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Article

The Life and Legacy of Tūmā al-Ṣafī ibn al-Ṣā'igh: A Coptic Scribe in the Turbulent Mamluk Times

Vevian Zaki | Munich

Abstract

The first half of the fourteenth century was a challenging period for the Copts under Mamluk rule. Successive waves of persecution, marked by forced conversions to Islam, the imposition of distinctive clothing and other political and social pressures, significantly impacted the Coptic community. These challenges were compounded by broader political and natural crises, such as the devastating plague. However, this grim picture gains some colour when viewed through the life and career of the Coptic monk Tūmā al-Ṣafī ibn al-Ṣā'igh, later Bishop Kīrullus (Cyril) of Assiut. Tūmā was a distinguished scribe of Arabic manuscripts, renowned for his mastery of the Mamluk style. Moving between Egypt and Syria, Tūmā transcribed a wide variety of manuscripts, many of which are now preserved in libraries worldwide.

This paper reconstructs Tūmā's career and activities, drawing on multiple sources, including colophons authored by him, by his students and by later scribes who copied his works. Additionally, the study examines the palaeographical and codicological aspects of his manuscripts, shedding light on the workshops, tools and methods available to him. This investigation uncovers a lesser-known dimension of Coptic social history, challenging the dominant narrative that portrays the period solely as a time of decline and persecution. By focusing on Tūmā's remarkable contributions, the paper reveals a more complex and vibrant picture of Coptic resilience and cultural expression under Mamluk rule.

Keywords

Arabic Bible, Bishop Kīrullus (Cyril) of Assiut, colophons, marginal notes, Copts in the Mamluk era, Mamluk scribes, Mamluk manuscripts, manuscript production, Tūmā al-Ṣafī ibn al-Ṣā'igh

1. The world of Tūmā: Copts in the first half of the fourteenth century

The Mamluk era (1250–1517 CE) was a period of profound difficulty for the Coptic Christian community in the sultanate.[1] Recurring waves of persecution, as recorded by the Muslim historian

[1] A large body of scholarship, old and new, has clarified many aspects of Coptic life under the Mamluks. An important early work was the seminal essay of Little 1976; other major contributions include Perlemann 1942; Dizon 2019. For some of the complexities of life in the sultanate, see the Mamluk rules of 1354 in El-Leithy 2005; 2011. On the influence of this period on the historiography writing of the Copts, see Pilette 2024.

Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī in *al-Mawā'iẓ wa-al-i'tibār*,[2] marked this era. Four major waves – in 1293, 1301, 1321 and 1354[3] – brought the destruction of churches, forced conversions to Islam, exclusion from public office and enforcement of distinctive clothing for Christians.[4]

The challenges faced by the Copts were shaped by a combination of factors that extended beyond state-led measures. Broader political, social and health crises likely contributed to their struggles to varying degrees. Copts were at times scapegoated for their role in implementing unpopular financial policies, such as the preparation of the various land redistributions (*rawk*).[5] They were also viewed with suspicion, accused of colluding with Crusaders and Mongols during the Mamluks' military conflicts. It might also be that religious sentiments, intensified by Crusader and Mongol conflicts, drove much of the hostility. Natural disasters, like the devastating flood of 1354, and recurring plague outbreaks – eighteen between 1347 and 1513 – further exacerbated societal tensions. Additionally, the competition between Muslim and non-Muslim elites over official roles cast further shadows on Christians and added to the constraints they endured. These interconnected pressures may have collectively fuelled anti-Christian sentiment.[6]

A notable feature of this period was the vulnerability of both poor and elite Copts. Poor Copts often converted to Islam to escape heavy taxation, while elite Copts – scribes, administrators and physicians – were highly visible due to their bureaucratic roles, making them targets of persecution and under pressure to convert.[7] This similarly led to waves of conversions among the elites: Bernadette Martel-Thoumian identified at least 140 high-ranking Coptic converts serving in administrative roles during the Mamluk period.[8] However, those Copts who converted to Islam were not fully trusted and were often regarded as 'false' Muslims. As a result, they remained excluded from important positions in the military, religious and legal spheres.[9]

The Mamluk period has also been identified as a potential demographic turning point when Christians became a minority in Egypt.[10] While the exact timing remains debated, the Coptic community's struggles under the Mamluks undeniably contributed to the decline of the Copts' demographic standing.[11]

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[2] Transcription of Arabic words in this paper follows the rules of the Library of the Congress. See <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/arabic.pdf>.

[3] Calendars used in this paper are the Islamic Hijri calendar (AH), the Coptic Martyrs calendar (AM) and the Alexander Greek era (AG). The Christian or Common era date (CE) is normally given without a specific indicator, unless there could be confusion.

[4] Several incidents of church destruction are recorded in al-Maqrīzī 1998, 138–152. On the topic of conversion of Copts to Islam in Mamluk times, see Little 1976, 553, and Bauden 2020, 275–279.

[5] Dizon 2019, 152–155.

[6] Dizon 2019, 161–162; Swanson 2010, 101–103; Ivanova 2020, 224–225; Raymond 1994, 129–132; Yarbrough 2017, 93–112.

[7] One of those who were forced to convert, al-Ṣāḥib Amīn al-Mulk ibn al-Ghannām, became later an important bureaucratic official, but whether he remained a convert or not is not known. See Little 1976, 561; and also Saleh 2018, 411. Another instance occurred in 1321 when Ibn Kabar, who was a former secretary of a Mamluk sultan, was about to be executed for not dealing properly with Muslims, see Ivanova 2020, 224.

[8] Martel-Thoumian 1991, quoted in Dizon 2019, 166 (n. 81).

[9] Dizon 2019, 153–154.

[10] See El-Leithy 2005.

[11] O'Sullivan 2006.

Modern historians have analysed this period in various ways, stressing the interplay between the public, the sultanate and the governmental officials. Some emphasize the public's role in persecuting Copts, while the Mamluks attempted to protect them, either due to European diplomatic pressure or the administrative services Copts provided. Others argue that it was governmental officials who sought to shield the Copts from the harsh measures imposed by the sultanate itself.[12]

The situation within the Coptic Church mirrored the broader challenges faced by the community. During the Mamluk period, there were eleven patriarchs, whom Mark Swanson has described as 'marginalized' and 'invisible'.[13] Contemporary sources offer little evidence of their involvement in addressing the crises faced by their congregations. Equally, little is known about the life of Coptic monks under constant threat of having their monasteries destroyed. Some monks, however, placed themselves in particularly precarious situations by engaging in acts of resistance, such as setting fire to mosques in Cairo.[14]

However, the portrayal presented thus far overlooks the vibrant manuscript culture that was flourishing within the Coptic community, revealing an often-neglected dimension of Coptic resilience during the Mamluk era. The production of manuscripts – ranging from basic to lavishly ornamented works – and their patronage reflect the interests, resources and social networks of the Coptic elite.[15] Manuscripts from this era reveal a thriving class of patrons, some commissioning modest texts and others funding opulent, richly decorated volumes. Personalized colophons listing elaborate titles for patrons and references to personal libraries (*khizānah*) suggest an educated Coptic elite that not only valued books but had also the means to establish well-curated, distinctive libraries.[16] Additionally, figures within the Coptic Church acquired skills in calligraphy and ornamentation, fields traditionally dominated by Muslim artisans.

This patronage of manuscripts invites questions about the motivations driving Coptic engagement with scholarship and artistry in the Mamluk era. Was this manuscript culture primarily a means of religious devotion and preservation, or did it also serve commercial and social purposes, allowing both scribes and patrons to assert status, build connections or even profit in a thriving manuscript trade? Studying Coptic manuscript production in Mamluk times thus reveals a multifaceted aspect of Coptic life: in one way it can highlight the strategic navigation between religious dedication and

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[12] Raymond 1994, 149; Petry 1981, 273–274. See also the example of Governor Baydarā who, as narrated by al-Maqrīzī, tried to support the Coptic functionaries; see the translation in Bauden 2020, 276–278.

[13] Swanson 2010, 103.

[14] O'Sullivan 2006, 78; Little 1976, 564.

[15] For instance, there were manuscripts that were copied without any calligraphy and with an average handwriting without aesthetic sense in St Mercurius's Monastery in Wādī al-Naṭrūn; see, for example, Aleppo, Fondation Georges et Mathilde Salem, Ar. 127, which contains the books of the Prophets and was copied in 1325. Examples of luxurious manuscripts include Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, Ar. 68; Wādī al-Naṭrūn, Dayr Abū Maqār, Bible 17, 18, 52; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 12; and London, British Library, Arundel MS 15.

[16] See for example Cairo, Coptic Museum, Bible 90 which was copied by Jirjis Abū al-Mufaḍḍal in 1340. Its colophon identifies the patron as a library, without a specific name:

للخزانة العالية المولوية المالكية الشيخية الأسعدية عمرها الله تعالى

The same is true for London, British Library, Or. 1327 whose colophon reads:

الخزانة العالية المولوية الشجية الرئيسية التقوية (؟) العالمية الصدرية عمرها الله تعالى ببقايه

potential commercial interests; equally, though, it can reveal details about a class of Copts that successfully navigated these challenging times.

One figure exemplifying this intersection of religious and commercial manuscript culture is the Coptic scribe and monk Tūmā al-Ṣafī ibn al-Ṣā'igh (active 1325/1326–1355), who later became Bishop Kīrullus (Cyril) of Assiut. Tūmā's life and career appear somewhat detached from the turmoil typically associated with the Mamluk period.[17] Unlike Muslim scribes and calligraphers, who dominate Islamic sources from this era, non-Muslim artisans like Tūmā are largely absent from the record.[18] This paper seeks to fill that gap by tracing Tūmā's life and works, offering insights into the hidden history of Christian scribes.

Drawing on colophons penned by Tūmā, his students, and later scribes, as well as marginal notes and the codicological and palaeographical features of his manuscripts, this study reconstructs Tūmā's career. It examines his contributions to Coptic manuscript culture and the broader social history of the Copts in the fourteenth century, presenting the narrative of a scribe whose influence extended well beyond his time.

2. Historiography

Manuscripts copied by Tūmā have attracted scholarly attention since the late nineteenth century. For instance, Barnabas Meistermann examined the text of one of Tūmā's Gospel manuscripts in Jerusalem.[19] However, the pivotal breakthrough in the study of Tūmā's life came from Fr Samir K. Samir, who discovered that Tūmā and Bishop Kīrullus, the bishop of Assiut and Manfalut in Upper Egypt during the mid-fourteenth century, were one and the same person.[20] Samir introduced Tūmā to academic scholarship, identified several of his manuscripts, and highlighted others copied from his exemplars. Building on Samir's work, this paper brings additional manuscripts by Tūmā to light and offers a detailed examination of his career and works.[21]

Tūmā's career can be divided into three main stages. The first stage relates to his early career, including his education, training and initial works. The second stage represents his professional peak, during which he produced the most elaborate and decorated manuscripts, gained widespread fame and developed a network of patrons from across the region, as well as supervising the work of other scribes. This period also raises questions about his dual identity – was he solely a monk or also a businessman involved in the manuscript trade? The final stage covers his ordination as a bishop, during which he appears to have retired from commercial manuscript production. The

[17] In this paper, I interchangeably use the names Tūmā and Kīrullus, without the title Ibn al-Ṣā'igh, to avoid confusion between the monk Tūmā ibn al-Ṣā'igh and another famous Muslim calligrapher also known as Ibn al-Ṣā'igh ('Abd al-Raḥman ibn Yūsuf, d. 845 AH/1442 CE). On him, see al-Ziriklī 2002, 343.

[18] Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 148.

[19] Meistermann 1904, 122–125.

[20] Samir 1991, 1270a–1271a.

[21] Recently, Adeline Laclau has studied two of Tūmā's manuscripts from the Bodleian Libraries from an art historian's point of view. See Laclau 2024. For the history of transmission of Oxford, Bodl., MS Laud. Or. 272, see Zaki, forthcoming. A new catalogue of some of Tūmā's manuscripts is in preparation for an exhibition in the Louvre; see Croq, forthcoming.

paper concludes by exploring Tūmā's enduring legacy, particularly through the manuscripts that continued to be copied from his exemplars long after his active career ended.

3. Early career

Tūmā recorded his name in more than one style. For example, in one case he wrote 'Tūmā ibn al-Ṣafī Buṭrus ibn Yūḥannā, known as al-Ṣā'igh' (Oxford, Bodleian Libraries (Bodl.), MS Laud Or. 272, fol. 101^{r}).[22] In others, he introduced himself using a variant, 'Thūmā ibn al-Ṣafī ibn Yūḥannā ibn Ṣalīb ibn 'Abd al-Masīḥ' (Oxford, Bodl., MS Arab. d. 19, fol. 195^{v}).[23] The title 'Ibn al-Ṣā'igh' seems to be an acquired title rather than a true family name, as he frequently prefaced it with *al-ma'rūf bi-* or 'known as'.

Little is known about Tūmā's early life or the name he bore before entering monastic life, but he was already bearing this name by 1325/1326 CE, when he copied his earliest known manuscript, a Gospel that was housed at the monastery of Mār Jirjis (St George) in Jerusalem. While this manuscript was still in the monastery's collection in 1884, when Meistermann examined it,[24] it was unfortunately lost by 1915, when Georg Graf catalogued this collection.[25] Consequently, no detailed information survives on the manuscript's palaeography or ornamentation, or any potential commissioner.

Three years later, Tūmā copied a manuscript of *Majmū' uṣūl al-dīn* or 'The compendium of the principles of religion' by al-Mu'taman ibn al-'Assāl (Red Sea, St Anthony's Monastery, Theology 119), but his whereabouts during this period remain unknown.[26] This manuscript, which lacks any mention of a commissioner, probably shows us the situation during Tūmā's early career, when he may have been copying works for sale on the open market. A somewhat later work, a copy of the Pauline Epistles (copied in 735 AH/1334–1335 CE in Damascus), similarly reflects this early stage of his career. In this study, this manuscript is coded as Cairo, Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate (COP), Bible 173(1) – or simply COP 173(1) – since it started out as a separate volume but was later joined with another manuscript copied by Tūmā (discussed below) to form what is now known as Cairo, COP, Bible 173.[27] The part containing the Pauline Epistles is the earliest part of the manuscript. Once again, COP 173(1) lacks a commissioner, and the colophons record only the year without specifying month or day, unlike Tūmā's more detailed records in later years.

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[22] Uri and Pusey 1787, 29.

[23] Déroche 2005, 87; and also in the UK online catalogue <https://www.fihrist.org.uk/catalog/manuscript_10205>.

[24] Meistermann 1904, 122–125. The same manuscript was later examined by Khalīl Martā; see Cheikho 1903, 238–240. For more about the Coptic monastery of Mār Jirjis in Jerusalem, see Meinardus 1960, 66–69.

[25] Graf 1915, 132–135.

[26] See Yassá Afandī (s.a.), and the edition of this famous work in Awad 1998.

[27] The Coptic Patriarchate's microfilm images can be accessed online via the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>, accessed 10 January 2025) by searching its project number (COP 14-11). Coloured images of fols 103 and 120 featuring the end pages of Galatians and Colossians along with the beginning pages of the Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians can be seen in *Illustrations from Coptic Manuscripts* 2000, 221. See also its description in Macomber 1997, 32–34.

At this early stage, Tūmā's manuscript ornamentations were modest: whoever was responsible for them used simple rectangular golden panels with double frames as title pieces or to highlight the subscription of each epistle. The frames were left unadorned, and the writing space within this panel is also free from any ornamentation, unlike in his later works where the script was surrounded by decorations (compare, for example, the full-page decoration on fol. 182^{v} in Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Ar. 29 with Cairo, COP, Bible 173, fols 28^{v}–29^{r}).[28] This simple approach, with a minimum of decorative elements, meant that at the time, Tūmā was not yet integrated into a workshop where tools and probably experienced illuminators were present to finish the manuscripts in a proper way, as is much more clearly done during the next stage of Tūmā's career. The simple approach might also reflect the lack of commissioners at this stage, as fully illuminated manuscripts were often reserved for commissioned works.

A lack of patrons was not, however, uncommon. Notably, Muslim scribes such as the renowned calligrapher Aḥmad al-Mutaṭabbib, a contemporary of Tūmā, frequently produced manuscripts without designated patrons, offering them directly to the market.[29] The book markets of Cairo and Damascus functioned as intellectual hubs where scholars browsed and engaged with manuscripts in a public setting, creating an environment conducive to independent production and sale.[30] This might be the same for Christian manuscripts, though the context of offering them in the market remains vague. It is probable that known potential clients would be approached with the finished manuscript.

This period in Tūmā's career raises another pertinent topic: the training of scribes in Mamluk Egypt and Syria. A significant number of scribes were known in the Mamluk times, some of whom were of course contemporary to Tūmā.[31] The art of calligraphy and manuscript ornamentation flourished under the Mamluks, and Muslim scribes were trained in sophisticated workshops.[32] There are a variety of sources we can access about the training of Muslim scribes, such as biographical works or even the writings of the scribes themselves. The rigorous training of Mamluk scribes, as detailed by Noha Abū Khatwa, would typically involve repetitive practice, mastering each letter before advancing to more complex compositions. These scribes were often trained by an accomplished master or *shaykh* with expertise in various scripts.[33]

Given Tūmā's advanced technique and knowledge of multiple script forms, it is likely that he received a similar level of training. However, the details of his education remain elusive, especially since it would have been challenging for a Christian monk to have studied directly under Muslim masters given the religious and social constraints of the time. As Tūmā was a Copt and a monk, there is limited information about his training; we mainly have to rely on what we can determine on the basis of his manuscripts.

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[28] The Vatican manuscript can be accessed via the Vatican Reading Room <https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/>.

[29] Laclau 2022, 38.

[30] Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 75.

[31] See the list of scribes in Yūsuf 2013, 136–157, and also in Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 79–80.

[32] Scholarship has recovered several workshops and scrutinized the nuances of this art. Important in this regard are the works of Laclau 2023, 155–211, and James 1988; 2007, 3–16.

[33] Abū Khatwa 2017, 308–316.

Tūmā primarily copied in Mamluk *naskh*, the Arabic book-hand *par excellence*, showcasing a neat and professional handwriting style that often featured multiple variations of individual letters. For example, initial and middle *hā'* appear in several distinct forms in some of his manuscripts (see Fig. 1 for examples of his letter shapes for *hā'*). His script also reveals influences from the *muḥaqqaq* style such as using sometimes a *lām-alif* with a loop. Both *muḥaqqaq* and *naskh* are known for their *lām-alif waraqīyah* that has a triangular base,[34] but in the case of *muḥaqqaq*, the *alif* is strongly slanted to the right – a feature Tūmā adopted in certain instances.[35] Additionally, his rendering of the initial *hā'* sometimes resembles the shape of a medial *hā'*, a characteristic common to both Tūmā's work and the *muḥaqqaq* style.[36] The full page decorations and headpieces of Oxford, Bodl., MS Arab. d. 19 further suggest a connection to other calligraphic traditions, as they feature *thuluth* calligraphy (fol. 2ʳ). Since *thuluth* was uncommon in Tūmā's manuscripts, this aspect may represent either his own work or that of another artisan in the Damascus workshop, as discussed below. These details suggest that Tūmā was proficient in multiple handwritings, a skill that goes beyond natural talent. He honed this expertise in a milieu marked by a growing interest in and refinement of elegant scripts associated with the Qur'an and Islamic religious sciences. This mastery implies that Tūmā underwent extensive and diverse training, though the specifics of his educational background remain obscure.

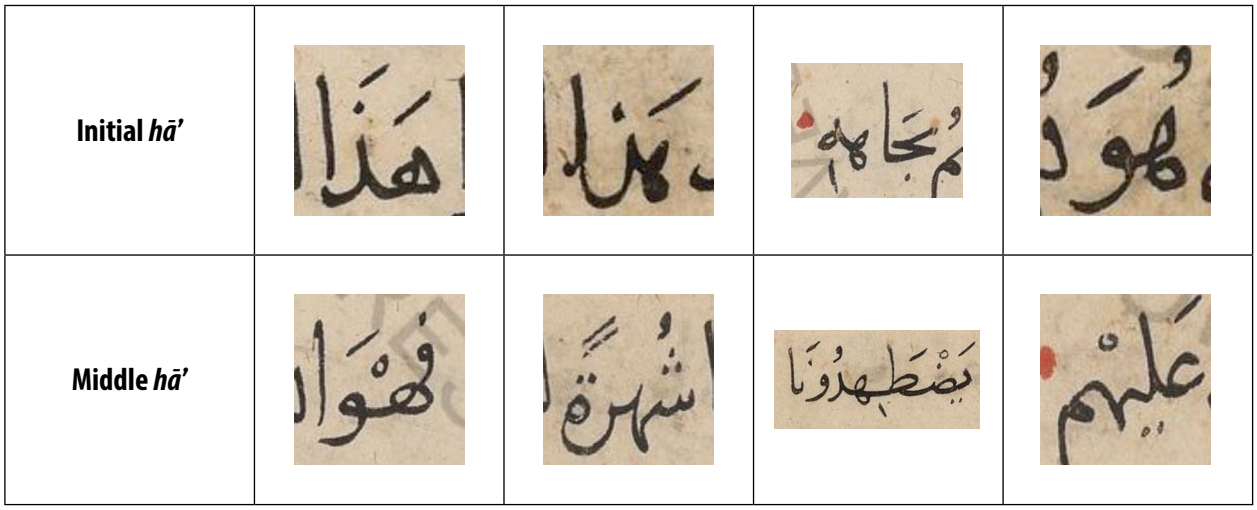

Fig. 1: Examples of shapes of *hā'* from Vatican, Ar. 29, 1342 (fols 23ʳ–26ʳ). © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

4. Peak activity and manuscript production

The 1340s marked a period of prosperity for Tūmā, with much of this decade spent in Damascus. The surviving manuscripts suggest a significant rise in his status, though the specifics of this

[34] Gacek 2011, 141.

[35] Compare the *lām-alif* in the catalogue of Muhammad ibn Ḥassan al-Ṭayyibī in al-Munjid 1962, 67 to that on fol. 3ʳ of Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29.

[36] Compare Fig. 107 in Gacek 2011, 161, to the calligraphy of Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29 (fol. 1ᵛ).

transition remain unclear. One moment, Tūmā is copying a relatively modest manuscript; the next, he is collating and revising a luxurious Gospel manuscript by the renowned scribe Jirjis ibn al-Qass Abū al-Faḍl (who is called interchangeably al-Mufaḍḍal and al-Faḍl). This collating occurred in Damascus, where Abū al-Faḍl copied the Gospels manuscript (Cairo, Coptic Museum, Bible 90) in the presence of Anbā Buṭrus, the metropolitan of the Copts of Jerusalem and Syria.[37]
The last section of the colophon reads:

> ...،والمقابلة والتحرير بحضور الأبوين السيدين الفاضلين: الأب المكرم أنبا بطرس مطران مدينة الله العظمى إيروشليم
> أدام الله أيام رئاسته في السلامة، والأب الفاضل المكرم الراهب أنبا توما عرف بابن الصائغ، كثر الله فوائده، وجعل
> التحرير أبدا عوائده والسبح والمجد والعزة والسلطان لله دائما أبدا.[38]
>
> … The collation and the copying took place in the presence of the honoured fathers: the honoured Father Anbā Buṭrus, the metropolitan of God's greatest city Jerusalem, may God keep the days of his headship in peace, and the honoured Father monk Anbā Tūmā who is known as Ibn al-Ṣā'igh, may God expand his benefits, and make copying [manuscripts] an eternal habit of his. Praise, glory, dignity and authority to God forever and ever.[39]

This colophon establishes Tūmā's status as a supervisor over another talented scribe, demonstrating his growing reputation. The manuscript was commissioned for the library of an anonymous Coptic dignitary.[40] By this point, Tūmā had built a network of relationships that included high-ranking figures such as the metropolitan of Jerusalem and Syria.

Within the span of one year, Tūmā's scribal activities in Damascus reveal the breadth of his connections and clientele:

• December 1341–January 1342: Tūmā copied the Epistles and Acts (St Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, D 228) for Sir Jakam al-Sukhaynī, an Italian consul in Damascus.[41]

• February 1342: Tūmā completed an East Syrian lectionary of the Pauline Epistles according to the Mosul rite for Sir Mānwil ibn Tūmā al-'Araqāwī (Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29).[42]

• September–November 1342: Tūmā produced Oxford, Bodl., MS Arab. d. 19 for Sir Jurj (George) Ūmādī, a Greek Orthodox merchant.

Some key observations can be drawn from this stage of Tūmā's scribal activities, particularly regarding his networks and professional relationships. The breadth of Tūmā's connections is evident from the names, denominations and origins of his clients. Unfortunately, one of the most frustrating aspects of this research has been the lack of additional information about these individuals in

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[37] The artistic features of this manuscript are compared to those of a Qur'an manuscript in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Hunt 2009, 106.

[38] Moawad 2014, 617.

[39] All translations of colophons and marginal notes are mine.

[40] The date of this specific manuscript is recorded according to three calendars: 21 Bābah 10[57] AM; last ten days of Rabī' II, 741 AH; 18 Tishrīn I 1652 AG (which all correspond to 21 October 1340 CE). Information about dates is found in the catalogue of Macomber 1995, 338–340.

[41] Serikoff (*s.a.*), 924–934.

[42] Mai 1831, 76.

other sources, which could have provided valuable insights into the social context of Tūmā's work. Nonetheless, it is still possible to construct a partial picture of his business by analysing the details he recorded in his colophons.

For instance, the patron of the St Petersburg manuscript, Jakam al-Sukhaynī, is explicitly identified as a consul in Damascus.[43] The colophon on fol. 140^{r} states:

كتبها الفقير المسكين المعترف بالعجز ثوما بن الصفي بن يوحنا
المترهب برسم خزانة المولى الاجل المحترم المحتشم
سير جكم السُّخيني الكنصل بدمشق المحروسة
في العشرين من شعبان من سنه 742[44]
والسبح لله دائما[45]

[It] was copied by the poor pitiful monk, who admitted his helplessness, Thūmā ibn al-Ṣafī ibn Yūḥannā. [It] was commissioned by the library of the honourable, respected and venerable lord, Sir Jakam al-Sukhaynī, the consul in the protected [city] of Damascus on 20 Sha'bān 742 [AH]. Praise to God forever!

Why would an Italian consul purchase an Arabic Bible? One possibility is that such a manuscript was acquired as a collectable masterpiece. Alternatively, it might have been intended as a gift for Arabic-speaking Christian merchants or elites with whom the consul maintained relationships and exchanged presents. The latter scenario seems more plausible, as there are indications that the manuscript was later used by both Arabic- and Syriac-speaking Christians.[46]

The culture of gifts was a vital aspect of Mamluk diplomacy and extended beyond official exchanges to other social strata within the sultanate. Common diplomatic gifts included animals, ceremonial gowns, swords, crystals, ivory, jewels, leather goods and perfumes. Notably, Qur'an manuscripts were often exchanged between Mamluk sultans and other Muslim rulers, demonstrating the significance of scripture as a diplomatic gift.[47] Within a Christian context, gifting a Bible would align with this broader tradition, making it a likely practice among both Arabic-speaking Christian communities and foreign elites. In this context, it becomes clearer why Tūmā predominantly focused on, or was commissioned to copy, Bible manuscripts more than other Christian texts.

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[43] I currently have no access to the St Petersburg manuscript, but its colophons were fully and accurately transcribed in Serikoff (*s.a.*), 924–934.

[44] Tūmā occasionally recorded years using Arabic words, but whenever he used numerical notation in his colophons, he consistently employed Coptic Epact numerals.

[45] See also the colophon (fol. 171^{r}):

كتبها ثوما الراهب برسم خزانة المولى المُجل المحترم الموقر سير جكم السخيني الكنصل

[This book] was copied by monk Thūmā, for the library of the honourable, respected and venerable lord consul, Sir Jakam al-Sukhaynī

[46] A certain Shammās Ibrāhīm noted down Arabic poems on fol. 140v; and an anonymous person wrote a Syriac comment on fol. 1^{r}. See Serikoff (*s.a.*), 939–940.

[47] Behrens-Abouseif's book is full of examples of diplomacy manuscripts gifts including the sixty volume Qur'an manuscript presented by the Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan to the Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1320, and the monumental Qur'an manuscript presented by the Mamluks to the Golden Horde in 1263. See Behrens-Abouseif 2016, 54, 62, 66 and 86–87.

The study of Mamluk diplomacy, in particular when it comes to relations with the Italian cities of Venice and Florence, has grown greatly in the past few decades. Nonetheless, finding the names of Italian consuls in Damascus at the beginning of the fourteenth century has so far proved to be an unfruitful mission. The name Jakam al-Sukhaynī could be the arabicized form of a name such as Giacomo Sacchini (or Zucchini or Zacchini). However, no consuls in Damascus have been found with this name in the relevant period.[48] In fact, the documentation of consuls – whether Venetian or Florentine – begins mostly from the second half of the fourteenth century, and searching in the known lists of Venetian consuls in Damascus has unearthed nothing.[49] When it comes to the contribution of this paper to the identities of this consul and other elite patrons, then, all it can do is reveal these names and wait for further information from Mamluk diplomacy scholars.

The interaction between Copts and Western Christians was complicated in Mamluk time. Broadly speaking, it seems that Copts, including figures like Tūmā, may have benefited from the protection and diplomatic intervention of European powers. Al-Maqrīzī, for instance, records that the king of Spain successfully lobbied the Mamluk authorities to reopen two churches in Cairo in 1304: the church of *al-Mu'allaqah* and the church of the Venetians (*al-Bunduqānīyīn*).[50] Pierre Moukarzel provides a more personal perspective on this relationship, describing the relative isolation of foreign merchants living in the Middle East during Mamluk times. These merchants lived in separate residences, served by European staff, and attended churches operated by Latin monks. Despite this separation, they conducted business through interpreters, often native Christians.[51] Manuscript production, which involved scribes like Tūmā, represents another dimension of these interactions, potentially indicating a broader network in which a European merchant might seek the services of a Coptic monk.

The second commissioner of Tūmā's manuscripts listed above, Mānwil (Manuel) ibn Tūmā al-'Araqāwī, is referred to in one of the colophons in the manuscript he commissioned (Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29, fol. 106^{v}):

برسم خزانة المولى
سير مانويل بن توما
العرقاوي
على يد الحقير في
الرهبان ثوما ابن الصفي
غفر الله له ذنوبه

Commissioned by the library of Sir Mānwil ibn Tūmā al-'Araqāwī. [Copied] by the hand of the despised among monks Thūmā ibn al-Ṣafī, may God forgive his iniquities.

[48] These forms of the names along with several sources to search were suggested by my colleague at the University of Oxford, Nicola Carotenuto. I am much indebted to him.

[49] Berchet 1866; Ashtor 1984, 551–559. The index includes the consuls of Alexandria and Damascus. See also Bauden and Dekkiche 2019.

[50] Little 1976, 358–359.

[51] Moukarzel 2010, 181–205.

This commissioner is also given the title 'Sir', although he is given no specific job title or rank. In his case, the title probably indicates a prestigious rich person of the type who would be expected to be able to afford such a luxurious manuscript, not necessarily a diplomat. His identity, though, is still confusing, as the first name could simply be an arabicization of an Italian name such as Manuele di Tommaso, followed by the translation of an Italian surname close to a word meaning 'liquor', which would result in 'al-'Araqāwī' in Arabic. It is evident, however, that this Mānwil came from Mosul, Iraq, and could easily be an Iraqi East Syrian. Not only is the manuscript he requested an East Syrian lectionary of the Pauline Epistles according to the Mosul liturgical practice, but the acquisition and transmission history of this manuscript shows that it settled in the Iraq/Turkey region before somehow arriving at the Vatican Library in 1741. In a waqf (endowment) note (fol. 183^{v}), the donor identifies himself as a *Mawṣilī*, that is, from Mosul; he does not explicitly state the location of the East Syrian church to which he donated the manuscript, but there is a good chance that it was in his hometown of Mosul. This hypothesis is strengthened by a purchase note of a deacon Yūsuf ibn Iliyā al-Diyār Bakirlī, who bought the manuscript in Mardin in 1750 (fol. 1^{r}).[52]

Tūmā's involvement in copying texts that diverged from Coptic doctrine and beliefs highlights both his open-mindedness and the likelihood that he was more commercially driven than a typical monk, and this lectionary text he copied for an East Syrian patron is a clear example. The text includes readings that became distinctive to the East Syrian Church but were rejected by other mainstream Christian traditions. For example, Hebrews 2:9 (fol. 92v) in this lectionary reads:

> وضعته قليلا عن الملايكه بالم موت ناسوته … والمجد والاكرام قد وضعا على راسه لاتحاده باللاهوت وقيامته فانه هو بناسوته المتحدة دون الله الذي اتخذه محلا لقدرته ذاق الموت عن جميع الناس
>
> You made him for a little while lower than the angels through the pain of his humanity's death … Glory and honour were placed upon his head for his unity with divinity and his resurrection. It is he, in his united humanity yet apart from God, who took him as a place for the manifestation of his power, [who] tasted death for all people.

A deep theological analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is sufficient to note the variant reading that became more connected to the East Syrian Church across the centuries – that is, 'apart from God'– while other mainstream churches adopted the reading 'grace of God'.[53] The emphasis on the human nature of Christ and the separation between his human and divine natures in East Syrian theology, as reflected in this text, created a significant theological divide between churches over the centuries.[54] Of course, it is impossible to determine whether Tūmā was fully aware of these nuances or had the time to scrutinize the theological implications of the texts he copied.

The relationship between the Coptic and East Syrian churches was complex. Despite their theological differences, they did not entirely sever relations. On the contrary, certain East Syrian

[52] This date contradicts the date given for when Giuseppe Assemani brought the manuscript to the Vatican Library, in 1741, given in a Latin note on fol. 1^{r}.

[53] For more on the history of the relations between the Copts and East Syrians, see Roncaglia 1991, 1785b–1786a.

[54] For more on this verse in the Syriac tradition see Brock 1985.

Fig. 2: Full-page decoration of Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29 (fol. 1ᵛ). © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

theologians and commentators were highly regarded by Coptic scholars. For instance, the works of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib, a renowned East Syrian scholar, were frequently copied and quoted in Coptic scholarship.[55] However, a sense of theological exclusivity remained. East Syrians were often viewed as having deviated from the 'sound' Orthodox doctrine – a sentiment evident even in Tūmā's intellectual circles. For example, a reader of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's commentary *Firdaws al-Naṣrānīyah* in Vatican, BAV, Ar. 37 (another manuscript that came from Tūmā's circle, as discussed below) appended the following reader's note to the manuscript (fol. 198ᵛ):

… واسال كل واقف عليه ان يحرم نسطور وكل من يعتقد اعتقاده …

… and I ask everyone who may hold [this manuscript] to *recite the bans* [my emphasis] against Nestorius and everyone who follows his beliefs …[56]

The third commissioner of manuscripts listed above is described by Tūmā as a prestigious Orthodox merchant, Sir Jurj Ūmadī. For him, Tūmā copied the Epistles and the book of Acts, the manuscript now known as Oxford, Bodl., MS Arab. d. 19. This was copied in Damascus, and Tūmā employed the Syriac names of months and the Christian era calendar along with the Hijri calendar. He recorded a colophon after almost every epistle, for example:

كتبت هذه الرسائل بدمشق المحروسة كتبها … ثوما بن الصفي في شهر أيلول من سنة (1342) مسيحية يوافقه ربيع الاخر من سنة (743) هجرية كُتبت برسم خزانة سير جُرْج أوْمَدَي

These epistles were copied in the protected city of Damascus. They were copied by… Thūmā ibn al-Ṣafī in the month of Aylūl [September] of the Christian year 1342 which corresponds to Rabī' II of the Hijri year 743. It was commissioned by the library of Sir Jurj Ūmadī (fol. 85ᵛ, after Galatians).[57]

كتبت برسم خزانة المولى الرئيس المجتهد المحصل المبجل المكين المكرم المسيحي الارثوذكسي سير جُرج أومدي عمّرت في حياته كتبها ثوما المترهب بدمشق المحروسة في شهور سنة ألف ثلثمايهابه واثنين واربعين مسيحية

It was commissioned by the library of the master, the diligent, learned, venerable, powerful, honourable, Orthodox Christian, Sir Jurj Ūmadī. May it flourish in his life. It was copied by monk Thūmā in the protected Damascus in the months of the Christian year 1342 CE (fol. 132ᵛ, after 2 Timothy).

The commissioner, Jurj Ūmadī, is again titled as 'Sir', and described as an Orthodox Christian. No information has been found out about him, beyond what appears in this manuscript. However, the expression 'Orthodox' would be used more frequently to refer to someone who was Greek Orthodox, known as Melkites; he would probably have been referred to as *qibṭī* if he was a Copt.

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[55] The Gospels translation by Ibn al-Ṭayyib was one of the sources used by Hibat Allāh ibn al-'Assāl in his Gospels recension. See Moawad 2014, viii.

[56] Another correction in the same manuscript, which might or might not be by the same reader, shows surprise at the defects of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's interpretation on the days of creation (fol. 7ᵛ):

...فكيف يقع ابن الطيب في مثل هذا الغلط القبيح الظاهر

… then why does Ibn al-Ṭayyib fall into this ugly obvious mistake

[57] The name could also be pronounced Awmadī.

Similarly, the use of the Syriac months suggests more a Melkite rather than a Coptic provenance. The presence of a Greek Orthodox merchant in a Mamluk state was not unusual at the time, since the sultanate was involved in trade with Byzantium.[58] Also, Byzantine rulers were among those foreign rulers who pressed the sultanate to reopen closed churches, and showed interest in the Melkite Egyptians, at least.

How can Tūmā's activities during this stage be summarized? First, there is a clear rise in his fame and the dissemination of his works, though the specifics of how this was accomplished remain uncertain. What is evident, however, is that his reputation transcended regional and denominational boundaries. His clientele included an Italian diplomat, an East Syrian dignitary – likely from the Iraq/Turkey region – and a Greek Orthodox elite figure.

Second, all the manuscripts from this stage are lavishly ornamented (see Fig. 2) in a variety of artistic styles. Notably, most of these luxurious works were produced in Damascus, in contrast to later manuscripts created in various locations in Egypt. This suggests that Tūmā may have been working in a Damascus workshop, where skilled illuminators and tools were readily available. For instance, the illumination at the end of Oxford, Bodl., MS Arab. d. 19, which is now glued onto modern paper, could either have originated from another manuscript, as Adeline Laclau has proposed,[59] or else from within the same manuscript, but have been created by a different illuminator and later reglued during a restoration process. This also suggests that, even if Tūmā was a professional scribe, he likely collaborated with others, with his primary role being the transcription of the text.

Third, Tūmā's manuscripts from this stage exhibit an extensive use of colophons, demonstrating his meticulous attention to detail. In his biblical manuscripts, he included a colophon after almost every biblical book. These colophons recorded valuable information such as details about the commissioner, himself, the place and date of completion for that specific book, and often prayer requests.

Fourth, the commercial sensibility in Tūmā's manuscript production is evident in his adaptability to various factors, one of which is his use of different calendars in each manuscript. In his earliest works, he exclusively used the Coptic Martyr calendar, likely because he was working within a monastery. Gradually, he began to include the Hijri calendar alongside the Coptic one, and in specific cases, he employed the Julian calendar, likely catering to the preferences of his patrons (see the dates in Appendix 1).

Tūmā's adaptability is also apparent in his choice of source text for each biblical manuscript, which seems to have been influenced by the denomination of the patron. A notable example is the now-lost manuscript of the Gospels that Meistermann examined in the monastery of Mār Jirjis in Jerusalem. According to Meistermann, Tūmā noted in the manuscript's preface that it was translated from Greek. Meistermann found one particular reading very striking, Luke 1:39. The text of Tūmā's manuscript referenced the town of 'Ayn Karm instead of the more common 'mountain'

[58] The slave trade was one of the trades that Mamluks and Byzantium shared. See Reuvan 2008, 349–368; and also Hunt 2016, 108–110.

[59] Laclau 2023, 408.

or 'hill'.[60] Based on his comparison with the famous Gospel recension of the thirteenth-century Coptic scholar Hibat Allāh ibn al-'Assāl, Meistermann concluded that this reading derived from a Greek source text. Although the accuracy of this claim is debatable, further investigation into Ibn al-'Assāl's recension reveals that this reading was relegated to his critical apparatus, indicating that it did not align with Coptic textual traditions.[61] Relevant for this discussion is the fact that this suggests that Tūmā had access to Arabic versions that were uncommon in the Coptic Church and freely utilized them, either due to their availability or to meet the needs of specific patrons.

Another example can be found in his copies of the Pauline Epistles. In 2 Timothy 4:14, Arabic manuscripts of both Coptic and Greek provenance describe the individual mentioned in this verse as a 'metalworker'.[62] This same reading appears in Tūmā's COP 173(1), which was copied in a Coptic monastery. However, a different reading, 'goldsmith', is found in Arabic manuscripts derived from Syriac source texts, such as the East Syrian lectionary copied by Tūmā in Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29 (fol. 33^{r}).[63] This flexibility in adapting his work to different textual traditions highlights Tūmā's open-mindedness and his commitment to satisfying the expectations of his patrons.

The monastery of Yuḥunnis Kāmā in the deserts of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, Egypt, played an essential role throughout Tūmā's life, although there is no evidence that this is his original monastery. Through all the periods of his activity, he used to come to this monastery, as is evident from his manuscripts. The reasons behind these visits are not clear. For instance, despite being in his Damascene heyday – productive and supported with all the necessary tools and collaborators – Tūmā appeared in this monastery in 1346. There he copied the book of Acts and the Catholic Epistles, a manuscript which now constitutes the second part of Cairo, COP, Bible 173, referred to here simply as COP 173(2). This second part of the manuscript deserves a closer look, together with its first part COP 173(1) that was mentioned earlier as being copied by Tūmā in 1334/1335 in Damascus.

COP 173(2) was copied in the Coptic month of Abīb in 1062 AM (1346 CE). Tūmā completed the first book in this part, the Epistle of James, on the third of this month and the final book, the Epistle of Jude, on the eleventh (so he was working on this manuscript for the period 5–13 July). This (second part of the) manuscript is completely missing any form of decoration, even the headpieces and the double frame panels that contained the subscriptions in COP 173(1) are not present in this part. It also contains no name of any commissioner, although prayers at the end of some

[60] Meistermann 1904, 125–126. The verse reads: 'In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah' (English Standard Version).

[61] The critical edition published by Moawad shows that the name 'Ayn Karm was mentioned in the critical apparatus of Ibn al-'Assāl's recension as a variant reading without identifying its belonging to a certain source text. See Moawad 2014, 317.

[62] The verse reads: 'Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him […]' (English Standard Version). See the 'metalworker' reading in Vatican, BAV, Ar. 28 (fol. 195r), and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 6725 (fol. 6^{r}).

[63] Other examples of this reading include Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, Ar. 151 (fol. 154^{v}) and Bzummār, Our Lady of Bzummār Convent, Ar. 215 (fol. 20^{v}).

epistles anonymously ask for forgiveness for the scribe and the commissioner.[64] This reinforces the earlier point that Tūmā was not the illuminator of his manuscripts and further suggests that his primary workshop, equipped with the necessary tools and staffed with illuminators, was located in Damascus.

There is no explicit explanation for why, after all his travel and activities, Tūmā is again secluded and copying a manuscript. However, it was not uncommon for a monk to temporarily return to his monastery. Moreover, continuous mobility was something that characterized the life of all scribes in Mamluk times.[65] Probably also relevant is the noticeable change in Tūmā's title in this manuscript, as he identifies himself in COP 173(2) as *al-qass* or 'priest', which means that he was ordained, probably during his time in the monastery or just before it.

COP 173(2) has an interesting transmission history, through which the name of Tūmā as its scribe became known today thanks to a restorer who worked on this manuscript centuries after Tūmā's time. Jirjis al-Ifranjī, a scribe and manuscript restorer who probably lived in Cairo sometime in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, undertook the mission of repairing what is now Cairo, COP, Bible 173; there is nothing unusual in this, since repairing manuscripts was routine in repositories with manuscript collections.[66] His fully vocalized *naskh* handwriting makes it clear that he is a professional scribe/restorer. Most likely he had two individual volumes at this point, COP 173(1) and COP 173(2). These two seem to have been separately circulating in Egypt until they were gathered into a single volume, probably by Jirjis himself, and later made a waqf (endowment) to the Coptic Patriarchate. The earlier part that contains the Pauline Epistles, COP 173(1), does not show any traces of Jirjis's restoration work. The situation is different, however, in the second volume COP 173(2), which contains the Catholic Epistles and the book of Acts. In this volume, Jirjis substituted four leaves from the original manuscript with new copies (fols 177–180); this makes up the last chapter of the First Epistle of John in addition to his Second and Third Epistles.

Jirjis retained precious historical information about Tūmā, the original scribe. On fol. 177^{v}, he copied the original colophon at the end of 1 John:

وكان كمالها ببرية شيهات على يد العبد المعترف بالعجز توما ابن الصفي الصايغ بالاسم قسا وهو يسال المسامحة بالغلط والدعا بالغفران
وذلك في تاسع ابيب (1062)

[64] For example, the prayer on fol. 170r reads:

بالحب الروحاني ايها القاري اذكر المهتم والناسخ العاجز
ولك من رحمة الله عوض ما تتفوه به

In spiritual love, o reader, pray for the commissioner and the helpless scribe. May the mercy of God reward you for your prayers.

[65] Laclau 2022, 39; Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 126–127.

[66] One of the most influential manuscript restorers was Athanasius, bishop of Abū Tīj, who was responsible for the restoration of around 200 manuscripts in the Coptic Church; see more details in Sidarus 2016. Similarly, the old catalogue of the monastery of St Paul in the Red Sea region of Egypt indicates that many manuscripts were repaired or rebound, identifying precisely the number of leaves that were substituted or repaired; see *Fihris al-Kutub* 1929.

> The completion of this [epistle] was in the deserts of Shihat (Wādī al-Naṭrūn) by the hand of the servant who admits his helplessness, Tūmā ibn al-Ṣafī al-Ṣā'igh, a priest by name. He requests forgiveness for [any] mistakes and prayers for forgiveness. This was on 9 Abīb 1062 AM.

This was the only time in the colophons of COP 173(2) that Tūmā recorded his name, and consequently why the recopying that Jirjis performed is so important. The first repair note of Jirjis comes right afterwards:

عندما غير الحقير جرجس الافرنجي
هذه الورقه وجد فيها هذا الموضوع
مكتوبا والتاريخ فنقله على حاله ليلا
يضيع اسم الكاتب غفر الله تعالى ذنوبه
واسكنه جنته وكذلك الحقير كاتب
هذه الورقه وكلمن يدعو لهما
والمجد لله دايما
والسبب في تغيرهم لانهم احترقوا

> When the despised Jirjis al-Ifranjī substituted (lit. changed) this leaf, he found this colophon (lit. topic) including the date written on it. Therefore, he copied it in its [original] state, lest the name of the scribe be lost. May God forgive his (the scribe's) sins and settle him in His paradise along with the despised copyist of this page and everyone who prays for both of them. Glory to God forever! The reason for substituting these [leaves] is that they were burnt.

Since Tūmā had written a colophon and/or a prayer at the end of each epistle (though otherwise without mentioning his name), Jirjis also made a short note at the end of 2 John and 3 John to the effect that he copied exactly what was found written on the leaf that was substituted (fols 179^{r} and 180^{v}). Jirjis's notes not only characterize his meticulously honest work in repairing the manuscript, but also retain the history of and attract attention to the original scribe who made this manuscript.

The seclusion of Tūmā ended shortly after he copied this manuscript, as he resumed his activities, but his whereabouts remain vague for a while. In the period from November 1347 until March 1348, he copied the Pentateuch of Oxford, Bodl., MS Laud Or. 272 (see Fig. 3). Every book in this impressive manuscript is preceded by two full pages of lavish Mamluk-style decorations and followed by a subscription and a colophon in a magnificent panel.[67] As mentioned earlier, the *thuluth* calligraphy in a few pages of this manuscript is uncommon in Tūmā's works. If we apply the same hypothesis used earlier, this would mean that Tūmā was again in a place where there were tools and assistance for the illuminations, most likely not in a monastery and probably in Damascus. The manuscript opens with a colophon introducing the scribe and commissioner, Arsānī ibn al-Qass al-Mukhliṣ Dāwud ibn al-Qass al-Amjad Hibat Allāh, an elite layman from a family of priests (fol. 3^{r}):

[67] See the description in Laclau 2023, 407–411, and Zaki, forthcoming.

برسم الخزانة المباركة الشيخية الصفوية أرساني بن القس المخلص داود ابن القس الأمجد هبه الله عمرها الله ببقايه امين كتبها احقر الكهنة توما بن الصايغ المترهب في شهور (748)

[This book] is commissioned by the blessed Shaykhīyah al-ṣafawīyah library of Arsānī ibn al-Qass al-Mukhliṣ Dāwud ibn al-Qass al-Amjad Hibat Allāh. May God make it flourish by his long life. Amen! [It was] copied by the most despised priest, the monk Tūmā ibn al-Ṣā'igh in the months of the year 748 AH.

Again, next to nothing is known about this Arsānī except that he was able to afford such a manuscript. Most likely he was a Copt, based on indications in the manuscript, such as the use of the Coptic calendar of the Martyrs in addition to the Hijri calendar, the writing of the title of each book in Coptic letters in blue ink at its end, and so on.

5. Ordination as a bishop, decline and legacy

Tūmā's colophons are still a source of information about the third stage of Tūmā's life; but additional information also comes from the colophons and notes of other scribes who copied his manuscripts across the centuries, as well as in a note from one of his patrons.

At some point after March 1348, Tūmā was ordained as Bishop Kīrullus. We know that by 1351, he was the bishop of the region of Assiut. This is mentioned in a colophon written by Jirjis ibn Abī al-Mufaḍḍal, the same scribe whom Tūmā supervised in Damascus more than a decade earlier. On 14 Ba'ūnah 1071 AM (16 June 1355), Ibn Abī al-Mufaḍḍal copied a manuscript of the Uṣūl al-Dīn completed by Kīrullus on 10 Baramhāt 752 AH (presumably March 1351). In the manuscript (London, British Library, Or. 1331), Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal recorded:[68]

نجز هذا الكتاب المقدس بعون الله تعالى جل جلاله نقل العبد الحقير بخطاياه جرجس بن القس ابي المفضل الذي لا يستحق ان يدعى انسانا لا سيما قس. هذه النسخة من مداها الى الورقة التي عليها عدد (233) في الباب الثالث والثلاثين من نسخة الاصل بمدينة دمشق المحروسة وكملت النسخة المذكورة من الورقة التي عليها عدد (239) والى اخرها من نسخه بخط الاب السيد العالم العامل الحبر الكامل الاسقف انبا كيرلص اسقف اسيوط عرف بابن الصايغ مما نقله (؟) ابن ابي اسحق المفضل ابن ابي اسحق ابن العسال اثابه الله ورحمه واسلافه وانه كمل جمعها في عاشر برمهات سنة (752) والحقير كمل التكملة على ما تقدم شرحه بالقاهرة المحروسة بمنزل المولى الشيخ الرئيس الفاضل المعلم (بن؟) السدرحي اطال الله بقاه في رابع عشر بوونه سنة (1071) والسبح لله دائما ابدا

This Holy Book was completed with the help of Almighty God, may His glory be exalted. It was copied by the despised servant [who is] burdened by his sins, Jirjis, son of the priest Abū al-Mufaḍḍal, who is unworthy to be called a human being, let alone a priest. This copy, from its beginning until the page bearing the number 233 that is in chapter thirty-three, is transcribed from the original manuscript which is kept in the protected city of Damascus. The aforementioned copy, from the page bearing the number 239 to its end, was completed from [another] copy by the hand of the honoured, learned, diligent and perfect scholar, Bishop Anbā Kīrullus, bishop of Assiut, known as Ibn al-Ṣā'igh. This was based on [the work] transcribed by Ibn Abī Isḥaq al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī Isḥaq ibn al-'Assāl – may God reward him and have mercy upon him and his ancestors. He [Kīrullus] finished gathering it on the tenth of Baramhāt in the year 752 AH [1351 CE]. And, this despised [servant] completed the remaining section as previously described in

[68] For the description of this manuscript, see Rieu 1894, 18 (no. 23).

Fig. 3: Full-page decorated colophon of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Laud Or. 272 (fol. 3ʳ). © Bodleian Libraries, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

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> the protected [city of] Cairo, at the residence of the noble, learned shaykh and master, al-Sinirjī-Sirījī – may God prolong his life – on the fourteenth of Ba'ūnah in the year 1071 AM [1355 CE]. Glory be to God, forever and ever.

The colophon mentions Kīrullus, and that he was known as ibn al-Ṣā'igh, although it does not actually explicitly identify him with Tūmā. This is the evidence that Fr Samir used, though, in deciding they were the same person, and it is easy to see why. In addition to the shared nickname and the fact that Tūmā and Kīrullus lived in the same time frame and historical context, this colophon also suggests a previous relationship between the scribe of London, British Library, Or. 1331 – that is, Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal – and Tūmā. However, there is some additional evidence that these two names represent the same person: the manuscript Cambridge, Cambridge University Library (CUL), Add. 2621 (discussed below, and illustrated in Fig. 5), which Kīrullus copied after his ordination as a bishop, demonstrates the same paleographical characteristics as Tūmā's earlier manuscripts (see Fig. 4 for comparisons).

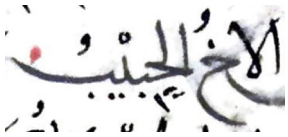
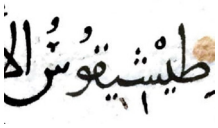
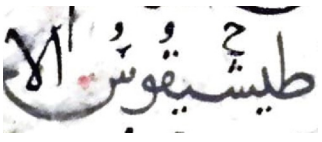
Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Arab d. 19 (fol. 94ᵛ)	Cambridge, CUL, Add. 2621 (fol. 53ᵛ)
	
	
	
	
	

Fig. 4: Words taken from MSS Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Add. 2621 and Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Arab d. 19 showing similar handwriting. © Cambridge University Library, reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; © Bodleian Libraries, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

The ordination of Kīrullus as a bishop took place in the days of the Coptic Patriarch Mark IV (1348–1363). As the canon laws of the Coptic Church stated that a bishop could be ordained in the absence of the patriarch only if three bishops were present, it is most likely that Tūmā had direct contact with this patriarch.[69] It is worth noting that Tūmā's lifetime overlapped with at least another five Coptic patriarchs.[70]

Another intriguing mention of Tūmā after his ordination comes in a purchase note from 1353 at the end of Vatican, BAV, Ar. 37 (fol. 198v). This time Tūmā was not the scribe of the manuscript, which is rather older, dating from December 1281 (fols 191[r] and 198[r]), and was copied by Yūḥannā ibn Abū al-Mannā.[71] It contains a commentary titled *Firdaws al-Naṣrānīyah* ('Paradise of Christianity') by the East Syrian commentator 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib. The buyer, as indicated in the note, bought it in Cairo from a certain 'Father Ya'qūb the brother of Father Tūmā ibn al-Ṣā'igh'. The buyer retained a level of familiarity, then, with the now-bishop Kīrullus, identifying him by his old name, Father Tūmā ibn al-Ṣā'igh, suggesting that he might be an old client. In fact, the family name of the buyer is familiar, although the first name is unclear: Ibn Nabīt(?) al-Sukhaynī/Suḥaynī. Is this the same Jakam al-Sukhaynī, the consul who commissioned a manuscript earlier in Damascus, or another?

حصل هذا الكتاب المبارك فى نوبة ابن (نبيت؟) السحينى بمقتضى الابتياع
الصحيح الشرعى وذلك من مدينة مصر فى سنة الف وثلثماية ثلثة وخمسين
مسيحية من الاب يعقوب اخى الاب توما ابن الصايغ عفا الله تعالى
عنهم وعن كلمن يطالع فيه ورده الى مستحقه بعد قضى شغله
فلعن الله خافيه و(ساقه)
لعنة لا تفارقه امين

This blessed book was obtained by Ibn (Nabīt) al-Sukhaynī/Suḥaynī by legally sound purchase. This was in the city of Cairo in 1353 CE from Father Ya'qūb the brother of Father Tūmā ibn al-Ṣā'igh, may God forgive both and all those who read [this book] and return it to his owner after finishing it. May God curse its stealer or thief, a curse that does not leave him. Amen!

The appearance for the first time of a brother of Tūmā, who also enjoys a religious rank, in the context of the manuscript trade, is intriguing. This suggests that Tūmā was perhaps more involved in the manuscript trade than would be expected from a monk, and that it might have been the family business. At the time, of course, the book trade was a profitable business, to the extent that some scholars abandoned their academic work to engage in it.[72]

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[69] This canon can be seen in the manuscript Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs, Ar. 311 (fol. 190v). I am indebted to my colleague Rocio Daga for bringing this to my attention.

[70] The Coptic patriarchs during his life were Theodosius II (1294–1300), John VIII (1300–1320), John IX (1320–1327), Benjamin II (1327–1339), Peter V (1340–1348) and Mark IV (1348–1363). See Swanson 2010, 97.

[71] The manuscript was copied in Ḥārat al-Rūm, Cairo, on 3 Kiyahk 978 AM/15 Sha'bān 680 AH; this corresponds to 6 December 1281 CE. The manuscript is available online in the Vatican Library reading room <https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/>. See also Mai 1831, 78.

[72] For example, the historian Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (d. 1363), and others. See Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 79–80.

Finally, in the same year that al-Sukhaynī/Suḥaynī was buying a manuscript from his brother, we have evidence from Bishop Kīrullus's own hand that he was in his diocese in Assiut. There, he once again copied the Epistles and Acts, in Cambridge, CUL, Add. 2621, and signed it with his new name and title (see Fig. 5).[73] As Tūmā was away from his usual centre of manuscript production, it is not surprising that the manuscript is devoid of any decorations. While he included a colophon at the end of nearly every book in the manuscript, as was his custom, it lacked even the simple panel designs that had characterized his earlier works.

The tone of his colophons in this manuscript is very different, reflecting his age and the feeling that the end is approaching. For the first time in the manuscripts that we know of, he indicates that he is copying this manuscript for himself and whoever succeeds him. This manuscript, then, was not meant to be sold but to be kept in the diocese for the use of the successive bishops.

> كتبها لنفسه ولمن يشا الله من بعده. العبد الراجي مراحم ربه وسيده كيرلص خادم الشعب المسيحي بكرسي سيوط ومنفلوط وما معهما وذلك في ايام من شهر امشير من سنه تسع وستين والف للشهداء. وهو يسال كل قارء فيها او ناقل منها ان يستر غلطاته ويسال عنه الرب العظيم لكي يغفر له زلاته ومن تفوه بشيء فله أضعاف امثاله فليذكره وليحسن في ذكره ومقاله فانه يكال له بمكياله
>
> He wrote [this book] for himself and for whomever God wills to succeed him: the servant who hopes for the mercies of his Lord and Master, Kīrullus, servant of the Christian people of the seat of Assiut and Manfalut and their surroundings, in the days of the month of Amshīr in the year 1069 AM [1353 CE]. He asks every reader or scribe copying from it to overlook his errors and to pray to the great Lord to forgive his faults. May whoever prays for him get double of his requests …[74]

The connection between Tūmā, now Kīrullus, and the monastery of Yuḥinnis Kāmā is revived even after his ordination as a bishop. The final visit we know of came to our knowledge three centuries later through a copy of one of his manuscripts. Cambridge, CUL, Add. 3283 is a Garshuni manuscript – that is, Arabic in Syriac letters – of *Mukhtaṣar al-qawānīn* ('Abridgement of the Church Laws').[75] It was copied in Mosul by Rabbān Isḥaq ibn 'Abd al-Ḥayy from the Syrian Orthodox monastery of Mār Mattá (St Matthew) in 1989 AG (1678 CE; fol. 208^{v}). This scribe recorded in his manuscript that the exemplar he copied was the work of Bishop Kīrullus in the monastery of Yuḥinnis Kāmā (fol. 15^{v}). Although he did not identify the bishop with a last name, it seems reasonable to consider that he was our Kīrullus, as he specialized in copying this work. Moreover, Rabbān Isḥaq left the place of the year empty in the note, despite recording the Coptic month of Tūt and the day of copying. Since Kīrullus often wrote the year in *Coptic Epact* numbers, it is understandable that a scribe from the Syriac Church was unable to decipher it, and hence left a blank space instead. The notes read:

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[73] Browne 1922, 12–13.

[74] Kīrullus identifies himself as Ibn al-Ṣā'igh in only one colophon in this manuscript (see Fig. 5).

[75] Wright and Cook 1901, 862–884.

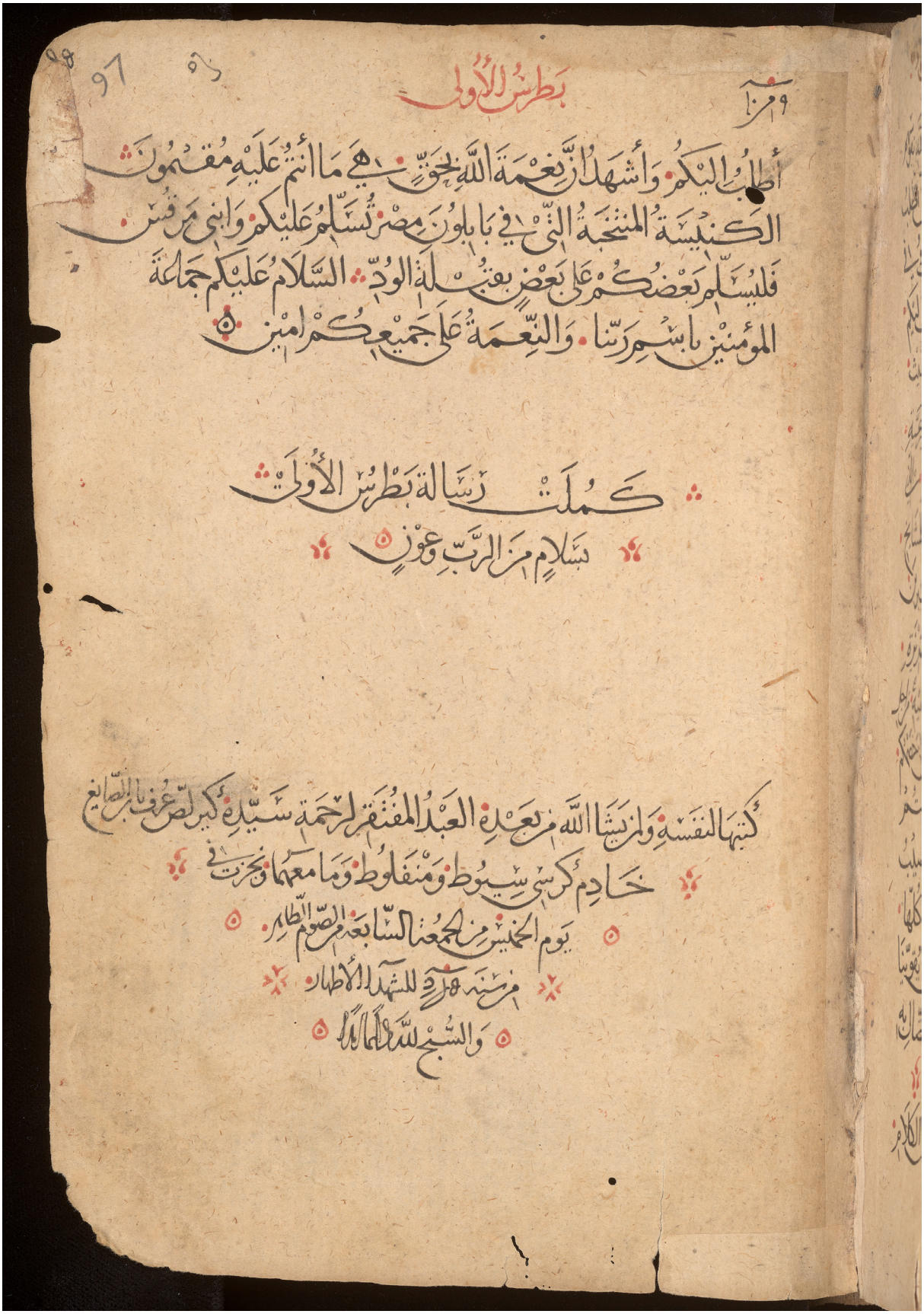

Fig. 5: A colophon by Bishop Kīrullus; Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Add. 2621 (fol. 97r). © Cambridge University Library, reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

DOI: 1015460/mc.2025.25.1.14

وكانت نسخه الكتاب العتيق خط الاب الاسقف انبا كيرلس وكتبها بدير القديس ابو يحنس اي انبا يوحنا الذي كان ديره في برية شيهات وكان التاريخ في تاني توت من سنة … الشهدا الاطهار

And the exemplar of the old book is by the hand of Father Bishop Anbā Kīrullus. He transcribed it in the monastery of al-Qiddīs Abū Yuḥinnis that is Anbā Yūḥannā whose monastery was in the deserts of Shihat. The date was the second of Tūt of the year … AM.

وجد في النسخه المكتوبه منها هذا الكتاب هكذا. كتب بدير القديس ابو (لحنسر؟) كما برية شيهات في تاني توت سنة … للشهدا الاطهار. وذلك خط الاب الاسقف انبا كيرلس نيح الله نفسه امين

This is what was found in the exemplar of this book: It was written in the monastery of al-Qiddīs Abū Yuḥinnis Kamā [sic] in the deserts of Shihat on the second of Tūt of the year … AM. This was the handwriting of Father Bishop Anbā Kīrullus himself. May God rest his soul, amen!

The latter note is slightly vague, not clearly distinguishing which statement is attributed to the scribe Rabbān Isḥaq and which is found in Kīrullus's colophon. However, the first part is clear enough, suggesting that Kīrullus, after his ordination as a bishop, visited and stayed in his monastery again for a period long enough for him to copy a substantial work like the *Mukhtaṣar al-Qawānīn*. This period likely occurred shortly after his ordination before he finally moved to settle in Assiut. This scenario makes more sense than suggesting he was travelling back and forth between Cairo and Upper Egypt. It is also unlikely that Rabbān Isḥaq would have known Tūmā's history and referred to him as Bishop Kīrullus unless that was the name in the manuscript, given the centuries and geographical distance separating them.

A side note about the monastery of Kāmā is related to the date of its destruction. It is generally considered, as mentioned by Meinardus and others, that it vanished between 1330 and 1442.[76] This is a very wide range: it lies between the documented visit of Patriarch Benjamin II to the monastery in 1330 and the death of the historian al-Maqrīzī, who stated that the monastery was now ruins. As Tūmā was copying COP 173(2) in the monastery in 1346, its destruction must post-date that. Moreover, the fact that Tūmā visited the monastery as a bishop implies an even later date, maybe after 1350, for the destruction.

Something that remains vague in the life of Tūmā, now Kīrullus, is the reason for his ordination as a bishop in the seat of Assiut. It might be that the extreme Mamluk measures, which resulted in the shift of Coptic population towards Upper Egypt and led to a decline in the state of the Shihat monasteries, required sending Tūmā away to Assiut.[77] However, the reason for excluding him from the active and profitable life that he led between Egypt and Syria by exiling him to the distant city of Assiut remains an open question.

[76] Meinardus 1965, 159; al-Suryānī 1992, 84–91.

[77] al-Suryānī 1992, 86–87; Ivanova 2020, 225.

6. Conclusion

Despite the wealth of information available about Tūmā, significant gaps remain. First, the specifics of his education as a Coptic monk and scribe in an art form that was predominantly Islamic – Mamluk manuscript production – are unclear, particularly when it comes to the identity of his teachers and the location of his training. Second, the existence of a market for Christian Arabic manuscripts raises questions about how scribes like Tūmā connected with patrons outside their ecclesiastical circles, as well as the purpose of manuscripts that appear to have been created without specific commissioners. The relationship between Tūmā and the Coptic Church is yet another gap in our knowledge, in particular whether they knew of and approved of his activities, and those of his brother.

Tūmā developed a distinctive style in his manuscript production. Notably, all the manuscripts attributed to him are exclusively in Arabic, rather than in the bilingual Coptic-Arabic format common in other contexts. His elaborate, lavishly decorated Bibles earned him a strong reputation as a producer of expensive and richly ornamented texts (see Appendix 1 for the list of manuscripts that we know he copied); this emphasis on luxurious religious texts may reflect the broader Mamluk-era focus on illustrated Qur'ans and religious manuscripts, which may have influenced Christian manuscript culture. Tūmā consistently recorded dates either in Arabic words or in *Coptic Epact* numbers, further reflecting his stylistic preferences. The examination of his manuscripts reveals that while his work was primarily the transcription, he might have been involved in calligraphy in some cases. However, he was not an illuminator, as evident from those manuscripts that he copied while in seclusion.

Tūmā's career as a scribe extended beyond religious devotion and into the realm of commerce. This is reflected in several ways, such as the potential existence of a family business and his wide network of commissioners. Moreover, his mobility, particularly his time in Damascus – a hub for the thriving book trade – demonstrates his awareness of market dynamics and his ability to expand his clientele. More evidence of his commercial sense can be seen in the diversity in his manuscripts, which range from modestly adorned texts to lavishly illuminated copies, indicating his ability to tailor his work to meet the economic and aesthetic preferences of a wide array of patrons.

By combining exceptional artistic skill with entrepreneurial acumen, Tūmā cultivated a reputation that endured well beyond his lifetime. This is evident in the numerous references to him in colophons and copies produced by his students and later scribes. A close examination of the marginal notes in his manuscripts reveals their extensive transmission history, highlighting the breadth of his legacy.

During his lifetime, Tūmā's influence extended to diverse communities, including Italians, East Syrians in Mosul, and Melkites. After his death, the manuscript evidence demonstrates that his impact reached even further. His works, whether through the copying of new manuscripts based on his originals or the transmission of his manuscripts into new regions, left a lasting mark.

His legacy is documented among the Copts in Cairo, Tanta (in the Nile Delta), the monasteries of the Eastern Desert, Wādī al-Naṭrūn, and Assiut (Upper Egypt), as well as in Jerusalem. Beyond the Coptic community, his influence also spread to other denominations, reaching Syrian

Orthodox communities in Mosul, East Syrians in Mardin, and Armenian Catholics in Lebanon. This widespread dissemination of his work underscores the enduring significance of Tūmā's contributions to manuscript culture and his remarkable ability to navigate the diverse religious and cultural landscapes of his time.

Tūmā's career also offers a broader lens through which to view the social dynamics of the time. Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī (d. 1325), in his prosopographical work *Tālī*,[78] attempted to present Christians as an integral part of Mamluk society, resisting narratives that excluded them from state roles. In one example, he framed the punishment of both a Muslim and a Coptic official for unfinished work as a shared experience, implying parity rather than exclusion. Luke Yarbrough has observed that such accounts suggest that 'being a non-Muslim was not much of a disability' in early fourteenth-century Mamluk society.[79] Similarly, Tūmā's life and career – marked by freedom of mobility, a wide and diverse network of patrons and a flourishing artistic practice – contradict the traditional portrayal of Copts as a vulnerable and suffering minority. Instead, his achievements depict him as a peer in a colourful and multifaceted society.

In conclusion, the book industry provided Copts with an open field in which to demonstrate their integration into Mamluk society, and was able to serve as a mechanism of resilience and self-assertion. Tūmā exemplifies how Copts could navigate and thrive in a challenging sociopolitical environment, proving their ability to adapt, contribute and flourish despite the harsh circumstances of the time.

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[78] Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī authored a continuation to the 'Book of the Elite Obituaries' by Ibn Khalliqān (d. 1282), titled *Tālī Kitāb Wafayāt al-A'yān*. See the edition in Sublet 1974, and more information about the author in Swanson 2012, 820–823.

[79] Yarbrough 2020, 244.

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Appendices

1. Manuscripts copied by Tūmā in chronological order

Shelf mark	Date	Contents	Illumination	Commissioner	Place of copying
Jerusalem, Mār Jirjis (lost)	1042 AM (1325/6)	Gospels	---	---	---
Red Sea, St Anthony's, Theology 119	22 Baramhāt 1045 AM (26 March 1329)	*Uṣūl al-dīn* (Compendium of the principles of religion)	No	---	---
Cairo, COP, Bible 173(1)	735 AH (September–August 1334–1335)	Pauline Epistles	No	None	Damascus
St Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, D 228	1 Shaʿbān–1 Ramaḍan 742 AH; 14 Kiyahk–14 Amshīr 1058 AM (December 1341–January 1342)	Pauline and Catholic Epistles, Acts	Yes	Jakam al-Sukhaynī	Damascus
Vatican, BAV, Ar. 29	February 1342 CE	Lectionary of Pauline Epistles	Yes	Mānwil ibn Tūmā al-ʿAraqāwī	Damascus
Oxford, Bodl., Arab d. 19	743 AH; Aylūl–Tishrīn II (September–November) 1342 CE	Pauline and Catholic Epistles, Acts, Paul's martyrdom	Yes	Jurj Ūmadī	Damascus
Cairo, COP, Bible 173(2)	3–11 Abīb 1062 AM (5–13 July 1346)	Catholic Epistles, Acts	No	None	Abū Kāmā Monastery, Wādī al-Naṭrūn, Egypt
Oxford, Bodl., Laud Or. 272	748 AH; 30 Hātūr–8 Baramhāt 1064 AM (November 1347–March 1348)	Pentateuch	Yes	Arsānī ibn al-Qass al-Mukhliṣ Dāwud ibn al-Qass al-Amjad Hibat Allāh	Not mentioned
Cambridge, CUL, Add. 2621	754 AH; 3 Amshīr–22 Baramhāt 1069 AM; Muḥarram–Ṣafar (14 March–25 April 1353)	Pauline Epistles	No	For himself and whoever may succeed him	Assiut, Upper Egypt

2. Manuscripts linked to Tūmā

Shelf mark	Date	Contents	Reference/project number	Link to Tūmā
Cairo, COP, Bible 133	16/17th c.	Matthew	Macomber, COP I, 340–348 (COP 11–15)	Copied from one of Tūmā's manuscripts
Cairo, Coptic Museum, Bible 90	1340	Gospels	Macomber CMA I, 438–440 (CM 15-1); Hunt 2009	He collated this manuscript
Cambridge, CUL, Add. 3283	1678	*Mukhtaṣar al-Qawānīn* (Abridgement of the church laws)	Samir, 'Ibn al-Ṣā'igh'	Copied from one of Tūmā's manuscripts
London, British Library, Or. 1331	1355	*Mukhtaṣar al-Qawānīn*	Rieu 1894, 18 (no. 23)	Part of it is copied from one of Tūmā's manuscripts

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