

DAYR AL-SULTAN

One of the most important Coptic monasteries in Jerusalem. It lies between the Coptic Patriarchate to the north and the Holy Sepulcher to the south. In the southwest corner of the monastery are two ancient churches. On the eastern side of the courtyard is the residence of the abbot and some rooms for the use of visiting Ethiopian monks. On the western side of the courtyard are two rooms used by the Ethiopians as a church.

G. Williams, who visited the monastery in 1842, [records](#) in his book *The Holy City* the legend that a sultan offered a generous reward to his Coptic clerk in return for his long service. The clerk asked instead for permission to renovate the devastated monastery and this was granted. In [memory](#) of this, it is said, the monastery was named after the sultan, and an iron chain was fastened in the wall by the gate as a sign that the monastery was under his protection.

The sultan's messengers and envoys used to reside at the monastery while in Jerusalem. One of these was Mansur al-Tilbani, who built a church in the monastery in the days of Patriarch CYRIL II (1078-1092). This is the most likely explanation for the name of the monastery.

When the [Crusaders](#) entered Jerusalem in 1099 they dismissed some of the clergy of the Oriental churches, among them the Copts, and confiscated their holy relics. However, it seems that they later allowed the Copts to stay in Jerusalem, since John of Wurzburg, who visited the city in 1165, and Theodoric, who was there in 1172, mention that Copts were among the Christian sects in the holy places at the time. When Saladin recaptured Jerusalem (1187), he restored to the Copts their churches and monasteries.

L. Cust, in *The Status Quo in the Holy Places* (1929), remarks that during

the Crusades the monastery was occupied by Augustinian monks, but that the Copts regained it in the days of Anba BASILIOS I, archbishop of Jerusalem from 1236 to 1260.

The connection between the Ethiopians and the monastery began when they were invited to stay there as they needed a shelter after they lost their monastery of Mar Ibrahim and some other holy places in Jerusalem in 1654, when they were unable to pay their taxes. In *Voyage nouveau de la Terre Sainte* (1679) M. Nau mentions “a church that was discovered a few years ago and is called the Church of the Apostles. This place belonged previously to the Ethiopians, but since they failed to pay the taxes to the Turks they had to withdraw and leave their possessions to the Romans.” This story is confirmed by other writers, including Chrysostomos Papadopoulos (1910) who states that “the Armenians . . . took over all the belongings of the Ethiopians in 1654.” A decree issued by the court of Jerusalem and registered in its [records](#) for 1654 states that the [Romans](#) received from the Armenians all that belonged to the Ethiopians by the order of the sultan.

The Copts have carefully maintained Dayr al-Sultan in their possession. An important document preserved in the Patriarchate in Jerusalem [records](#) renovations carried out by the Copts at the monastery in 1686, and refers to the monastery as the “monastery of the Coptic sect in the protectorate of Holy Jerusalem, known in the past as Al- Sultan monastery.” An inventory compiled in 1820 indicates places that needed renovation, and a decree approving the work was issued in the same year. There are other records of renovations undertaken at the monastery.

Under Turkish rule, despite the Copts’ generosity and hospitality toward them, the Ethiopians soon turned against their hosts and attempted to obtain rights in the monastery. These attempts were in vain, but in 1878 the keys of the church were stolen. Anba BASILIOS II, archbishop of Jerusalem (1856-1899), complained to the Great Council of the city, which ordered that they should be returned to the Copts.

When it was decided to enlarge the gate of the monastery with the approval of the authorities, the Ethiopians attempted to prevent the work from taking place, but the authorities confirmed that “the monastery belongs to the Copts” and the work was completed.

The Ethiopians enlisted the help of Russia in their attempts to obtain rights in the monastery and they sent many delegations to the sultan in Istanbul, but in vain. The sultan’s order was given in 1905 that “the demands of the Ethiopians cannot be accepted.” A further decree issued by the governor of Jerusalem in 1907 reaffirmed the rights of the Copts in the monastery.

The government of the British mandate showed respect for the status quo in the holy places. Despite the repeated attempts of the Ethiopians at that time, they failed to obtain rights to the monastery and retained only the right of transient hospitality.

During Jordan’s rule of the Holy City, the government conformed with and preserved the status quo in the holy places, including Dayr al-Sultan. However, things changed when diplomatic relations between Egypt and [Jordan](#) were broken off. In 1959 the Ethiopian bishop in Jerusalem took advantage of the political conflict and the fact that the see of Jerusalem was vacant following the death of Anba Yacobos, and asked the government to restore what he called the rights of the Ethiopians. The Coptic patriarchate in Jerusalem, however, defended its right of ownership of the monastery, and the Jordanian committee that had been set up to examine the issue never met.

In 1960, when relations between Egypt and [Jordan](#) had deteriorated once more, the governor of Jerusalem attempted to reopen the subject of the monastery. The Coptic archbishop, Basilios IV, who was present at a meeting called by the governor, refused to discuss the subject on the grounds that there was no dispute over the ownership of the monastery. He notified the patriarchate in Cairo about the meeting, and CYRIL VI

sent a cable to the Jordanian prime minister in which he pointed out that the status quo in the holy places was governed by international agreement and could not be revoked by any local authority.

[Pope Cyril](#) also asked the archbishop of Jerusalem not to attend any further meetings called by the governor of Jerusalem concerning the monastery, lest his presence be interpreted as approval of the eligibility of the Jordanian authorities to deal with the subject.

In 1961, the governor summoned the Coptic archbishop and produced a copy of a decree stipulating that Dayr al-Sultan should immediately be taken over by the Ethiopians. The archbishop rejected the decree and asked for time to consult higher authorities. The governor refused and threatened to take over the monastery by force. When the archbishop refused once more to surrender the monastery, the governor ordered the military commander of the area to break down the doors and occupy it. These orders were carried out, and a group of armed soldiers was placed inside the monastery.

The archbishop had a meeting with King Hussein to explain that the monastery had belonged to the Copts for centuries, and that the Ethiopians had no rights in the monastery except that of transient hospitality. The archbishop asked the king to revoke the decision and to restore the status quo in the monastery. The king promised to consider the matter. Evidence of the Copts' ownership of the monastery was presented to the authorities, and a document that listed all the possessions of the Copts was submitted. In this document Archbishop Basilios declared that the governor was responsible for any alterations to, tamperings with, or losses of any of these holy possessions that might result from the seizure of the monastery. The archbishop sent a copy of this declaration to the Jordanian prime minister and to the minister of the interior.

Archbishop Basilios, however, was unable to contact the patriarchate in

Cairo, due to the political situation. He was compelled to [send](#) the steward of the Coptic monasteries in Jerusalem to Cairo, carrying a message from himself to the pope, in which he requested that the Egyptian government protest officially against the seizure of the monastery, cancel pilgrimages from Egypt, and call for an urgent meeting of the Holy Council.

In March 1961, a Coptic delegation arrived in Jerusalem with a message to the Jordanian king from Cyril VI. The delegation met the king and the prime minister and discussed the subject of the ownership of the monastery with them, pointing out that the government had acted illegally in taking over the monastery.

On 1 April, it was decreed that the status quo should be restored in the monastery, and it was handed back to the Copts on the same day. The governor of Jerusalem conveyed this decision to the Ethiopian bishop in Jerusalem, and a copy was sent to the Coptic archbishop.

After the June 1967 war and Israel's occupation of the Holy City, trouble arose from the favor shown by the Israeli authorities to the Ethiopians, with whom they maintained good relations. The Copts, on the other hand, considered themselves to be in a state of war with the Israelis. Although the Israeli prime minister announced to all the religious leaders that the Israeli government recognized the status quo in the holy places, the Israeli government soon began putting pressure on the Copts to give rights to the Ethiopians in Dayr al- Sultan. The Coptic archbishop steadfastly resisted this pressure and insisted upon the [preservation](#) of the status quo in the monastery.

On Easter Eve 1969, the Israeli government attempted to install large numbers of police inside the Coptic Patriarchate and Dayr al- Sultan, but the Copts prevented them. The Israeli police then attacked the Coptic priests and laymen, and several were injured. The archbishop presented a strong protest against the behavior of the authorities. Before Easter

1970, Archbishop Basilios, being worried lest the authorities should repeat their attack, wrote to various ministries asking them to respect the status quo in the holy places and to allow the performance of the religious rites in peace.

However, on Easter Eve hundreds of police officers and armed guards occupied the Patriarchate and Dayr al-Sultan. They refused to leave when requested and changed the locks of the doors leading to the two Coptic churches in the monastery and to the road leading from the churches to the yard of the Holy Sepulcher. They seized the two churches and handed them over to the Ethiopians. When the Copts found out what had happened, some priests went to the monastery but were prevented from entering. They then informed the archbishop, who interrupted his prayers, and went to the monastery with large numbers of priests, Copts, and Christians of other sects. On arriving at the monastery, they were threatened by the soldiers. More armed police arrived, and the people were led at gunpoint through the streets to the Patriarchate. Some who refused to obey were beaten.

The same night the archbishop tried unsuccessfully to contact government officials. He, therefore, brought the case before the Israeli supreme court in Jerusalem, and on 16 March 1971 it decreed that what had happened was a flagrant violation of security and public order and asked the minister of police to restore the usurped places to the Copts.

Despite this, the Israeli government entered a temporary decision against the Copts, while setting up a committee to reexamine the issue and to submit its recommendations to the cabinet. This committee did nothing to resolve the situation, and the archbishop was compelled to go once more to the supreme court in 1977. Although the five judges were not unanimous in their findings, on 1 January they adopted a unified attitude critical of the government.

After the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the

archbishop wrote to the Israeli head of state, its prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of the interior, the minister of police, and the minister of religions, asserting that the peace between the two countries conflicted with the pressure exerted by the authorities against the Copts. He once more requested that the temporary decision made by the government against the Copts in 1971 should be revoked and that the Coptic possessions should be returned to them. The question has still not been resolved satisfactorily.

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ARCHBISHOP BASILIOS

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