

The Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel (FAYYUM)

The saintly bishop AUR OF NAQLUN, the legendary founder of the monastery, was the secret son of a princess and a magician living somewhere in the East. His mother died when he was three years old. When he was eight years old, the king, the father of the princess, discovered his existence. Guided by the Archangel Gabriel, Aur escaped with his father and two elder brothers to Fayyum. They settled in Naqlun, practicing magic. Shortly afterward, the father died. The Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel appeared to the brothers and they were converted to Christianity.

They promised to build a church in honor of the archangel, and Gabriel and the Virgin traced the ground plan. Legend has it that after much trouble caused by Satan, who wanted to stop the building, the church was completed. Saint Isaac, Bishop of Fayyum, consecrated the church and [ordained](#) Aur priest. After St. Isaac's death, Aur succeeded him as Bishop of Fayyum.

Although the origin of this story is uncertain, archaeological research in and around the monastery has been uncovering an extensive monastic community going back to at least the fifth century ad. Eighty-nine rock-cut [hermitages](#) in the hills and monastic buildings on the plateau at the foot of the hills were discovered. They testify to a way of life where monks lived on their own in hermitages, coming down for Mass and supplies.

In around 900, the complex on the plateau completely burned down. A new monastic center was built and the current Church of the Archangel Gabriel presumably dates to this period. It has a basilican plan with a nave, side aisles and returns aisle, an apse, and side chambers. Pieces of architectural sculpture (pilasters, columns, and capitals) dating to the fifth century and presumably originating from an older church on the plateau (not localized yet) were reused. From 1990-1996, wall paintings

were discovered.

On the walls of the nave, a series of equestrian saints (among others, Theodore and Mercurius), standing saints, Gabriel, Virgin and Child between archangels, and crosses were found. In the apse, the traditional pattern has been adapted to the architecture: Christ enthroned surrounded by the Four Living Creatures was depicted in the half-dome. Below, on either side of a window, the apostles were painted, accompanied by two monastic saints. The Virgin, who normally takes her place in the middle of the group of apostles, was painted on a lower level, in the central niche of the east wall.

Inscriptions mentioning Patriarch Zacharias (1005-1030) point to a date of creation during his patriarchate. This makes the decorative program one of the few firmly dated assemblages in a [Christian](#) wall painting in Egypt. In the apse, paintings of an earlier layer are still visible in the lateral niches: St. Mark and (presumably) St. Athanasius.

The [hermitages](#) seem to have been in use until the twelfth century, while the monastery was deserted in the fourteenth century. The Church of the Archangel Gabriel survived and has been the nucleus of a small complex. Renovations included a khurus, domes above the eastern end, and a wall closing the return-aisle, turning it into a narthex. Since the 1990s, the community has been revived and a new monastery is being developed.



The apostles in the apse of the central haykal on both sides of a window

with stucco tracery

The apostles in the apse of the central haykal on both sides of a window with stucco tracery



St. Mark (niche in the apse)

St. Mark (niche in the apse)



The apostles in the apse of the central haykal on both sides of a window with stucco tracery

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The Church of the Archangel Gabriel, view from the south aisle to the sanctuary. The basin in the floor (laqqan) was used for the [ceremony](#) of foot washing on Maundy Thursday.

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The equestrian saint Pichoshe on the west -wall of the church. This is the only image preserved of this soldier and nothing is known about his life. The equestrian saint Pichoshe on the west -wall of the church. This is the only image preserved of this soldier and nothing is known about his life.



The Virgin enthroned with Child, accompanied by two archangels. The mural was painted on the west wall of the church, a most unusual place for this theme.

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