

DAYR AL-SURYAN (Monastery of Saint Mary Deipara)

History

This is one of the four monasteries still functioning in Wadi al- Natrun (the ancient desert of SCETIS) southwest of the Nile Delta. In the earliest explicit references that have survived (in notes written into three Syriac manuscripts shortly after A.D. 851), it is called the Monastery “of the Mother of God of the Syrians [one note adds “of Abba Bishoi”] which is in the desert of Egypt [or “of Scetis”].” From its library, now mostly but not entirely in the British Library, the Vatican Library, the National Library in Paris, and elsewhere in Europe, have come many of the most important Syriac manuscripts extant.

The records of its early period seem to have perished in the general devastation of the monasteries in Wadi al-Natrun by Arab marauders around 817. It is not one of the original monasteries of Scetis. It was established for those monks of the neighboring monastery of DAYR ANBA BISHOI who were doctrinal partisans of SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH. In the first decades after 518, the opposing party, which subscribed to the Christological views of JULIAN of Halicarnassus, had gained control of the four original monasteries. Each was then doubled by a new and separate monastery dedicated to the THEOTOKOS (mother of God), to which those members of the community who were doctrinal followers of Severus moved.

Eventually, perhaps after the reconciliation of the Gaianite (Julianist) party and the Theodosian (Severan) party in Egypt around 710, the *dayr* was bought from the Copts and converted into a Syrian monastery by a certain Marutha, a man of Takritan (i.e., East Syrian, but Monophysite)

origin who had risen to high position in the government of Egypt. It was, at any rate, a Syrian monastery by 850 when the buildings, including the present principal church, were already taking form. The massive fortifying walls of the late ninth century still surround the monastery.

The monastery's most memorable abbot was Moses of Nisibis, whose reign spanned most of the first half of the tenth century, when the present *haykal* (sanctuary) screen and choir screen of the principal church, the mural decoration of its apse, and the Chapel of the Forty-Nine Martyrs were put in place. Abbot Moses was sent to Baghdad around 927 with a delegation seeking the exemption of bishops, monks, and infirm Christians from the capitation tax recently imposed in Egypt. He stayed on for some time after that goal was attained and collected a choice array of manuscripts in Mesopotamia and northern Syria, which he brought back to the monastery library in 931-932.

The sources of the monastery's income are unknown. It is unlikely that it possessed endowments or land in the fertile parts of Egypt in the Middle Ages. In 987 the Syrian patriarch of Antioch felt constrained to write to the Coptic patriarch to ask that the latter be attentive to the needs of the monks of Dayr al-Suryan and their nourishment. The monks continued to be recruited mainly from the Eastern (Takritan) dioceses of the Antiochene Syrian church until at least the early eleventh century, and throughout that period their recorded benefactors were for the most part Takritans of Mesopotamia or Egypt. In 1088, Dayr al-Suryan, with sixty monks, was the third largest of the seven monasteries then existing in Wadi al-Natrun.

After 1100, the monks seem to have come rather from the western part of the Church of Antioch. The accession of new manuscripts continued, but their limited range of content (mostly biblical, liturgical, hagiographical, and ascetical) reflects a narrowing of the community's interests. The Black Death that struck Egypt in 1348-1349, the famine and pestilence twenty-five years later, and the ravages of Tamerlane (Timur) and his

Mongols in Syria at the turn of the century help to explain why a visiting monk from Syria found a single monk in the monastery in 1412-1413. A revival, evident after 1484, continued into the early years of the next century, with some Takritans joined by several monks from Lebanon, including the administratively vigorous abbot Cyriac.

The community was gradually becoming more Coptic than Syrian. Of its forty-three monks in 1515-1516, only [eighteen](#) were Syrian, while the other twenty-five were Copts. The monks who left to repopulate the monasteries of Saint Antony (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS) and of Saint Paul (DAYR ANBA BULA) in the [Eastern Desert](#) later in the century were presumably Copts, but the monastery received aid from the Syrian patriarch Dawud-Shah in the late sixteenth century. The [steward](#) in 1626-1627 was a Syrian, but the Coptic patriarchal synod installed a new abbot in 1636-1637. After that, Dayr al-Suryan can be considered a Coptic monastery, although a church in the compound was still said to be for Syrian use in 1657, and Robert Curzon, visiting the monastery in 1837, found a group of Ethiopian monks living in a part of the enclosure.

Today the monks of the monastery, who in 1976 numbered thirty in the monastery itself and ten active elsewhere in Egypt and in the Coptic establishments of Jerusalem, play an important role in the current Coptic monastic renaissance. Physical improvements reflecting the growth of the monastery since 1950 include a building for the museum and library, a small printing press, and provisions for running water. Pope Shenouda III, elected in 1971, was a monk of the community.

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- For what can be known of the history of the community, its buildings, and its library down to the nineteenth century, the meticulously documented work of H. G. Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi'n Natrun*, Vol. 2, *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis*, pp. 232-35, 309-321, 337-38, 414-16, 439-57 (New York,

- 1932); Vol. 3, *Architecture and Archaeology*, pp. 167-220 (New York, 1933), is the source of almost all that has been published since.
- A new document from the reign of Abbot Cyriac has been published by J. Leroy, “Un témoignage inédit sur l’état du monastère des Syriens au Wadi’n Natrun au début du XVIe siècle,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’Archéologie orientale* 65 (1967):1-23.
 - Brief notices on the Syrian presence in the monastery documented by Arabic sources, mainly of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries but as late as 1632, mostly unknown to Evelyn- White, can be found in G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, Vol. 3 (Vatican City, 1949), p. 55, and Vol. 4 (Vatican City, 1951), pp. 8, 11, 23.
 - Still unavailable when Evelyn-White was doing his work on the churches was U. Monneret de Villard, *Les Eglises du monastère des Syriens au Wadi en-Natrun* (Milan, 1928).
 - Accounts of modern visitors are of unequal value; one, in Arabic, is that of the Copt Zaki Tawadrus in *Al-Karmah* 16 (1930):490-502.
 - The monastery’s history and archaeology, with some data not gleaned by Evelyn-White, are included, with information on the monastery in recent years, in O. Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts* (Cairo, 1961). Subsequent developments are chronicled in O. Meinardus, “Recent Developments in Egyptian Monasticism 1960-1964,” *Oriens christianus* 49 (1965):79-87, and his “Zur monastischen Erneuerung in der koptischen Kirche,” *Oriens christianus* 61 (1977):59-70.
 - A brief historical and artistic sketch, based entirely on Evelyn-White’s work, is given by O. H. E. Burmester, *A Guide to the Monasteries of the Wadi’n-Natrun* (Cairo, 1955), pp. 13-21.

AELRED CODY, O.S.B

Architecture

The *dayr* is situated barely 110 yards (100 m) to the west of the Dayr

Anba Bishoi and is the smallest among the still inhabited monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun. Only in the modern period have extensive gardens been joined to the monastery, on its east side.

The monastery proper, which is enclosed by a high wall, possesses an east-west orientation in its main extension and is about 165 yards (150 m) long. The main entrance lies at the west end of the northern girdle wall. It leads immediately into a small court that is bounded on the north by the [cloister](#) wall and on the west and south by the *jawsaq* (keep) and its outer stairs. Adjoining this court is a larger court that includes a garden. Along the south side it is bordered by the al-‘Adhra’ Church and by several monastic cells. To the west of the church lies the refectory, no longer in use, and the kitchen belonging to it, as well as a small courtyard that also extends to an area west of the *jawsaq*.

The other buildings are also situated right next to the wall. The central area is thereby left clear for passages and modest gardens. The row of cells along the north wall is interrupted by the Church of Sitt Maryam. A third church, that of Saint John (Evelyn-White, 1973, , pp. 217-20), is found at the far eastern end in the northeast corner of the monastery. This is a small single-aisled chapel that is no longer in use as such but instead now serves as a kitchen and storehouse. Along the south wall of the monastery several uniformly executed cells have been set up. A few steps to the east of the al-‘Adhra’ Church a modern guesthouse has been constructed.

The al-‘Adhra’ Church (Grossmann, 1982, pp. 113ff., fig. 47; Evelyn-White, 1973, , pp. 180ff.) is the most important church edifice of Wadi al-Natrun and, in its plan, almost completely preserved. Very probably this is the church built by Syrian monks in the former Theotokos monastery of Dayr Anba Bishoi, which was sold into Syrian hands after 710. The church may thus be dated to the first quarter of the eighth century. Originally it stood unconnected on all sides. Only in recent times was the south wall of the monastery erected along the south wall of the church.

In its constructional design, the church is a basilica. It was originally covered by a wooden roof and had a return aisle at the west end and a tripartite sanctuary with an original *khurus*. The latter has been combined with the altar chamber into a triconch, whose center is emphasized by four half-columns. In the south wall of the naos the original sequence of niches has been preserved. The room to the west of the church that occupies the position normally held by the [narthex](#) is accessible only from within the church. In the southwest corner of this chamber are the stairs [leading](#) up to the roof. The area beneath the staircase was made accessible from the church only at a later stage when it was developed into a supplementary vestry.

The greatest change undergone by the building is the transformation in the tenth century of the *haykal* into a domed area provided with a rich stucco ornamentation. This is the earliest attested instance of the erection of a full dome over a *haykal*. The dome itself was restored again in the [Fatimid](#) period, as was the one over the intersection of the *khurus*. To the external additions on the north side belong a portal building added in the Mamluk period and originally executed as a tetrapylon, and a building set up as early as the tenth century and once richly decorated with stuccoed wall niches. The original purpose and size of this edifice are unknown; in recent times it was transformed into the Chapel of the Forty-nine Martyrs.

The Church of Sitt Maryam (Grossmann, 1982, pp. 106ff.; Evelyn-White, 1973, , pp. 212ff.) seems not to have been constructed before the eleventh century. Moreover, only the naos, designed as an undivided transverse room, and the *khurus*, of similar shape but more shallow, date from this period. The two rooms were originally connected by a large central arch and a narrower passage on the southern side. The northern side passage was opened only subsequently. The sanctuary with its three *haykals*, the central one of which protrudes from the east wall, dates only from the fourteenth or fifteenth century. From a deep niche in the north wall of the north *haykal* lies the access to a cache (KHIZANAH) placed

between the church and the outer wall of the monastery.

The *jawsaq* (Evelyn-White, 1932, , pp. 175ff.) of the monastery is situated next to the entrance gate, against the north wall, and still imparts an idea of the original strength of the walls, which elsewhere have been consistently fortified on the inside. Judging from its plan, it belongs to the less developed examples from the older period; it already possesses, however, a more complex arrangement of rooms. Like those other examples, it must be entered at the second floor by means of a drawbridge hinged at the external wall of the tower and [leading](#) from a separately erected staircase building situated to the east. This floor also contains quarters for the monks, whereas the rooms in the basement and on the first floor for the most part have no windows and were storerooms and archives. Only a larger broad room on the first floor containing a niche in the east wall with a small recess underneath it, such as it is often found in the oratories of the monastic cells of KELLIA, probably served originally as a common oratory. The furnishings on the third floor, with a library and a chapel, belong to the modern period. According to H. G. Evelyn-White (1973, , p. 178), the latter dates to the fifteenth century, whereas the erection of the tower itself is dated by him to around 850.

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