

Anba Isaac, the bishop of the Fayoum, holds a unique place in the history of the Coptic [Church](#) during the mid-nineteenth century. This standing is due, in part, to his massive diocese, which included three Egyptian governorates: Giza, the Fayoum, and Beni Suef. It is also recognition of what he achieved in both ecclesiastical life and the monastic life in Wadi al-Natrun during his time as bishop of a diocese, which lasted for almost forty-seven years. No article about him, however, was included in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* edited in 1991.

Anba Isaac was among sixteen monks living in the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan in the early nineteenth century. It is known that he was greatly loved by his brother monks (al-Suriani 1968: 166). When the diocese of the Fayoum, al-Bahnasa, and Giza lost its bishop due to the death of Anba Yussab, who had shepherded this diocese from 1820 to 1833, the monks of the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan asked Pope Peter VII of Alexandria (Boutros al-Gawly), who used to select his bishops from among the monks of the Monastery of St. Antony on the Red Sea, to ordain their brother monk Isaac as bishop of the vacant diocese. The patriarch agreed, and the consecration took place in the papal residence in the Cathedral of St. Mark in Azbakiya, the old cathedral in downtown Cairo, which was built by the famous archon Ibrahim al-Gohary (al-Masry 1992: 267).

The Geographical Boundaries of the Diocese of Anba Isaac

The diocese of Anba Isaac included three entire governorates (or states), namely the Fayoum, al-Bahnasa (Beni Suef), and Giza, and also a part of al-Minya governorate as far as the town of Bani Mazar. Anba Isaac was consecrated a bishop in 1834 at a time when Prince Hussein Agha was the governor of the province of the Fayoum (which was formerly divided into two parts). Prince Hussein was a member of the dynasty of Muhammad 'Ah, who was the ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1849. Later, in

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1868, Khedive Isma'il, the ruler of Egypt, issued a decree combining the Fayoum and Beni Suef into one entity. In 1870, another decree was issued turning the Fayoum into an independent governorate. It is noteworthy that these administrative divisions did not have any impact on the pastoral mission of the bishop who was consecrated for these provinces according to the tradition at the time of his enthronement to the bishopric (al- Masry 1992:267).

Anba Isaac remained in his diocese until 1858, and later, at an unknown date, he was [ordained](#) a metropolitan, which is a very high-ranking bishop. He lived until 1881; unfortunately, it is unknown exactly when he died or where he was buried.

Anba Isaac's Achievements as Bishop

The following are the bishop's known achievements in his diocese:

1. In 1856, he built the first church, which had the name of the Holy Virgin, in the town of Beni Suef in an area called Darb al-' Abd. In 1869, he built a [church](#) named for St. George in an area called Abu Seir al-Malak in the province of al-Wassty. A third church also bearing the name of the Holy Virgin was built by him in al-Fashn in 1861 (Daoud and Fakhry 2011: 252).
2. He restored a number of churches and monasteries in the Fayoum governorate, among which were the [Church](#) of the Holy Virgin, the Monastery of al-Amir Tadros (Prince Theodore) in an area called Dessia, and the church of Abu Sayfayn (Abraam 2004: 309).
3. In 1862, he built a [church](#) in the name of the Holy Virgin in the village of Atris, which was affiliated with the province of Awssim, Giza governorate. This church belonged to—and still belongs to—the monks of the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan. In 1872, he built a church in the same village in the name of St. Macarius, which still belongs to the monks of the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi al-Natrun. In 1881, he started the construction of St. Mark's Church

in Giza (Daoud and Fakhry 2011: 279).

4. He [ordained](#) several priests in the three governorates.
5. He participated in the recommendation made for Hegumen (chief priest) Daoud of the Monastery of St. Antony to be [ordained](#) a general metropolitan in 1853, and later he participated in consecrating him as patriarch under the name Pope Cyril IV in 1854. Years later, Anba Isaac also participated in recommending the monk Mikhail of the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi al-Natrun to be consecrated as patriarch, taking the name Pope Demetrius II in 1862 (al-Masry 1992: 311).
6. He played a major role in bringing about the enthronement of the monk [Youhanna](#) the Scribe as patriarch of the See of St. Mark under the name Cyril V in 1874. An interesting story may be mentioned here: Archon Wahba al-Gizawi (a senior government official) was opposed to the nomination of Youhanna the Scribe to the patriarchate. Al-Gizawi instead supported the nomination of Anba Morcos, the metropolitan of al-Beheira (al-Masry 1992: 381). Anba Isaac went to al-Gizawi in the company of a number of bishops to reason with him on the necessity of consecrating Youhanna the Scribe as patriarch as soon as possible, as the dioceses of Qusqam, Manfalut, Asyut, Qena, Esna, and Khartoum (in present-day Sudan) were without leadership because of the deaths of their bishops, and it was known that there was, at least for the time being, the legally required number of bishops necessary for the consecration of a new patriarch. The archon told them he would reply to them after three days. Anba Isaac shouted at him, saying, "Why this delay, my son? And what are we to do if we do not find you alive when we come to you after three days?" Then Anba Isaac stood up and declared angrily that the [Church](#) had a Lord to look after it. And it came to pass that Archon al-Gizawi died on the third day, and Youhanna the Scribe was consecrated as patriarch on 1 November 1874 (Abraam 2004: 309).

Anba Isaac's Achievements in the Monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun

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Anba Isaac took great care of the four monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, especially al-Suryan Monastery, to the extent that he used to spend half the year caring for his diocese and the other half in the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun. As soon as he took over the diocese, he [ordained](#) so many priests and monks that he was called the “Chief of the Monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, and the Caretaker of the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan.” It is noteworthy that there is preserved in this monastery a vestment of his, ornamented with silver wire, embroidered with depictions of the twelve disciples, Melchizedek, and Aaron the priest. On it is written, “He who loves this reverend father—Anba Isaac, bishop of al-Bahnasa and al-Fayoum—in the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan—am 1555— ah 1245 (ad 1839)” (Daoud and Fakhry 2011: 276).

Anba Isaac’s achievements can be summarized as follows:

1. He restored the [Church](#) of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan in Wadi al-Natrun, sometimes called “the Cave” (Evelyn-White 1933:212) because it was built about 1.5 meters below ground level. This unique church was inaugurated on 23 April ad 1853, corresponding to the Coptic date of 17 Barmuda am. This was recorded in the manuscript of the four Gospels given by him as a gift to the monastery, mentioned below. This manuscript is still at the monastery.
2. Together with his sister Hanona, he presented to the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan a manuscript of the four Gospels in both Coptic and Arabic, dated to the year ad 1852. It was transcribed by a monk called Shenouda from al-Suryan Monastery. It was stamped by the bishop’s round seal, “Isaac the bishop 58.” He bought this manuscript for 350 Roman piasters. He also presented to the same monastery another manuscript of “The Consecration of Churches” in both Coptic and Arabic in ad 1834 (am 1550). He inscribed in this manuscript, “The vile person Isaac, Bishop of al-Bahnasa—in the name of God the merciful and compassionate and glory be to God in the highest heaven—a perpetual and everlasting endowment to the [Church](#) of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan in the wilderness of St.

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Macarius... am 1550." He signed it in Coptic, "The vile person Isaac the bishop." This manuscript is now kept in the patriarchal library in Abbasiya, Cairo (Daoud and Fakhry 2011: 251).

3. He always accompanied the patriarchs in their visits to the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun. This was mentioned in a manuscript describing the visit of the Coptic patriarch Pope Peter VII in ad 1835, stating that Pope Peter "was accompanied by the reverend bishop Anba Isaac, of al-Bahnasa and Fayoum and the caretaker of the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Surian" (Daoud and Fakhry 2011:251).
4. He played a major role in increasing the number of monks in the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, who numbered 150 in 1890. The number of monks had been only around seventy-five in 1833 (Tosson 1935: 46). The number of monks in the Monastery of the Holy Virgin al-Suryan was forty in 1896 (Meinardus 1988:140).

The Influence of Different Circumstances in the Nineteenth Century on the Diocese of Anba Isaac

No doubt the diocese of the Fayoum and al-Bahnasa was affected by the economical, political, and scientific changes that took place in the nineteenth century at the hands of the ruler of Egypt Muhammad 'Ali and his successors. These changes can be observed in the following:

1. The prevalence of foreign missionaries in Egypt, especially the [Catholic](#) ones who came from Rome and the Protestant ones who came from the United States and England. These missionaries spread their faith among the Orthodox [Egyptians](#) by offering social and educational services to the people and establishing scientific schools, institutes, and civil societies (al-Masry 1984: 44).
2. The Coptic archons (who were high-level government officials) played a major role in mediation between the [Church](#) and the rulers. These archons held senior positions in government departments, owned large estates, and established charities. Examples of such [notable](#)

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archons are Moallams Ghali and his brother Francis, Boktor, Youhanna, Mansour, Yacoub, and Beshara (al-Masry 1992: 380).

3. The remarkable role played by the Coptic patriarchs of the nineteenth century in confirming the Orthodox faith among Egyptians. One example of these popes was Pope Peter VII or, as the [Egyptians](#) knew him, Boutros al-Gawly (al-Gawly is the name of a village in Upper Egypt). This patriarch was keen on sending pastoral letters to the different dioceses for the sake of confirming the Orthodox doctrine, in the face of encroaching European churches. Another example was Pope Cyril IV, who built a printing house for publishing the books of the teachings of the Orthodox Church. He also established Coptic schools. A third example was Pope Demetrius II, who intensified his pastoral visits to his congregation, especially in Upper Egypt, for the sake of confirming their faith. He did this under the auspices of Khedive Isma'il, the ruler of Egypt at that time. We can say that the spiritual renaissance of the Coptic [Church](#) went hand in hand with the late nineteenth-century scientific and economic renaissance in Egypt.

Anba Isaac Strays from [Church](#) Teachings on the Subject of Divorce

For reasons unclear to us in the present day, Anba Isaac went against [Church](#) teachings and allowed divorce, permitting those who got divorced for trivial reasons (both men and women) to remarry. This prompted Pope Demetrius II to send a letter to the people and the priests of al-Bahnasa, the Fayoum, and Giza warning against and objecting to this matter.

It seems that the issue of divorce was raised at this time as a result of the weakness of the pastoral role of the Coptic [Church](#) in the previous period, which witnessed a state of political strife between the Mamluks and the Ottomans. This lasted for more than two centuries until Muhammad 'Ali ended the Mamluks' power completely in the famous massacre at the citadel in Cairo.

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In ad 1822, an important yet most unfortunate series of events related to the subject of divorce took place. The most respectable Archon Ghali had a younger brother named Francis, who was also an archon. In an audacious act with deadly consequences, Francis forged a letter in the ruler Muhammad 'Ali's name and, with his forged signature, requested the Roman pontiff to ordain a friend of his who was a pupil in the Roman Propaganda (the Roman [Catholic](#) office of [missionary](#) activities) as archbishop of Memphis, promising to coerce the Copts into submission to Rome. Previously, Archon Ghali and Archon Francis had converted to Catholicism by the command of Muhammad¹ Ali. Archon Francis sent this forged letter because of a dispute between him and the [Catholic](#) bishop Maximus related to the issue of divorce. When the forgery was brought to light, in accordance with the oriental concept that the head of the family is responsible for the actions of its members, Muhammad 'Ali ordered the execution of Archon Ghali, who was innocent, but yet was held responsible for his younger brother's illegal actions. These events came as quite a shocking blow to the Christian community in Egypt (Sourial 1984:134—35).

It seems that the phenomenon of divorce was trying to raise its head, but the popes of the [church](#) were keen on restricting it to the circumstances mentioned in the Bible, meaning divorce was allowed in case of adultery only. It seems that pressure was being put on the bishops by rich people and the nobles to be lenient in this matter. Some of these bishops acquiesced to this pressure, and it seems Anba Isaac was among them.

Consequently, Pope Demetrius II (ad 1862-70) sent a letter to the people and priests of the diocese of the Fayoum and al-Bahnasa gently blaming Anba Isaac and excommunicating a priest called Awad:

May the entire blessing and comprehensive grace be bestowed upon the ears of all the blessed sons and the trustworthy priests of the diocese of al-Bahnasa and the Fayoum. May the Lord bestow on them the best spiritual blessings and the greatest heavenly bounties, Amen. We inform

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you that we received news from many people and objections from some of our Christian Orthodox sons around the diocese. From this news and these objections, we know that our brother, Bishop Isaac, is acting against the Christian religion, such as breaking the ecclesiastical law by allowing some women to obtain a divorce from their husbands, and then giving them documents permitting them to get married again.

As we all know that what God has joined together, man must not separate, as said in the Holy Bible, we find it a must to send you this letter asking you not to accept any of these documents from anyone, but instead try to reconcile the husband and wife who want to divorce, as the Lord says, "How blessed are the peacemakers; God shall call them his sons." Whoever of you divorces a husband from his wife, or accepts documents from the bishop allowing remarriage, let him be excommunicated by the power of the word of God, the bishops of the Holy Synod, and me, Demetrius the vile servant of the See of St. Mark.

As for the priest Awad, who writes these documents with his own hand, we have stripped him of the priesthood and we ask you not to deal with him. My beloved sons, we ask whoever reads this letter to act according to its content and keep a copy of it for use if necessary. We ask every priest who reads this letter to pass it on to other priests all over the diocese. May God's blessing be bestowed on obedient children. (Abraam 2004: 620)

Conclusion

We have briefly studied the life of a very influential bishop of the Coptic Church during the nineteenth century, who not only greatly influenced the renaissance of the Coptic Church by his interest in building churches and repairing monasteries, and by increasing the numbers of monks and priests in his diocese, but was also influential in the enthronement of at least three patriarchs. In the swirl of social changes and challenges in Egypt during his time as bishop, it seems that Anba Isaac's judgment



Anba Isaac, Bishop of the Fayoum, al-Bahnasa, and Giza, 1834-81, and strayed from the dogma of the church. And while the patriarch gently rebuked him, it seems he continued to hold his high position, perhaps in deference to all his previous achievements for the Church.

It is strange indeed for such an influential figure as Anba Isaac, who was a bishop, then metropolitan, for almost fifty years, that when he died the exact date of his death was seemingly lost to history, as was the location of his grave. Still, we honor him for the many positive effects he had on the Coptic Church during the nineteenth century, and hope that someday more of his story emerges.

Bishop Martyros

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