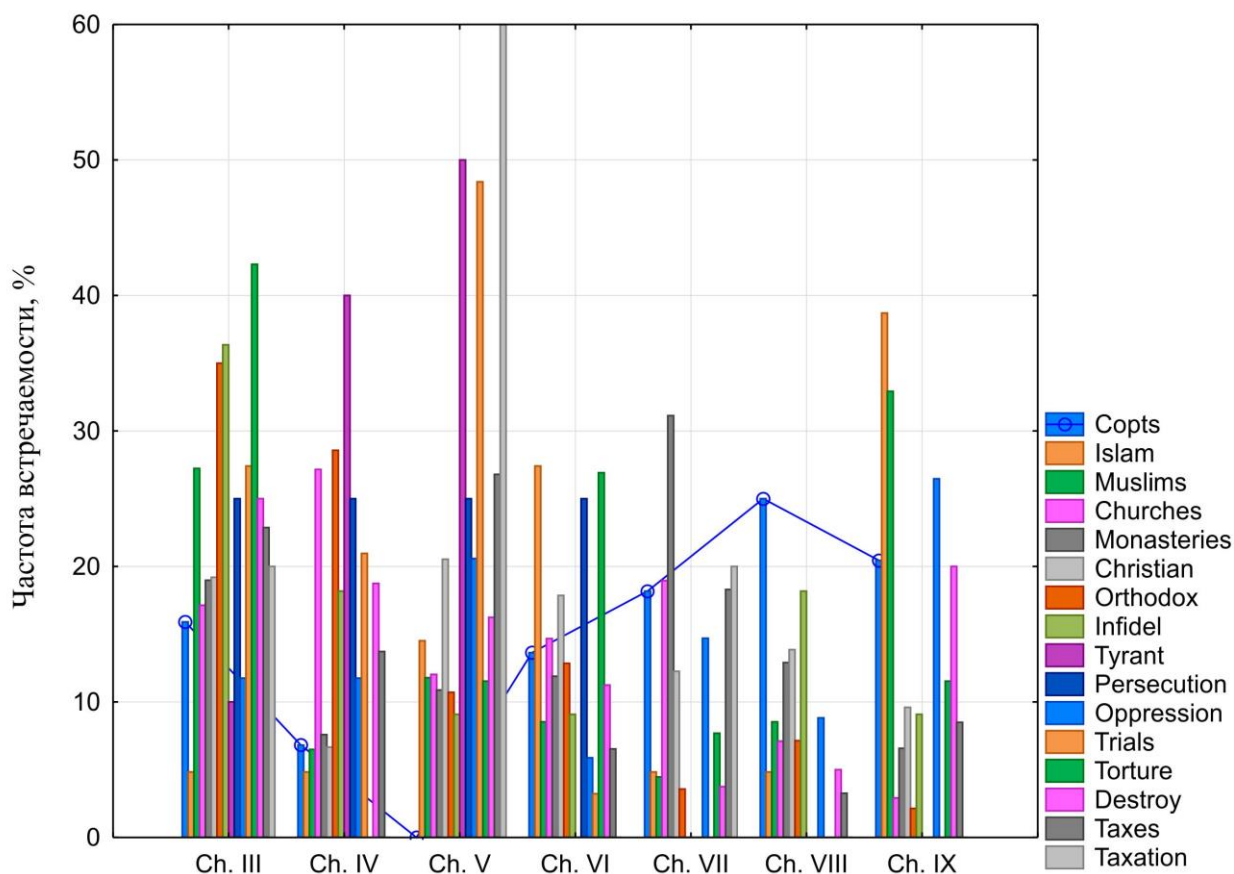


Figure 1. Diagram for temporal trends of the semantic units

Correlation analysis of the sample of semantic units by number of references in the text showed that the couples "copt-tyrant", "copt-persecution", "copt-trials" show significant negative correlation coefficients, illustrating the inverse relationship: -0.9; -0.76 and -0.84, respectively. This demonstrates the primary effect of political factors on the social situation of the Copts.

For typification in historical research the methods of multivariate statistics are the most effective, in particular - cluster analysis, which is important as applied to a set of time-series. By means of it periods can be distinguished when the values of the respective indicators were sufficiently close, and groups of time series, the dynamics of which are the most similar, can be determined.

The diagram (Figure 2) shows the cluster structure of the text of the manuscript by the presence and frequency of occurrence of semantic units (Table 1).

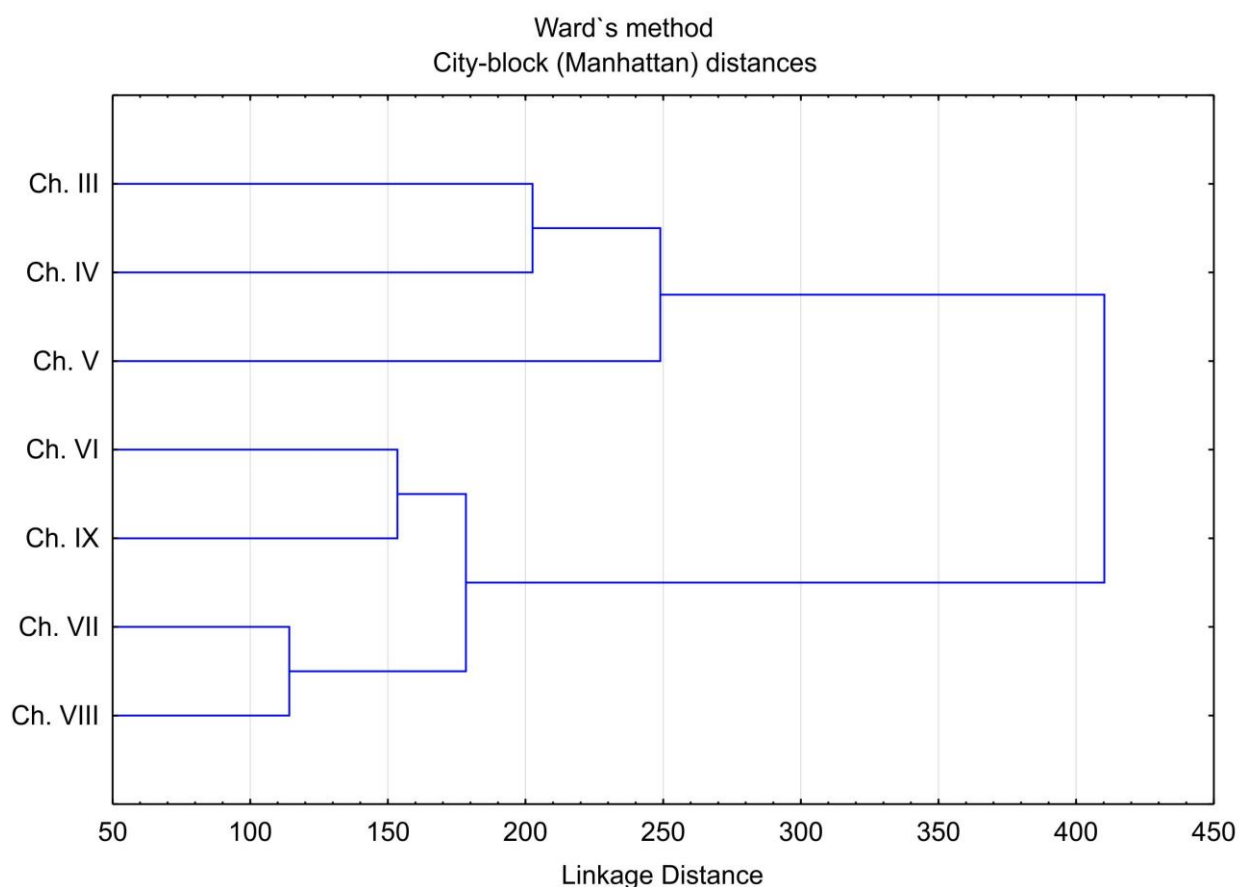


Figure 2. Tree diagram for the time series

The analysis is performed in a hierarchical algorithm, the Ward's method, as the method most suitable for small datasets. As a result, a dendrogram (hierarchical structure) of the time sequence has been obtained, in which two temporary clusters have been distinguished, differing in the totality of semantic units, i.e. the analyzed categories (= religious, political and economic situation in a certain period). The first cluster includes periods III, IV and V (from the conquest of Egypt to the late Abbasid period), III and IV showing a similarity of the above mentioned conditions. The second cluster includes periods VI, VII, VIII and IX (early Tulunids to mid-Ayyubids), while the religious, political and economic situation is the most similar in periods VII and VIII, and also similar, but more different from each other, are the conditions during periods VI and IX.

Comparing Figures 1 and 2, it can be assumed that the evolution of the social situation of the Copts in medieval Egypt's society was as follows: during periods III and IV a deterioration developed that peaked in V period. Then improvement began that lasted, with minor fluctuations, over periods VI to IX.

These results meet the facts obtained by the method of comparative analysis of the sources. The period of intense confrontations between the Copts and Muslim authorities came to an end by period VI, making place for tolerance and mutual respect under the Fatimid reign (periods VI, VII, VIII), the period that is mostly characterized by historians as a kind of "golden age" of the Copts, though there still were rulers who despised them. The similarity between periods VI and IX is probably due to the changes that came with the Fatimids coming to power, in the first case, and the fact that during the Ayyubid reign the Copts had the trust of the authorities with administrative matters, by at the same time were assaulted and insinuated about due to their would-be connections with the Crusaders.

Conclusion

The balance between interchanging periods of positive and negative discrimination was a solid trend in the medieval history of the Coptic Church and community. The liberal policies of the first Muslim rulers did not last long, followed by the period of repression, which caused Christians to abandon their faith and begin their way to becoming a discriminated social group. But at the same time, accepting Islam gave the Copts a possibility of integration to privileged Muslim class. Due to this possibility and as well the processes of Islamization and Arabization of Egypt, by the IX century the Copts had gradually ceased to be a numerical majority, becoming a smaller ethno-confessional group more prone to discrimination. During the 'Abbasid reign mass social protest developed against the 'dominance' of the Copts, which resulted in significant damage to the chances of their integration to the Muslim society of Egypt.

The times of relative stability under the Tulunid, Ikhshidid and Fatimid dynasties brought the Copts to the highest administrative positions, making them a part of the country's elite. Despite some exceptions, the period of Fatimid and the following Ayyubid reign (969-1252) can be characterized as a period of prosperity and definitely positive discrimination of the Copts. This situation continued up to the mid-XIV century, when the beginning of the decline of the Mamluk sultanate brought severe repression, extermination and negative discrimination on the heads of the Copts.

Thus, it can be said that the station of the Copts in medieval Egypt was quite bilateral, and in the course of time they experienced both the positive and negative discrimination. On the

one hand, the Copts were often appointed to higher administrative positions and took a significant place in the life and administration of the Egyptian court, due to their high cultural level and profound implementation of some fiscal, notary and direct administrative functions. But on the other hand, they kept being an oppressed group of low social status, unequal to Muslims in terms of rights, experiencing severe tax policies, religious discrimination and forced to comply with a number of social and domestic constraints.

It can be stated that negative discrimination followed by measures of positive was used by Muslim rulers to keep the Copts at bay, but still enjoy the benefits of their existence. Such policy created a significant socio-economic gap, both between the Muslims and Christians, and inside the Coptic community itself. This question is very important for understanding the specifics of intrastate relations in medieval Egypt and relations between Christians and Muslim authorities in general, so surely deserves deeper study.

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