

COPTIC HAGIOGRAPHY

Egypt was influenced by the Greek culture, hence many of the hagiographical texts were written first in this language and translated later into Coptic. It is important to use the classical hagiographical tools such as *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* and the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (16 vols., Rome 1965-1976), in addition to the bibliography in each issue of the *Analecta Bollandiana*. There are several methods to approach the study of the Coptic hagiography, but the preferred one is to choose the liturgical aspect or how the Coptic Church presents its saints through the Coptic liturgical books.

The saints are commemorated through several rites, such as the **Rite of Glorifications**. This book contains various hymns in honor of saints. A short account of their life is included in the **Synaxarion**. It contains the lives of saints according to the Coptic calendar. There are two versions, one of the Lower Egypt and another one from Upper Egypt. The **Antiphonarion** (in Arabic, **Difnar**) is a collection of hymns for the whole year.

The hymns of the Antiphonarion are sung in the service of the Psalmody, which follows the office of Compline. For the liturgical celebration, the Coptic Church possesses the synaxis (assembly) of the saints, where the Virgin Mary asks for their intercessions and their prayers; another synaxis is also recited before the mass during the midnight prayer. See GLORIFICATIONS, RATE OF.

The commemorated saints in the Coptic Church can be put in several categories:

1. The Virgin Mary. There exists the **feast** of her birthday, the feast of her entrance in the temple, the feast of her resting, the feast of the **Assumption** of her body, and the consecration of the church named after her in the city of Philippi. In addition to that, the month of Kiahk,

preceding the feast of the Nativity, is consecrated to praising the Virgin Mary and comparing the [image](#) of the Virgin symbols in the Old Testament.

2. The angels and the heavenly creatures: the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and others.

- The Archangel Michael (12 Hathor, 12 Baunah) is the most popular heavenly creature among the Copts. He inherited several characters from the ancient Egyptian religion, such as a special cake that was presented in ancient times to Osiris. According to Coptic tradition, Michael is the angel who announced the Resurrection to the women. Michael is also the angel of the Last Judgment, holding a balance with his hand like the god Anubis. Several churches and monasteries are named after him.
- The Archangel Gabriel (22 Kiahk) is the angel of the Annunciation, hence his commemoration is included in the Fast of the Advent, during the month of Kiahk, and also for the feast of the Annunciation. In art, he is always represented with the Virgin for the Annunciation, or with a sword in front of the **icon** of Michael.
- The Archangel Raphael (3 Nasi), in the Coptic mentality, is assimilated to the story of Tobit, so he is always presented as a guardian angel.
- The Archangel Suriel, according to the Coptic tradition, is the trumpeter of the Apocalypse.
- The Four Bodiless Creatures (8 Hathor)—only a few churches are dedicated to them, such as the ancient church of the **Monastery of St. Antony**.
- The Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse (24 Hathor) represent the **priests** on Earth; their **doxology** is used to welcome the new priest and **bishops**.

3. John the Baptist (2 Thot, 2 Baunah, 30 Baunah, 30 Meshir, 26 Thot): the precursor of Christ has a very special place among the Coptic synaxis.

The Coptic Church asks his intercession, as it does the Virgin, the angels, and the heavenly creatures, while for the other saints it is only a prayer.

4. The infants of Bethlehem (3 Tobeh): assimilated to the 144,000 of the Apocalypse.

5. The prophets of the Old Testament: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (28 Messori), Moses (8 Thot), Jeshua, son of Nun (4 Thot), Isaiah (6 Thot), Jonah (25 Thot), Joel, Nahum, Haggi, David, Obiedias, Hosoe, Daniel, Ezechiel, Joachim, Jeremiah, Samuel, Joseph the carpenter, Eziachias, and Micha. Most of their biographies in the Synaxarion are inspired from the Bible and sometimes from apocryphal texts.

6. The Apostles: Peter, Paul, Philip, Andrew, Barnabas, James son of Alpheus, Ansemus, Matthias, James son of Zabadee, James the brother of the Lord, Thomas, Titus.

7. The 70 disciples: Stephen, Philipp, and others.

8. The Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the evangelist.

9. The martyrs: Hippolyte [Delehay](#) traces the history of the persecution by comparing the Coptic texts with the Greek and Latin Passions. He analyzed the texts and concluded that they were written in **Alexandria** by a Greek Egyptian. De Lacy O'Leary listed all the saints in the [Copto-Arabic Synaxarion](#) and gave some details about the manuscripts of each saint. Baumeister compared the Coptic texts with the ancient Egyptian mentality and concluded that there is what can be called the "Coptic consensus."

A) Martyrs before the Diocletian era: Few martyrs before the Diocletian era are included in the Coptic calendar; most of them are foreigners, such as Ignatius of Antioch under Trajan, and St. Mercurius and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus under Decius. There is the legend of the martyr Eudoemon, who was from Erment in Upper Egypt. An angel informed him

of the presence of the Lord Jesus, Joseph, and the Virgin Mary in Ashmunaun, fleeing Herod. He went to their place and worshipped Christ. After his return to his village, he refused to worship the pagan gods and suffered. The tradition of this martyrdom occurs only in the Synaxarion of Upper Egypt.

B) Martyrs during the great persecution:

i- The martyrs of Egypt.

1. The clergy: This category is very important. Historically, we have the martyrdom of Phileas, Bishop of The Coptic calendar includes also several bishops such as Serapamon, Bishop of Nikiou; Pisoura, Bishop of Masil; Macrobius of Nikiou; Psate, Bishop of Psoi; Gallinicus, and Ammonius.

2. Nobles such as John of Sanhout (8 Bachans) and Isaac of Tiphre (6 Bashans).

3. Soldiers such as Apa Dios (25 Tubah), Ischyriou of Qallin (7 Baunah), Abakradjon (25 Abib), and St. **Menas**.

ii- The martyrs of Antioch (the **Basilides** family): These martyrs are considered members of the legendary royal or noble family of Basilides. There are several genealogies included in their martyrdoms but without any. This cycle includes the martyrdoms of Claudius, Basilides, [Apater](#) and Iraaie, Macarius, Eusebius, sometimes Theodore, Victor, Besamon, Apoli, and Justus.

C) The group of Julius of Aqfahs: This group is attributed to a person called Julius of Akfahs. In fact, the study of this corpus shows that these martyrdoms were written between the 6th or 7th century and the 11th century. The study of the events, administrative titles, geography, and persons demonstrates that this corpus can be subdivided in homogenous. The first group is the martyrs from Middle Egypt, such as Epima, Shenoufe, Heraclides, Didymus, Pansnew, and Chamoul.

It shows that the compiler knew very well the geography of this district; they have a common beginning and end, but there is an evolution toward the presentation of Julius of Akfahs. The second group is composed of the

texts of Ari and Anoub. It was written in Lower Egypt.

Julius is presented in a few lines and the author did not give any useful data for the geography of administrative titles. The third group is Paese and Thecla. It has a different style—the story of a brother and a sister—and it seems that the text we have is a compilation of at least two narrations.

Macarius of Antioch and Nahrawa are the fourth group. It is characterized by the exaggeration—hence, the judge is the emperor himself—and the events are in Antioch (the capital). The martyrdom of John and Simon is from the 11th century and ascribed to Julius of Akfahs. There are also several texts in Arabic attributed to Julius of Akfahs, but it is hard to determine their authorship. Mention can be made of Mirhch, Apa Ischyron, and Kastor.

D) The foreign martyrs

E) The post-Diocletian martyrs, Alladius (3 Baunah)

i- The non-Roman martyrs: St. George, James Intercicus, and Helias

ii- The martyrs against the heresies (against **Arianism**, Chalcedonianism)

iii- The new martyrs (or martyrs during the post-Arab conquest) such as John of Phanidjoit, Salib (3 Kiahk), and George al-Mozahim (19 Baunah). The text of their martyrdom is more or less realistic; there are no outstanding miracles, atrocious tortures, or heroic. The general schema of these martyrdoms is that the saint was falsely accused; to keep his life, he has to renounce his faith and become Muslim (some of them adopted for a while the Islamic religion either as from Islamic origin, such as George al-Mozahim, or by proselytism). An outbreak of the mob or fanatical caprice of some rulers or searching for a scapegoat cause the martyrdom of these saints. Geographical and historical data are, generally speaking, accurate.

iv- The Confessors, such as Agapetus (24 Amshir)

10. The monks: Egypt is the cradle of the **monasticism**, and the Coptic

sanctoral includes many monks. Foremost is St. **Antony** the Great, but there are also other important monks such as St. **Macarius**, St. **Paul** the Hermit, St. John Kama, and Simeon the Stylite. The monks could be grouped either using the geographical criterion; hence, we can say the monk of Lower Egypt, **Scetis**, **Nitria**, and **Kellia**; the monks of Middle Egypt; the disciples of St. Antony and those of the Fayyumic regions; and the monks of Upper Egypt such as **Pachomius** and Shenute.

The last category includes all the rest, including the foreigners. They could also be grouped according to their order or the rule that they follow; hence, one finds the hermits, the semihermits (cross-bearers), the monks in the community, and the stylites. Finally, the monks can be categorized using historical criterion; hence, starting with the monks of the fourth century, the fifth century, and so forth.

11. Fathers of the Church. This category regroups the several Fathers of the Church. As opposed to the martyrs, the Fathers of the Church are historically authentic. We may notice that some of them are local **patriarchs**, while other are broadly known (Basil the Great) and the group of the Fathers who played an important role in the Monophysite movement.

A. The patriarchs of the Coptic Church, such as **Peter I, the Seal of the Martyrs**, Agathon, Cosman, Demetrius, Khayil, Macarius, **Alexander**, and Damian.

B. The bishops who suffered for their faith: John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, **Athanasius**, Gregory the Amenianm Liberius, and Felix.

C. The bishops who established the faith: This category is mainly formed from the Eastern Fathers in addition to the Alexandrian patriarchs, such as **Cyril** of Alexandria, **Severus of Antioch**, Dionysios of Alexandria, **Dioscorus** of Alexandria

12. Contemporary saints and martyrs: During the 19th and 20th centuries, various riots of the Muslim mob produced several Under rule

of the [President](#) Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981), the Islamic fundamentalist movements were on the rise. These groups started a systematic persecution, especially in Upper Egypt. These persecutions produced many martyrs; some of them are known by name while others remain anonymous. The following can be mentioned among them:

- Sidhum Bishai (1804-1844). He served as clerk at the port of Damietta when a Muslim-instigated revolt erupted. He was accused of insulting Islam. His incorruptible body reposes in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Damietta.
- In March 1978, in the province of Minya, a priest, Father Marcus Aziz, was killed in the city of Samalut.
- On 3 August 1978 in Qalubya Province, in Mansha Delo, two Copts were killed.
- On 4 September 1978 in al-Minya Province, in the city of Samalut, Father Gabriel Abd al-Mutagaly, a woman, and a child were killed.
- On 24 November 1978, in Assiut Province, in the city of Abu Tig, Father Ruweiss Fakher, parish priest of the Church of Dweina in Abu Tig, was massacred when he refused the pressure of Islamic groups to close his church except on
- In March 1981 in Cairo, in the Zawyia Hamra suburb, six months before the assassination of [President](#) Sadat, an everyday conflict started between a Coptic family and a Muslim that turned quickly to a religious war; about 25 Christians perished and three churches were burned.
- In April 1990, about seven Copts died in an attack against a Coptic Church in Alexandria.
- In September 1991 in Embaba, Cairo, several Copts were murdered and their homes destroyed.
- In May 1992 in Dayrout-Assiut, 12 Coptic students along with their teacher were murdered inside the classroom.
- In January 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, a Coptic man was
- In January 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, a Coptic shopowner was

- murdered and three others were wounded by members of a Jihadist Islamic group.
- In June 1993 in Sohag, a clash between one Moslem and a Christian family resulted in the killing of two Copts.
 - In July 1993 in Assiut, a Copt was murdered by Islamic radical militants.
 - In August 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, a Copt was murdered by Islamic radical militants.
 - In August 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, a Coptic school vice-principal was murdered.
 - In August 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, the Coptic manager of a detention center hospital was murdered by the al-Gama'a al-Islamia.
 - In August 1993 in Assiut, a Coptic jewelry store owner was
 - In October 1993 in Assiut, a Coptic liquor store owner and his son were murdered.
 - In October 1993 in Assiut, a Coptic secret service policeman was murdered.
 - In October 1993 in Dayrout-Assiut, a Coptic pharmacist was murdered and two others were wounded in an attack by Islamic radical militants.
 - In October 1993 in Assiut, a Coptic policeman was
 - In March 1994 in **Dayr al-Muharrag**, Dayrout-Assiut, an armed assault on the visitors and the fathers of the monastery resulted in the death of five Copts. Islamic radical militants carried out the assault.
 - In February 1996 in al-Badary-Assiut, five Copts were
 - In February 1997 in al-Fekrya Abu Qurqas, in al-Minya Province, an armed assault on a Coptic Church during Sunday School service resulted in the [murder](#) of 10 parishioners inside the church.
 - On 13 March 1997 in Nag Hammadi-Quena, eight Copts were murdered.
 - On 23 April 1997 in al-Minya, two Copts were murdered.
 - In January 2000 in al-Kosheh, Sohag Province, 21 Copts were

murdered and tens of stores and shops were destroyed as a result of a random and armed raid on Copts.

There is no procedure for **canonization** in the Coptic Church. Several Fathers are venerated by the Coptic people as saints, among them:

1. 'Abd al-Masih al-Makari (1892-1963). He was a monk in the **Monastery of St. Macarius** but dwelt in several He served as a parish priest in the village of al-Manahra. He used to do some strange acts to hide his holiness. He is venerated as a wonder worker. He is buried in the Church of al-Manahra.
 2. Abraham Bishop of Fayyum (1829-1914). He was the abbot of the Monastery of al-Muharraq in Upper Egypt. Accused of mismanagement, he was chased to the **Monastery of al-Baramous**. He was ordained Bishop of Fayyum by Patriarch Cyril V. He is known for his charity to the poor and as a wonder worker. He is buried in Dair al-'Azab, Fayyum.
 3. **Cyril VI** (1959-1971). He was a monk in the Monastery of al-Baramous and became a [hermit](#) in the hills near Cairo. During World War II, he was forced to leave his cell in the windmill and live in Cairo. He built a church named after St. Menas. After his enthronement, he built the Monastery of St. Menas, the Cairo Cathedral, and during his patriarchate, a part of the relics of St. **Mark** was returned to Egypt. In 1968, the Virgin Mary appeared in the Church of Zeitun-Cairo. He is venerated as a wonder worker. His shrine in the Monastery of St. Menas as well as his cells in the Monastery of al-Baramous and in the windmill attract many pilgrims.
 4. Mikha'il al-Buhayri (1847-1923). He was a monk in the Monastery of al-Muharraq and a disciple of Anba Abraham, Bishop of Fayyum. He observed silence all his life.
13. The newly discovered saints and martyrs: the criteria of identification are not clear, sometimes resulting from the vision of a monk, or a dream, or a pure coincidence in a historical book.

A. While restoring the **Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus** in Old Cairo, some bones were discovered on 25 April 1991. They were identified as the relics of St. Bashnufa mentioned in the ***History of the Patriarchs*** who suffered martyrdom in 1164. The **Naqlun** martyrs: On the Polish archaeological mission working in the site of the Monastery of St. Gabriel, Naqlun Fayyum discovered 13 complete bodies of men, women, and children that bore traces of tortures. There were considered as martyrs but the circumstances of their martyrdom are not known.

B. Simeon the Tanner: His relics were discovered in the Church of the Virgin Babylon al-Darag in August 1991.

[Coptic hagiography](#) is not a closed book. As can be seen, every day there are new saints added to the list of saints, martyrs, and miracles workers.

GAWDAT GABRA

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