

## **Iconostasis**

An [iconostasis](#) is the screen or wall in a church that separates the sanctuary, presbytery, or bema, restricted to the clergy, from the naos, or area of the laity. It developed in the [fourteenth century](#) in Byzantine areas, earlier in Egypt. The Arab word for it is *hijab*, which literally means “curtains.”

The spatial separation of [clergy](#) from laity began in the early church, where low *cancelli* (see above) shielded the sanctuary but did not hide it from view. In the sixth century in Byzantine areas the [cancelli](#) developed into the *templon*, a more ornate screen with curtains above it, which concealed the [acts](#) carried out at the [altar](#) from the view of worshipers. It is not known exactly when such concealment was considered necessary.

A similar effect was achieved when curtains were added above the [cancelli](#) in Western churches, first mentioned in the seventh century in *Liber pontificalis* (Duchesne and Vogel, 1955-1957, p. 375). About the same time, the western wall of the *khurus*, a room between the naos and the sanctuary, was performing the function of concealment in Egyptian churches. The wall had a central opening, which might be narrow and provided with wooden doors, as in the churches of Dayr al-Suryan and Dayr al Baramus in Wadi al-Natrun, which have doors from the tenth century (Evelyn-White, 1972, pp. 187-90, 197-200). If the central opening was wide, as in the Church of Saint Mercurius in Dayr Abu Sayfayn, Cairo, columns were inserted in it and the space between them was provided with a wooden framework probably to hold a curtain.

During the Middle Ages the west wall of the *khurus* became more solid and elaborate. Made of wood or stone, it was taller than a man and contained a main entrance that could be closed by a wooden door that was sometimes richly carved (see WOODWORK, COPTIC). There were also side entrances or windows. The stone *khurus* was usually an undecorated wall surmounted by a simple cornice, but the wooden *khurus*

was frequently elaborately carved.

In the Fatimid period (tenth to twelfth centuries) a series of [panels](#) with [figurative](#) and ornamental carving, sometimes inlaid with ivory, were joined in a continuous framework. In the Mamluk period (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) the *khurus* wall was artfully constructed of different colored wood and ivory panels, as can still be seen in churches in Cairo. Meanwhile the *khurus* room itself was opening into the sanctuary and gradually disappeared. The function of the west wall in hiding the sanctuary was then served by the iconostasis, a solid wall pierced by doors, which is covered with paintings of holy persons called icons. These are arranged according to a fixed pattern of subject matter and add greatly to the spiritual meaning and [decorative](#) effect of Coptic churches.

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