

*Original article*

THE HISTORY OF THE SPONSORSHIP AND FINANCIAL OF THE CHRISTIAN  
MONASTERIES AND CHURCHES IN THE FATIMID ERA IN EGYPT  
(969-1171 A.D/ 358-567H)

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**Abstract**

*The Christian Egypt, under the Muslim rulers, enjoyed their entire freedom of religion, because the teachings of Islam states that all people shall coexist in tolerance and satisfaction, this is the first motif which made them life together. So the Muslims rulers care of the second sector of them citizens and give them the enough money to built them churches and monasteries. The purpose of this paper is report the sponsorship and the financial process of building and tracking the significant care in the innovation and construction and defining the methods of the economic financial of Christian Church of the Christian Church through the Fatimid period (969-1171A.D/358-567H), whereas, the Christian buildings relied heavily on the government to finance the reconstruction and the life of the monks themselves inside these buildings.*

**Keywords:** *Christian, Fatimid decrees, Church, Endowment, Fatimid age*

**1. Introduction**

The Islamic conquest in Egypt in 9<sup>th</sup> of April in 641 A.D /20 A.H [1][2], was a new era, that was quite different from the previous period, as the Egyptian church was rid of the oppression and aggression acts it was subject to and the Christians (Nasara) enjoyed with entire freedom of religion [3]. Because the teachings of Islam states that all people shall coexist in tolerance and satisfaction. Allah says "*The Prophet believed in what was revealed to him from his prophet and the believers, all believed in Allah, his angels, books and prophets, we do not distinguish any of his prophets and they said we heard and obeyed may Allah forgive us and the destiny is to Allah*" [4]. Moreover, the prophet felt intimacy and

mercy towards the people of Egypt, although he did not recommend dealing with the people of Egypt in a method specific to them all [5], he said "*If you conquered Egypt, be kind to the Copts, as they are people of doctrine and mercy*" [6], and "*No clergy of his or monk of his monasticism*". The most famous covenant of the conquered cities is the *Umariyyia* covenant which was signed between the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khatab and *Sophronius*, the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 638A.D, following the siege of Jerusalem, in order to determine the rights and obligations of all non-Muslims, Christians (*Nasara*) and Jews, who enjoyed some protection but had to pay a special poll tax called *jeizia*

(Tribute) [7]. If we track the financial process of construction of the Egyptian Church, through the Fatimid age (969-1171 AD / 358-567 A.H), we will find significant care in the innovation and construction, which confine in the following: **A)** the attention of the Muslims (*Muslimin*) rulers to the church was the very important facture in the Christian churches architecture [8] [9] [10]. **B)** The Islamic age was characterized with the so-called fixed subsistence and gifts dedicated for the monasteries. Such as; the fertile Egyptian lands which was an entailment on many monasteries from the caliphates and the lease of which was benefited in the renovation of the building [10]. We can understand from the notes of Sawiras Ibn el Mukaffaa that there were many officers of the Christian endowments of the hanging church [11], also, the historian al Maqrizy mentioned that the endowments of the Egyptian Churches were 25 thousands fidden [12]. **C)** The caliphs, princes, rich and notable Copts established many service establishments to help the Churches and monasteries to achieve its function [10]. **D)** The monks themselves working in various fields as the Farms, making the mats from the palmate leaves and branches, squeezing olives, and selling it. The monks were not dependant, that they working with the farmers in the fields, and have the wheat and the linen as salary. **E)** The gifts weren't just from the ruler and Princes, but also were from the rich men and women, whom give money and different endowments, which dedicated to the churches and

### **2.1. First point**

The attention of the Fatimid state to the church was not restricted to a certain sect, it was an integral attention that including all the different religious sects including Melkite (*Malakiyin*), Jacobean (*Yiakubiyin*) and Nestorians (*Nasturiyin*) [6]. It is noteworthy that we find in this age a new expression which is the collective church. This term was used by *Abu Saleh* the Armenian to call some of the churches of Egypt in the Fatimid

Monasteries architecture and life of monks [6]. All these sources dedicated to the Christian buildings in Islamic period. In the Fatimid period the Christians enjoyed especially favored treatments by Egypt's rulers [13], and we can declare that at least till the end days of the caliphate al- Aziz billah. The Egyptian church had a large extent of care at this era, a matter that can be followed in several conditions, such as the equality of several matters among the sects of the people such as the titles given to the state officers of all classes respectively, including the titles of the influence of the Christians who reached a large extent of importance in glory and positions, a matter that was not familiar to them before and the approach of the patriarchs of the Egyptian church to the caliphs themselves, which helped them to reconstruct and renew them churches and monasteries[12] [14][15]. From the first time of the Fatimid arrival to Egypt there were good relation between them and the Christians, that when Gawhar al-Sqully need to destroy one monastery near of the new city "Cairo", he built another one called the Khandaq monastery, on other hand the caliphate al Muez le Din ullah ordered to built the keep of Abu Murkura and supervise himself the works of the construction [16]. And many caliphs paid several visits to the monasteries of the desert to go around them and care for its monks [12] [17] [18]. Before dealing the innovation and reconstruction process of the churches and monasteries at this period, several points shall be indicated:

period that included several structures for more than one Islamic sect of the Christians, the Jacobeans (*Yiakubiyin*), the Melkite (*Malakiyin*) and the Armenians. He said in his notes, the name of a church that was established in the village of al-Saft Meidom governorate, with three Alters, one of them for the Jacobeans (*Yiakubiyin*), which is the main middle slaughter that was traditionally found in the Coptic

church, the second for the Armenians and the third for the Melkite (*Malakiyin*). The Melkite (*Malakiyin*) sect had their churches and monasteries that some of them were renewed by the caliphs and princes at the Fatimid age, and some of them established the different sceneries next or over them. They had the monastery of al-Qusir, a church where a group of monks prayed, in addition to a structure that they sacred in one of the

## 2.2. Second point

Abu Saleh the Armenian included in his book a list of the Egyptian churches and monasteries to the year 1200 A.D, as the number of these monasteries and churches (2084 churches) and (834 monasteries) distributed to the different eparchies of Egypt [6] [19]. Even if we think that this number which is included by the researchers is exaggerated, even if the churches of the monasteries were calculated within this large number [6]. The number of churches and monasteries in Egypt during the Mamluk age according to what was included in the plans of Al-Maqrizy was 74 monasteries and 193 churches [20]. The monasteries and churches had many endowments. Such as, the Shahrān monastery had an orchard with an area of six feddans, where fruitful palms and agrarian lands were located. For this monastery [12]; the Al-Baseq, brother of Bahrām the Armenian dedicated sixteen feddans as fixed subsistence for him and the monastery of Al-Qusir is considered to be one of the most important monasteries that remained occupied with its monks till the Mamluk age, as there were few monks spreading out of the place. In this regard, the historian, Al-Maqrizy says: "*to its side there was a hermitage that was never free from hermit*", this monastery was one of the good parks, with a large orchard and mansion. This monastery was frequently visited by caliph al-Hakem, as Abou Saleh mentions that "*he goes out to the mountain and moves to the wilderness*" [16]. Among the other important monasteries that had

churches established in Etfeih (Al-Saff town), Giza governorate known as Quna church, and a church in the Armenian alley, Fayoum [6]. As for the Nestorians (*Nasturiyin*) sect in Egypt, they had a monastery in the pool of El-Habash after the name of St. Mar Gorges surround by a circular wall described as being made of "*good neat architecture and one of the renowned parks. It was also a great citadel*" [6] [19].

porches and fixed properties from the Fatimid caliphs is the monastery of Devils, it had an orchard, lands and property at Minya el Shammās. It was known at the same time as the monastery of candles in the west of the Giza Tamaweih village, and remained occupied with its monks during the Fatimid age, until it was deserted at the age of Al-Mustanser Bellah. This church was renewed in 951 AD. This monastery had an orchard, trees and agrarian lands planted with grape [12]. The caliph Al-Muezz le-Din Allah (952-975 A.D / 341-365A.H) stayed for seven months next to the monastery of Nahia referred to before and established there an orchard, waterwheel and fountain. He reconstructed the Hanging church of the Virgin Mary (*al-Mualaqa*), pl. (1-a), [21], in the days of the Patriarch Ibrahim (975-978 A.D) [22]. The history of Patriarchs of Egyptian churches recorded also that the church of St. Marcurius was rebuilt during the pontificate of Patriarch Abraham, pl. (1-b) [21]. It is noteworthy that the relation between this caliph and the Christians had a close relation, as *Sawiras ibn El-Muqaffa* describes this in the history of the patriarchs as saying: "*he had a great favor between the caliph and the men of his country*" [11] The caliph allowed the patriarch to construct and renew all the Egyptian churches and monasteries, based on the fact that it is a construction of the country [11] This good relation between Al-Muezz and the Christians had made some historian to believe that the caliphate Al-Muezz had converted to christianity [23].

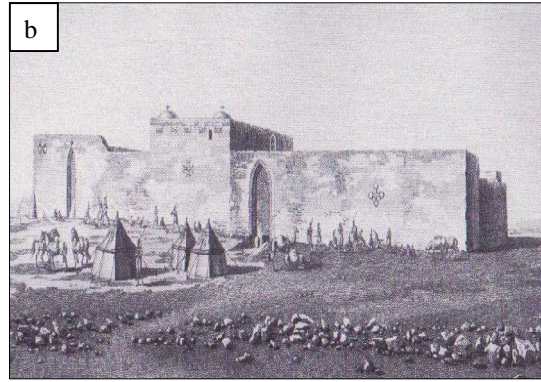


Plate (1) **a** the Church of Virgin Mary (Hanging church), Old Cairo, **b** the monastery of St. Macarius (Abu Maqqar) at Wadi Al Natrun 5<sup>th</sup> century, after Otto. F., 2002.

## 2. Discussion

The Caliph al-Muezz allows his attendance with discussions and argumentations among the senior Muslim, Jews, and Christian's scientists. And he was also depends on the personalities of Christianity to achieve many missions, such as the minister Abou El-Yiaman kazman Ibn Mina had a clear importance role at the period of caliph al-Muezz. He was a minister to Kafur El-Ekshidy and the caliph al-Muezz retained him for his faith and good reputation and assigned him to collect the money of Egypt, also passed him to Palestine and left ninety thousand Dinars in the possession of patriarch Ephraim that he spent in the reconstruction of the churches and monasteries [10] [12]. The age of al-Aziz (975-996A.D/365-386 A.H) witnessed a significant tolerance, with which some of the non-Muslim peoples were promoted to high positions in the state and the Caliphate himself had a Christian wife. The monasteries were in the protection of the Caliph and the monks were enjoyed the sponsorship throughout his reign, as the Christians built without permission from the Caliph [24], for example, the Patriarch Arsanios had built a large enclosure wall around the monastery and had established many buildings inside the monastery of al Kosir in al Mukatam [8]. It is noteworthy that prince Tamim; brother of caliph al-Aziz bellah, implanted many orchards next to the monastery of Mar John on the beach of

berket el-Habash and the establishment of "a well-built council on columns of good manufacture", next to this monastery, and established a well, known as the well of abi Mamaty [25], and they constructed and restored many churches [16]. Hence, we can say that both of al-Muezz and al-Aziz had permitted to restoration of Churches which is in agreement with the document Omar Ibn el-Khatib; also, they had violated the same document by allowing the construction of new churches. The most serious persecution of the Christians in the middle ages occurred during the patriarchate of the Anba Zakharias (1004-1032 A.D) in the days of al-Hakim (996-1021 A.D) [17]. The persecution of the Christians population was particularly. In 1005 A.D. a general order was issued for the destruction of all Christian churches and the confiscation of their lands and property [26]. In the tenth of Rajab 398 A.H (1006-7 A.D) the caliph ordered the endowments to take all monasteries and churches in Egypt and the annexation of his property in court [8][12]. The Christians were offered the choice of becoming Muslims or leaving the country or else wearing a heavy cross as a badge of their degradation [27][11][29][30][31][32]. In 1008 A.D. Al-Hakim destroyed the church of St. Mariam Al-Kantara and allowed to the people to enter inside the churches [33] [30]. There were some problems between some Christian ministers like Isa Ibn

Nwstors, so, al-Hakim order issued to the populations to destroy three great Christian buildings and removed the cross converting it to mosques [34] [35]; such as the church of St. Shenouti (Anba shanoudah), which mentioned by the historian al-Maqrizi, who states that the Muslim call to prayer was mad from this church [36]. In the last days of al-Hakim, exactly in 410 A.H/ 1019 A.D, the situation was changed; the Christians enjoyed with some of freedom [17]. He had ordered to exempt the churches and its endowments from paying taxes [8], and allowed them to build and re-constructing their churches and other religious buildings and he gave them back all the lands and all endowments and issued many decrees [10]. And he spent in the monastery of Shahran when he went to hunt [16]. After the death of al-Hakim, his sister Sitt al-Mulk had cancelled all his orders and decisions against the Christians and returns their positions, so, they became very strong and worked very hard to reconstructing their churches [8]. In fact, the situation was different to a great extent in the caliphate of al-Hakim, as the ruling caliph launched a coup to the Christians [37], who found that he had several justifications to urge them to turn against them all and his anger was stronger on the melikite sect (Malakiyin). The anger of al-Hakim extended to include the Muslims, as some scientists described his age as being the oddest age in the history as a whole, mixed with the disappearance and fear and is full of types of contrast and slump [25]. The caliph al-Zahir (411-427 A.H / 1020-1035 A.D), he had returned all endowments of the churches and the Christians re-constructed them religious buildings [8]. He grants privileges to the monks [17], and confirming the previous decrees of the caliph's al-Muezz, al-Aziz and al-Hakim; the caliph al-Zahir issued a decree. This decree dated 415 A.H / 1024 A.D [38]. We can read: "...You, the Copt monks, have submitted to the commander of the Faithful a petition in which you

*enumerated the privileges granted to you in the past, namely that...}your cultivations, and there should be exacted from you no....assistance in war, or going out....that if a monk of yours dies, all his property which he leaves be not interfered with but revert to his brethren in monarcal life with the exclusion of relatives and blood-relations other than they. And that the Imam la-Muezz li-Din Allah and the Imam al-Aziz billah and the Imam al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah had ordered the writing of decrees confirming all this to you. You then asked for the writing of a decree to renew all that the Imams had granted to you, to confirm the protection which they had extended to all of you and to observe these bonds and engagements due to you. The Commander of the Faithful has therefore ordered that open decree, to deal with you..."<sup>(a)</sup>. This is the first part of the decree is indeed the reproduction of privileges granted to the monks is clear from the subsequent passage: and that the Imams al-Muezz etc..., had ordered the writing of decrees confirming all this to you. Thus there is no reason to assume that the present decree had the particular aim of abolishing measures taken against the monks during the anti-Christian persecutions under al-Hakim; it appears as a routine step taken by the new caliph al-Zahir, who began his reign in 411 A.H / 1021 A.D, to confirm the privileges granted by his ancestors [8]. In the era of Caliph al-Mustansir (427-487 AH / 1035-1094 AD). Christians restored the building and some churches, as Abu Saleh, the Armenian said that the Church of St. Sergius in al-Hamra have been restored at the hands of the teacher, who was pleased majesty of rich Christians [16]. There were also in the days of al-Mustansir many men of the State has donated and sponsored the Churches of the Christians and houses of worship [17]. At the age of Caliph al-Hafez le Din Allah (524- 544A.H/ 1130-1149 A.D) there were many reconstructions of the architecture of many Egyptian Churches and monasteries, such as the church of*

Virgin Mary in the Harat Zuwaila, it was also among the churches demolished in the year 1131A.D [39][22], but was rebuilt in the age of al-Hafez le Din Allah. For example, the keep of el-Mahraq monastery was renewed, and the Church of St. John the Baptist in Misr el Qadima, pl. (2), and the architecture of the monastery of Devils as also reconstructed [16]. We have some documents that improve that there were divers endowments on the Christians monasteries in the rule of al-Hafiz, We have a decree from the caliph al-Hafiz dated 528 A.H / 1134 A.D, concerning also the monks of Mount Sinai. The monastery of St. Catharine contain inside its walls a very beautiful mosque, pl. (3), it was erected in 1106 AD [40], and its minaret beside the tower of the main

Church of the monastery. This Fatimid mosque, lead us to understand the good relation between the ruler and the Christians in this period. We can read in the document many orders to protect the monks who have retired to the Mount Sinai and the Christians who visit them, and cut off arrogant hands from hurting them, also, to exempt them from forced payments and from fines which are imposed upon them. This decree had raised because the bishop of the aforesaid Mount Sinai, Antony and his monks, invoking the beneficence shown to them by this empire and the asked to be honored by the issue of an order to write an open decree which should renew the garment of these privileges and confirm for them the covenants of justice [38].

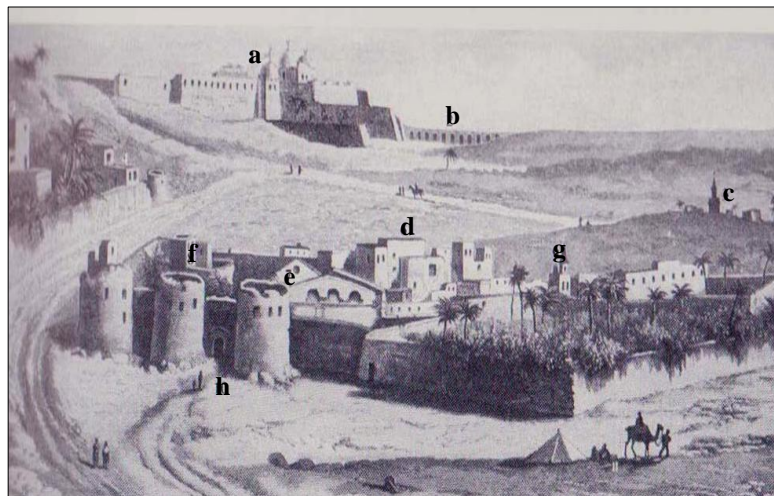


Plate (2) The Roman fortress in old Cairo contain **a** St. Mercurius district, **b** Aqueduct, **c** mosque of Amr ibn al-As, **d** church of St. Sergius, **e** church of the holy virgin (al-Mualaqa), **f** church of St. George. **g** church of St. Barbara. **h** Roman gate.



Plate (3) The Fatimid Mosque inside the monastery of St. Cathrine, Sinai.

Another decree by the same caliph and his vizier Bahrām dated 529 A.H / 1135 A.D, concerning the monks of Mount Sinai <sup>(b)</sup>. We can read “...had reported that a petition had been submitted to him, headed by the name of Abd al-Masih, agent of the property endowment upon Mount Sinai, and containing the following: some treacherous administrators have hands upon the afore-mentioned property and grasped the rents which he used to collect and spend on the support of monks who stay there, he also has in his hands earlier decrees and definitive admonishments which attest the protection given to this endowment...” [38]. He ordered to the office of the correspondence to write this open decree about the release of the endowment in all financial departments of the kingdom. For the historian of the Fatimids, however, the document is important for a different reason. This decree was issued, not in the name of the caliph, but in that of vizier. The vizier, to whom the monks petition was submitted and who issued the decree in response to it was Bahram <sup>(c)</sup>, an officer of Armenian origin [38]. The present decree incidentally happens also to have a great interest for general Fatimid history, owing to the sponsorship of the Christians and the finance of them churches. There is also a decree issued by the caliph al-Hafiz dated 530 A.H / 1136A.D. concerning the monks of Mount Sinai. The caliph al-Hafiz orders the amir Muwali,l-Dawla, military governor of al-Tur, to extend his protection to the monks, and more especially the bishop of Sinai [38]. “...the monks asked to be granted anew an open decree enjoining that they be protected and guarded and that justice be spread out upon them according to the habit to which they were accustomed.”, “...the order of the commander of Faithful was issued to his Commander of armies....to write this open decree to the effect the kindness to them(the monks) be doubled, benefactions continuously extended, their share in protection increased and that in

*defense multiplied, and that they be enveloped by all-embracing justice and perfect equity, since they are attached to Islam by a covenant which ought not to be broken and the link of which should not be interrupted...”*[38]. The vizier al-Abbas, vizier of caliph al-Zafir (544-548 A.H / 1149-1154 A.D) issued a decree dated 548 A.H / 1154 A.D <sup>(d)</sup>. He orders that the monks of Mount Sinai and their visitors and agents be protected and no unusual impositions be demanded of them: “...to protect the aforementioned monks and those who come to visit them and their co-religionists who accompany them, those who follow them and those who are employed in obtaining their food and other necessaries without which people like them cannot do; to guard and defend them and keep them safe...” [38]. In the rule of al-Fāiz (549-555 A.H / 1154-1160 A.D), the vizier Talai[38] in 551 A.H / 1156 A.D orders that the tax of 10 Dinars and tow carpets lately exacted by the governors from Anthony, bishop of Mount Sinai, be abolished and the bishop and his monks protected[38] “...this is an open decree, the order for writing of which was given by al-Faiz; whereas it is part of our noble qualities to remove innovations and obliterate their traces, prevent their continuance and insist on prohibiting them, to guard those of the people of protection and cover them with our justice.....that this open decree contain a command about the total abolition of tax and that it should not be demanded and exacted from this bishop, and that he be granted protection, care and help, and be treated with extreme honor and all his business eased; and neither he nor any of his monks be charged with fines or damage, and that he be dealt with according to the rules of fairness and the best of arrangements...”[38]. After two years, in 553 A.H / 1158 A.D; an open decree by the same vizier Talai <sup>(e)</sup>, he orders the amir Izz al-Mulk saad al-Dawla, governor of al-Tur, and his eventual successors that the bishop of Mount Sinai and his monks protected, newly

introduced taxes abolished, the palm trees of the monastery not interfered with; “...*Abul Gharat Talai, al-Faizi; he ordered to include in the follows: whereas it our opinion that we ought to spread out the cloak of justice and embrace by our mercy and affection the different religious communities and comprise Muslims and non-Muslims in measures aiming at the improvement of conditions and at fulfilling all that they can hope for in the way of restfulness and safety, we act so as to grant to all the subjects protection from damage and harm, more especially to those who retire to lead a monkish life. And whereas the bishop of Mount Sinai and his monks are believing thus, we confirm our intention to pass through that to safeguard them and renew our instruction to attend to them and protect them, facilitate their business, encompass them and promote their welfare, keep away from them harm and prevent damage from reaching them or coming near them, that impositions newly introduced by governors and fines which cause them harm be abolished...that the palm-trees of the monastery be not interfered with, nor touched by damaging hands*” [38]. And now we get to the age of the last Fatimid caliph which was al-Adid (555-567 A.H / 1160-1171 A.D), that a decree by his vizier Shirikuh, dated 564 A.H/ 1169 A.D <sup>(6)</sup>. The caliph grants privileges to Marcarius bishop of Sinai and his monks, prohibits by the governors of al-Tur or interference with monks traveling to

Egypt. Understand from the reading of this decree that the Christians had granted many privileges in the Fatimid period, that we can read: “...*our order was issued to include in this open decree our command to take care of them and our insistence to guard them, facilitate their business, treat them according to their custom, grant them the utmost respect they can wish for, help them to obtain what improves their condition and brings about the flourishing of their hopes and gladdening of their hearts, to look after them wherever they are, behave towards them in such a way as to bestow upon them bounties both new and old-established...to protect all their companions and those employed on their business or appointed to collect the rents of their endowments and defend and treat well their hired men while they gather their crops...*” [38]. Furthermore, women played important role in this age in the movement of renovation and reconstruction in the Christian religious buildings. The church historian Abou Saleh, note that there was a lady called "Turfa" who renewed the architecture of a Church which was established in khat el Hamara[6]. He said that he saw the foundation board that carry its name and the renovation of the Church architecture fixed on the external gate of the church [16]. From the aforementioned, the extent of care and attention directed to the Church and monastery in Egypt appears clear during the Fatimid age and the previous Islamic ages.

### 3. Conclusion:

*It's very difficult to track the methods of the sponsorship of the Church, especially in Islamic period, because there weren't official documents, or monumental texts on the churches recording some thing like that, but we can find just some historian writings which commented on this sponsorship to the Coptic buildings. The Christians under the Muslim rulers, enjoyed their entire freedom of religion that was embezzled from them by the rulers of Byzantium, because the teachings of Islam states that all people shall coexist in tolerance and satisfaction, this is the first motif which made them life together. Numerous and means of financing and sponsoring churches in the Fatimid era, was issued decrees ordered to care and non-infringement on the church property, or determine that distract from the endowments of the monasteries and Churches. So, we can say that there was an official sponsorship in the Fatimid age in Egypt to building the churches and Monasteries, but they were persecuted in some periods in the days of Caliph al-Hakim in the same way as all Muslims who were also were oppressed by the actions of this caliph. The Muslim rulers in Fatimid age, Were eager to please the second sector of them citizens and give them the enough money and endowments*



*to built them Churches and monasteries. And the Christian buildings were depended on the government to financing it, to reconstruction. The caliphs, princes, rich and notable, established many service establishments to help the Churches and monasteries to achieve its function.*

## Endnotes

- (a) The decree preserved in the Coptic Museum, Old Cairo, no. 2704.
- (b) The document nos. 3-9 belongs to the monastery of St. Catherine in Mount Sinai.
- (c) Bahrām there is a study by Canard. M: “Un vizir chretien a la époque fatimite: 1, Armenien Bahram”, annals de 1, Institut d, Etudes Orientales, xii (Algieres 1954), pp.84-113.
- (d) Preserved in Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Scroll no.9.
- (e) Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, scroll no. 963.
- (f) Preserved in Cairo branch of the Sinai monastery

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