



DMES PUBLIC TALKS

Defining a Minority:

The Construction of the Copts in the Earliest Arabic Historical Texts

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In the aftermath of the Arab conquests the Islamic caliphate found itself ruling an enormous territory stretching from modern Portugal to Pakistan, containing diverse populations with different languages, religions, and political heritages. Arabic historical writing was in part an attempt to construct and justify the new status quo of the caliphate and its origins in the conquests. This process involved categorising, defining, and developing ideas about the populations of the newly conquered territories. This paper explores this phenomenon by examining early Arabic representations of the Copts (*al-qibt*), a term often used in Arabic literary sources to describe the population of Egypt. Traditionally, scholarship has tended to project the modern usage of the term into these early Islamic texts. This paper instead asks what the earliest Arabic texts meant when they used this term and attempts to unpick some of the polemical work which was involved in this Arabic definition of the population of Egypt.

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5.15-6.45pm (tea & biscuits from 5.00pm)

Room 8/9

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