

# The Factors that Caused the Islamization of Egypt

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## Abstract

Ancient Egypt used to be a splendid civilization in history. However, the great traditions of Egyptian culture, such as the creation of monumental architecture, language, and polytheistic religion, had vanished by the early Christian period. By the sixth century, the conquest of Arab gave the final push that destroyed the ancient Egyptian culture. In this paper, we focus on the Islamization process of Egypt. We approach the problem in education, economy, religion, violence, language, settlement, and geopolitics.

## 1 Introduction

Before the middle of the sixth century, the majority of Egyptians are Christians, ruled by Cyrus of Alexandria. On December 22th 640, Cyrus of Alexandria entered into a treaty with the Muslims, by which Muslim sovereignty over Egypt was recognized. Then Egyptians agreed to pay Jizya. In 641 AD, the Muslims invaded Alexandria and killed emperor Heraclius. The figure 1 shows the Arab conquest process in history.

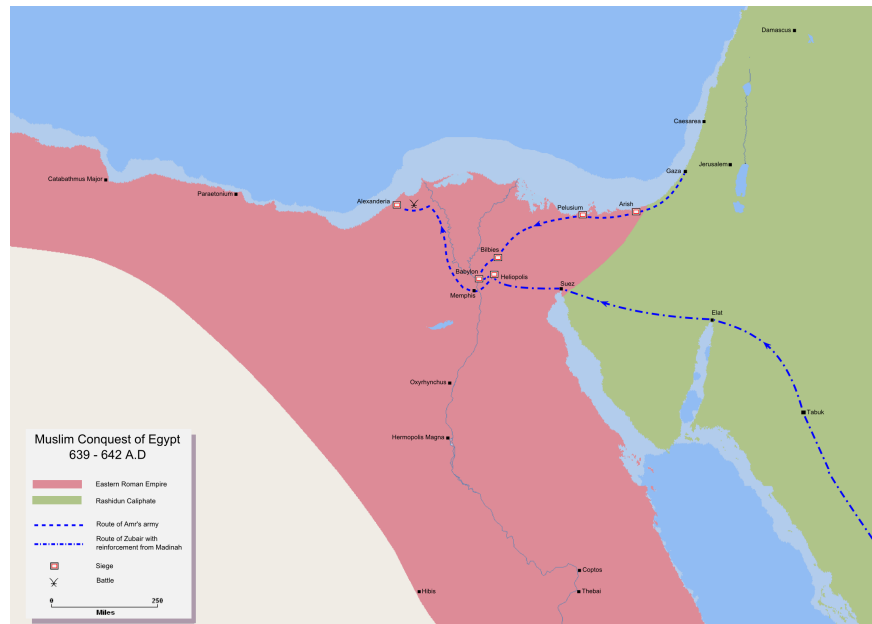


Figure 1: Conquest of Arab

Islamization has taken place in many countries in history. As one of the most powerful religions in the world, it has believers in most middle east countries. Egypt had a splendid history, such as pyramid, astronomy, religions, etc. In the sixth century, two civilizations conflicted after the Arab conquest.

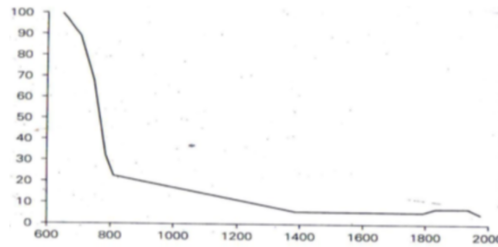


Figure 2: Percentage of Christians in Egypt, estimated by Courbage and Fargues

Apart from physical conquer, the transformation of religion took a long time in Egypt. The figure 2 shows that Islamization in Egypt, though took a long time, did happen.

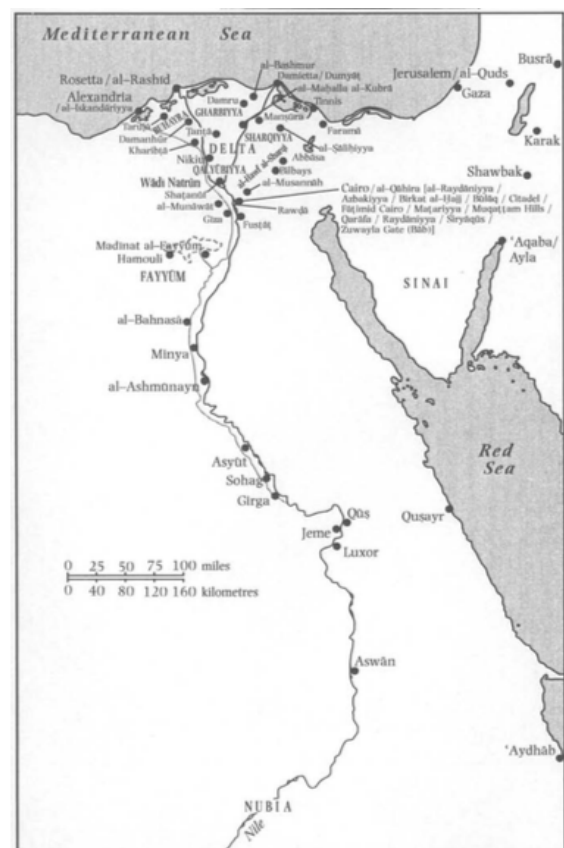
On the last evening of our stay, we visited a Bazaar in Cairo. When I was bargaining to buy a T-shirt, I chatted with the shop owner about Islam. I thought it was a pity that Egyptians forgot about nearly all about ancient Egyptian culture. Should we blame Islam for that? The shop owner disagreed with me. When we finished bargain, he told me seriously, Islam is a good thing.

This paper intends to analyze the criteria that contributed to the Islamization of Egypt after the Arab conquest. We put forward geopolitics, violence & war, settlement, economy, religion, education, and language aspects to answer why Islamization took place in Egypt.



Map 1 Ptolemaic and Byzantine Egypt

Egypt before the Arab Conquest



Map 2 Islamic (post-conquest) Egypt

Egypt after the Arab Conquest

## 2 Research

### 2.1 Geopolitics

To some extent, our neighbors can have a massive impact on our religion. Figure 1 shows the conquest of Arabs to the Middle East in the 7th century and after. The neighbors were not as civilized as Egypt, so they were assimilated to Islam quickly. Surrounded by Islamic countries, some Egyptians changed their religion.

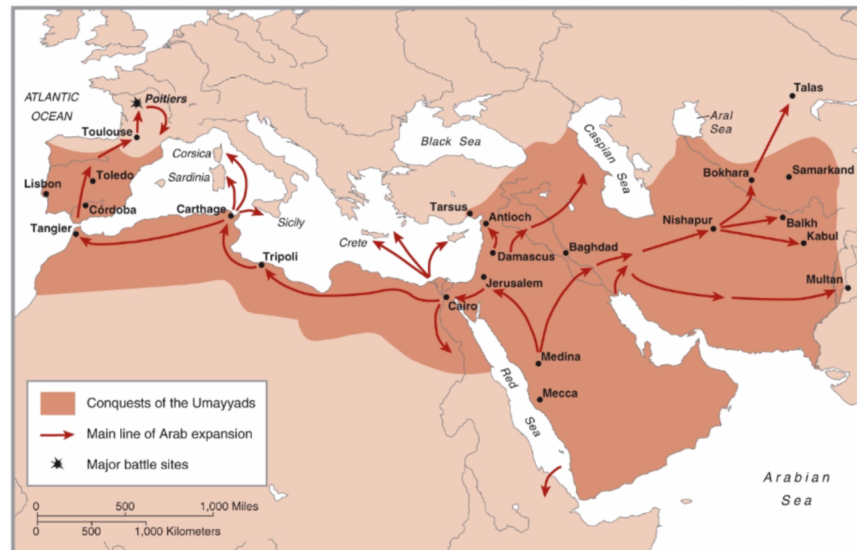


Figure 3: Arab Expansion(Liran Yadger, Jews at the Origins of Islam in Yale University 2016 Fall)

### 2.2 Violence and War

Ancient historian al-Maqrizi recorded eight assaults against Copts that occurred in 1259, 1264, 1279, 1283, 1293, 1301, 1321, and 1354. The intended violence against Christians increased the pressure to maintain their belief. On the other hand, the Christian churches were destroyed.

In all the provinces of Egypt, both north and south, no church remained that had not been razed; on many of these sites, mosques were constructed. For when the Christians' affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam. Thus Islam spread among the Christians of Egypt, and in the town of Qalyub alone, 450 persons were converted to Islam in a single day. Many people attributed this to Christian cunning, so repugnant did the populace find them. But this was a momentous event in Egyptian history. From that time on, lineages became mixed in Egypt.

### 2.3 Settlement

After the Arab conquest, the new ruler of Egypt promulgated some apartheid policy.

Though some Muslims settled down in Egypt after the Arab conquest, they did not live with Egyptians. Instead, Muslims and non-Muslims stayed in different area.<sup>[1]</sup>

Arabs took control of the cities and Copts farmed in the countryside. The aristocracy was formed by collecting taxes from Coptic peasants. By exploitation, the remaining value flowed into the cities.

## 2.4 Economy

Arabic merchants were famous in history. They were quite professional in dealing with business. In the economic aspect, they imposed a special tax, called 'Jizya' on non-Muslims.

Researchers have found that the rate of 'Jizya' was increased during the time. The tax became higher and higher, making it a vast afford to Coptics.

That contributed to the transformation of Christianity religion to Islam religion. In 727, about 24000 Copts transformed into Islam in order to escape 'Jizya'<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2.5 Religion

Muslims are forbidden to change their religion. Once a person becomes a Muslim, he/she will be a Muslim for the lifelong.

"A Muslim who becomes a non-Muslim is punishable by death."

"A non-Muslim who leads a Muslim away from Islam is punishable by death."

The discrimination of women and the allowance of polygamy resulted in a high birth rate of Muslims. On the contrary, Christians believed in monogamy.

"A non-Muslim man who marries a Muslim woman is punishable by death."

"A woman can have one husband, who can have up to 4 wives; Muhammad can have more."

## 2.6 Education

Educational institutions were established to train Muslims officials and provided a place for the elites to meet each other. People call Marasa in Arabic<sup>[3]</sup>. It divided Muslims and non-Muslims. To some extent, it served as an entrance to the higher social class.

Inside Marasa, the knowledge of the law was taught in the Sunni community. The education in Marasa enhanced people's belief in Islam.

## 2.7 Language

Language is the carrier of civilization. After the Arabs took a dominate role in Egypt, they use Arabic as the only legitimate language. In order to get a brighter future under the current social construction at that time, studying Arabic became a necessity.

The loss of ancient Egyptian language imperceptibly influenced Copts to give up their own language and got to learn the traditions of Arabs.

## 3 Conclusion

Arabs and Copts engaged in different industrials in society. The division of labor was a projection of social class. The jobs of Arabs were easier and more rewarding. On the other hand, Islamic law placed a lot of restrictions on Muslims. Therefore, marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims were rare. An invisible wall thwarted those two races against fusion. Thus, social classes were formed, highly consistent with religions.

For those who did not chase for a higher social status, violence, and taxes 'Jizya' were presented as a pressure to assimilate them into Islam. The Islam belief of surrounding countries counted as another force to influence Egyptians.

Islam society had a well-designed management system. Marasa, the college provided a place to unite Muslim elites and enhance the belief of Islam in the governing families. Because Arabic was the only legitimate language, people tended to learn Arabic and dropped the ancient Egyptian language. The loss of language was the beginning of the loss of literature. From then on, the loss of culture was not far away.

## 4 Acknowledgement

This essay is the final project for Tsinghua South Culture Immersion Program in Egypt. That's such a great experience to study in Egypt for two weeks. Because we are just amateurs in this issue, there may be mistakes in this paper. We are willing to get your advice and comments(wangshiy16@mails.tsinghua.edu.cn).

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It flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands, Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream, And times and things, as in that vision, seem Keeping along it their eternal stands,—  
Caves, pillars, pyramids, the shepherd bands That roamed through the young world, the glory extreme Of high Sesostrius, and that southern beam, The laughing queen that caught the world's great hands.

Then comes a mightier silence, stern and strong, As of a world left empty of its throng, And the void weighs on us; and then we wake, And hear the fruitful stream lapsing along Twixt villages, and think how we shall take Our own calm journey on for human sake.

—James Leigh Hunt

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