

Christianity and Monasticism in al-Bahnasa according to Arabic Sources

LOCATED ABOUT two hundred kilometers south of [Cairo](#) on the western bank of [Bahr](#) Yusuf (literally, the Sea of Joseph, but actually a canal running off from the Nile), in Minya governorate, about sixteen kilometers northwest of the district of Bani Mazar, al-Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchos, or the Oxyrhynchite province) has been one of the most important cities in Egypt throughout history. In fact, the early [history](#) of al-Bahnasa is obscure. The situation of al-Bahnasa was given in Claudius Ptolemaeus, and this is one of the earliest references to it (Vogt 1920, vol. 5:29).

In the *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti*, it was placed on the military road running along the west of the Nile (Parthey and Pinder 1848). The river and the desert formed the western and eastern boundaries of the Oxyrhynchite province. The name of al-Bahnasa is mentioned in the *Scaloe coptes-arabes*, in the *Chronicle of John of Nikiou* (John of Nikiou 1916: 555), in the [History](#) of the Patriarchs (Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa' 1959), and in several other Coptic texts and Arabic translations and sources, which identify it as one of the most prosperous cities during the Byzantine period.

Al-Bahnasa's Name

In ancient times, the importance of al-Bahnasa was due to the ancient tombs built on its outskirts, and to the ruins of ancient Egyptian temples like those of Theories, the local hippopotamus goddess, and the sacred sharp-nosed fish that gave the town its name. The city is mentioned in the records of the Kushite king Piye (the more usual name for Piankhy), who captured it during his reign (ca. 741-ca. 712 BC).

The town itself was the nome capital in the seventh century BC (Bagnall and Rathbone 2008: 158—59). Speaking about the oasis of al-Bahnasa,

Abu al-Makarim, who lived during the Fatimid period (AH 351—555/AD 952-1160), cited the Little Oasis or the Oasis Parva. Its Coptic name was °Y^2 neHxe • which is directly translated into Arabic as ‘Wah al-Bahnasa.’ It was also named ‘Wah al-Bahariya’ because it is located to the north of Kharga and Dakhla oases. Abu al-Makarim recorded the meaning of al- Bahnasa’s Coptic name as ‘marriage’ or ‘place of marriage’ (MXNtpexeT). He mentioned that this town was built for the maidens who were the virgin daughters of the kings, or for those married to the sons of kings who originated from this place. The place in which Joseph the Truthful worshiped was near al-Bahnasa (Abu al-Makarim 1895: fol.75 a, 215).

In their books, Ibn Khirdadhabah (AH 205-80/AD 820-93) and Yaqut al-Hamawi (AH 626/AD 1228) mention the name of al-Bahnasi (Ibn Khirdadhabah 1955: 247; Yaqut al-Hamawi 1955, vol. 1: 771). Al-Bakri (d. AH 487/AD 1094) also mentions it as al-Bahnas or Bahnasat al-Wahat (1992: vol. 2:145/2, 147 note 2, 187, 286).

Ibn Mammati (AH 544—606/AD 1149—1209) also mentions its Arabic names, al-Bahnasa and al-Bahnasawiya (1943: 81, 345-46). Al-Qalqashandi (AH 756- 821/AD 1355-1418) wrote of al-Bahnasi and al-Bahnasawiya on the western bank of the Nile (1963, vol. 3:377,390,393). In the Description de l’Egypte, the city is mentioned with the name “Bahnasa” (182, vol. 4:391; vol. 18:115).

Amelineau and Muhammad Ramzi give the ancient Egyptian name of al-Bahnasa as Pamadjat or Pamazet (Amelineau 1893: 91-93; Ramzi 1960, vol. 3:212). The name of al-Bahnasa is mentioned by Isambert (1881, vol. 2: 467); Boinet (1899:105); Maspero (1912:40,140); Maspero and Wiet (1919, vol. 39: 51,173-91); Combe, Sauvaget, and Wiet (1932: vol. 3, no. 939); and Wiet (1960:926). Timm also wrote of it as “al-Bahnasa” and “Pemea” (1984, vol. 1: 111). According to Muhammad Ramzi, al-Bahnasa is one of the ancient Egyptian villages previously mentioned by Gauthier (1925) under the religious name Permaza or Permazd. Its [civic](#) name was Mert.

Its Roman name was Oxyrhynchos (Ramzi 1960, vol. 3: 211). Al-Bahnasa's name in Greek is geprou or Egepiou (Timm 1984-92, vol. 1:111-28,283-300), and in Coptic it is *neorne* ('Ah Mubarak 1881, vol. II:3; Timm 1984-92, vol. 1: 111—28, 283—300). According to Grenfell and Hunt, the ancient al-Bahnasa received the official Greek name of Nea *Nea*; during the sixth century AD (1898, vol. 1: 51—52,126, 33).

MacLennan writes concerning the name of al-Bahnasa: "It took its outlandish name from a certain species of fish which in antique times was adopted as a sort of genius loci. This fish-cult dated back to remote pharaohs and during Roman times had apparently lost most of its importance" (MacLennan 1968: 11-12; Meinardus 1969: 259). [Mary Magdi](#) added that al-Bahnasa was the capital of the nineteenth province in Upper Egypt, in which the locals worshiped a type of fish called *Mormyrus* that was common in this city (Milad 2000: 59—60; Magdi 2011: 306).

After the Arab conquest of Egypt by 'Amr ibn al-'As in AH 21/AD 641—42, al-Bahnasa received other names, such as 'Izbat al-'Abadiya and Bahnasat Ahmad (Magdi 2011: 306).

Muhammad Ramzi adds that al-Bahnasa was mentioned in AD 1820 with the name of al-Bahnasa al-Gharbiya, a name that is still used by the Ministry of Interior, perhaps because the town is located west of the Nile in front of Sandfa, which is called by the locals 'al-Bahnasa al-Sharqiya.' When Muhammad Pasha al-Nashangi became the prefect of Egypt for the first time in AD 1720, he ordered the removal of the 'prefectus diwan' from al-Bahnasa to al-Fashn, to be near the main road between [Cairo](#) and Upper Egypt. In AD 1830, under Muhammad 'Ah Pasha, al-Bahnasa became the main town of Middle Egypt, and perhaps also its center of government, after all the towns in the districts of Minya and Abu Qurqas were added to it. Since that time, al-Bahnasa has been considered a part of the district of Bani Mazar (Ramzi 1960: 212).

Al-Bahnasa in Arabic Sources

Under the rule of the Roman emperors, al-Bahnasa was the most important municipal center in the area; it was the main capital or metropolis of its district and also of the Oxyrhynchite province (Bowman et al. 2007: v—vi). In AD 200, when Septimus Severus visited Egypt, he held his assizes first at Pelusium and then at al-Bahnasa. It may have become a regular seat for the prefect's conventus in the late third century AD (Turner 1952; Meinardus 1969: 256). In 1912, Maspero mentioned Futuh al-Bahnasa, a historical reference without any real documentary value for the purposes of this chapter (1912: 40). He described only the towers and the military architecture of Roman Bahnasa without giving any information about its Christian religious buildings.

Narrating the details of the Arab conquest of Egypt and the battle of Heliopolis, Butler said, "They advanced in this way to a town called Bahnasa which they took by storm, and slaughtered all before them—men, women and children" (1902: 223). He mentioned also how the city of al- Bahnasa resisted the Arab conquest.

Al-Bahnasa was also one of the most important sources for the wood used for the Egyptian fleet under the rule of the Fatimids and the Ayyubids (AH 567—647/AD 1171—1249). It is known that the famous historian al-Musabihi (AH 366—420/AD 977—1029) was the prefect of al-Bahnasa during the time of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah (AH 386—411/AD 996—1021) (Anan 1999:49—50). The well-known historian and geographer Ibn Hawqal (d. AH 367/AD 977) described al-Bahnasa as a town in Upper Egypt (1938, vol. 2:155; 1965, vol. 1, 2nd ed.: 105,159). Many are the other Arabic sources in which al-Bahnasa is mentioned, such as the work of al-Quda'i (d. AH 454/AD 1062), who was born during the time of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah (Anan 1999: 57-58), and who mentioned al-Bahnasa simply as one of the cities of Egypt. Other Arabic sources describing al-Bahnasa include the books of Ibn Qudama (d. AH 486/AD 1093), Ibn al-Hamadhani (d. AH 759/AD 1357), and al-

Al-Muqaddasi (AH 819—88/AD 1416—83) wrote about the luxury linen textiles produced in Oxyrhynchos, which was a big city inhabited by a large population (al-Muqaddasi 1980). For Ibn al-Ji'an (d. AH 930/AD 1524), this town declined to the point where it existed in name alone (1898:159).

After visiting Egypt, several foreign travelers, such as Nasir-i Khusraw 'Ulwi ([fifth century](#) AH/eleventh century AD), 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (AH 557-629/AD 1162-1231), and Ibn Batutta (AH 703-79/AD 1304-77), described al-Bahnasa as a big city surrounded by several gardens (Nasir-i Khusraw 'Ulwi 1993; 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi 1810: 685; Deffemery and Sanguinetti 1969, vol. 1).

Christianity in al-Bahnasa in Arabic Sources

In Arabic sources, al-Bahnasa is mentioned as flourishing, due to its ancient Egyptian temples, its Coptic monasteries, and its churches. John of Nikiou mentions the city while writing about the Arab conquest of Egypt (John of Nikiou 1916: 555).

Abu al-Makarim also writes that the churches of this city and the neighborhood are several and he specifically mentions the church of St. Ammon (Abamun). He mentions the existence of about 360 churches in the area of al-Bahnasa. Among them are the church of [Mary](#) and the church of St. John or Abu Hanna the martyr, constructed perhaps in Najaj, to the north of Rifa and Udrunkah (Evetts and Butler 1895: fol. 75 a, 215; Hyvernat 1886: 174; Amelineau 1890: 141). Abu al-Makarim also speaks about the churches of the martyred saints George and Bartholomew. The latter suffered martyrdom on 1 [Tut](#)/29 August, either in the oasis of al-Bahnasa or on the Egyptian or Nubian seacoast; his body was in a church in al-Bahnasa named the church of Karbil. Abu Salih the

Armenian says about this martyr:

On this day is commemorated the [death](#) of the holy disciple Bartholomew, one of the Twelve. To this apostle, it was allotted that he should go to the Oases. So he and Peter travelled thither, and he preached the gospel to the inhabitants of the Oases, and called them to the Knowledge of God, after wonderful signs and astounding miracles had been shown to them. After converting the people in the Oases, then he went to the country on the sea-coast, to those who knew not God; and he preached among them and turned them to the Knowledge of God and to faith in the Lord Christ. But Agharbus, the king, heard of him and was wroth with him, and commanded that they should put him in a sack of hair-cloth and fill it with sand and cast him into the sea. (Evetts and Butler 1895:215—16)

In addition, Abu al-Makarim reports the existence of the churches of saints Mark, Stephen, and Theodore in al-Saqya, also called Saqyat Mahfuz (Evetts and Buder 1895:215; Ibn Duqmaq 1893, vol. 5:8). There were also the churches of St. Abadir, of the archangels Michael and Gabriel, renovated by a certain official, the churches of the disciples and the apostles, and the church of the Holy Virgin Mary. He adds to his list the church of the martyr Istafura, that is, St. Christopher or Christianos, named the Dog's Face. This martyr, whose church was on the canal outside the city, was one of those who were usually associated with the pure disciples and the fathers.

For each of the two saints George and Mercurius, there were two churches on the borders of the lake in al-Bahnasa and in Idfak, in addition to churches bearing the names of saints Paul and Thomas. Most probably the historian means here St. Paul the first hermit or St. Paul of Tamwuh, known for his austerity, who is commemorated on 7 Baba/4 October (Evetts and Butler 1895:217). Concerning the church of St. George, built in the oasis of al-Bahnasa, according to Abu al-Makarim it is said that it contained only his body without the head (Evetts and Buder 1895: 258—59). In Ashrubah in the district of Bani Mazar, there were also two

Christianity and Monasticism in al-Bahnasa according to Arabic Sources | 7
churches of the Cross. At Saft Rashin, to the north of al-Bahnasa and to the south of Beni Suef, there was the church of St. Theodore the Oriental, which was wrecked by the Ghuzz and the Kurds. Later, this church was transformed into a mosque (Evetts and Butler 1895:214).

Al-Maqrizi (d. AH 845/AD 1441) mentions that the city of al-Bahnasa was built by a [Copt](#) named Minawish ibn Minqawish (1835, vol. 1: 237). He also writes about the Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary, outside Tanbda, a small village away from the main road. At that time, only one monk was living in this monastery. The same historian adds that in al-Bahnasa many monasteries and churches were built but had lately been destroyed (al-Maqrizi 1835, vol 1: 237; al-Maqrizi 1998: 164, 217 n. 3; 'Ali Mubarak 1887, vol. 11: 3). According to Gabra, perhaps some of these monasteries and churches declined or were abandoned after the heavy tax imposed on the monks for the first time in AD 705 (2008: 204). Al-Bakri confirms the arrival of the Savior and his Mother in al-Bahnasa, where palms flourished (1992: vol. 2, 147 n. 2).

Yaqut al-Hamawi mentions that there was also a chapel in al-Bahnasa where the Holy Family stayed for about seven years before they returned to Jerusalem. In fact, the duration of the stay of the Holy Family in Egypt has long been a matter of controversy, perhaps because the duration is not mentioned in the Holy Book, in the historical sources, or in the homilies. But it is known that the Savior and his Mother stayed in Egypt for about three years and eleven months according to the [Coptic Orthodox](#) tradition and also to the contents of a [Coptic papyrus](#) published at Cologne University in May 1998 by Gesa Schenke (2004:151–55). [Mary](#) Magdi mentions that the news of this papyrus, dating from the fourth-[fifth century](#) AD, was published in the second edition of al-Ahram under the title “Bardiya qibtiya al-masih ‘asha fi misr arba’ sanawat” (Magdi 2011:42-43).

According to Mikha'il Maksi Iskandar and Abba Demetrius, from this papyrus, written in Fayoumic Coptic, we learn that the arrival of the Savior was in the Coptic month of Pashons, as follows: "6K6(J)(on I N2ynonXAION NHI 2M nG2AOY NTGK KAHpONOMIA MnAOjAC" ('You shall be the homeland for my feet in the day of your inheritance in Pashons'). Gesa Schenke published this text as follows: "Du wirst mir zum FuBschemel werden, [am](#) Tage deines Erbes im (Monat) Paschons" (Schenke 2004:154).

In the same papyrus, the following is written: "TM6TKOYI MilAQJHAI GC6(l)(Dni N2HTK NF NAAMni MN I A NABAT" ('The childhood of my son will be in you three years and eleven months when the enemies shall follow him') (Iskandar 1999: 75; Adli 1999: 130; Abba Demetrius 2000: 55; Abba Demetrius 2007: 13, 37-46; Athanasiyus al-Maqqari 2007:11; Magdi 2011: 42—43).

Following Abu al-Makarim, al-Maqrizi also mentions that there were about 360 churches in Bahnasa province, all of which were damaged except for the Church of the Virgin, which still existed in al-Maqrizi's time (al-Maqrizi 1835, vol. 1: 237; al-Maqrizi 1998:164, 217 n. 3; 'Ali Mubarak 1887, vol. 11:3).

Al-Bahnasa was well known for its fine textiles made out of linen, wool, cotton, and silk. These rich fabrics were exported to the Mediterranean area and to the Arab countries.

At the end of Mamluk rule (AH 648—923/ AD 1250—1517), many historians spoke about al-Bahnasa as a glorious and considerable city, and they mentioned that all kinds of textiles produced in it were decorated with its name. The woolen fabrics produced in this city impressed several historians and travelers, such as Ibn Mammati and Ibn Battuta (Ibn Mammati 1943: 81, 344—45; Ramzi 1960, vol. 3: 212; Deffemery and Sanguinetti 1969, vol. 1: 96).

Some examples are displayed in the Coptic and Islamic Art museums in

Christianity and Monasticism in al-Bahnasa according to Arabic Sources | 9
Cairo, as well as in other internationally known archaeological museums in Europe and America.

Describing al-Bahnasa, 'Ah Mubarak confirmed that there were two cities bearing this name: one in the Wah oasis and the other in Middle Egypt between Minyat Khasib and Beni Suef. According to 'Ali Mubarak, the large city of al-Bahnasa in Middle Egypt was well known before the Arab conquest of Egypt. Its area was about one thousand feddans. During the conquest, al-Bahnasa was a distinguished city with high walls, towers, and gates. It had four gates oriented to the four cardinal points: Bab al-Ghabal, Bab Qandas, Bab al-Tzabi, and Bab Tuma.

Each gate consisted of three towers. Between each pair of towers, there were several windows. Al-Bahnasa contained the largest number of Coptic monasteries and churches in Egypt. The inhabitants used to pray in the twelve main churches ('Ali Mubarak 1887, vol. 11: 1–3). Its gates and suburbs were protected by guards who used to receive foreign visitors. The city was also inhabited by a great number of monks and priests. They outnumbered the craftsmen and the workers of the city.

Relying on what the historian Palladius wrote after his visit to Egypt in AD 407 (Lucot 1912, vol. 34), 'Ali Mubarak wrote that there were perhaps two thousand nuns and five thousand monks and hegumens who lived in the monasteries and inside the city walls of al-Bahnasa. These figures may be compared with what Maspero wrote in 1923 when he said that, in a period previous to his own, the number of the religious in this city was equivalent to the number of unbelievers (Maspero 1923:55). In the [Historia Monachorum](#) in Aegypto, the author reports that, in the fourth century AD, about ten thousand monks and twenty thousand nuns were subject to the bishop of the diocese of Bahnasa (Meinardus 1969: 256;

Stewart 1991).

[Mary](#) Magdi confirms that during these two centuries, al-Bahnasa was one of the well-known Coptic bishoprics, containing the same number of monks but only twelve thousand nuns (Magdi 2011: 307). Meinardus mentions that these numbers were “enough to turn the town into a kind of holy city, where monks congested the streets and the town was so full of monasteries that monkish songs were heard in every quarter.” He added that the town had its own hospital and became a considerable episcopal see during the sixth century AD (Meinardus 1969: 256). Also according to Meinardus, the monastic population of Egypt exceeded half a million souls.

These exaggerated numbers show that during the [fifth century](#) AD the towns and villages of the province of al-Bahnasa were full of Christians, monasteries, and churches. It is evident that al-Bahnasa was the seat of the bishops and it became the capital of the province of Arcadia in Middle Egypt (Bagnall and Rathbone 2008: 158–59). [Mary](#) Magdi mentions the names of Eha the Eunuch, Isaac, and Apios, who suffered martyrdom under the rule of the Roman emperor Diocletian (AD 284-305) (Iskandar 1999: 51-52; Magdi 2011:307).

She also mentions the name of Abba Butros as one of the famous bishops of al-Bahnasa who attended the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, in addition to other bishops such as Theodosios, Blagios, Dionisios, Theodoros, Apollonios, and Cyril, who wrote and explained the Gospels of Saints Luke and John (Magdi 2011:307). After AD 1821, the locality went into severe decline.

Al-Bahnasa in Recent References

At the turn of the twentieth century in al-Bahnasa, Grenfell, Hunt, and

Christianity and Monasticism in al-Bahnasa according to Arabic Sources. | 11

their successors discovered the biggest collection of papyri at that time, the most important pieces of which Edgar Lobel conserved at Queen's College, Oxford. In the winter of 1896-97 and from 1903 to 1907, these scholars discovered many Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Coptic texts dating from the time of Augustus until the eighth century AD (Turner 1952; Poethke 1991; Bowman et al. 2007: v-vi). These included possible works of Ephorus, the Life of Euripides written by Satyrus in the form of a dialogue, and a popular biography, as well as a literary find in an example of a Latin text (Meinardus 1969: 257).

Since 1890, remains of granite columns, fragments of capitals, and other stonework, as well as pottery objects, have been discovered. Recently, scholars have written much about al-Bahnasa, which came to international fame because of its long and important Christian history, its monuments, and its papyri, but little or no mention has been made of Christianity itself in this locale.

About eighteen kilometers to the west of Bani Mazar, the church of St. Theodore was built on the eastern bank of the Sea of Joseph in the al-Bahnasa region. The existing building dates back to the eighteenth nineteenth century AD. The translation of the relics of St. Theodore to Shutb, located in the south of Asyut, is annually celebrated here on 20 Abib/27 July (Meinardus 2003: 78).

Flinders Petrie discovered the Roman and the Byzantine necropolis, as did the members of the Italian scientific archaeological missions (Bagnall and Rathbone 2008:160). In 1923, the church of Saint George the Roman was built in al-Bahnasa by Ibrahim Ghattas and Father Butros Ishaq in the same place as the ancient archaeological church of the Holy Virgin Mary.

In 1955, remains of an archaeological church were discovered inside the Islamic tombs of al-Bahnasa. From 1985 until 1987, the members of the Kuwaiti archaeological mission worked on the Islamic remains at al-

Christianity and Monasticism in al-Bahnasa according to Arabic Sources | 12

Bahnasa. In 1992, Catalan-Egyptian excavations took place in the north western necropolis of al-Bahnasa, and a Coptic oratory and access to three crypts were discovered (Bagnall and Rathbone 2008:161). Nowadays, anyone can visit the only ancient archaeological site existing, which includes the tree of [Mary](#) and a well that is inside the recent Islamic cemetery about ten kilometers from the Garanus monastery. In conclusion, al-Bahnasa was blessed by the visit of the Savior, according to the [Coptic Orthodox](#) tradition. Immediately after the introduction of Christianity in al-Bahnasa, according to several Arabic sources, the number of Christians increased in this town. The Arab historians affirm that during medieval times, al-Bahnasa was a prosperous city known for its rich Christian tradition. It was the birthplace of many saints and martyrs. Several ancient temples of al-Bahnasa were transformed into monasteries and churches.

Other monasteries and churches were built throughout the city. Later, Islamic buildings were constructed there. In al-Bahnasa, there was also the largest archaeological discovery of Greek papyri in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. For a long recent period the entire city was covered by sand, and today the appearance of al-Bahnasa has totally changed from the large and vibrant city described by various Arab historians and travelers. Nowadays, the bishop of Beni Suef is the bishop of al-Bahnasa and Beni Suef.

Sherin Sadek El Gendi

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