

DAYR ABU SAYFAYN (Old Cairo)

A Christian enclosure that derives its name from the great church dedicated to Abu Sayfayn (Father of Two Swords), an epithet given to Saint [MERCURIUS](#) of Caesarea. The complex also has churches of [Saint SHENUTE](#) and the Virgin Mary, as well as a convent of nuns dedicated to Saint Mercurius.

The HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS, in discussing the patriarch [MARK VII](#), (1745-1769) mentions “the monastery of the great martyr Philopator Mercurius, Father of the Two Swords.”

J. Butler (1884, pp. 75-76) reported that “half a mile beyond Mari Mina lies the walled enclosure or dair of Abu’s-Sifain, so called after the principal though not the most ancient church within it.” M. JULLIEN (1891, p. 224) wrote about “the Coptic quarter of Abou Seyfeyn,” indicating that it was a small town surrounded by ramparts not far from the mosque. P. Casanova (1919, pp. 192-98) said that “under the name of deir Abou-s Seifain there is in the center of the ancient Fustat a quite important group of buildings.” M. Simaykah (1937, p. 75) spoke of “Deir Aboul Sefein.”

Dayr [Abu Sayfayn](#) is situated north of Qasr al-Sham’ in the old city of Misr (Old Cairo) in Jami’ ‘Amr Street, near the railway to Hilwan and northwest of the mosque of ‘Amr ibn al-‘As. In 1672, J. Vansleb (1677, p. 131) wrote that “near the Kasr esh Schamma, on the Cairo side, is the domain of the Coptic patriarch, called in Arabic Haret il Batrak; it is separated from this [castle](#) by a high rampart by which it is surrounded.”

The construction of an enclosure around Dayr [Abu Sayfayn](#) was probably undertaken in the course of the twelfth century by a certain Ibn Abu al-Fada’il ibn Faruj. Butler (1884, pp. 75-76) remarked that “at the low square doorway of the enclosure one sees, swung back on its hinges, a

ponderous door, [plated](#) with bands of iron and studded over with flattened bolt-heads. This iron casing stands out six inches from the wooden frame or backing, and fits closely into the doorway. A short dim passage leads by a turn to the left to Al 'Adra; straight onwards it emerges from a sort of tunnel into a street about eight yards long, on one side of which are high dwelling-houses, on the other the churches of Anba Shanudah and Abu-s- Sifain."

Thus, the entrance gate of Dayr [Abu Sayfayn](#) was down to Butler's time on the west side. Simaykah (1937, p. 75) said that the ring of high ramparts surrounding Dayr Abu [Sayfayn](#) had formerly only a single entrance on the west side, noting that "recently a new gate on the south side is used." The door of sycamore wood reinforced by bands of iron was transferred to the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo; in the inventory of the museum it bears the number 688 (ibid., pp. 19-20, 75; see also Coquin, 1974, p. 34).

Between the churches of Saint [Mercurius](#) and [Saint Shenute](#) one notices an ancient mosque, very confined and today no longer in use. It is probably the mosque of Ibn al-Hamid. Butler, in a sketch of Dayr [Abu Sayfayn](#) placed opposite the title page, drew attention to the crescent of the mosque, situated between the two churches, while Jullien, in a view of the *dayr* taken from the south, noted three crescents surmounting three cupolas (see Casanova, 1919, p. 193).

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