

HISTORIC CHURCHES IN ALEXANDRIA

As capital of Egypt prior to the ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT, Alexandria deserves special attention in regard to its religious institutions. This need is further accentuated by the fact that it was also the seat of the Coptic patriarchate throughout the Byzantine period and during the early centuries of Arab rule. Pope Christodoulus (1047-1077), the sixty-sixth patriarch, decided to move the seat of the patriarchate closer to the new central government, from Alexandria to the southern city of al-Fustat (Cairo) where he resided in the area of the ancient Church of Our Lady known as al-Mu'allaqah within the precincts of the Fort of BABYLON in Old Cairo.

The most extensive record of the ancient churches established in Alexandria appears in the twelfth-century work of Abu [al-Makarim](#) on the history of Coptic churches and monasteries; and an analytical survey of its contents in the chapters devoted to Alexandria (1984, vol. 1, pp. 135-75) gives the right perspective on this important subject.

It is interesting to note, however, that the religious foundations in that city must have suffered greatly when the Persians descended on Egypt in their conquest of the late sixth century, even before the Arabs appeared on the scene. Nevertheless, the churches of Alexandria survived that temporary havoc, and it is impossible to find a more detailed account of those ancient churches than we have in the work of Abu al-Makarim. A summary follows.

1. Saint Mark's church on the seashore, known as Bucalis, the spot where Saint Mark was martyred and buried.
2. Church of Mar Saba (see no. 35, below).
3. Church of Saint John the Evangelist, consecrated by Pope Christodoulus.
4. Church of Saint Mercurius, consecrated by Pope Christodoulus.
5. Church of the Archangel Michael, consecrated by Pope

Christodoulus.

6. Church of Saint Menas, situated outside the city fortress, consecrated by Pope Christodoulus.
7. Church of Saint George (Mar Jirjis), consecrated by Pope Christodoulus.
8. Church of the Virgin Mary, founded by Saint THEONAS (282- 300), the sixteenth patriarch of the Coptic church, during the age of persecutions. Here, during the patriarchate of KHA'IL I (744- 767), the forty-sixth pope, a story is told of a man who looked at the icon of the crucifixion and jeered at the idea of the stabbing in the side of the crucified Jesus. Then he took a cane and mounted to where the icon hung with the intent of stabbing the other side of Jesus while ten thousand spectators watched. As soon as he reached the icon, he felt that he was himself stabbed and hanging in mid air; he suffered mortal pains and decided to offer penitence and to become converted if he were relieved. The legend continues that he was relieved, became converted, and went to the monastery of Saint Macarius where he was baptized and became a monk and died.
9. Church of John the Baptist and the Prophet Elijah, which apparently suffered some damage in the age of persecutions, and was restored by Pope THEOPHILUS (385-412), the twenty- third patriarch. The body of John was laid there, but the head was later discovered in Emesa (Homs) during the reign of Pope DIOSCORUS I (444-458), the twenty-fifth patriarch.
10. The Smaller Church in the Febrius (the island of Pharos), where the bodies of the martyrs Apa Cyr (Abuqir) the monk and John the soldier were transferred from Saint Mark's Church during the patriarchate of CYRIL I the Great (412-444).
11. The Church on the Island (of Pharos), restored by Theophilus (385-412).
12. Church of the Angelion, a large cathedral with 140 priests in the west of Alexandria, restored by the Orthodox people in the papacy of THEODOSIUS I (535-567), the thirty-third patriarch; temporarily

appropriated by the Chalcedonians; then returned to the See of Saint Mark. SIMON I (689-701) was consecrated forty-second patriarch in it.

13. Church of COSMAS AND DAMIAN, situated in the stadium west of the colonnade, founded in the year 284 during the reign of Emperor DIOCLETIAN.
14. Church of Our Lady, probably founded by the fifteenth patriarch MAXIMUS (264-282) during the reign of Emperor Aurelianus (270-275). Abu [al-Makarim](#) mentions the founder as the patriarch Taron (corruption of [Theonas](#) who succeeded Maximus), and states that it was in the reign of Aurelianus, who was a contemporary of Maximus.
15. Church of Archangel Michael, founded in a temple where Cleopatra installed a brass statue named Michael that the Alexandrians cherished with tremendous offerings. The nineteenth patriarch, ALEXANDER I (312-326), convinced them of the falsehood of that statue and replaced it with the archangel Michael. This ancient church suffered much damage by fire during the invasion of Alexandria by the North [African](#) tribe of Habasah in 912.
16. Legend describes an anonymous church that the unfaithful wanted to drown by a spring pouring from the mountain. It was saved by an angel who deflected the course of the stream by striking a rock asunder so that the water flowed away from the church.
17. Church of Thaddaeus, restored by Theophilus, the twenty-third patriarch.
18. Church of Our Lady (Martmaryam), restored by Theophilus.
19. Church of Saint John, also restored by Theophilus.
20. Church of Emperor Arcadius (395-408), son of Theodosius the Great (379-395), completed by Theophilus (385-412). A rich Jew by the name of Orbeit was converted to Christianity and was very charitable to the needy. One [Easter](#) he died there while distributing charities to 300 persons.
21. The Cathedral Church of the Jacobites, the finest and largest in

Egypt, is situated in the section of Alexandria known as al-Masárij where the Copts firmly espoused the Orthodox Creed confirmed by the 318 church fathers at the [Council](#) of NICAIA and rejected the Arian heresy described here as the Melchite sect. The Melchite patriarch, supported by Emperor Constantine the Lesser (the second), ascended the pulpit and declared his heretical creed. Consequently, the Jacobites rebelled and stoned and killed the patriarch, and his body was transported outside the city and burned. Constantine was furious and appointed another patriarch in succession, who planned a conspiracy to chastise the Jacobites. The Melchites, armed with swords in the form of staves and crutches, invited the Copts to congregate in that cathedral. Once inside, the gates of the cathedral were locked and the swords were mercilessly used to kill the Orthodox congregation to avenge the murder of the Melchite patriarch. Much blood was spilled, and destruction of the edifice itself followed to the extent that only a staircase and a couple of doors survived the havoc. This apparently happened during the reign of Pope ATHANASIUS I, the Apostolic (326-373), the immortal twentieth patriarch who combated and defeated the Arian heresy.

22. Church of Saint Peter the Apostle, restored by Severus of Antioch and appropriated by the the Melchites.
23. Church of Mark the Evangelist, known as al-Qamhah, outside Alexandria, restored by JOHN III (677-686) of Samannud, the fortieth patriarch, who purchased [property](#) for it in Cairo, Alexandria, and Mareotis and with the help of the Christian population constructed for it a mill and a wine press.
24. Church of Saint George, originally the house of *ANIANUS the Cobbler, the second patriarch after Saint Mark, and situated on the Alexandria.
25. Church of Saint Menas, situated outside the fort of Alexandria.
26. Church of Joseph (the Prophet), situated about nine miles outside Alexandria and used as the residence of PETER IV (567- 569), the thirty-fourth patriarch, who used it as a shelter from the powerful

Chalcedonian sect in Alexandria.

27. An anonymous church restored by the archons of Alexandria in the reign of CYRIL II (1078-1092), the sixty-seventh patriarch.
28. Church of Saints Sergius and Wachas, inside Alexandria, destroyed during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-HAKIM (996-1021) and restored by Pope ZACHARIAS (1004-1032), the sixty-fourth patriarch. It was enriched by the archon Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim ibn Abu al-Makarim, who constructed a carved wooden ICONOSTASIS to the central altar in the year A.M. 893/A.D.
29. Church of Our Lady, known as al-Mu'allaqah, appropriated by the Venetians in Alexandria and restored by the Venetians in Alexandria and restored by Zacharias.
30. Church of the Savior, built in the name of Jesus Christ in a vast area comprising several chapels built by Pope Mark II (799- 819), the forty-ninth patriarch. It was destroyed by Andalusian arsonists within sight of that patriarch, who restored it nevertheless. It has many upper and lower chapels, as well as an extensive cemetery (Tafus)
31. Church of Saint John (Abu Yuhannis) located in the district of al-Habbalin in Alexandria. It was a fine structure containing the tomb of [CYRUS](#) the *Muqawqas*, who was viceroy of Egypt at the Arab conquest and who concluded the surrender on the basis of the Covenant of 'Umar during the patriarchate of BENJAMIN I (622-661).
32. Church of Saint Sanutius (Abu Shinudah), situated on an ancient gulf in the Mediterranean just outside Alexandria. It had a Greek inscription that describes Maximus and Basilius as the universal sovereigns.
33. Church of the Tomb of the Prophet Jeremiah located in an area of Alexandria known as Qubbat al-Warshan amidst a Muslim cemetery, now functioning as a mosque.
34. Church of Saint Nicholas (Mar Niqulah) located in the district of Hammam al-Akawayn, which belonged to the Melchites.
35. Church of Mar Saba in the district of Al-Qamrah, once belonging to the Melchites but returned to the Jacobites in the reign of COSMOS I

(730-731) by Caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd-al- Malik (724-743).

36. Church of John the Baptist, originally a fine and vast structure belonging to the Melchites, but later reduced by the Muslims, who constructed many shops within its area and left only a small section for church.
37. Church of the Qaysariyyah (square) belonging to the Melchites.
38. Church of Creniua, where Proterius the Melchite patriarch was assassinated by the Jacobite populace. His body was transported on camelback to the Ptolemaic stadium where it was burned.
39. Church of Saint Menas (Abu Mina) in Mareotis, where the body of the saint is interred. It was constructed in the time of Theophilus (385-412), the twenty-third patriarch, and the emperors Arcadius (395-408) and Theodosius II (408-450). It was completed in the time of TIMOTHY II AELURUS (458-480) who enriched it with columns of colored marble, the like of which was seen nowhere else. With the help of a Chalcedonian, the Abbasid caliph transported these columns to Baghdad during the papacy of YUSAB I (830-849), the fifty-second patriarch, who tried to restore the structure and beautify it again.
40. Church of THEODOSIUS II, son of Arcadius (395-408), founded by Theophilus (385-412), the twenty-third patriarch.
41. An unknown church at Bukhisha, a village in the district of Mareotis, built by a heretical sect that denied the [passion](#) of Jesus and professed that his physical tortures were unreal and only like a dream. This took place during the reign of Pope SHENUTE I (858-880), the fifty-fifth patriarch. Ultimately they came back to orthodoxy and were welcomed by the patriarch, who consecrated a priest for them from their group. That sect is reminiscent of the Qur'anic theory of the crucifixion of Jesus in Islam, which is unreal and only a semblance (Qur'an, Surat al- Nisa', 4:157).

According to Sa'id ibn AL-BITRIQ (quoted by Abu al-Makarim, Vol. 1, pp. 151, 164) many other churches were founded in Alexandria and its

environs but were later destroyed and could not be traced after the Persian invasion, which razed many religious monuments.

It is to be remembered that churches were not the only religious institutions in Alexandria. Several monasteries appeared in the city and became known as great landmarks. Perhaps the most conspicuous among them was the ENATON, known as Dayr al-Zujaj, which was started by one of the Coptic fathers toward the end of the age of persecutions and Coptic martyrdoms. PETER IV (567- 569), the thirty-fourth patriarch, graduated from that monastery, which contained the relics of Peter the Confessor, bishop of Ghaza, as well as those of Abu Batra and Severus of Antioch.

This monastery grew to considerable dimensions. Its fourteen wells and numerous water-wheels irrigated its arable terrains and the palm groves within its precincts. It had a solidly built KEEP with numerous monks. Another subsidiary monastery also arose on the seashore. It was inhabited by forty-four monks in the year A.M. 804/A.D. 1088, and it is even said that similar institutions were situated in that area for other monks and for nuns as well. The Nikious monastery, located in the northeast section of the city, was favored by Benjamin I (622-661), the thirty-eighth patriarch, contemporary of the Arab Conquest.

The Dayr Batrah monastery was an episcopal seat. After destruction by fire, it was restored by Isaac (686-689), the forty-first patriarch. Other houses for monks as well as nuns were started by the [presbyter ANASTASIUS](#) before he became the thirty-sixth patriarch (605-616). A monastery known as that of the lower terrain (DAYR ASFAL AL-ARD) and bearing the name of Saint Mark existed in the east section of Alexandria amidst orchards and agricultural land. It was here that the evangelist celebrated mass. Bodies of martyrs were preserved in its caves, including the remains of Saint Sophia and her three daughters. It is said that this latter monastery was given to the Melchites in the partition of religious [property](#) with the Jacobites. Just outside Alexandria, in Mareotis, was another monastery that housed aged fathers and younger monks who

tortured themselves by the use of iron fetters.

Alexandria, where Christianity took root in Egypt and where the ancient foundation of the Coptic Orthodox Church was laid by Saint Mark, continued to be a significant home of time-honored religious institutions, too numerous to be fully treated by scholars and historians.

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[AZIZ S. ATIYA](#)

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