Youhanna Nessim Youssef

The Icon Writer Hanna al-Armani according to an Ottoman Legal Document.
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HANNA AL-ARMANI (John the Armenian) is a celebrated writer of icons from the XVIII century. Previously studied by art historians, in this article, it is his private life that is examined in order to help further iconographic studies.

A document from Ottoman times, lists a certain “Hanna son of Artin, son of Karabid of Jerusalem, the Armenian painter.” This document is dated the 6 Joumadah 1200 E.H. (3 March 1786 A.D.). This person can be identified as the writer of icons, Hanna al-Armani for several reasons: the name Hanna Karabid of Jerusalem is mentioned on icons; the date corresponds to the end of the career of Hanna al-Armani 1783 A.D.; and there were no beaux-arts (fine arts) painters at the time.

As there are no icons in Armenian Churches, it is only by comparing two icons of the archangel Michael in the church of Haret Zuweila–Cairo, that we are able to demonstrate that Hanna al-Armani learned his art from Ibrahim al-Nasikh (Abraham the scribe).

From the Ottoman document, we learn that Hanna al-Armani did not have a profession other than writing icons which is unusual because Ibrahim, his master, was also a scribe and others were priests such as Mencorius (Coptic Museum nº 18) and Cyril (Coptic Museum nº 29).
As the document mentions Hanna al-Armani is of Armenian origin but he came from Jerusalem. Hanna married twice. His first wife was Armenian. She bore two sons and a daughter: Artin, Girgis and Monkechah respectively.

His second wife Damiana, was a Coptic woman, daughter of George (Girgis) the Dhimmī, the Christian goldsmith of Darb al-Ginînah in the lane of al-Qantara al-Gididah. The fact that Hanna al-Armani married such a wealthy Copt suggests that he was accepted by Coptic society.

The document notes that his residence was in Darb al-Ginînah in the lane al-Qantara al-Gididah. This street is close to the old Coptic cathedral of Izbakiyah. The district was predominantly Christian in makeup, which is a further indication of the extent to which Hanna had been integrated into Coptic Egyptian society.

The extant works of Hanna al-Armani show that he was an icon writer of great ability, yet despite this the Ottoman document reveals that Hanna was very poor and his son Artin, son had to care for him and his wife towards the end of Hanna’s life. Although the fact that he had no other occupation, unlike other icon writers of the period (see above), suggests he was able to make a reasonable living from his work.

The document that is published here for the first time, provides some interesting personal information on one of the most notable icon writers in the Coptic Church.

1. Hanna al-Armani was still living in 1786 A.D.
2. He married twice, his first wife was probably Armenian and his second was Coptic, and had two sons and a daughter from his first marriage.
3. He did not have an occupation other than writing icons and that was not lucrative.
4. One can suppose that his workshop was in the district of Izbakiah, while Ibrahîm, his master, had his workshop in Haret al-Rûm.

Translation of the will of Hanna al Armani

The gentlemen mentioned hereafter: Ahmad, son of honoured him Badawî al-Gammâl al-Islîmî; his honoured brother Mohammad; the honoured Ibrahîm al-Saïdi son of the late Mohammad; Azer the Dhimmî, the goldsmith; Nagah Afanîn, (? ) son of the dhimmî Paul (Bûlus) the Armenian; the dhimmî [2] Joseph the Fat (Youssef Samin) son of the dhimmî

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9 The Dhimmî, are those non-Muslim nations living in communities that were subjected to Muslim domination after the conquest of their territories by the Arabs. cf. Bat Ye’er, The Dhimmî, translated by D. Maisel, P. Fenton, D. Littman, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1985, p. 35.

10 Eleven years after the date of the document, Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt was administered from this district under the direction of General Yacob. For a study of this district cf. G. Vialaud, Les secrets des mystérieuses rues du Caire, Cairo 1990, p. 51-54. For the situation of the Copts in general cf. A. Raymond, Egyptiens et Français au Caire 1798-1801, BiGen 18, Cairo 1998, p. 60-62.

Shukrî al-Halabî; the dhimmi ‘Assef Saylân, son of George the Armenian; the dhimmi David (Daoud), son of Mirzâh al-Kharazgi; and the dhimmi Abraham (Ibrahîm), son of George al-Aqwasi, and the priest [3] Stephen, son of the dhimmi Warnade, the Christian (nazarene) of Jerusalem, each of them to inform and to testify them on what follows:

(They were) aware of an impeccable manner and swore that the Hanna, the dhimmi painter, son of Artin [4] son of the Armenian Karabid, the Christian of Jerusalem, that he is responsible by the normal standard of responsibility, declared that what he possessed of possessions of the width of this perishable world and under his control [5] in the possession in his house, with his wife, the dhimmi Damiana daughter of the dhimmi George Anbar, the goldsmith, the Christian (nazarene) Coptic, resident in the Darb al-Ginînah of al-Qantara al-Gididah, district, is as follows: [6] two dresses Banchayn in red and green wool, three shirts, two pure coats; Ambasti (?) of cloths; a basket of dates; two quilts in canvas; dark blue veils in cotton; only one pot in copper; [7] and three plates in copper, no more than that. However the dhimmi Hanna, the above mentioned, eats, drinks and dresses, currently, with his wife, aforesaid at his son [8] Artin the Dhimmia the forger of the Hotel of the currency like charity of his money for them and for the piety of God and alms. The dhimmi Hanna, the painter, above mentioned, did absolve (acquit) his wife the dhimmia [9] Damianah aforesaid and his three children of another one that Artin the Dhimmia are the aforesaid smith, George the Dhimmia, the sculptor, and the dhimmi Munkishah and his niece the dhimmia Beha (?) [10] the woman, the daughter of aforesaid Khasarûd, son of Ûrtine, and her husband the aforesaid dhimmia David al-Kharazgi. The acquitement (litt. a free hand) of all consequences, rights and duties, [11] business, consequences, the grant and the offer, orders and of all [12] civil law before the date and after the date of the discharge of the consideration right. Him of it is not anymore, and don’t require this right anymore for his wife, [13] his three children, his niece (his brother’s girl) and her husband aforesaid and do not consist a right anymore abstracts, or a duty, or a demand, or a solicitude, or a reason, or a part or of gold, or money, [14] or a cut, or for reasons, or covers, or on dresses, or on gold jewellery, or on other generosity, or on the fundamental possessions, or on iron for price. He is thus free from [15] any obligation, he did not have neither offer nor debt, nor fundamental possessions, nor man, nor children, nor deposit, nor order, nor assets. There is not absolutely any right [16] nor sum of money to condition nor something else that he/it is small or big before this act of discharge. [17] This act of discharge is definitive and irrevocable, annihilating any demand or request, if any exists [18] and the dhimmia Damianah and the dhimmia Ourtin, the blacksmith and his brothers and the dhimmia Simah and her spouse, above mentioned, approved the acquitement of Hanna painter aforesaid. [19] (This approval) is on everything that has been explained concerning the general and legal acquitement of Hanna [20] and by the declaration of the dhimmia Hanna the painter, his wife and his three children and the dhimmia Simah and her spouse, the aforesaid dhimmia David (Daoud) al-Kharazgi. [21] Each of them made the proxy for the other from the date of the declaration and the approval of the right of consideration of each and they all agreed [22] on this makes the six Djumada in the year two hundred and thousand. The sheik Abdallah al-Hamalaoui and the sheik...
قل وجل لما سلف في الزمان [17] والى تاريخه وابرا ذمتهما برا عاما قاطعا مانعا حاسما
زما مبتلا لكل حق ودعوى وطلب ونية وعين باينة اذا وجدت وصدق [18] كل من
الذمة دميانه والذمي اورتين الحداد والخويه والذمية سيمما وزوجها المرقومين على براء
ذمة حنا الرسام المرقوم وعلى [19] صحة ما تعرف بشرق باعلية وعلي برأة ذمة بعضهم
بضع لسبب ذلك براءة الرعبة ابوا المندرج تحتها لكل عموم ونصوص تصديقا [20]
الشرعية باعتراف كل من الذمي حنا الرسام وزوجته وأولاده الثلاث والذمية سيمما
وزوجها الذمي داود الخرزجى المذكورين اعلاه [21] وتصديق كل منهم الآخر على
ذلك في يوم تاريخه الاعتراف والتصديق المرمعين المقبولين في كل منهم للاخر القبول
والرعي بالطريق الرعي والرضى وهذا [22] على ذلك كل وثبت وحكم تحرر في سادس
جماد اول سنة مانيين والشيخ عبدله الحملاوى والشيخ
1. Legal text mentioning the icon-writer Hanna al-Armani.