

## DAYR AL-SHUHADA' (Isna)

### History

This monastery is situated in the stony area (*hajir* in Egyptian Arabic) between the cultivated land and the mountain, about 3 miles (5 km) to the southwest of the town of ISNA (Sent in ancient Egyptian, Latopolis in the Hellenistic period). Its site is called Mountain of the Good (*agathon* in Greek) in the story of the martyrs of Isna, composed on the basis of now-lost Coptic texts and in the panegyric on these saints pronounced by Dorotheus, bishop of Isna in the fourth century (unpublished). It is surrounded by an enclosure wall and is thus a true cenobium. It is also called Dayr Manawus (Ammonius); it is Ammonius to whom tradition attributes the foundation of the monastery, but no text or inscription accords to him this honor. It is only said that being bishop of Isna, ordained by the martyr patriarch PETER I, he was martyred and buried at Antinoë (ANTINOOPOLIS), where his body remained.

According to the panegyric on the martyrs of Isna by John, bishop of Asyut, Abu Tij, and Manfalut, the oldest [manuscript](#) of which is dated 1520 (but some authors say he lived in the thirteenth century; cf. Sbath, 1940, p. 71, no. 606), the monastery was erected on the very spot of the martyrdom of the saints of Isna (Khater, 1981, pp. 55 [text], 66 [trans.]). Perhaps this author is the same one who attended at the preparation of the CHRISM in 1257 (Munier, 1943, p. 55). The fact that three episcopal sees were then united under the same titular head betrays a period when Christianity was in decline, which corresponds very well to the thirteenth century, although there is no other evidence that these three dioceses were united under a single name. If this personage was indeed of the thirteenth century, the monastery must have been established before that date.

However that may be, the oldest part of the present buildings seem to

date from the second half of the eleventh century. But the presence of numerous Greek funerary stelae in the neighboring cemetery proves that the site was venerated very early (Sauneron and Coquin, 1980, pp. 239-77 and pls. 39-44).

This monastery is well known, for it has been mentioned or described by European travelers from the seventeenth century on. The first appears to be that of the fathers [Protais](#) and François in 1668 (Sauneron, 1974, p. 79); J. VANSLEB (1677, p. 406; 1678, p. 243) copied their text, being unable to go beyond Jirja. C. [SICARD](#) also mentioned it (1982, Vol. 2, p. 66; Vol. 3, p. 77: “la fameuse église des Martyrs à Assena”).

In 1730-1732, the physician N. Granger (1745, p. 24) noted this monastery during his wanderings. It is fitting to note the descriptions of R. Lepsius (1842-1845: Griechisch [Vol. 4], pp. 172-75), C. E. Wilbour (1936), and R. POCOCKE (1743-1745, p. 112). Granger mentioned two monks at the monastery. In the *Description de l’Egypte* that resulted from Napoleon’s expedition, P. Jollois, and E. Devilliers, in a chapter entitled “Description des dégâts d’Esna et de ses environs” (Vol. 1, pp. 397-38), attributed the devastation to the Mamluks. S. CLARKE (1912, p. 111) drew up the plan of the *dayr*, and V. de Bock (1901, p. 75) published Uspenskij’s notes.

In the twentieth century, the monastery was often visited: by M. JULLIEN (1903, pp. 250-52, 283), Johann Georg (1914, pp. 58-59), and L. T. LEFORT (1939, pp. 404-407). T. Smolenski (1910, pp. 27-34) was to study the inscriptions noted by Granger. Since 1967, DAYR AL-FAKHURI and Dayr al-Shuhada’ have been included in a vast program covering all the archaeological data about the region of Isna; to date, there have been published works by J. Leroy (1975, Vol. 1) and R. G. Coquin (1975, pp. 241-61). Meinardus gave a good description of Dayr al-Shuhada’ (1965, pp. 324-25; 1977, pp. 440-41). Walters (1974) frequently quoted him.

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## **Art**

The monastery called Dayr al-Shuhada' (Monastery of the Martyrs) and sometimes Dayr Anba Bakhum (Pachomius) recalls the martyrs massacred in the town of Isna, mentioned in the SYNAXARION at 7 and 13 Kiyahk (CSCO 49, pp. 321-323, 333-336 [Arabic text]; Vol. 78, pp. 189-192, 226-231 [Latin translation]). The use of the name Pachomius here derives from the fact that he was born and lived his early years near this town, where he also spent the night in prison at the time of his recruitment into the army of Constantine. The church of this monastery, which for a long time past has not given shelter to any monks, has been used for occasional services in recent decades.

The church is the juxtaposition of two different buildings. To the south, there is a church of basilica form with three aisles and a transverse choir and the ordinary sanctuary complex placed between two side rooms, the one on the north no doubt serving as a baptistery, as the presence of a

trough seems to indicate. Immediately to the north of this church is another one, with two aisles and a transept giving on to two conch-shaped apses set in the east wall. The pictorial decoration is distributed in the first on the walls of the sanctuary, and in the second, in the apses.

It appears very probable that the south church was built on the site of an older church (Clarke, 1912, p. 114). An inscription below the fresco decorating the right wall of the sanctuary was noted by V. de Bock and copied by him (1901, p. 76 and n. 77). It was not noted at all by J. Leroy, who reproduced de Bock's iconographic description, stopping just before this detail. It is dated to the year A.M. 502/A.D. 786. If one takes this date into account, one of the buildings would be largely anterior to that date.

Among the paintings that decorate the two churches, few have remained legible, but what remains of them reveals work of high quality. Of those who have noticed them, de Bock was the most explicit, but his work appeared posthumously, and its editors could only transcribe the statements that he left, many of his thoughts remaining unrecorded. J. Leroy and his party, who visited the site more than seventy years later, were able to identify only some of the pictures that de Bock mentioned; these are discussed below.

In the south church, the right wall to the east above blind niches is occupied by a fresco showing Christ in majesty. He holds a square codex in his left hand and raises his right, with the palm forward. At his sides the archangels MICHAEL and GABRIEL bend toward him, their arms raised and their heads full-face. Their wings, which extend on the side under the arcosolium, shelter respectively Saint Basil (?) and the bishop Saint Gregory, near whom is a beardless young man whose probable counterpart at the side of Saint Basil has disappeared. All are portrayed full-face (Leroy, 1975, pl. 4).

Opposite this painting and above the door, de Bock noted an enthroned Virgin with Child, between two angels standing with bare feet, their

hands joined in front (de Bock, 1901, p. 76). Leroy apparently did not find it again (Leroy, 1975, p. 4).

The north church is richer in surviving art. In the apse to the right of the entrance of the first chapel backing on the east wall, two frescoes are placed one above the other (de Bock, 1901, pp. 76-77; Leroy, 1975, pl. 12-13). In the higher of the two, Christ is seated on a bench without a back in front of a circular mandorla, beyond which extend the top of his nimbus, the end of his right hand, and his feet. His left hand holds by the top a square codex, the cover of which is spanned by a cross pattee between stars. His right hand is raised in blessing. The heads of the four evangelical symbols project from the middle and lower parts on each side of the mandorla. On the lower sides, an angel in profile, his head in three-quarter view, walks bending with his hands raised toward Christ, one of his wings being lowered, the other raised. Two busts, one of them in the orant posture, are placed in a small conical vault, each near to the feet of Christ.

Under this ensemble, to the measure of the diameter of the mandorla, is placed a rectangle filled by an enthroned Virgin with Child. Flanking this are the archangels Michael and Gabriel crowned, both standing full-face and holding a globe in the left hand in a flap of the upper garment; in the right hand Michael holds a long rod ending in a cross and Gabriel a sword hanging at his side.

On the intrados of this chapel stands Saint Peter, long-haired and bearded, holding in his left hand a bunch of two keys, to which he draws attention with his right, and under a cross with the fleur-de-lis, Saint Stephen, beardless, the second and third fingers of his right hand resting on a chalice that he holds with his left hand.

The north church presents another fresco of Christ in majesty (Leroy, 1975, pl. 29-38) in the second chapel situated to the north. The upper central part of the subject is illegible, but the lower part and the sides are

relatively legible. The scene differs from the preceding one only in that Christ's feet are on a stool and the archangels Michael and Gabriel are on one knee on the ground, with arms stretched forward and the wings forming a right angle in the corner where the head of each is set.

In a chapel against the north wall there is an immense archangel (7.2 feet, or 2.20 m, in height), beyond doubt Gabriel, standing and haloed, with a globe decorated with a rosette in his left hand and resting on the flap of his *himation* (mantle); in his right hand he holds a rod ending in a cross. Near his right foot is traced the form of a building with three domes, probably a picture of the church, fulfilling a role analogous to that of similar detail near the mount of each saint on horseback portrayed in the entrance of the church of the Monastery of Saint ANTONY of the Desert, near the Red Sea.

Finally, one must note in the transept the representation of a saint on horseback on each of three walls. The only ones that can be identified are Saint Claudius (south wall) and THEODORUS (west wall); like the one on the north wall, whose name has disappeared, they are presented in rich colors.

The datings given by Leroy (1975, p. 33), although only suggestive, point toward the beginning of the twelfth century. He expressed complete admiration for the style and the grandeur of these paintings (*ibid.*, p. 12).

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## PIERRE DU BOURGUET

### Architecture

Dayr al-Shuhada' is a rectangular complex closed in by a surrounding wall of unbaked bricks. Its present entrance is on the north. It contains on the east some ruined buildings arranged round a courtyard, and on the west a group of buildings separated by a narrow street. To the north of this street are the medieval church and its auxiliary buildings, and to the south, the modern church of Saint Ammonius and the Martyrs, built in 1901 on the ruins of the ancient cells of the monastery. In ancient times the entrance to the monastery was to the west, on the axis of the street. To the south of this entrance, the remains of an ancient cell and a keep still survive.

The medieval church is dedicated to Ammonius and contains three aisles. The main aisle consists of two square areas roofed over by domes. The side aisles and the *khurus* (room between naos and sanctuary) form a sort of ambulatory around the main aisle. On the east, the sanctuary and its two adjoining chambers open onto the *khurus*. That on the north now serves as a baptistery; that on the south gives access to a new baptistery and its appurtenances built in 1901. In ancient times, the sanctuary communicated with the north chamber and was wide open to the *khurus*. Later it was divided by a partition (*hijab*) in the middle, the sanctuary being to the east and the western part becoming the *khurus*.

A smaller church, dedicated to the martyrs of Isna, was built between the medieval church of Ammonius and the north surrounding wall of the monastery. This church contains two aisles, a narthex, and two sanctuaries with *khurus*. Each sanctuary is closed off by a recent partition. The north aisle contained some tombs. The door situated in the *khurus* of the medieval church gave access into this secondary church;

the hall in front of this door is roofed by a Fatimid cupola set on decorated squinches. Later the aisles of this church were divided again by a transverse wall and a new church, the Church of the Three Peasants, was fitted up in the western part. From this period date the two openings (today walled up) in the north surrounding wall that allowed pilgrims to enter directly into the churches from outside the monastery.

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