

The Monastery of the Holy Virgin [Mary](#) at al-Muharraq, Mount¹ Qusqam: Reflections of Its Monks Today

Introduction

The value of ancient monuments, sometimes, is not in the material they are made of, but rather in their living heritage and ancestral spirit.^[1] How much more it is if these were blessed by the Lord himself, such as the deserted house in which He dwelled as a child and which later became the ancient church of Our Lady in the monastery today.

The site gained worldwide fame, for generations, as a place of pilgrimage. Whenever an opportunity arose, there were renovations or a new expansion of the buildings in order to accommodate pilgrims and others who frequented the monastery.

Hence, today, there are no surviving remains of the ancient walls and buildings, except for those in the 'archaeological area' (fig. 26.1) and a remaining portion of the walls on the southern and eastern sides dating back to the nineteenth century.

Before giving a detailed description of the archaeological area in the monastery, it should be noted that in the first quarter of the twentieth century an engineering committee of archaeologists was formed to study the monastery. The committee delegated Dr. Ugo Monneret de Villard to prepare a comprehensive survey of the churches and buildings of the monastery.

Subsequently, he meticulously and skillfully completed the task of preparing [architectural](#) drawings with detailed cross-sections of vertical elevations, side views, and horizontal plans of the area (Dayr al-Muharraq 2012: 14, 24, 28—30; Monneret deVillard 1928). The book was published

Description of the Ancient Monuments of the Monastery

The Holy Virgin [Mary](#) Ancient Church

This church is the oldest one in the monastery and is unique in its simple structure. It cannot be categorized under the common [architectural](#) styles found in any Coptic church. It is built out of sun-dried bricks with asymmetrical walls. There are no ornamental ancient Coptic patterns, engravings, dapping, variegations, or drawings on its walls.

It is known that ancient architecture, especially that of Coptic churches, has its own unique [architectural](#) features that can identify the time of construction by a building's style and interior division. Yet the simple structure of this church—unlike ancient churches in general—makes it difficult to draw any conclusions.

The simplicity and lack of unique features are a testimony to its antiquity and originality. Despite the repair and renovations performed in the church, it has always been the deliberate practice of the monks living there to keep the simplicity of the style intact. Although they could have built a cathedral honoring and befitting the status and prestige of the place, which the Holy Family blessed during their visit and stay, they chose not to.

Despite the customary practice in some Coptic church building of adding more lavish architecture and art as a part of the renovation work, this was not the case with this ancient church throughout the various repairs and renovations up to the nineteenth century.

The only exceptions were the construction of two rooms, one on each side of the sanctuary, at an unknown time period prior to the erection of three domes on top of the church in the sixteenth century. It has become a deep-rooted feeling in the hearts and minds of the monastery's fathers

not to change the church.

This can be attributed to a divine order that the church must be as it has always been, a witness through generations to the meekness of the only-begotten Son who took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men to save his people.^[2]

The following is a detailed description of the church.



Fig. 26.5. Anba Abram, bishop of the Fayoum and Giza (left); St. Hegomen Mikhail al-Buhairi al-Muharraqi (right). Photograph by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

Fig. 26.5. Anba Abram, bishop of the Fayoum and Giza (left); St. Hegomen Mikhail al-Buhairi al-Muharraqi (right). Photograph by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.



Fig. 26.4. Qusqam, marble iconostasis of St. George Church. Photograph by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

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The interior of the keep with the Chapel of the Archangel Michael with a wooden lectern.

The interior of the keep with the Chapel of the Archangel Michael with a wooden lectern.



The Quarry Church of the Virgin.

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The ancient [Church of the Virgin](#) Mary, view from the nave to the sanctuary. According to tradition, Christ consecrated the house where the family lived during their stay in Egypt as a church, the first church in Egypt. The present building most probably dates to the twelfth century.

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Fig. 26.1. Qusqam, the archaeological area. Photograph by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

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This altar stone of the main altar was previously used as a tombstone for a man named Colluthos in the year 746.

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The reused columns were placed upside down. RIGHT: the well on the ground floor of the keep.

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Fig. 26.3. Qusqam, selected ornamental carvings on the outside walls of the keep. Photographs by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

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The main gate of the monastery.

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The ancient [Church of the Virgin](#) Mary, the central altar room.

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The interior of the keep with the Chapel of the Archangel Michael with a wooden lectern.

The interior of the keep with the Chapel of the Archangel Michael with a⁵ wooden lectern.



The Ark or Throne of the Chalice (Kursi al-kas). During liturgy, the prepared chalice is put in the Ark until Holy Communion. The icon painter A[na]stasi al-Qudsi al-Rumi decorated the Ark with The Last Supper (photograph), the Virgin and Child and the archangels Michael and Gabriel (dated am 1581/ad 1864-1865).

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Fig. 26.2. Qusqam, two [iconostases](#) in the ancient Church of the Holy Virgin Mary. Photograph by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

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Fig. 26.6. Qusqam, selected collection of antiquities. Photographs by Fr. Maximous al-Muharraqi.

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The sanctuary

The eastern apse in a Coptic church is referred to as the bosom of God the Father, as it symbolizes God's longing for His Church, which is waiting for His Second Coming. It is a curved semicircular area in the eastern wall of the sanctuary. Two other rooms were built on either side of the sanctuary. They are also of simpler architecture, matching that of the ancient structure. The left (northern) room is used as a sacristy, a dressing room for the clergymen, and has no door entry to the nave of the church.

The right (southern) room is for the deacons' service, where the Holy Communion set is kept. It is worth mentioning that during the restoration and renovation of the church in the year 2000, it was discovered that the eastern wall is a double wall with enough space in between for one

person to stand. This space had an opening to the southern room of the sanctuary. The three sixteenth-century domes are atop the sanctuary and the two rooms.

The altar is the most important part of the sanctuary. It is cubical rather than rectangular. On its surface there is a marble top with a semicircular edge,^[3] with an engraved Greek inscription. It reads: “O Lord, give rest to the blessed Colluthos,” and is dated 15 [Kiyahk](#) am 463 (11 December ad 746).^[4]

According to church tradition, four pillars symbolizing the four Evangelists must be erected around the altar. However, due to the narrow space of the sanctuary, only three were erected and fixed to the right and left walls. The fourth pillar was added later, during the 2000 restoration mentioned above.

Entries to the sanctuary are all low-rise, which makes the believer passing through them bow his head in humility and respect for the house of the Lord. According to the Coptic Church tradition, the altar of the Holy Virgin [Mary](#) Church is located “in the midst of the land of Egypt.” This is understood as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, “In that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord”.

The nave

Nothing remains of the ancient nave except for the southern wall, extending from the first to the second sections. The other walls—the southern wall of the third section, as well as the western and the northern walls—were all constructed in the nineteenth century. As is customary in Coptic churches, the nave is divided into three main sections.

The first section is for the believers, the second for the penitents, and the third for the catechumens or those not yet baptized. Seven domes were

also built over the nave, carried by squinches on top of four circular⁹ pillars, made of red and black bricks.

The narthex

This is built with two pillars in the middle with a wooden roof. At a later date, the church of the Ethiopians was built on top of it. However, in the 1930s this church was removed because it was feared that it might affect the structure of the ancient church. In 2000, the following restoration and renovation work took place:

1. Two additional domes were built on top of the nave, for a total of nine domes. The old layer of gypsum on the walls was replaced with a new one.
2. During the restoration in the southern wall, two doors were found hidden under the old layer of gypsum, so they were reopened (Dayr al- Muharraq 2012: photographs nos. 2 and 3).
3. A door was reopened in the western wall of the external narthex of the church. This door existed in the nineteenth century.

Wood-carved [iconostases](#)

The iconostasis, forming a complete visual and physical barrier, is adorned with beautiful icons and carved wooden crosses facing the congregation. It represents an open book written in an easy and simple language, announcing to all generations God's love for humans. There are two [iconostases](#) in the church (fig. 26.2):

1. The first iconostasis has a wooden plaque with a Coptic—Arabic phrase inlaid in silver lettering, reading: "Hail to the sanctuary of God, Hail to St. [Mary](#) Mother of God." It appears that the arch of this part of the door is made of wood older than the rest of the iconostasis. It has some anonymous carved inscriptions on its back. In the center of the arch is a metal ring to hang the thurible (censer)

during the liturgy. Due to the sacredness of the sanctuary, no layman¹¹⁰ is allowed inside it. Hence, there is a small window on each side of the main door for the congregation to receive Holy Communion. Currently, communion is administered to the congregation in the nave of the church, in front of the main door. In the 1940s, the iconostasis was disassembled because of termite infestation and the damaged sections were removed. This restoration resulted in the reduction of the overall size of the iconostasis.

2. The second iconostasis was removed from the Ethiopian church and is placed adjacent to the first iconostasis. On the arch of its door it similarly has a wooden plaque inlaid with silver lettering, but with different Coptic—Arabic phrases, which date back to the nineteenth century. They read: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. Hail to the sanctuary of God the Father. A sanctuary dedicated to the name of Peter and Paul the Apostles.”

The church icons

In the Orthodox tradition, the icon is a highly stylized religious painting. The subject and placement of the icons is significant, as an uneducated person could learn the whole Bible just by looking at them. The icons are fixed to the iconostasis in order to attract the soul to long for eternal glory. In 1996, the monastery paid special attention to the preservation and cataloging of these icons, which date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Dayr al-Muharraq 2012:19—22).

Oil lamps and ostrich eggs

The oil lamps are placed in front of icons during the liturgy and lit with pure olive oil. Currently, the only remaining oil lamp in the church is that of the east wall within the sanctuary; it is always lit so that no strange (i.e., outside) fire is used in the church. This is symbolic of what the Lord said to Moses regarding oil lamps being constantly lit (see). The east lamp also symbolizes the star that appeared to the wise men from the

The Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary at al-Muharraq east in the Levant. Ostrich eggs in the church symbolize the divine providence and resurrection of the Lord. They are usually hung in front of the iconostasis.

Two Other Ancient Churches

Historical documents of the monastery mention two other churches, but today they no longer exist.

St. John the Baptist Church

This church was dedicated to the Ethiopian monks. Its date of construction is unknown; the oldest evidence found so far of its existence dates back to the middle of the seventeenth century. The church was in close proximity to the ancient Holy Virgin Church, on its north side. It was demolished in the nineteenth century and replaced by the new narthex and its attached rooms. What remains today are only the stone altar and some icons.

St. Takla-Haymanot Church

Although the iconostasis bears the name of the [Apostles](#) Peter and Paul, the name 'St. Takla-Haymanot' was prevalent throughout the church. It was also dedicated to the Ethiopian monks and built on the roof of the ancient church narthex in the nineteenth century. It too was demolished in the 1930s due to the weakness of the ancient church building. The iconostasis of this church was placed inside the ancient church, as mentioned above.

The Ancient Keep

Keeps were built to protect the monks from fierce barbarian raids. One of the oldest and largest known keeps is that of the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi al-Natrun (al-Maskin 1984: 394-95; 591-620). The keep,

The Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary at al-Muharraq in structure, is a fortified building with one entrance accessed by a¹² wooden drawbridge. The shape of its openings (windows) in cross-section is conical, a design that allows the viewer from inside to observe what is outside, while not giving the viewer from outside the same privilege.

The keep needed to be designed and well-enough equipped to give the monks maximum protection for as long as a siege would last. It is also arranged to allow the monks to perform their ascetic practices as well as to sustain them physically during their stay.

The essential elements of a keep

The keep contained the following for use during a siege:

1. *A source of drinkable water.* As this keep had no well, there must have been a link between the well of the ancient Church of the Holy Virgin [Mary](#) and the lupine basin in a room on the ground floor. Another possibility is that there was an old well to the east of the keep connected to the lupine basin. When water was needed, the basin inlet was opened to let water flow.
2. *Sufficient amounts of food:* Only lupine could be stored during any siege, as all other [food](#) would soon rot. This would be sufficient for sustaining the monks regardless of how long the siege lasted.
3. *Cells or living rooms.*
4. *A place for worship:* In this keep there is one chapel, dedicated to the Archangel Michael, that he might intercede on the monks' behalf and protect them from evil.
5. *One or more small burial rooms:* In the event of a monk dying during the siege, he would be buried in a designated area that at al-Muharraq was usually located between the roof of the keep and the ceiling of the chapel
6. *Emergency caches:* These were constructed in case the attackers succeeded in breaking through to kill the monks. The most important is situated under the sanctuary. If a breach of the defenses took place

during the liturgy, the priest and those who served with him, if possible, would escape there to hastily receive the Holy Communion before it fell into the hands of the attackers.¹³

Key features of the al-Muharraq keep

1. *The dimensions of the keep*
 - Base area: 10.53 m X 10.10 m
 - Upper area: 9.60 m x 8.80 m
 - Height: 16.57 m
2. *The keep chapeh* This is dedicated to the Archangel Michael. It has one altar and its nave is divided into two small sections by two pillars and a wooden partition in between. It seems that the two pillars are probably from ancient times and possibly taken from a nearby pagan temple that existed during the earliest period of Christianity, as evidenced from the broken capital of one of them. Standing at the front of the nave is a wooden lectern from which the 'lectionary book'—the book of ritual readings—is read. It is believed to date as far back as the twelfth century, when the keep was renovated. The door of the church, as well as the other doors, is of the same design as those of the ancient Church of the Holy Virgin Mary. We have had no information to date to confirm whether the keep was ever utilized. Yet it has been renovated and restored at different times: in the twelfth, sixteenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In 2001 a complete exterior and interior renovation was carried out.
3. *The hemicycle sundial*: This consists of a fixed gnomon in the middle of the diameter of a semicircle, carved on the southern wall of the keep. The time is read from the shadow of the gnomon falling on the time scale.

The Holy Virgin [Mary](#) Church, also known as St. George Church

The church was established in the late eighteenth century with meager

The Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary at al-Muharraq resources. In 1878 a new church called 'the Holy Virgin Mary' was built¹¹⁴ over the ruins of this church. It was finished in 1880. The northern altar was named after John the Baptist, the southern one after St. George, and the middle one after the new name of the church, the Holy Virgin Mary. A number of biblical verses are engraved on its iconostasis in a most beautiful Arabic calligraphy, along with other decorative ornamental elements (fig. 26.4).

The church icons

a) Icons mounted on the marble iconostasis (Dayr al-Muharraq 2012: 38), in the Byzantine style, painted by two renowned iconographers from Jerusalem in the nineteenth century: Nicola Tawdory of Jerusalem and Demitry Girges of Jerusalem

B) Icons mounted on the walls and Holy Icon (Dayr al-Muharraq 2012:39, 40), dating back to the nineteenth century.

The nave

The nave is designed following the medieval pattern, in which women had a private place on the second floor over the church's nave. The interior of the church was renovated in 1990. After the renovations, it was consecrated on the commemoration of our Father Hegomen Mikhail al-Buhairy's repose. His relics were moved to a handmade wood-carved reliquary and placed in a magnificent Epitaphios canopy in the nave during a ceremony attended by His Grace Bishop Sawiros, abbot of the monastery, along with thirteen other Coptic bishops on 16 Amshir am 1707 (23 February 1991).

This holy father pursued the monastic life during the tenure of Abbot Fr. Boules al-Delgawy (ad 1866—70), who later became known as Anba Abram, bishop of the Fayoum and Giza, and was renowned for his holiness.^[5] St. Mikhail al-Buhairi was also famous for his virtues and his

The Monastery of the Holy Virgin Mary at al-Muharraq holiness; he reposed on 23 February 1923. The [Holy Synod](#) proclaimed him a saint in 1963 along with his spiritual father, Anba Abram (fig. 26.5).¹¹⁵

The southeast, outside the nave

The baptistery is located here. Also, underneath, there is a sepulcher for the abbots of the monastery. The last monks to be honored by being buried there were Fr. Benjamin al-Muharraqi and Fr. Aghabius al-Muharraqi, who were martyred at the monastery's main gate on 11 March 1994.

The outside of the church's eastern wall

Here is found a wall painting of two martyrs: St. George on the southern side and St. Mercurius Abu Sayfayn on the northern side.

More Recent and Modern Buildings

The monastery buildings consist of many different [architectural](#) styles, depending on the time of their building and the needs they serve. It is worth mentioning that all recent renovations of and restorations to the monastery churches (previously mentioned), as well as all new construction dating from 1977 to the present time, were accomplished under the guidance and blessings of His Grace Bishop Sawiros, bishop and abbot of the monastery.

The New Church of the Holy Virgin Mary (built 1964)

This church has three altars. The middle or main one is dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary; the southern altar was originally named after St. George and later rededicated to St. Abram, bishop of the Fayoum and Giza; and the northern altar is named after St. Takla-Haymanot the Ethiopian. All the icons in the church were painted by the iconographer Yacoub Fanous.

Abbot's Residence

This is the official place of residence of the abbot. It also functions as a residence for visiting senior dignitaries of the Church, such as patriarchs, bishops, and so on. Its architecture is Italian in style. It was built in 1910, during the tenure of His Grace Bishop Pachomius I, abbot of the monastery from 1896 to 1928.

Educational Ministry

Education in monasteries has great importance for students and scholars as it provides the means to develop their intellect spiritually and scientifically, while also being immersed in the monastic life. The following are institutions of education at the monastery:

The theological seminary

The purpose of this seminary is to prepare qualified clergymen for the Church. The seminary offers a four-year bachelor's degree program in theology.

St. Didymus Institute for Cantors

The purpose of this institute is to train cantors and chanters who perform an essential role in churches. The institute offers a five-year study program to enable students to learn other curricula besides chants, melodies, and rites of the church.

Visitors' and Pilgrims' Buildings

Throughout the year, the monastery celebrates all Coptic Orthodox Church feasts, especially those of the Holy Virgin Mary. Multitudes of visitors and pilgrims attend these occasions in the monastery, to receive blessings and, for some, to baptize their infants. Accordingly, the monastery is equipped with many facilities, such as several guest

accommodations and a celebration yard.

Walls and Gates

The monastery walls and gates have the following features (Dayr al-Muharraq 2012: 46,47):

1. Sun-dried brick walls from the nineteenth century.
2. Stone walls dating back to the first half of the twentieth century, designed by the professional committee that commissioned the survey (as mentioned in the introduction). This portion of the wall is modeled on the walls of Jerusalem and has two gates.
3. A section of red-brick walls with reinforced concrete was built in 1978 to replace the sun-dried brick wall. It has two gates. The main gate was renovated during 2003-2004 to make it architecturally worthy of the monastery's historical status.

A Selection of Antiquities from the Monastery's Collection Some of the notable antiquities found in the monastery are as follows (fig. 26.6):

1. The holy wooden plate of the Ethiopian church.
2. Wooden, silver-plated Gospel casket decorated with crosses, foliage ornaments, and Arabic and Coptic inscriptions (twelfth/thirteenth century).
3. Decorated silver cover of an oil lamp.
4. Pottery vessel.
5. Granite font.
6. Column capitals, limestone.
7. Wooden lectern (twelfth century).
8. Stone baptistery font.
9. Stone altar of the Ethiopian church.

Conclusion

This chapter presents a brief survey of the architecture and the contents¹¹⁸ of al-Muharraq monastery, presented as reflections of the monk-fathers of the monastery. It is considered one of the holiest places in Egypt: the site hosted the Holy Family during their flight to Egypt, and Church tradition tells us that its ancient church was dedicated by the Lord and His Apostles. This truly represents an altar in the middle of Egypt, as Isaiah the prophet wrote hundreds of years before the advent of Christ.

**Fr. Philoxenos al-Muharraqi
and a group of the monastery's monks**

[1] This chapter is based on Dayr al-Muharraq 2012, published on the occasion of the convening of the sixth International Symposium of Christianity and Monasticism in Middle Egypt, at the Monastery of al-Muharraq, Egypt.

[2] This is based on the Holy Virgin [Mary](#)'s instruction to Pope Theophilus of Alexandria (twenty-third Pope of Alexandria, AD 385-412), as recorded on page 88 of Manuscript 9/14 in the monastery library.

[3] This semicircle of marble is a peculiar shape found in ancient Coptic altars in Egypt. The idea of such a shape comes from an old Coptic motif that first appeared in the Last Supper icons, where the table is semicircular.

[4] See "History and Heritage" in Dayr al-Muharraq 2012, and figure 8.6 in this volume.

[5] He reposed in 1914.

Tags: [Places](#)