

DAYR ANBA BISHOI (Scetis)

History

This is one of the surviving ancient monasteries in SCETIS (modern Wadi al-Natrun). There is no historically reliable information on its foundation, but on the basis of what little is known of the earliest monastic establishments in Scetis, it may be surmised that it grew from a settlement, or *laura*, of anchorites whose forerunners had gathered around the desert father Bishoi (in medieval [Arabic](#) sources, Bishay) from whom the monastery has taken its name. The settlement probably came into being later than those of DAYR AL-BARAMUS and Dayr Abu Maqar, but before the death of [MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN](#), around 390.

According to the various recensions of the Life of Bishoi, whose author claims to be JOHN COLOBOS (the Short), Bishoi's companion during their earlier years in Scetis, the two of them eventually parted company. John stayed in the place where they had most recently lived, while Bishoi moved to a cave 2 miles to the north.

Dayr Anba Bishoi is, in fact, about 2 Roman miles northwest of the ruins of the former Monastery of John the Short, but the association and then separation of John and Bishoi in the legend may be no more than an etiological reflection of that topographic reality. After a [barbarian](#) raid, which may be the historical raid through Scetis in 407, Bishoi, according to the [Arabic](#) recension of the legend, fled to a spot near the city of Antinoë (ANTINOOPOLIS) and spent the rest of his life there. When he died, his body was taken to Antinoë, where it was to remain for the next four centuries.

In Scetis the monastic settlement to which his memory and his name were attached was quickly revived, but historical information on its subsequent history is very scarce. It obviously shared in the general

vicissitudes of monastic establishments in Scetis through the centuries.

Dayr Anba Bishoi was founded between 535 and 580. During that period the Theodosian monks, who adhered to the Christological doctrine of SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH, were in opposition to the Gaianite monks, who adhered to the doctrinal position of JULIAN of Halicarnassus. Since the Gaianites were in temporary control of the existing monasteries, the Theodosian monks established their own monasteries dedicated to the Virgin Mother as counterparts.

It is not known how long any of the monasteries remained in Gaianite control, but it is certain, from the colophons of certain Syrian manuscripts from the middle of the ninth century, that the present DAYR AL-SURYAN was originally the counterpart Monastery of the Virgin Mother of God of Anba Bishoi. After a period of general desolation in Scetis resulting from a particularly serious [barbarian](#) raid probably in the late sixth century and from the troubled times that preceded the Arab [conquest](#) of Egypt, both Dayr Anba Bishoi and its counterpart were rebuilt in the reign of the Coptic patriarch [BENJAMIN](#) I (622-661). At the time of another general reconstruction in Scetis during the reign of the patriarch YUSAB I (830-849), after yet another barbarian destruction around 817, the body of Anba Bishoi was at last transported from its resting place in Antinoë to the monastery in Scetis that bears his name.

For greater protection, the enclosure walls of Dayr Anba Bishoi, like those surrounding the other monasteries in Wadi al-Natrun, were fortified sometime before the end of the ninth century. Unlike the monasteries of Abu Maqar and of John the Short, Dayr Anba Bishoi seems to have had no large outlying cells, or “dwellings” (in reality small monasteries in themselves), dependent upon it. In the statistical list of the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun drawn up in 1088, there are forty monks listed for the Monastery of Bishoi, more than the numbers listed for the communities of JOHN KAMA and Baramus and the small “Cave of Moses.”

However, the number is less than those listed for the Monastery of the Syrians and considerably less than the numbers given for the monasteries of Abu Maqar and of John the Short, which are, however, surely inflated by inclusion of all the monks living in the cells and dwellings dependent on those two monasteries. By 1330 the buildings of Dayr Anba Bishoi were on the verge of collapse because of the damage done by termites in the woodwork. In that year the patriarch [BENJAMIN](#) II intervened personally to assure the monastery's reconstruction as a cooperative project of the monks of various houses, in order to [save](#) the community from dispersion. In the late Middle Ages and as recently as the nineteenth century, Dayr Anba Bishoi was at times called the White Monastery, which can lead to its confusion with [the White Monastery](#) of Shenute west of Suhaj in Upper Egypt.

Visitors to Wadi al-Nat run in the seventeenth century consistently noted that the church of Dayr Anba Bishoi was in the best condition of all the churches in the region, but the number of monks living in the monastery was very low. C. Sicard discovered only three or four in 1712; there were twelve when General Andréossy visited in 1799, and thirteen when Sir Gardner Wilkinson was there in 1843. In 1976 there were thirty-two monks of the community, twenty-two of them in the monastery and ten in its dependency at Kafr Dawud in the Delta or elsewhere (Meinardus, 1977, p. 67). The Coptic patriarchs GABRIEL VIII and [MACARIUS](#) III were monks of Dayr Anba Bishoi.

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Architecture

The walled area of the monastery forms an asymmetrical rectangle enclosing all the buildings. The only entrance is situated at the western end of the north wall. It consists of the usual lofty gateway and an inner gatehouse, the best of its kind preserved in the Wadi al-Natrun (Evelyn-White, 1933, p. 139). The church and most of the remaining buildings, including the monks' cells, stand in the southern half of the walled area. The northern half (apart from the great *jawsaq*, or keep, of the monastery) is in the main taken over by gardens.

The Church

The present-day church is a conglomerate of different buildings, renovations, and extensions that are disentangled only with difficulty. According to Evelyn-White (1933, p. 142), the oldest remains of the church do not predate the great destruction of the monastery between 830 and 849. However, one can, with a great degree of certainty, reconstruct the ground plan of the new building erected afterward. It had a three-aisled naos with a western return aisle; a broad, deep *khurus*, the like of which is encountered almost universally in buildings from the eighth century on, especially in monastic architecture; and a tripartite sanctuary. The latter consisted originally of a large square altar room (*haykal*) and two very narrow adjoining side chambers (Evelyn-White, 1933, fig. 13). At a later period, the southern side chamber was expanded into a second altar room.

Presumably in the eleventh century a *PAREKKLESION* dedicated to Abu Iskhirun was added on the south side; it repeated in principle the form of

the main church, though on a reduced scale. Its almost square naos, approximately 20 feet (6 m) wide, could only have had a single nave and probably always had a cupola (in contrast to the assumption of Evelyn-White). Other extensions and renovations were carried out only after the eleventh or twelfth century.

The Refectories

[Evelyn-White](#) mentioned only one refectory, the latest of all of them. It is found to the west of the complex of churches from which it is separated by a narrow vaulted passageway. It is an elongated single-aisle building that is subdivided by transverse arches into five domed bays of equal size. A further domed bay made up the kitchen. The main entrance is situated in the center opposite the western entrance of the church. A table, about 3 feet wide, stands inside and occupies the entire length of the refectory.

The monastery has two additional refectories of an older type. The smaller of these may be seen in the southwestern corner building of the main church. It was transformed later into the Chapel of Mar Jirjis (Evelyn-White, 1933, p. 161). The room contains a sturdy square central pillar from which arches radiate on all four sides and divide the room into four domed bays.

A third refectory, which is likewise abandoned, is found in the southeastern corner of the monastery and is now used as a storeroom. Its architectural plan is the same as the building on the site of the present-day chapel of Mar Jirjis, but is considerably larger and is subdivided by four square pillars into nine bays. In the rooms bordering on the north are the bakery and the mill.

The *Jawsaq*

The *jawsaq* of Dayr Anba Bishoi is one of the largest and most finely executed towers of Wadi al-Natrun. It is a few years older in date than the

one in the Monastery of Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR). Its architectural layout shows the usual [schema](#) of all the towers in Wadi al-Natrun. It is two (originally three, according to Evelyn-White) floors high and can be entered by a drawbridge, in the present instance [leading](#) out from the tower gate of the monastery wall onto the first floor. Inside there is a long, straight corridor. In front, on the right, lie the stairs, and at the farthest end, the bathrooms. The rooms on the left of the corridor are two rows deep.

It was originally intended to fit out the first floor as a church (Grossmann, 1982, pp. 213ff., fig. 81), but this intention was never fulfilled. The present-day Church of Saint Michael on the second floor is later in origin and was built only after the loss of the original second floor. The *jawsaq* dates to the late thirteenth century.



The Church of St. Pshoi, view to the central altar room.

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The khurus. On both sides of the doors to the central altar room are modern paintings of the Virgin with Child, Christ, Saint John the Baptist, apostles, and saints. On the left, next to the entrance to the side chapel dedicated to Patriarch [Benjamin](#) 11 (1327-1339) is a reliquary with the relics of St. Pshoi and his friend St. Paul of Tamweh.

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The corridor between the church of St. Pshoi and the ancient refectory to the west of the church

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The churches of the monastery, both old and new
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The keep with drawbridge. It is the largest and finest tower in Wadi al-Natrun. Building dates vary between the eleventh and thirteenth century.
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The well in the keep.
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