

CHURCH OF AL-MU'ALLAQAH (Old Cairo) □□□□□□ □□□□□□

This church is called in Coptic manuscripts “the church of Saint Mary, Mother of God, at Babylon in Egypt” (Amélineau, 1893, pp. 577-79). Texts in Arabic describe it as the “church of our Lady Mary, surnamed the hanging.” European travelers have called it “the church of the column” or “the church of the staircase” (see Coquin, 1974, pp. 65, 74-75, 77-79).

This church is situated to the south of the modern city of Cairo, at QASR AL-SHAM' (Old Cairo), occupying the south and southwest bastions of the ancient Roman fortress often called BABYLON (Coquin, pp. 65, 76-77; Simaykah, 1930, p. 20). According to some Arab historians of the fourteenth century, a mosque was erected under the church of al-Mu'allaqah (Coquin, p. 77).

The different constructions surviving may be divided into two parts: that of the southeast, which is probably the primitive church, situated above the south bastions of the fortress and now containing a [chapel](#) and a baptistery, and that to the north of it, which is the principal church, of basilica plan.

The primitive church in the time of [Butler](#) was divided into three chapels and a baptistery (1884, pp. 224-28). The first [chapel](#) adjoining the south nave of the principal church is dedicated to the Ethiopian saint Takla Haymanot.

According to modern authors, the original part of the church of al-Mu'allaqah was built between the third and seventh centuries (Coquin, p. 66), although we have no historical source attesting the antiquity of this

adaptation of the Roman bastion.

Modern authors date the construction of the principal church to the fifth or seventh century (Coquin, p. 66), while an Arab legend attributes it to Belsa (Balthasar), son of Nebuchadnezzar and a Coptic woman.

A first destruction and immediate restoration of the church is attested under the patriarch YUSAB I (830-849). A second restoration took place under the patriarch ABRAHAM (975-978) and the caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (952-975). Under the patriarch ZACHARIAH (1004-1032) the caliph al-HAKIM (996-1021) had the al-Mu'allaqah church surrounded by a wall to prohibit access. Shortly afterward the church was sacked, and its closing was ordered by the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. Some modern authors mention the plundering of the church, as well as a precious chalice buried under the altar (Coquin, p. 67).

The church was plundered once again under al-Ashraf Khalil, 1290-1293). At the beginning of the fourteenth century the al-Mu'allaqah was closed anew, and reopened due to the intervention in 1301 of the emperor of Byzantium, as al-Maqrizi and Abu al-[Barakat IBN KABAR](#) record (see Coquin, p. 68). Later the church underwent in turn closures, burning, partial destructions, and restorations, as the Arab historians bear witness. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments of Arab Art has been carrying out repairs and various works in this church.

The church of al-Mu'allaqah from the time of the patriarch CHRISTODOULUS (1047-1077) was the place of the election, consecration, or enthronement of the patriarchs of Alexandria. This lasted down to the [patriarch JOHN](#) VIII (1300-1320). It was also the patriarchal

residence from the time of the patriarch MIKHA'IL IV (1092-1102) to the reign of the patriarch THEODOSIUS II (1294- 1300), and the place of burial of several patriarchs (Coquin, pp. 70- 71, 79). Synods were held in this church as well as ordinations; the patriarchs from CYRIL II (1078-1092) to JOHN VIII (1300-1320) consecrated the chrism there.

The Holy Family is said to have dwelt in this church at the time of its passage to Babylon in Egypt. The relics of Saint Martin and Saint Barbara are found there.

Among the significant objects that belong, or have belonged, to the al-Mu'allaqah church are the following: The screens in wood that separate the three sanctuaries from the naves of the principal church are inlaid with [ivory](#) and composed of crosswise designs. According to modern authors, they date from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The wood screen of the [chapel](#) of Takla Haymanot is composed of panels inlaid with ivory and dates from the thirteenth century.

According to nineteenth-century authors, a lintel in wood from the entrance door of the principal church was still in place. It represents in relief the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem on the left, and the Ascension of Christ on the right. It dates from the fourth to the sixth centuries. At present, it is deposited in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo.

Three wooden doors are composed of panels, sculpted in relief, and inlaid with ebony and ivory. They date from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. At present they are in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo.

Greville Chester (1872, p. 128) noted two leaves of a door in wood in a small place situated between the central and north sanctuaries. This door contains ten wooden panels sculpted in relief and representing scenes drawn from the life of Christ. They date from the thirteenth century. They

are now deposited in the British Museum in London (Dalton, 1901).

Another wooden door is situated almost in the middle of the south wall of the south nave of the principal church of al- Mu'allaqah, by which one enters the early church. It is of pine wood, inlaid with ivory, and dates from the eleventh century.

Regarding altars and their ciboria in the principal church, Greville Chester (p. 128) wrote he had seen above the altar of the south sanctuary a ciborium in wood, supported by columns in marble. Butler (1884) noted that he did not see the ancient altars, for they were already demolished. But he observed in the north sanctuary two altar tables in white marble, which would probably have belonged to the north and south sanctuaries.

One of them had the form of a horseshoe, while the second had a rectangular form, in the middle of which a hole was pierced. He also says that the altar of the central sanctuary was of "the ordinary type." According to the information from the priest, the ancient altars must have been replaced by slabs upheld by small columns. The author also affirms having seen two ancient ciboria, which formerly surmounted the altars, but time and neglect had damaged the condition of the prettily painted figures. One of these altar ciboria in wood, dated to the tenth/eleventh century, is in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo.

Describing the altars and their ciboria, modern authors must refer to those that replaced the ancient ones at the end of the nineteenth century.

Against the first column on the north side of the central nave of the principal church is placed an ambo supported by five columns. It is decorated with mosaics and crosses in relief. Modern authors attribute it to the tenth century.

Describing the altar and ciborium of the [chapel](#) of Takla Haymanot, Greville Chester (1872, p. 129) speaks of an altar covered with a circular slab, in the middle of which is carved a cross. Butler (1884, Vol. 1, p. 225) mentions the ciborium that had just replaced the old one.

The [baptismal](#) fonts in granite are located in a hollow in the south wall of the primitive church and surmounted by a niche adorned with mosaics.

Beginning from the narthex, on the fourth column of the row that separates the central nave from the south nave, a mural decoration depicts an angel standing, full-face, beardless, and bearing the nimbus and the diadem; his name is partially effaced.

The south sanctuary ends in an apse, the lower part of which is decorated with designs, inlaid with marble of different colors, while the upper part is decorated with designs in plaster. The niche in the middle of the apse represents a cross, inlaid with marble. Russell, 1962, p. 88, dates this niche to the twelfth century.

In the [Chapel](#) of Takla Haymanot, the flat apse in the east wall contains in two registers separated by a horizontal inscription in Coptic (Ps. 121:1-2) the following representations: in the middle of the upper register, the Holy Virgin is painted in distemper, standing on a pedestal, holding Christ in her arms. On the two sides, remnants survive of two figures, probably angels in adoration. In the lower register stand the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse, seen full-face and clothed in the sacerdotal habit. Their heads are haloed, and each holds in his right hand a censer and in the left an object that cannot be identified.





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In the course of work carried out in 1983 a wall painting representing the Nativity of Christ was discovered.

The library of the al-Mu'allaqah church appears to have possessed manuscripts of a theological, liturgical, and hagiographical order. These are now deposited in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo and in the Coptic Patriarchate.

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