

CHURCH OF ABU SAYFAYN (Old Cairo)

In the Arabic manuscripts this [church](#) is called “church of Abu Marqurah,” and in a Garshuni manuscript (Arabic written in Syriac characters) “church of Mar Quryus” (Mercurius).

Two late Coptic manuscripts describe it thus: “Mercurius at the tetrapylon of the river.” Western travelers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries called it “[church](#) of Mari Moncure” or “church of Saint Macarius” (probably a confusion between Marqurah and Maqarah; Coquin, 1974, pp. 15-17).

The [church](#) belongs to the group of buildings included in the Christian enclosure of DAYR ABU SAYFAYN, which is situated to the north of the QASR AL-SHAM’, near the Hilwan railway line and the mosque of ‘Amr ibn al ‘As in Old Cairo. Down to the late Middle Ages, when the [Nile](#) flowed more to the east than today, the river bank was in front of the church (Coquin, 1974, pp. 27-30; see also Casanova, 1919, pp. 192-98 and pl. 3). The [Church](#) of Abu Sayfayn includes the church proper, said to be dedicated to Saint MERCURIUS OF CAESAREA, and two groups of secondary chapels annexed to the church; the first to the northeast of the principal church containing three oratories on both the ground floor and the first story, and the second to the northwest above the north vestibule and the *mandarah* (reception hall).

According to some authors the [church](#) was reconstructed under the patriarch ABRAHAM (975-978) after having been destroyed and converted into a warehouse for sugarcane. It was burned down and pillaged by a Muslim mob under the patriarch [MARK](#) III (1167- 1189). The chapels dedicated to Saint John the Baptist and Saint George, probably situated in the south nave of the [church](#) and its corresponding triforium (see [ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS](#)), were spared from the fire.

An immediate [reconstruction](#) was undertaken at the expense of the *shaykh* Abu al-Barakat ibn Abu Sa'id Hablan, and the [church](#) was reopened in 1175. It was closed in March 1301, at the same time as all the other churches in Egypt, and reopened in 1312-1313. It underwent restorations in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries carried out by the Committee for the Conservation of Monuments of Arab Art (Coquin, 1974, pp. 18-20).

In this [church](#) were consecrated Mar Basliyus, patriarch of Antioch, in 1421-1422, as well as GABRIEL VIII (1586-1601), PETER VI (1718-1826) and JOHN XVII (1726-1745), patriarchs of the Coptic church. It has been the residence of the Coptic patriarchs from CHRISTODOULUS (1047-1077) and the place of the death and burial of subsequent patriarchs (Coquin, pp. 21-24).

An assembly of the bishops took place there to protest against the patriarch SHENUTE II (1032-1046), who practiced simony. The concoction of the CHRISM under the [patriarch THEODOSIUS II](#) (1294-1300) took place in the church (Coquin, pp. 24-25).

Anba BARSUM, called the Naked, lived for a long time in a crypt on the north side of the [church](#) and died during the reign of patriarch JOHN VIII (1300-1320).

The [church](#) of Saint Mercurius, the secondary chapels, and other nearby places contain numerous artistic objects. On the ground floor of the church itself is a *screen in wood* that separates the [narthex](#) from the central chapel; according to Raouf Habib, it dates from the eighteenth century (1967, p. 65). A screen of the central sanctuary is made of pinewood and composed of panels inlaid with ebony and ivory and decorated with floral motifs. The screen of the south and north sanctuaries and altar of the second is made of wood and composed of panels inlaid with ivory and ebony and representing floral designs. The first dates from 1753, while the second dates from the Fatimid period

(909-1171) according to modern authors; Raouf Habib (p. 70) mentions the altar surmounted by a low ciborium (see [ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS](#)).

An *ambo* in marble, resting on fifteen small columns, is situated in the northeast corner of the central nave; it bears an inscription in Coptic.

The extant remains of the wall painting on the southeast column of the central nave depict according to Meinardus (1969-1970, p. 140, pl. 11, B) a horseman, probably Saint Theodorus. The wall painting in the south nave is mentioned by Raouf Habib (p. 67) as the remains of mural painting. Wall paintings on the two columns situated on each side of the door of the screen of the central sanctuary are, according to Meinardus, the surviving remnants of paintings representing on the north column Christ holding the Gospel and blessing and on the south column the Holy Virgin holding the infant Jesus (pp. 140-41, pl. 12 A-B).

In the central sanctuary, the altar is surmounted by a ciborium in wood, supported by four [marble](#) columns. The lower part of the ciborium represents Christ surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists. The sanctuary ends in the east with an apse, the upper part of which is painted with Christ in a mandorla, supported by two angels. In the middle of the lower part and behind the episcopal chair is a niche in which Christ is painted enthroned, holding the Gospel and blessing. The twelve apostles are represented on each side. Above the arch of the niche are painted in the middle a seraph and on either side of him the angel Gabriel and the Virgin of the Annunciation.

In the time of Butler the baptismal fonts occupied the eastern part of the south nave, surmounted by a ciborium. Today they are in the south sanctuary itself, dedicated to the [archangel](#) Raphael (1884, pp. 115-16). Butler also speaks of having found in a chapel outside the principal [church](#) a chalice casket, which the priest of the church caused to be placed in the north sanctuary (1884, pp. 109-10, 117). It is a box in the

form of a cube with an opening in the upper part; it is dated to 1563. The four sides of this box are covered with paintings representing Christ, the Virgin carrying the infant Jesus, the Annunciation, and the priest Zosimus giving communion to Saint Mary the Egyptian. On the walls and the beams above the wooden screens icons are suspended.

In the Chapel of Saint George on the ceiling of the south triforium and on the side of the choir one may see the remains of a sculpture in wood, described by Butler (p. 123) and dating from the thirteenth century. On the north side and a little farther forward, one sees the remains of an ambo in wood, fitted into the wall and accessible by a ladder.

Raouf Habib (p. 73) dates it to the twelfth or thirteenth century. The niche fitted up in the east wall of the sanctuary contains the painting of Christ seated, holding the Gospel and blessing; He is surrounded by a mandorla. On each side are two medallions containing what may be two human busts (Meinardus, p. 139, pl. 10, A).

Mural paintings of the north triforium include a hollow in the north wall, in which a fresco represents an angel, probably the [archangel](#) Suriel according to the Coptic inscription underneath, which recalls the name of the donor. On the outside north wall, one may still distinguish remains of painting (Meinardus, p. 125, pl. 7 A).

In the northeast group of secondary chapels on the ground floor, the north sanctuary is consecrated to Saint James Intercisus and contains a screen in wood. Above it and on the eastern wall is an inscription in Cufic characters, dated to the tenth century. Remains of wall painting are preserved to the right of this inscription (Meinardus, pp. 139-40, pls. 10 B; 11 A). Butler (p. 118) speaks of having seen in this sanctuary the altar covered with a [marble](#) plaque in the form of a horseshoe.

The central and south sanctuaries, consecrated, respectively, to Saint John the Baptist and Saint George, each have a screen that derives from

the chapel of Saint George, situated in the south triforium of the [Church of Saint Mercurius](#). According to modern authors, they date from between the tenth to the twelfth centuries. To the south of the naves is the baptistery, closed by a screen in wood of the Fatimid period, which, according to Butler (pp. 123-24), belongs to the same chapel mentioned above. The baptismal fonts are constructed of masonry.

In the naves of the first story one can distinguish the remains of wall painting, a saint blessing and holding the keys, and an inscription (Meinardus, pp. 134-35, pls. 6 A-B). The north sanctuary, closed by a screen, contains a ciborium already in ruins. In the niche in the east wall, the Holy Virgin is represented with the infant Jesus. The central sanctuary, according to Butler (p. 120), contains a remarkable screen. Its ciborium is abandoned in a corner. The south sanctuary has a screen, and the ciborium is in situ.

In the *northwest group* is the chapel dedicated to the Virgin, containing three sanctuaries that are separated from the naves by a screen in wood, above which is suspended a range of icons representing the twelve apostles. The altar is surmounted by a painted ciborium. The apse of the east wall is painted with the Ascension, deliberately damaged.

In the upper register is Christ enthroned, holding the Gospel and blessing; he is surrounded by a mandorla supported by the four animals of the Apocalypse; and on each side are two angels in adoration. In the lower register the Virgin is represented in the middle, in an orant position, surrounded by twelve apostles (Meinardus, pp. 136-39, pls. 7 B; 8 A-B; 9 A). According to Butler (p. 121) the niche of the south sanctuary is decorated with the Baptism of Christ, a painting that, according to Meinardus (p. 139, pl. 9 B), must be dated to the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

The Coptic Museum possesses various pieces of woodwork deriving from this church (see Coquin, 1971, p. 35): a door of wood, composed of panels

inlaid with ebony, probably from the twelfth century; a screen of wood composed of two leaves; a panel in wood representing the figure of a holy personage, sculpted in relief, dating from the twelfth century; a frame in wood composed of panels sculpted in relief, bearing an inscription in Cufic, dating from the twelfth century; and an altar plaque in pine wood, dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

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