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An Arabic History of the Byzantine Empire

The pre-Islamic history of the Fertile Crescent barely occupied the medieval Muslim historians.¹ Their use of early non-Arabic sources to reconstruct the past of Egypt and Syria is minimal.² Hence it was a great surprise to discover that recently an Egyptian professor edited an Arabic chronicle of Byzantium.³ It is not an original Arabic writing, but an adoption of an unknown Greek chronicle that tells the history of the East-Roman Empire from the days of Constantine (324–37) to the emperor Leo the Isaurian (717–41).

The text does not name the composer, nor the date and place of its writing. From internal data we may assume that this Arabic text was composed after the conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul 857/1453)⁴ by the Ottomans but prior to their conquest of Syria and Egypt (1516–17).⁵ The usage of Mamluk administrative terminology suggests that the composer was a contemporary.⁶ His use of Syriac names of the months indicates that he was a Syrian priest familiar with the Seleucid (*rūmī*) calendar.⁷

In October 1453 an ambassador sent by Muḥammad ibn ‘Uthmān (Fatih Sultan Mehmed) arrived in Cairo and informed the sultan al-Ashraf Sayf al-Dīn Abū al-Naṣr Īnāl (or Aynāl) that on Tuesday the twentieth of Jumādā I (29 May 1453) the Ottomans had seized Constantinople (Istanbul).⁸ It is likely that this news gener-

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¹Bernard Lewis, “The Use by Muslim Historians of Non-Muslim Sources,” in P. M. Holt and Bernard Lewis, *Historians of the Middle East* (London and New York, 1962); reprinted in Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East* (London, 1973, 1993), 118.

²Michael Cook, “Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 57 (1983): 67–103.

³*Tārīkh Mulūk al-Qusṭantīniyah*, ed. Ṭāriq Maṣṣūr (Cairo: Miṣr al-‘Arabīyah lil-Naṣr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 1428/2008).

⁴P. 133: “Where stands today the mosque of the Sultan Muḥammad who conquered the city.”

⁵P. 132: “It survived to these days in an elevated place [within the Hagia Sophia], where the leader of the [Ottoman] Turks is praying.”

⁶*Kharāj* (p. 123); *manshūr* (p. 124).

⁷Tishrīn (p. 127); Shubāt (p. 128); Nīsān (p. 125); Āb (p. 85); Illūl (Aylūl) (p. 98). On these months see S. P. Brock, “A Dispute of the Months and some Related Syriac Texts,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 30 (1985): 193–96; George Saliba, “A Medieval Note on the Himyarite Dialect,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985): 715–17.

⁸Abū al-Maḥāsīn Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībīrdī (813–74/1411–70), *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fi Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, ed. J. al-Shayyāl and F. M. Shaltūt (Cairo, 1427/2006), 16:70–71; idem,



ated mix reactions in Cairo. While the official response was a festive welcome, among the Christian subjects of the Mamluk Sultanate it evoked a nostalgic atmosphere. Hence, it seems sound to speculate that the dramatic information on the fate of the Byzantine capital city stimulated intellectual curiosity among the governing echelons of the sultanate, as well as among its Christian subjects. This anonymous chronicle reflects this mood.

Ḥawādith al-Duhūr fī Madā al-Ayyām wa-al-Shuhūr, ed. M. K. ‘Izz al-Dīn (Beirut, 1410/1990), 2:453–54; Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥanafī Ibn Iyās (852–930/1448–1524), *Badai‘ al-Zuhūr fī Waqā’i‘ al-Duhūr [Die Chronik des Ibn Ijās]*, ed. M. Muṣṭafā (Wiesbaden, 1975, repr. Cairo, 1429/2008), 2:316.