

STATE MUSEUM OF BERLIN

The Coptic collection of the Staatliche Museen in East Berlin is one of the most extensive and most important outside Egypt. It contains some 2,000 works of all kinds.

Its origin is closely connected with the building up of a section for Early Christian and Byzantine works of art; from about 1895, this collection was systematically bought by Wilhelm Bode for the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, opened in 1904 and called today the Bode Museum. In the winter of 1901-1902 he commissioned J. Strzygowski, at that time probably the best judge of Byzantine and Early Christian art in the Orient, to purchase Coptic works of art in Egypt for the Berlin Museum.

By far the greatest part of the Coptic works were bought at that time (cf. the catalog in Wulff, 1909, pp. 332-34): sculptures and figures in relief, funerary stelae, small carvings in stone, architectural sculptures, wood-carvings, stamps, clay lamps, earthenware, stoppers for jars, statuettes, funerary boards, bone carvings for furniture decorations, glassware, leather work, bronze vessels or utensils and parts thereof, pieces of jewelry, gold, silver or bronze, lead ornaments, textiles.

Places of purchase are given [chiefly](#) as Akhmim, Alexandria, (Old) Cairo, al-Ashmunayn, Bawit, Idfu, Armant, the Fayyum, Giza, Hilwan, Qina, Luxor, and other places, but that tells us nothing about the actual origin of the pieces.

From 1901 numerous minor works of Coptic art were added as well as some pieces passed on from the Egyptian Museum. From 1903 important purchases repeatedly appear in the inventory with the statement of origin "Egypt," occasionally also "Bawit," but the circumstances of purchase and the agents concerned are not made known.

In 1902 a large number of lamps and ampullae from ABU MINA were

added (among them a number donated by Bode), as well as terra-cotta and architectural sculptures from Abu Mina and Cairo (some of them allegedly again from Bawit). The Coptic collection in this way steadily grew until 1912. The holdings of Coptic textiles were considerably expanded by the collection of the German consul in Cairo, C. Reinhardt, purchased in 1900 by Bode and given by him to the Museum.

In 1905 parts of the collection of T. Graf (Vienna) were added, and also valuable private donations, such as some of the large tapestries. The textiles purchased by C. Schmidt in Antinoopolis, G. Schweinfurth in Arsinoë (the Fayyum), and others in the 1930s were also handed over to the [textile](#) collection of the early Christian and Byzantine collection. The collection today comprises about 1,500 pieces.

The Coptic collection was badly affected by the great losses that the early Christian and Byzantine collection suffered in World War II. Almost all the small works of art in wood, bone, leather, and metal depicted in Wulff, 1909 (pls. 8-58), have been destroyed. From the textiles only the large multicolored tapestries (e.g., pls. 2, 4, 5, 10, 39, 43-48, and others) perished.

As a result of the separation of the Berlin museums, some pieces are today preserved in West Berlin (Wulff, 1909, no. 42, 243). For most of the works destroyed, the old negative plates are still in existence.

Among the works in the plastic arts, architectural reliefs of the third to fifth centuries predominate, such as the top part of a round [niche](#) with the head of Aphrodite in the conch (Wulff, 1909, no. 58), a bust of Tyche (Wulff, no. 55), frieze blocks with mythological [themes](#) and figures (Leda and the swan, Wulff, no. 64; sea creatures, Wulff, no. 59; putti, Wulff, nos. 60-62).

Among the Christian exhibits of the fourth to seventh centuries the important panel in relief with the Entry of Christ, allegedly deriving from

Suhaj (Wulff, no. 72), stands out, as does a tympanum, though badly worn, with the presentation of Apa PHOIBAMMON before the enthroned Christ (Wulff, 1911, no. 2240). The group of the funerary reliefs includes a remarkable selection of all the current local types of the third to eighth centuries, among them the stela of Apa SHENUTE, readily connected with the founder of the White and Red monasteries, which is alleged to derive from Suhaj (Wulff, 1909, no. 73).

Of special significance for the history of iconography is a colored picture of a poised lactating mother (Wulff, 1909, no. 79), which on the basis of recently analyzed inscriptional remains could be recognized as a Christian adaptation of a pagan model (Effenberger, 1977). The stela with figures (Wulff, 1909, no. 77) is firmly dated by inscription 703, but with this late date little is gained for the chronology of Coptic reliefs.

The Berlin collection also possesses an outstanding selection of Coptic architectural moldings: a two-tier capital bought in [Cairo](#) in 1909 (Wulff, 1909, no. 1656), which imitates contemporary Constantinopolitan models of the period of Justinian and attests the high artistic level of Coptic architectural sculpture at the time; and a wall fragment from Bawit with a circular design and Christogram (Wulff, no. 237), two wainscoting [panels](#) of the sixth/seventh century, probably from the same source, adorned with geometrical and ornamental designs (Wulff, nos. 1641-42), as well as a frieze originating in the fifth century consisting of five blocks with slender fronds, animals, and a head of Tyche in laurel wreaths borne aloft by putti (Wulff, no. 208).

[Capitals](#) of different types, sometimes carved after imported models, frieze fragments with decorative, pagan, or symbolic Christian designs, conchs, sometimes filled with crosses (Wulff, no. 233), and other motifs also appear. Among the wood-carvings, adorned with figures or ornaments, door jambs and frieze boards predominate.

Unique pieces are the pilaster cornice with “relief of a besieged town”

(Wulff, no. 342, today in West Berlin) and the console with a representation of Daniel between lions (Wulff, no. 242, with doubtful derivation from Bawit). The beams with their inscriptions and ornamental reliefs of figures provide important stylistic and iconographical clues, still not fully evaluated, for the chronology of Coptic plastic arts of the sixth to eighth centuries.

Also of value for cultural history is the extant stock of wooden bread stamps (Wulff, 1909, pl. 12).

Among the [paintings](#) on wooden boards, the three most important have fortunately survived: the icon of Bishop ABRAHAM of Hermonthis (Wulff, 1909, no. 1607), the panel of a coffer ceiling with busts (Wulff, no. 1608), and the casket with [Christ](#) the Redeemer and busts of angels and saints (Wulff, no. 1604). The icon of Abraham could be identified with the bishop of Hermonthis of the same name, and dated to the period about 600 (Krause, 1971).

The collection of Coptic textiles is in essentials identical with the stock cataloged by Wulff and Volbach in 1926. The most important fragments have been carefully restored in recent years. The most important works of the Berlin collection have repeatedly been the subject of research and publication (cf. Wessel, 1963; Effenberger, 1974; Badawy, 1978), but a fundamental new treatment is urgently needed.

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