

ALTAR

A place, structure, or table on which sacrifices are offered to a divinity. The word comes from the Latin *altare* related to the verb *adolere*, to “burn up.”

Pagan Altars

Since prehistoric times, [offerings](#) to subterranean gods were made in pits, and offerings to heavenly gods were presented on altars raised above the ground. The latter usage was influenced not only by awe of the deity but also by considerations of expedience, whether the object sacrificed was a burnt offering of meat or a simple offering of fruit or grain. At first a pile of wood and branches or a large, freestanding stone may have sufficed.

When such sacrificial acts were regularly repeated at the same spot, it was natural to create a permanent artificial support for them. In Judaism, altars built of earth or unhewn stones (Ex. 20:24-25) were required. The Greeks and Romans, as well as the Egyptians, at first used brick altars. Later they built altars of hewn stones or even monoliths. In Egypt, a brick altar belonging to the Fourth Dynasty was identified in the area of the Satet temple at Elephantine (Dreyer, 1977, pp. 73-81), but Egyptian altars usually consisted of movable wooden offering tables, sometimes overlaid with metal, which were kept in storehouses when not in use. The few stone altars fixed in position are cubical and suggest the wooden altars that were their prototype. The upper surface is enclosed by a frame and, in some cases, contains bowl-shaped depressions.

For a long time in the Greco-Roman world most altars were built in a simple block form. From the beginning of the classical period, however, the form of the altar became artistically richer, modeled on the bases of statues and elements of temple architecture. The altars of some important temples were even adorned with reliefs, for example, the altar

at Pergamum and the Ara Pacis in Rome. At the same time, their size was increased. While most altars were small and humble, there were some of enormous dimensions and of an unusual height, so that the officiating priest could ascend to them only by a staircase. The enhancement of their size had the purely practical purpose of affording the largest possible number of people a view of the sacrificial rites.

Christian Altars

In Christianity also, the altar is the place of sacrifice, for it is only at the altar, considered as holy, that the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and [Blood of Christ](#) is accomplished in the EUCHARIST, through which worshipers are in communion with God. In some texts of the Coptic tradition, the concept of sacrifice is given very clear expression. In the early period of Christianity, the altar also served as the table (Greek *trapeza*) on which the gifts of bread and wine to be used for the Eucharist were laid by the congregation. The altar thus became the place of sacrifice only after the development of the liturgy in which the priest officiated. When congregations had grown to large numbers in the Constantinian period separate tables for gifts were set up alongside the actual eucharistic sacrificial altar (Klauser, Vol. 43, 1935, pp. 179-86).

When in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries the practice of the congregation making such [offerings](#) again fell out of use and the elements to be used for the Eucharist had increasingly to be supplied by the church, these gift tables also fell into disuse. Nevertheless, there are still traces of such subsidiary tables. One is in a side niche in the central church of Makhurah al-Qibli (Grossmann, 1980, pp. 225-27). In the church in front of the pylon of the [Luxor](#) temple such a table stood at the sidewall of the apse. Both could properly be interpreted only as gift tables in the sense mentioned. Otherwise, in the Eastern churches, the gifts [intended](#) for the Eucharist were deposited in a room called the *scevophilacion*, situated near the entrance or even outside the church; they were ceremonially brought to the altar only in the "great entrance,"

which has its origin in this rite (Descoedres, 1983, pp. 49-61).

Form. Probably because of its original subsidiary function as a table for the gifts brought by the congregation, the altar in the early Christian period frequently took the form of an ordinary table. It consisted of a top (*mensa*) carried on one or more legs, which were themselves fixed in a base or simply into the floor. The [Coptic church](#) also used movable wooden altars. Altars with six legs are less common but occur in both main churches of the Kellia. The altar of the later East Church of Qasr Wahaydah was round. Several built-in altar bases of the early Christian period have a further depression in the middle as in the East Church of the pilgrim center of ABU MINA, (Grossmann, 1977, pp. 35-38), which was probably the place for a reliquary.

Besides these simple table-altars, massive monolithic altars and altars built of stone or bricks were in use at an early date. The former often consisted of blocks that originally came from another structure and were reworked for their new use. Thus, the altar of the East Church of Abu Mina consisted of a simple column [drum](#) flattened on the back (Grossmann, 1977, p. 37). In the church in the Isis temple at PHILAE dedicated to Saint Stephen, a former pagan altar was taken over for church use.

The form of altar in use today in Egypt appears to have developed in the Fatimid period. It consists of a cube built up of quarried stone or, more rarely, of bricks, as at DAYR SITT DIMIYANAH, which in only a few cases is furnished with an upper cornice. Notable exceptions are in Cairo. The latter probably has its origin in the monolithic marble slab used earlier. A shallow rectangular depression was let into the upper surface of the block, which originally held a relic. Today, in the same place, there is a consecrated wooden board (*maqta'*). In the back of the altar, facing the east, a small but relatively deep cavity like a niche is left open close to the floor; this must be regarded as the last vestige of the original table-shaped form of the altar. Today the consecrated oil is frequently kept in

it.

Location

As a rule, in the early Christian period, the altar in a church stood not within but in front of the apse, in an area surrounded by low screens (cancelli), the presbytery (see ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS OF CHURCHES). In the Great Basilica of Abu Mina it stood in the center of the intersection of the nave and the presbytery, and in the North Basilica of the same place, it stood in the area of the second eastern intercolumnium. Only in very simple churches—such as those of the anchorite settlements of Kellia, which instead of a semicircular apse had only a rectangular cult chamber furnished in the east wall with a simple [prayer](#) niche— is the altar accommodated within this cult chamber. The latter accordingly represents the presbytery.

In very small oratories, the altar consists of no more than a *mensa* let into an eastern niche, usually semicircular. In some cases, the space under the *mensa* is not even left open but is imitated by dark painting. In these oratories the niche serves as both altar room and apse. Even after the introduction of the *khurus* (room at the eastern end of the nave) in the late seventh century, the altar remained located in front of the apse and of necessity came to be in the area of the *khurus*. An exception, however, is the al-‘Adhra church of DAYR AL-SURYAN in Wadi al-Natrun, deriving from the early eighth century, where the altar, despite the original presence of a *khurus*, was evidently accommodated from the beginning in the central cult chamber at the eastern end of the church (Grossmann, 1982, pp. 115-19).

An alteration to this pattern resulted from the introduction of churches with several altars in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. In all probability the typical simple anchorite church served as the model for this new development. The altar is now occasionally accommodated in a room designated as the *haykal* (Hebrew, *hekal*, the room in front of the

Holy of Holies in the Temple) or *sharqiyyah* (Arabic for “the eastern”). This room, the sanctuary, is closed off toward the nave by a screen called the *hijab*, or ICONOSTASIS, built of wood, stone, or brick.

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