

## ***The Monastery of Abu Fana (MINYA)***

THE MONASTERY OF ABU FANA is situated eighteen kilometers south of al-Minya, at the edge of the Western Desert. It was named after the fourth-century hermit Apa Bane. According to the accounts of his life, Apa Bane, a gentle, wise, and humble man, lived in a pitch-dark cell for eighteen years. He was always on his feet, even sleeping in this position, leaning on a low wall built especially for this purpose. [Bane](#) means 'palm tree' in Coptic. It was not his name (his real name is not known) but it described his appearance: his body was stiff and stooped forward like a palm tree.

After his death, miracles happened on his tomb in the church and the monastery became large and prosperous. The Arab [historian](#) al-Maqrizi (d. 1442) wrote that, formerly, a thousand monks lived there, although in his time no more than two survived.<sup>88</sup> It is not known when the decline set in.

At present, the 'Church on the Hill' is the only structure that survives from the old monastic complex. The sanctuary belongs to the original seventh-century structure. The eastern part looks like a triconch, as found in the churches of monasteries near Sohag, but was not built as such. The side rooms are narrower than the main apse and their half-domes are of later date. Originally, only the main apse had a half-dome (still in place) while the space in front was a khurus, most likely covered with a tunnel vault or a flat roof.

The nave was remodeled several times and comprises now only part of the original space with a small courtyard at the western end. The Church is famous for its wall paintings: the huge, intricate patterned cross above the altar and the crosses in the southern and western half-dome (dating to the thirteenth century), that made the site also known as the 'Monastery of the Crosses.'

From 1987 to 1993, an [Austrian](#) team restored the church and excavated part of the monastic complex to the north. Below the pavement of a sixth-century church, they found the remains of a fourth-century church with the tomb of Apa Bane. The saint could be identified because his spine showed signs of the chronic illness ankylosing spondylitis, or Bechterew's Disease, a form of arthritis that primarily affects the spine and caused the stiffness of his body as described in his biographies.

The cult of Apa Bane, the oldest saint in Egypt whose remains have been identified, is still flourishing. Near the old church, a new monastery and church were built and solemnly inaugurated and consecrated in 2004.



The modern cemetery, surrounded by desert.

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The dome of the church from the desert.

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Crosses on the west wall of the courtyard. Originally, this space belonged to the nave of the church.

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Southern half-dome. The painting shows a large ornamental medallion with a cross under a canopy.

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View to the altar room with the large ornamental cross in the half dome.

The altar screen with icons is modern. The [Corinthian](#) capitals of the columns flanking the entrance to the khurus are reused building elements from the sixth century.

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88 Evetts and Butler 1895,314.

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