

DAYR AL-QUSAYR (Turah)

[This article is made up of two parts, history and architecture. More information has accumulated about Dayr [al-Qusayr](#) than about many other monasteries.]

History

This ruined monastery in the Middle Ages was called Dayr al- Baghl (Monastery of the Mule); Dayr al- Yunan; Dayr al- Haraqal (Monastery of Heraclius); and Dayr Arsaniyus, for according to the tradition, it was to a cavern in the region of Turah (Troa) that Saint Arsenius retired after spending forty years at SCETIS, ten at Turah “to the south of Babylon and opposite Memphis,” three at Canopus, and then two more years at Turah (Evelyn-White, 1932), where he died (*Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, col. 197; for the dates of the life of Arsenius, see Evelyn-White, 1932, p. 162).

According to a tradition reported by Euty chius (Sa’id ibn al- Batriq, 1863, Vol. 1, p. 537; PG 111, col. 1028) and taken up by ABU SALIH THE ARMENIAN (1895, p. 145) and al-MAQRIZI (1853, Vol. 2, p. 503), the monastery is said to have been built over the tomb of Arsenius by Arcadius, whose tutor Arsenius had been.

Eustathius, who was a monk at this monastery and Melchite patriarch of Alexandria in 813-817, was at that time superior of this monastery and built the church of the apostles Peter and Paul and a hermitage for the bishops (Abu Salih, 1895, pp. 146-47).

At the end of the tenth century or beginning of the eleventh, al- Shabushti (1939, pp. 10, 24) mentioned the *dayr* and was echoed by al-MAQRIZI (1853, Vol. 2, p. 502). The monastery and this church were destroyed in 1010 by order of al- HAKIM. Some time afterward they were restored.

Murqus ibn Qanbar, a Coptic dissident, took refuge at the monastery and died there in 1208. Under the patriarch CYRIL III IBN LAQLAQ, the Melchite monks of al- Qusayr obtained from the Sultan [al-Malik al-Kamil](#) a reduction of taxes.

In 1320 the Dominican F. Pepin (1859, p. 412) visited the monastery. He found there some Greek monks and, in the cells in the vicinity, some Jacobite hermits. The following year, in the course of popular riots, fourteen monks of the monastery were burned, and the monastery itself was abandoned (al- Maqrizi, 1853, Vol. 2, pp. 512-17). In the time of al- Maqrizi, there was only a single guardian in the monastery.

In 1518, a Russian merchant, Basil Posniakoff, visited the monastery, which was then deserted (Volkoff, 1972, p. 19).

B. de Maillet (1735, p. 320) visited the monastery at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the same period C. SICARD (1982, Vol. 2, pp. 157-58) called attention to the ruins of the Monastery of Saint Arsenius on Mount Tora or Troyen.

In 1941, soldiers of the British army, while clearing out a cavern, discovered nearly two thousand pages of papyrus belonging to eight codices, the greater part of which consisted of works of ORIGEN and DIDYMUS THE BLIND. These papyri must have been hidden at the time of Origenist controversy. Various scholars have published on the subject (Koenen, 1968).

Abu Salih (1895, p. 147) mentioned that between Turah and the Nile, half a day's walk from Dayr al-Qusayr, was another monastery, Dayr [al-Qusayr al-Haqqani](#), at that time already deserted.

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Architecture

The remains of the medieval monastery are situated in a forbidden military zone and consequently can be visited at present only by special authorization. A fleeting visit in 1963 (Müller- Wiener, 1968, p. 58) determined that the main building was a complex approximately square in shape, which spread out on both sides of a ridge of rock that had been partially hollowed out and left behind by quarry workmen in ancient times. Furthermore, the two parts were connected with each other by a kind of cave passage. The domestic facilities appear to have been situated in the northern area. The entrance gate stood on this side, and presumably, here too were the cisterns, which were replenished by

carrier donkeys that worked in relays to transport water from the river to the monastery. The southern area contained the living quarters of the monks. Further accommodation of this kind may be recognized in a large building, at one time multistoried, situated in the southeast corner. Other single rooms extend along the south wall. No remains of a *jawsaq* (keep), which is a necessary part of all other Egyptian monasteries, have been located, on account of the high level of rubble.

The church is in the extreme southeast corner of the main building mentioned above. It has a narthex-like anteroom and an almost square naos, the walls of which are strengthened on all four sides by buttresses that protrude on the inside. Similar wall supports are also found in the Greek octagon-domed churches and appear again in the church of DAYR ANBA HADRA at Aswan. Consequently, the building is likewise supplied with a large [dome](#) constructed on squinches. There are sufficient reasons, therefore, for identifying it with the Sabas church founded before 1125 and described by Abu Salih: “Over the midst of the church there is one large cupola of conspicuous size” (ed. Evetts, p. 150). The sanctuary of the church followed convention and consisted of three sections, but no details of the layout of the rooms have survived. A [crypt](#) was discovered beneath the church.

Of the rest of the numerous churches of the monastery that at one time existed, at least one with a large apse can be recognized in a quarry cave to the east of the walled area of the monastery. For the most part, the rest of the churches consist of the same kind of rock-hewn chapels. Finally, attention may be drawn to a tomb construction situated a small distance south of the church that could be that of Abu al-Fadail, mentioned by ABU SALIH (p. 151).

None of the recognizable churches are older than the Middle Ages and, in all probability, they date back only to the period after the destruction under al-Hakim in 1010. Remains of the early Christian settlement—which, according to textual sources, was a group of anchorite

dwelling —may be recognized in the earlier quarry caves that extend less than a mile to the south of the monastery and contain remains of small building extensions over a wide area.

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