

**JOHANN MICHAEL VANSLEB (WANSLEBEN) (d. 1679)**

A [German](#) Orientalist. After intensive studies in Oriental languages, especially Ethiopic and Arabic, he went to Egypt for the first time in 1664-1665 with the intention of going on to Ethiopia, but the patriarch [MATTHEW](#) IV dissuaded him. He then went to Rome, converted to Catholicism, and joined the Dominican order.

Later in Paris, Colbert commissioned him to go to the Orient to buy manuscripts for the Royal Library. In Egypt for the second time, he resided there from June 1672 to October 1673. He then moved to Istanbul, where he wrote his *Histoire de l'église d'Alexandrie* (Paris, 1677). He returned to France in 1676 and died in disgrace three years later. He was accused by Colbert of lingering too long in Istanbul and not attempting to reach Ethiopia.

His great skill at discovering manuscripts of great value puts him in the forefront of those who introduced [Christian](#) Egypt to the West, while these manuscripts became useful for his own work. *Misbah al-Zulmah*, by Abu al-Barakat; *History of the Patriarchs of the [Egyptian Church](#)*; and *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries* were among 355 codices acquired in Egypt that consisted of *scalae* (comprehensive lexicons of all available Coptic terms and their [Arabic](#) equivalents), canonical records, and liturgical books. These manuscripts helped Eusebe Renaudot to write his *Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum Jacobitarum* (Paris, 1713) and *Liturgiarum Orientalium Collectio* (Paris, 1716), which remain classic references on the subject to this day.

Two of Vansleb's publications are of special interest to Coptologists. The *Histoire de l'église d'Alexandrie* is a brief description of the hierarchical structure of the [Alexandrian](#) Coptic church, its customs, liturgy, theology, and canon law. To it, two lists were attached, one about the patriarchs of the church and the other about the "illustrious men of the Coptic nation,"

[meaning](#) its writers in the [Arabic](#) language and their works. This presentation taken from manuscripts listed by Vansleb shows objectivity, scientific approach, and a lack of polemical commentary. The same qualities are found in his *Nouvelle Relation en forme de journal d'un voyage fait en Egypte en 1672 et 1673* (Paris, 1677).

Vansleb's interest in the affairs of the church resulted in works that provide firsthand information on the condition of the Monastery of Saint Antony, on the pilgrimage of Sitt Dimyanah, of the precarious situation of the patriarch and the bishop of Fayyum, the number of churches in the province of Manfalut, and so on. Particularly moving is the account of the pastoral visit of the bishop of Asyut to the White Monastery (DAYR ANBA SHINUDAH) on the west bank of the Nile. Vansleb accompanied him and thus came to travel farther south in Egypt than any European up to that time.

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**MAURICE MARTIN, S. J.**

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