

The Architecture of Coptic Churches

THE CHRISTIANS OF EGYPT OFTEN FOUND THEMSELVES facing the monumental architecture of the pharaonic past. The grand limestone and colorful granite temple complexes of the ancient gods were still active in the first centuries under the patronage of the Roman emperors; [paganism](#) was certainly not overshadowed by the rise of Christianity in Egypt. The foreign pharaohs sought to refurbish and add to these ancient monuments to solidify their names in history and to earn the eternal favor of the ancient Egyptian gods. With the vibrancy of the old cults, it was difficult for the Christians of the first centuries to imagine that one day Egypt would be home to one of the largest pilgrimage centers in the Mediterranean world and that Christian monasticism would be born in the deserts that held the tombs of the long-forgotten pharaohs.

Initially, there was no place for early Christians to practice their religion, except in their homes. Christians in Egypt, as elsewhere in the empire, were not allowed to practice their religion freely. The house meetings, therefore, provided a safe environment for observing their traditions and creating a community. Their church was to be the body of believers and they continued to gather, as they had in the time of first apostles, in the homes of those who could afford to host the gatherings.

By the second century, the Didache recounts that Christians were gathering for a Thanksgiving meal, possibly the Eucharist, and a communal meal.⁽⁸⁾ The homes were eventually remodeled to accommodate larger gatherings of Christians and to provide the [proper](#) furniture for the celebration of a sacred meal, baptism, and worship. The earliest example of a house-church, domus ecclesiae, dating to 256, was found at Dura Europa in Syria. This house church demonstrates the natural evolution of a communal space into sacred space and includes the basic components of what would become indicative of church architecture throughout the Byzantine Empire.⁹ Unfortunately, few parallels exist for Christian architecture until the fourth century when the

first monumental constructions were sponsored by Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena. With imperial support, they built churches that would rival the size and splendor of the old [pagan](#) temples and marked the landscape with visible sacred spaces for creating a new form of religious architecture.

Given the late start to church building in the empire, it is not surprising that the earliest churches in Egypt do not date before the late fourth and early fifth centuries; however, written [sources](#) from the fourth century do suggest that churches were being used earlier in Egypt, although no physical remains have been found.¹⁰ The earliest layouts of churches in Egypt and the Byzantine Empire include a nave, or naos, where the laity would gather; a sanctuary, complete with an [altar](#) table and seating for the clergy, the synthronon; and barriers that separate the two spaces. Additional elements, such as a baptistery, clerestory, a narthex, a crypt for the honored dead, and side rooms for the preparation of the Eucharist, appear in a variety of forms, depending upon the period and the needs of the community. Even the method of constructing a timber- or brick-domed roof would influence church design in the later medieval periods.

In Egypt, church architecture bears particular features which set these spaces of worship apart from their Greek counterparts in the broader Byzantine Empire. With the evolution of church architecture in Egypt, there are distinctive features that reflect particular needs and theological beliefs regarding the space in which one worshiped and gathered for the synaxis, the gathering for the liturgy or celebration of the Eucharist. Even the manner in which churches were painted with scenes from the Biblical and monastic world would distinguish Egyptian churches from other Christian churches.

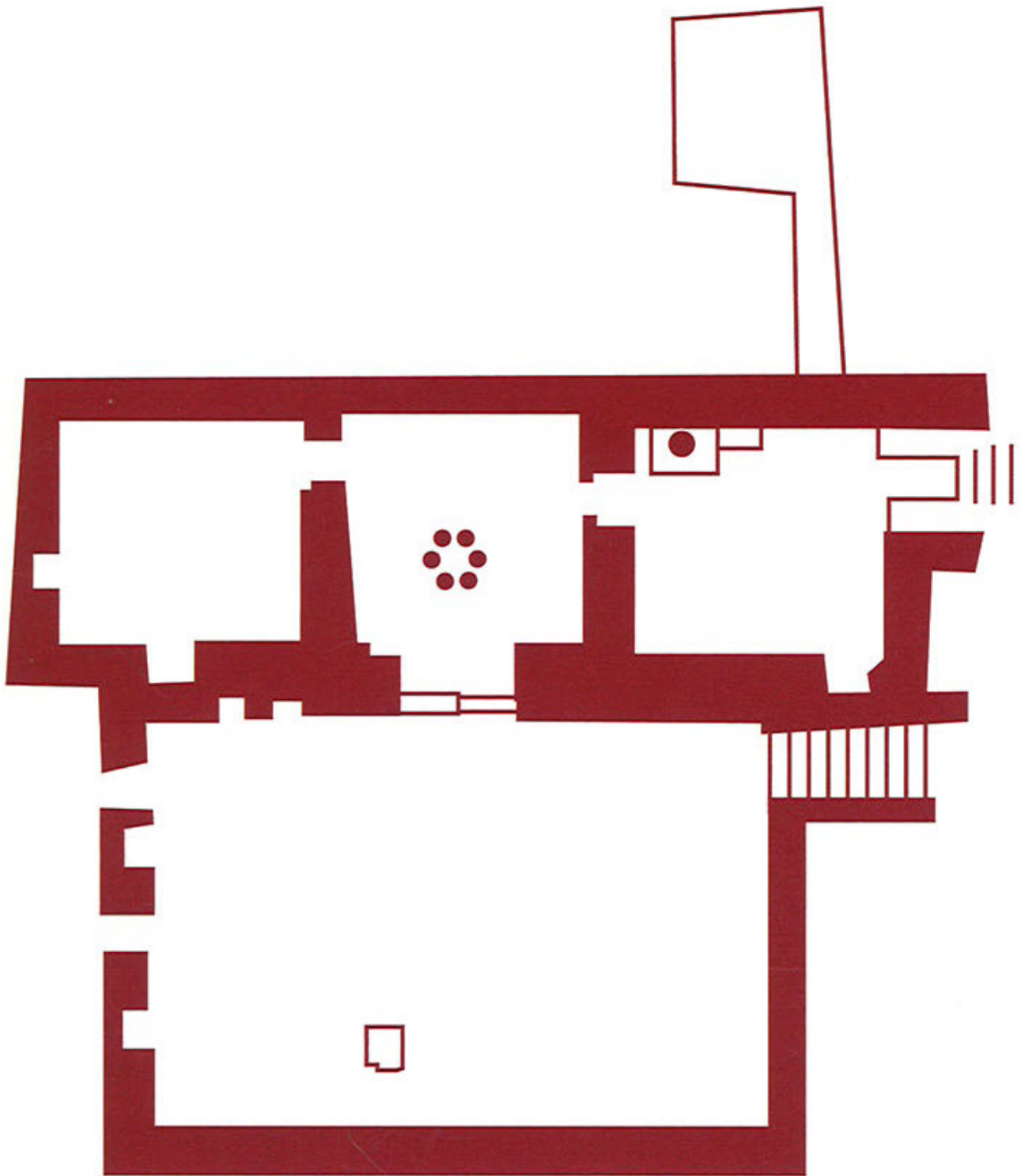


Fig. 1. North church at Kellia



Fig. 2. West and East churches at Kellia

The first Egyptian churches, dating to the late fourth and early fifth centuries, include examples found at the famous monastic sites of Kellia and Wadi al-Natrun. In both locations, excavations have revealed one-room structures with sanctuaries in the eastern end of the building. At Qusur 'Isa and Qasr al-Waheida, churches were built with an early basilica form (figs. 1 and 2). The buildings included two rows of columns that created bays in the small nave, which was often entered from the south. The square sanctuary housed the [altar](#) table and the space was

flanked on either side by chambers that were entered from the sanctuary. In a few cases, these rooms were used as the location for the baptistery. As the monastic communities expanded in the sixth and seventh centuries, so did the churches. The new churches were larger and had a full colonnade that created an ambulatory around the nave. While the sanctuaries were relatively similar in size to the first churches, the naves were substantially larger, reflecting a need for more space for the growing communities.

In the [fifth century](#) new churches were mostly built to follow what would be later recognized as the Christian basilica. The architects had [copied](#) a Roman model of secular and public architecture to provide a space for the gathering of large crowds. As the examples from Kellia demonstrated in the changing size of the nave, the church could be expanded without jeopardizing the sanctity of the sanctuary and altar. The ability to increase the width and length of the nave allowed for the sanctuary space to remain relatively small and secluded, while the community area could satisfy the needs of the laity. The shape of the sanctuary would vary between following the Roman model of an apsidal space, often with a syntironon seat, and a squared sanctuary.

Four churches provide examples of the variety present in fifth-century Egyptian church architecture. Each contains architectural features that make it a unique form, and each reflects the influence of some Roman and Egyptian models of monumental architecture. The monastic site at Faw Qibli, ancient Pbow, was home to a monastic community that followed the rules of St. Pachomius.¹¹ Excavations in the 1970s have provided evidence of two church constructions of five-aisled basilicas from the [fifth century](#) and a third church from the sixth century (fig. 3). The churches reflect the basic rectangular shape of Ptolemaic temples while also adopting the interior of the Roman basilica with reused Roman columns and the apsidal, almost [horseshoe](#)-shaped sanctuary in the eastern end. The presence of four rows of columns nearly equidistant from one another means that the nave was almost as narrow as the aisles.

The five-aisled church would not become a regular feature of [Coptic churches](#) in later periods, but it was adopted in the fifth and sixth centuries and is present at other sites such as at Armant, Antinoopolis, and Madinat Madi.

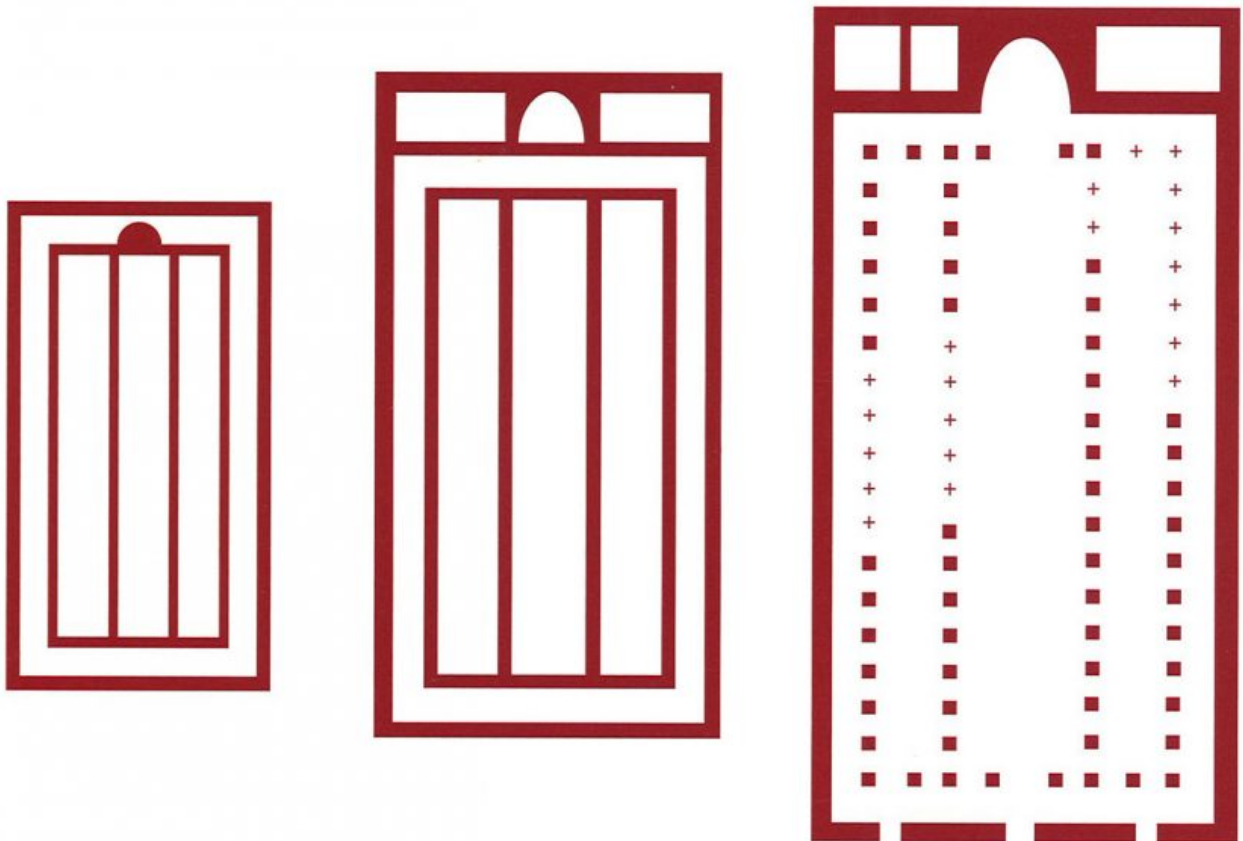


Fig. 3. Faw Qibli

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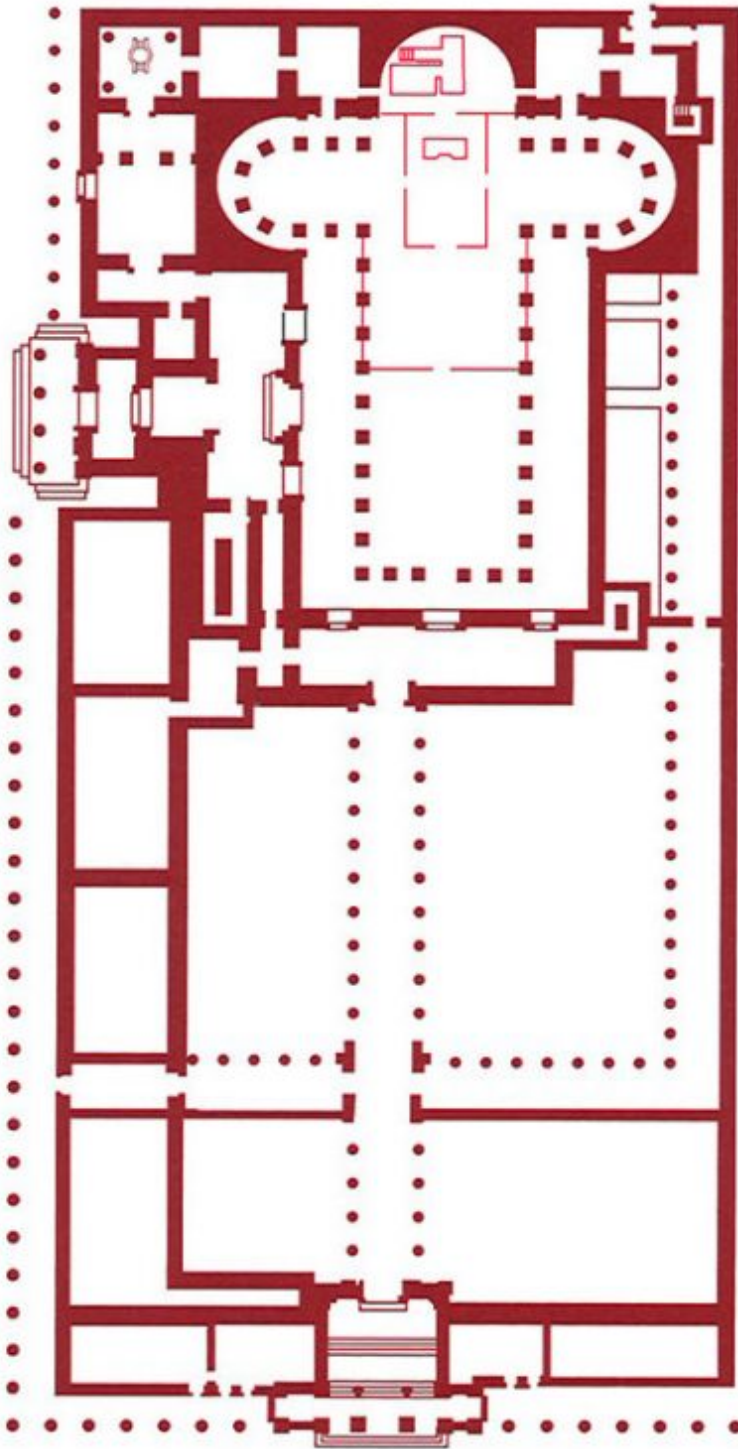


Fig. 4. Great Basilica, al-Ashmunayn

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In contrast to the linear churches at Faw Qibli, the second example of early Egyptian architecture is the Great Basilica at al-Ashmunayn, ancient Hermopolis Magna. The church illustrates the more experimental phase of early church basilicas that included a massive transept (fig. 4). In the case of the Great Basilica, the transept in the north and south ended in semi-circular arms. The styling of the transept was new in Egyptian architecture and was exclusively found within the realm of more urban ecclesiastical environments. It was a form that was more popular outside Egypt and therefore is thought to be more of a Byzantine layout than a Coptic plan. A similar church plan was discovered recently from the site of al-Hawariya, ancient Marea, on the coast, west of Alexandria. Unlike the church at al-Ashmunayn, the al-Hawariya church lacks a western return aisle and does not have sanctuary rooms to the north and south of the central, eastern apse.

The basilica at al-Ashmunayn was built on top of the remains of a Ptolemaic temple. The two-aisled basilica had an entrance on both the north and west sides of the nave. The western entrance led from a narrow narthex to a tribeion, or three-arched doorway, that opened to the nave.¹² As with the church at Faw Qibli, the columns reflect Hellenistic tastes on the interior of the church with the use of Corinthian capitals for the columns. The church was part of a larger complex of rooms, one of which contained a baptistery, and a large courtyard that was likely used for assemblies.

A second church, the South Church at al-Ashmunayn, was far more modest in scale and bears the sign of the more traditional layout of Egyptian churches (fig. 5). It was also built near the remains of a pharaonic temple built originally by Ramesses II and later restored by Emperor Nero. The church has a western return aisle and was a two-aisled basilica with a simple eastern apse. The small rooms on the south side of the church included a water-delivery system for a baptistery and a

staircase that led to an underground chamber for holding relics. The presence of two very different churches in the same city suggests that one was likely the ecclesiastical center for the district, while the smaller church may have served the needs of a smaller congregation. The basilica transept would not be adopted until after the seventh century.

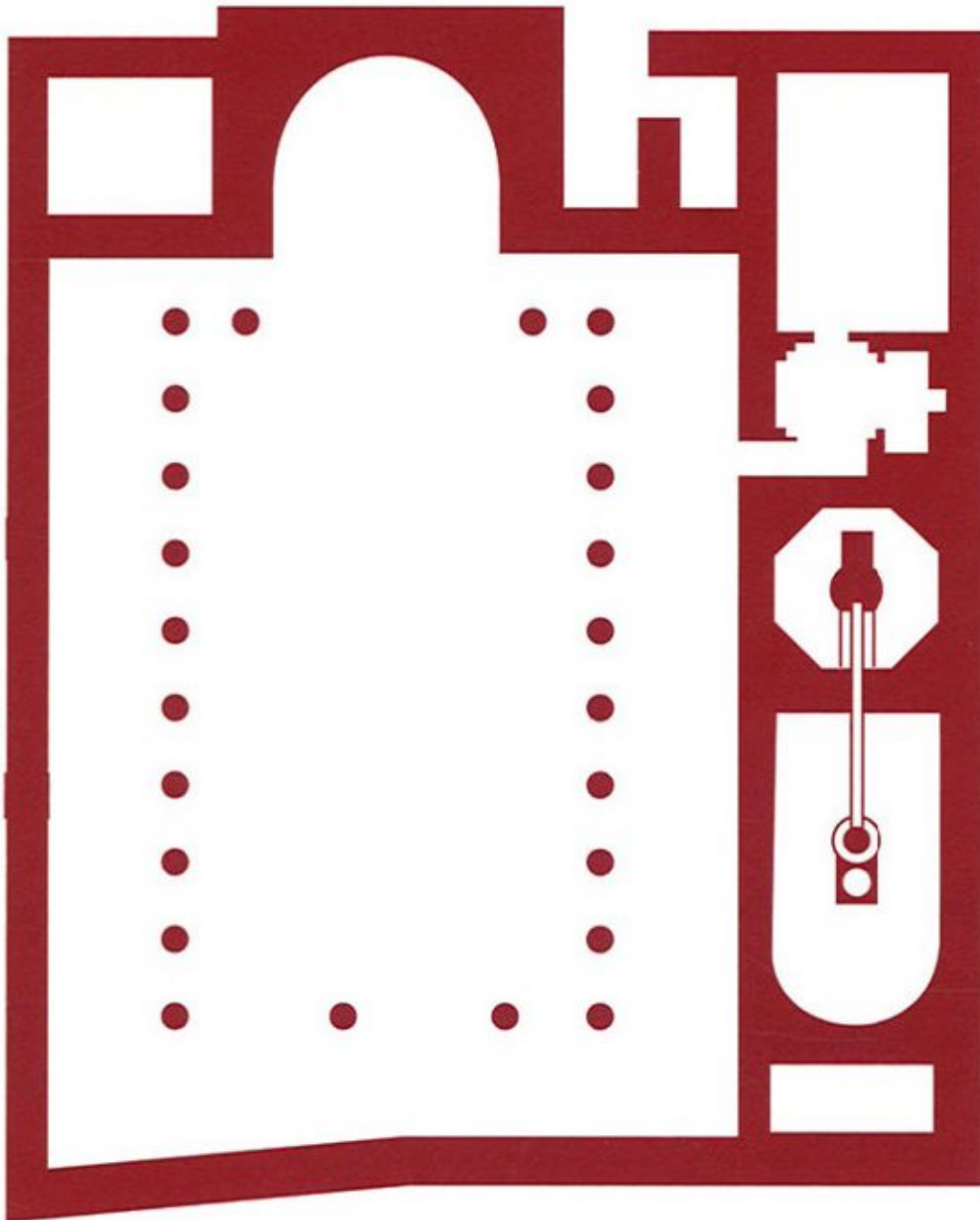


Fig. 5. Southern Church, al-Ashmunayn

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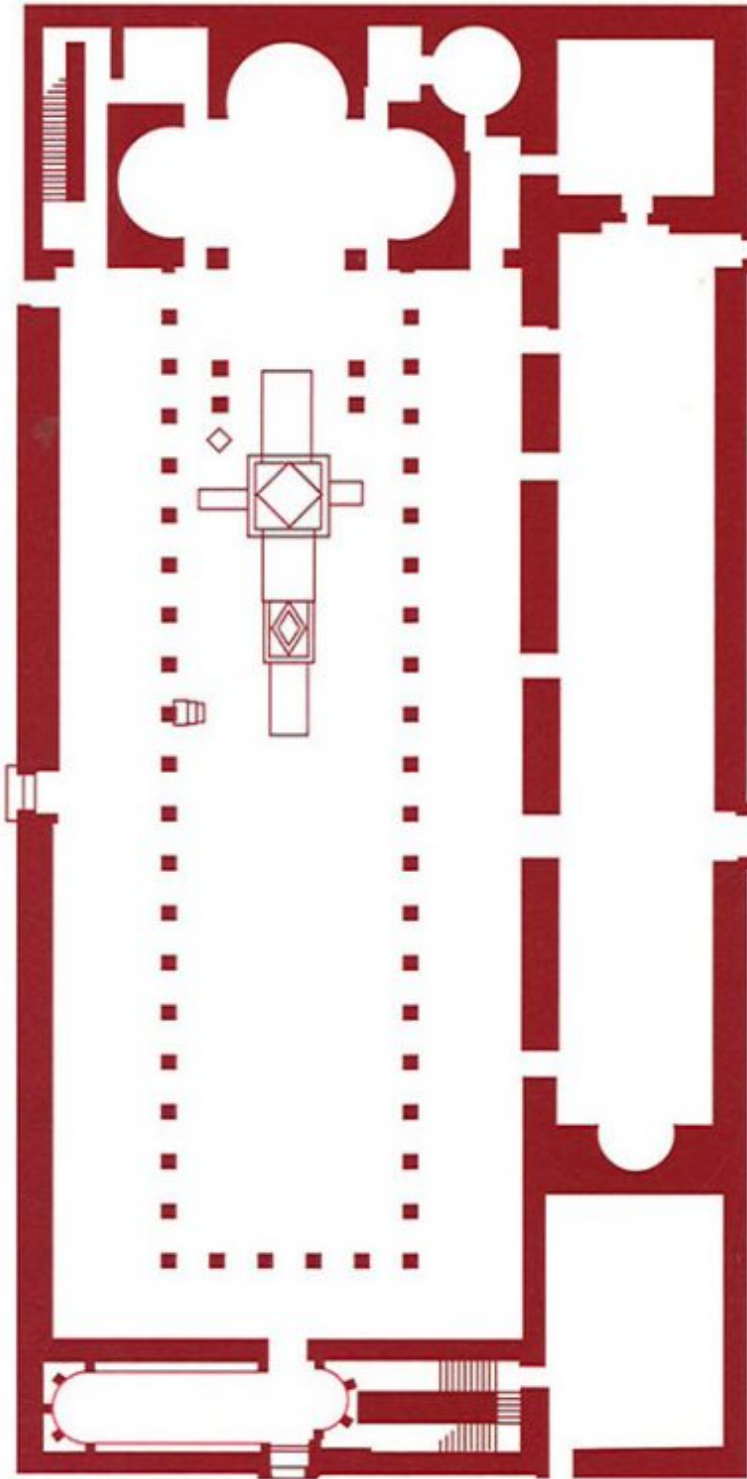


Fig 6. White Monastery, Sohag

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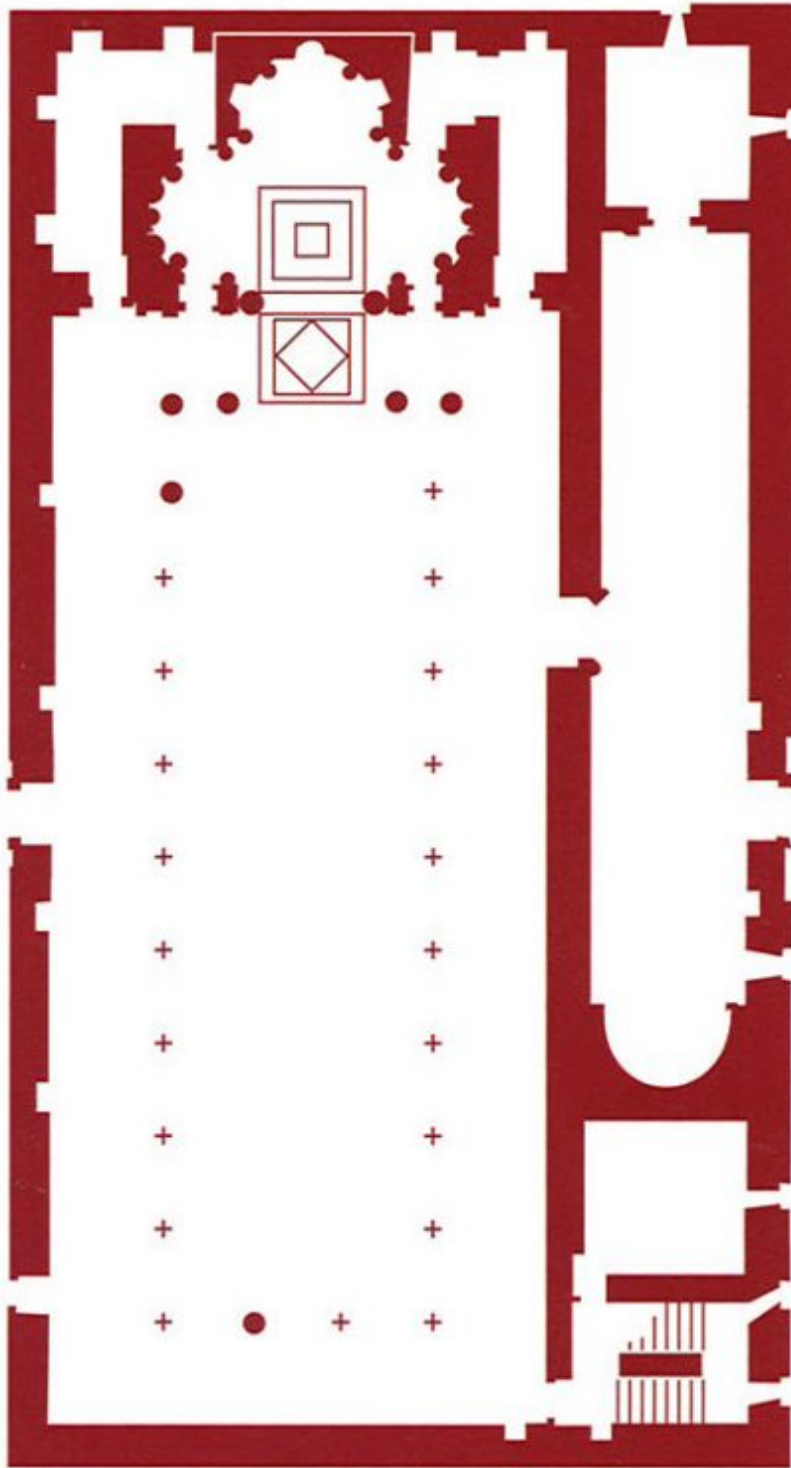


Fig. 7. Red Monastery, Sohag

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A third and equally grand example of church architecture from the mid-[fifth century](#) is found not in the urban setting, but in a monastery in the southern region of Sohag. [The White Monastery](#) of St. Shenute included a large limestone basilica whose exterior mirrored the cavetto cornices along the exterior walls of pharaonic temples. Although pharaonic blocks were reused in the construction of the church, the church does not appear to be built over an older [pagan](#) temple. It is striking that from the exterior the church evokes Egypt's past, while the interior clearly exhibits a uniquely Christian layout, with a trilobe or [triconch](#) sanctuary with niches and side rooms extending its north and south (fig. 6).

The interior of the church is a basilica form with monumental entrances on the north, west, and south sides. Although most of the columns are now lost, the bases of the columns indicate that the nave was divided by two aisles and a return aisle on the western side. The church was entered on two sides by narthexes and two doorways on the northern wall; the western narthex was small, although it ended in the north and south with a small colonnaded apse and a stairway [leading](#) to the upper gallery. The southern narthex spanned almost the entire length of the church and also had an apse on the western end. Evidence is still visible of the ambon, or pulpit, in the nave. The interior of the church also includes several highly decorative niches which would become a common feature of Egyptian church architecture in later periods.

About three kilometers to the north is the Red Monastery. Together, the Red and White Monasteries formed part of [the White Monastery](#) Federation of St. Shenute in the fifth century. While much is known about the White Monastery due to the extensive collection of Coptic manuscripts written by its abbot, St. Shenute, little is known of the Red Monastery. The church of the Red Monastery is smaller in scale than the White Monastery and was made of red brick, rather than white limestone (fig. 7). It also lacks the elaborate western narthex entrance and bears

entrances only on the north and south sides. The southern narthex is more linear than that of the White Monastery. On the exterior and interior it would seem that the Red Monastery church is merely a copy of the White Monastery; however, on closer inspection the tri lobe sanctuary is far more elaborate and all the architectural features are painted, including the niches and columns that flank the spaces. The paintings of this trilobe sanctuary are the object of a large conservation effort and, once finished, the sanctuary will be one of the few entirely painted spaces preserved from the late antique world. The paintings also reflect a Coptic style that demonstrates the richness of the Egyptian tradition independent of Byzantine models. Other [triconch](#) churches are found at Dendara and Dakhla Oasis (the Monastery of Abu Matta).

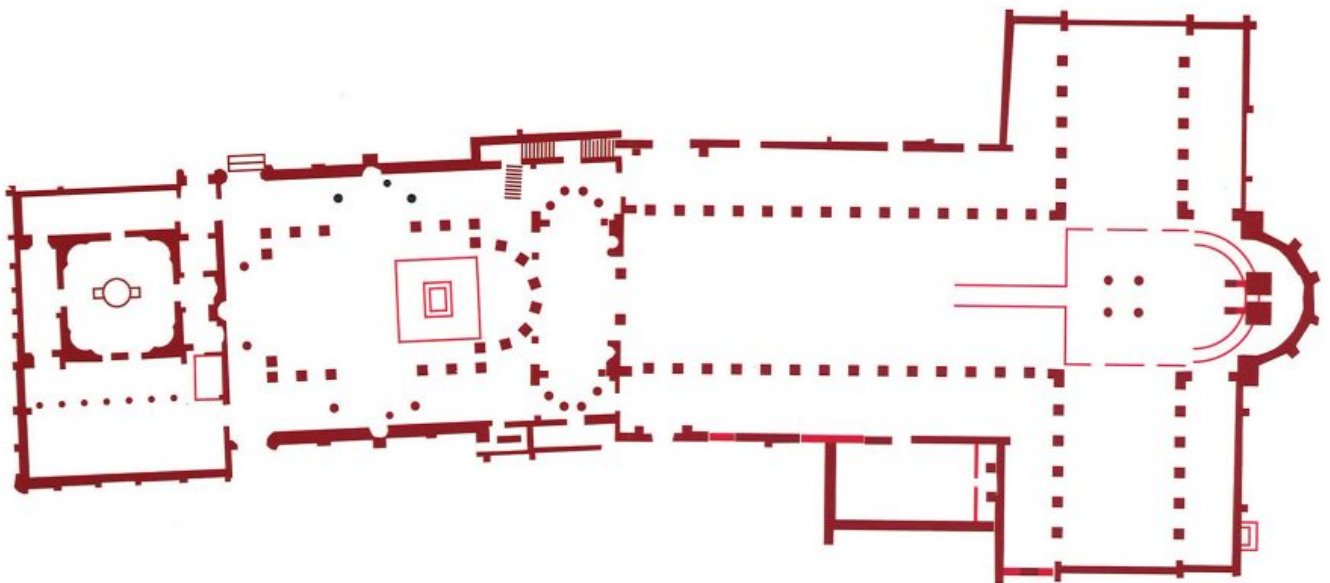


Fig. 8. Basilica and baptistery at Abu Mina

The final example of fifth-century architecture is considered the largest pilgrimage center of the late antique Mediterranean world. The site of Abu Mina, seventy kilometers southwest of Alexandria, was the center of a large cultic sanctuary dedicated to the memory of St. Menas, a third-century martyr. The popularity of the saint and the rituals surrounding his life would be a catalyst for the expansion of the center into a full urban pilgrimage center, one of the largest in the Christian late antique

world.¹⁴ The city's center was a massive church complex that included the largest basilica in Egypt in the fifth century (fig. 8). The model for this basilica is thought to be the Constantinian Basilica of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, due to the imperial transept basilica form. The quality of the masonry and materials used also suggests that the building was inspired by imperial craftsmen.

In the fifth century, a new basilica church was erected over the earlier martyrion. The basilica was an addition and later remodeling of a much smaller and earlier martyrion. The new church contained an eastern apse and, on the western end, a baptistery. Despite this construction, the expansion was not sufficient to meet the needs of the pilgrims and therefore additional aisles were added to the church. In the sixth century, the basilica was replaced by a tetraconch church made up of four semicircular apses (fig. 9). This unique structure would be found only at the pilgrimage center in Egypt and would physically highlight the importance of the St. Menas cult and its importance in the region. The tetraconch church is perhaps modeled after Syrian and Greek originals.¹⁶

All of these churches represent structures of the late fourth, fifth, and early sixth centuries built specifically for Christian worship. Spiritual needs and financial resources guided the design and layout of the churches such that larger monasteries and cities had more elaborate churches, and smaller communities opted for simpler church designs. However, in some cases, Christians were able to modify already existing structures to create spaces for worship. Several pharaonic temples were used for Christian worship, but only select areas of the temples were altered for Christian use. At Madinat Habu, in Thebes, a church was built in the [fifth century](#) inside the walls of the old mortuary temple of Ramesses III from the Nineteenth Dynasty (fig. 10). The church was a five-aisled basilica in plan and incorporated the pharaonic colonnades into the return aisle. An apse was added in the eastern end of the courtyard. The architects needed to remove one of the eastern pillars and

this was the only structural change that required the removal of any elements of the ancient temple. By placing crosses on the walls and painting images of saints on the columns, the space was converted into a church that could be used by the inhabitants of the town of Djeme.

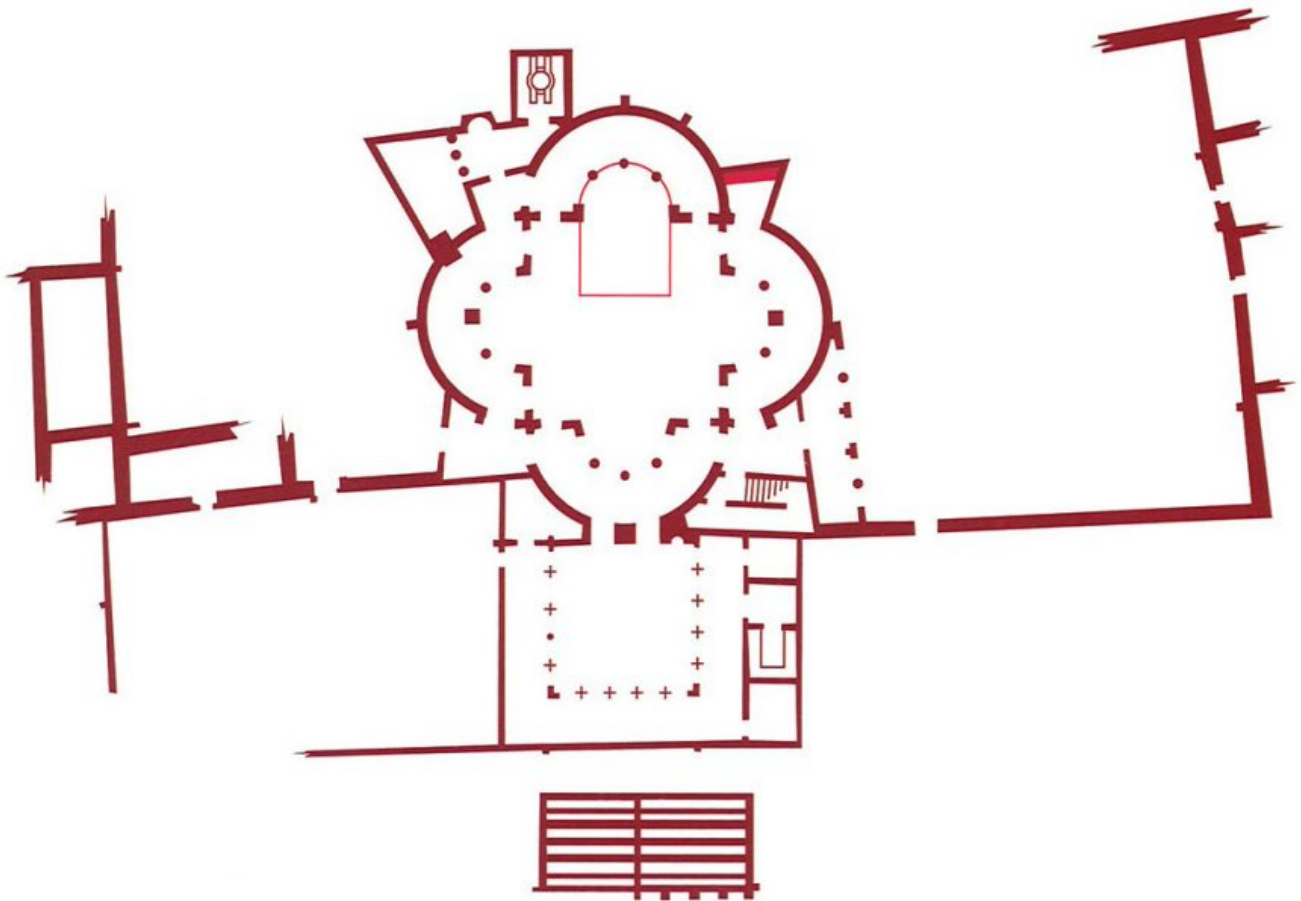


Fig. 9. Tetraconch Church at Abu Mina

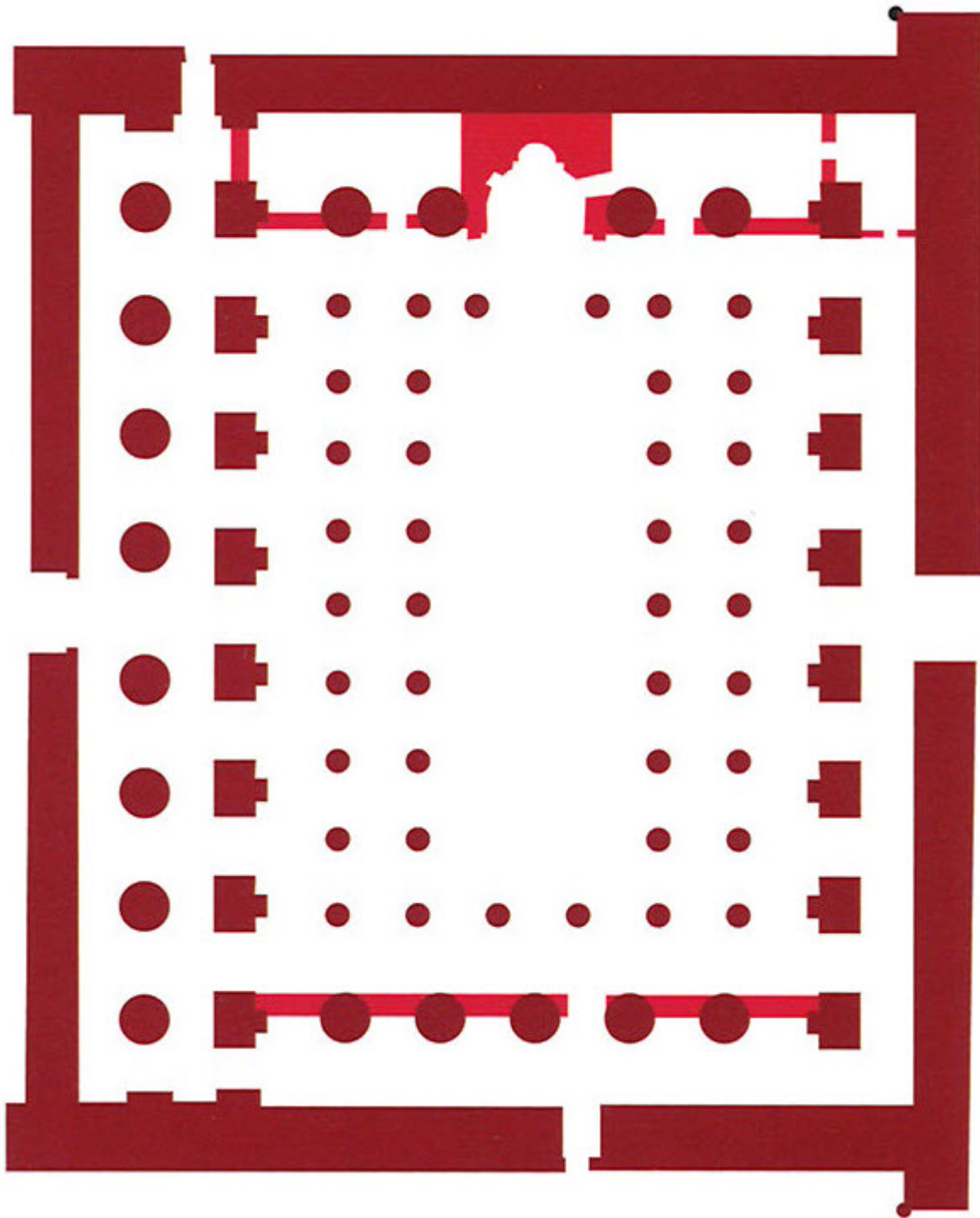


Fig. 10. Madinat Habu

In other cases, Christians built churches alongside or inside the large temple complexes. One example is found at the Ptolemaic site of Dendara where a small [triconch](#) church, similar to that of the grand churches at

the White and Red Monasteries in Sohag, was built and follows the layout of the basilica church with side aisles and a western narthex. This early sixth-century church has a rather elaborate narthex with apses at each end and a triple entrance into the nave. Like the church at Madinat Habu, the church at Dendara demonstrates that Christians were eventually free to assume the rights to [pagan](#) temple lands and were able to build churches within and among these structures without needing to remove the massive pharaonic temples. By placing churches within the pagan precincts, the Christians were able to claim that land as sacred for Christ.

The seventh-century marks a significant change in the interior layout of Coptic churches. While the basilica form was maintained, the introduction of a new feature, the khurus, created a greater physical division between the congregation and the clergy. The khurus is frequently a wall that hides the sanctuary from direct view, except for one entrance. The wall would later be pierced, in some examples, by two other entrances that would give access to the side chambers that made up part of the tripartite sanctuary. One of the first appearances of a khurus built within a new church is found in the large monastic church at the Monastery of Jeremiah (fig. 11). The khurus was used frequently in the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun: the Monastery of al-Baramus, the Monastery of St. Pshoi, the Monastery of the Syrians, and the Monastery of St. Macarius. In particular, the Church of the Virgin at the Monastery of the Syrians includes a fully developed single-entrance khurus covered with wooden doors (fig. 12). The basilica plan is still in use, with an entrance on the north and a narthex on the west end. As found in other Coptic churches, the walls are pierced with niches along all the interior walls and the upper levels decorated with wall paintings. The practice of using the khurus can be found throughout the medieval period until its eventual abandonment in the Mamluk period.

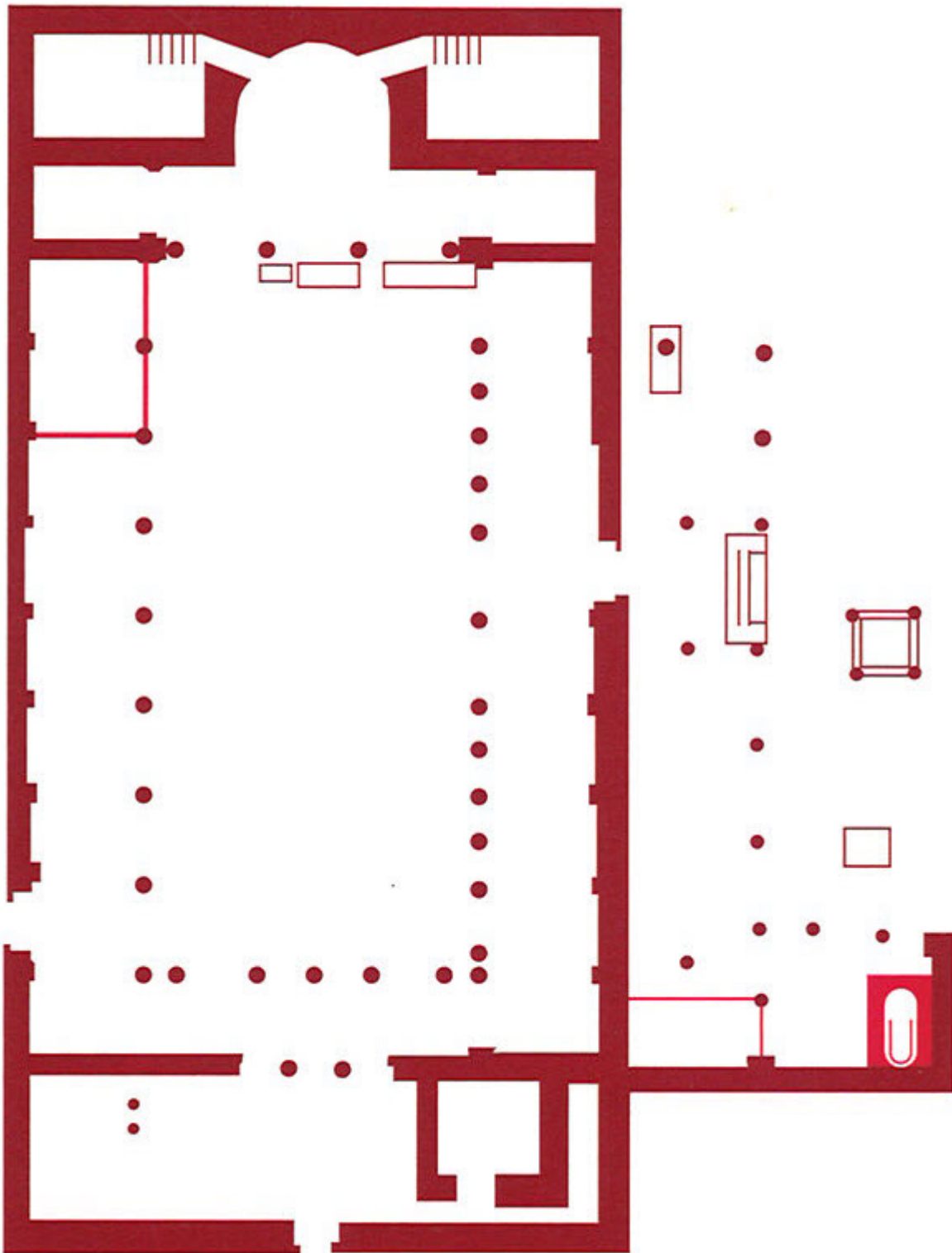


Fig. 11. Monastery of St. Jeremiah, Saqqara

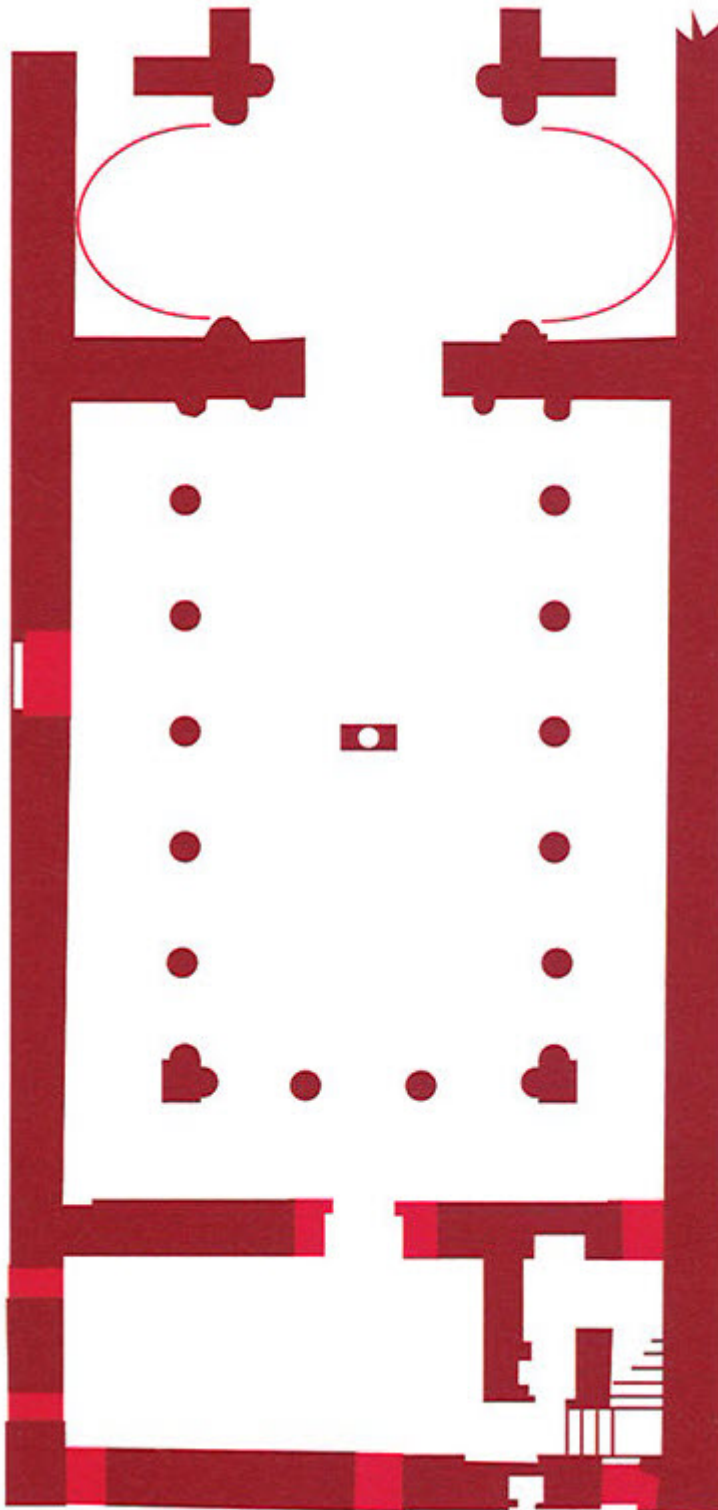


Fig. 12. The Church of the Virgin at the Monastery of the Syrians

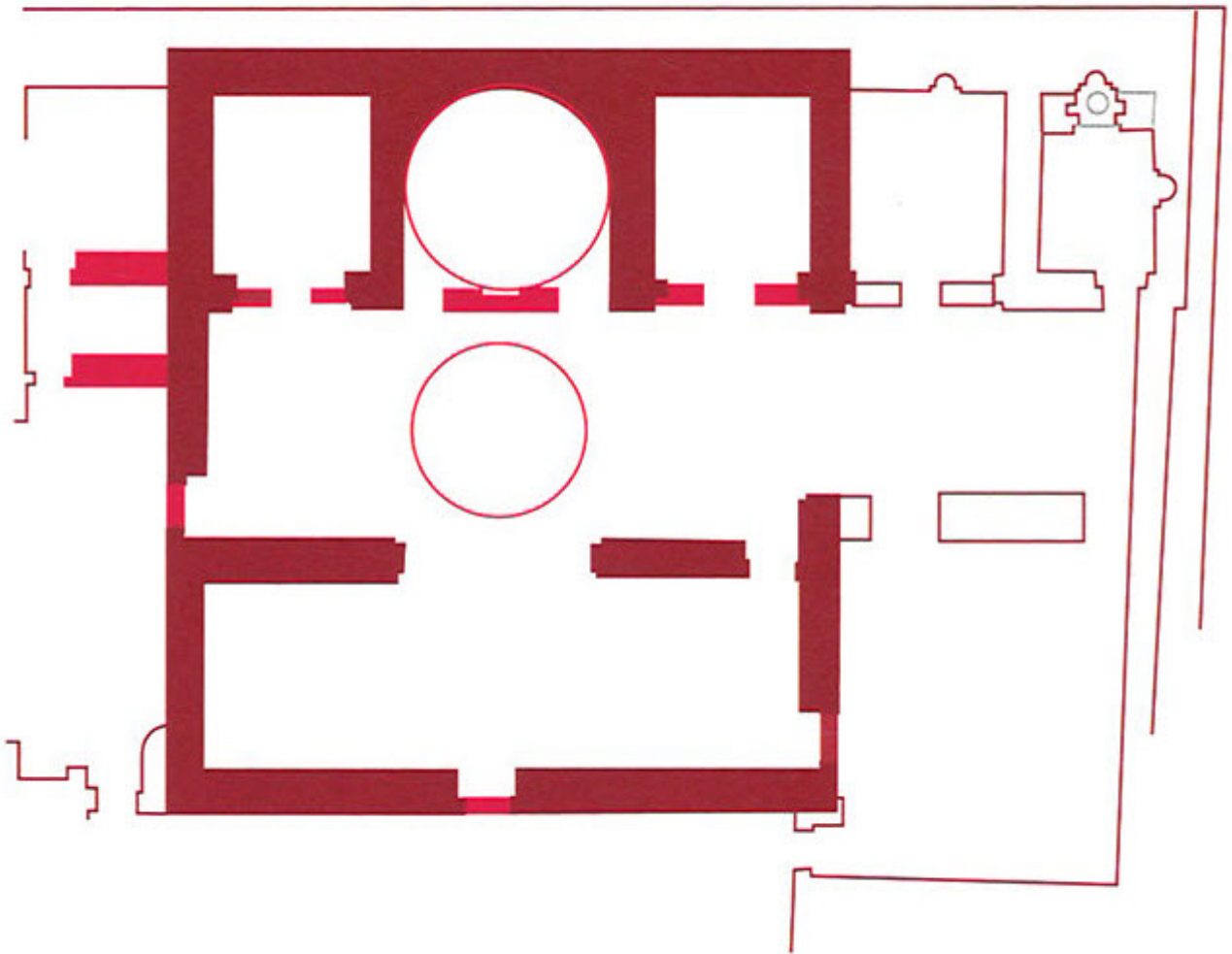


Fig. 13. Church at the Monastery of the Martyrs

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, in the [Fatimid](#) period, Egyptian

churches had evolved from the basilican plan to either the domed octagon or the domed oblong plan. Part of the shift in design can be attributed to the preference to roof buildings throughout Egypt with domes rather than timber. The use of mud and fired bricks was far more affordable than the use of timber. This shift from five-aisled to three-aisled plans and then to a grid pattern of domed spaces created more intimate spaces that did not have clerestories or galleries, as was once common in the sixth century.

The domed oblong plan is best exhibited in the monastic complex of the Monastery of St. Hatre in Aswan. The church, built in the eleventh century, includes a khurus that connected the sanctuary to two smaller domed bays which made up the nave.¹⁷ The side aisles were added at a later point and create elongated chambers that open onto the nave bays and have two entrances to the khurus.

Another domed oblong plan is that of the [Fatimid](#)-period Church of St. [Antony](#) in the Monastery of St. Antony by the Red Sea. The first sacred building in the area was originally a chapel that may have commemorated the burial of St. Antony, one of the forerunners of Egyptian monasticism. Like the Monastery of St. Hatre, the Church of St. Antony has a tripartite sanctuary, a khurus, and two domed bays that comprise the nave. However, the Church of St. Antony is unique in that it contains a dated painted program by the hand of Theodore from 1232/1233.¹⁸ This dating provides an opportunity to examine in detail the form of the church and its evolution. An extension to the chapel was added after the tenth century, although exactly when is not clear; based upon its axis of orientation, the new church was likely built at the same time as the keep of the monastery. The final phase of the church, with its tripartite sanctuary, each part containing altars, was possibly built in the thirteenth century. Its current form reflects the last major significant alteration to the church.¹⁹

The domed octagon is seen prominently in the churches in Akhmim, such as the church at the Monastery of the Martyrs (Dayr al-Shuhada) (fig. 13).

These churches reflect the preference of the late medieval Christians who adopted this plan in the sixteenth century. The churches of this period represent the last phase of the use of the khurus.²⁰ The medieval churches are divided by columns that then carry the weight of the domes and the naves are therefore usually divided into large bays. The church at the Monastery of the Martyrs exhibits the shift to the more intimate interiors with low walls and domed roofs that would be indicative of the late medieval church.

Church architecture in Egypt evolved from the plan of a secular Roman basilica to that of an exclusively Christian plan that incorporated architectural elements, such as the khurus, to reflect the needs and practices of the Christian communities. The manner in which these structures were then decorated with images of saints and scenes of Biblical heroes demonstrates that these spaces were always sacred spaces, regardless of how many galleries or chapels the church contained. We know little about the architects who were responsible for these grand structures, but they were perhaps guided by the belief that God had inspired them just as St. Apollo was directed by Christ in how to build his martyrion to commemorate the life of his companion, Apa Phib. The evolution of church architecture reflects the richness of the history of Christianity in Egypt, including the importance of monastic communities.

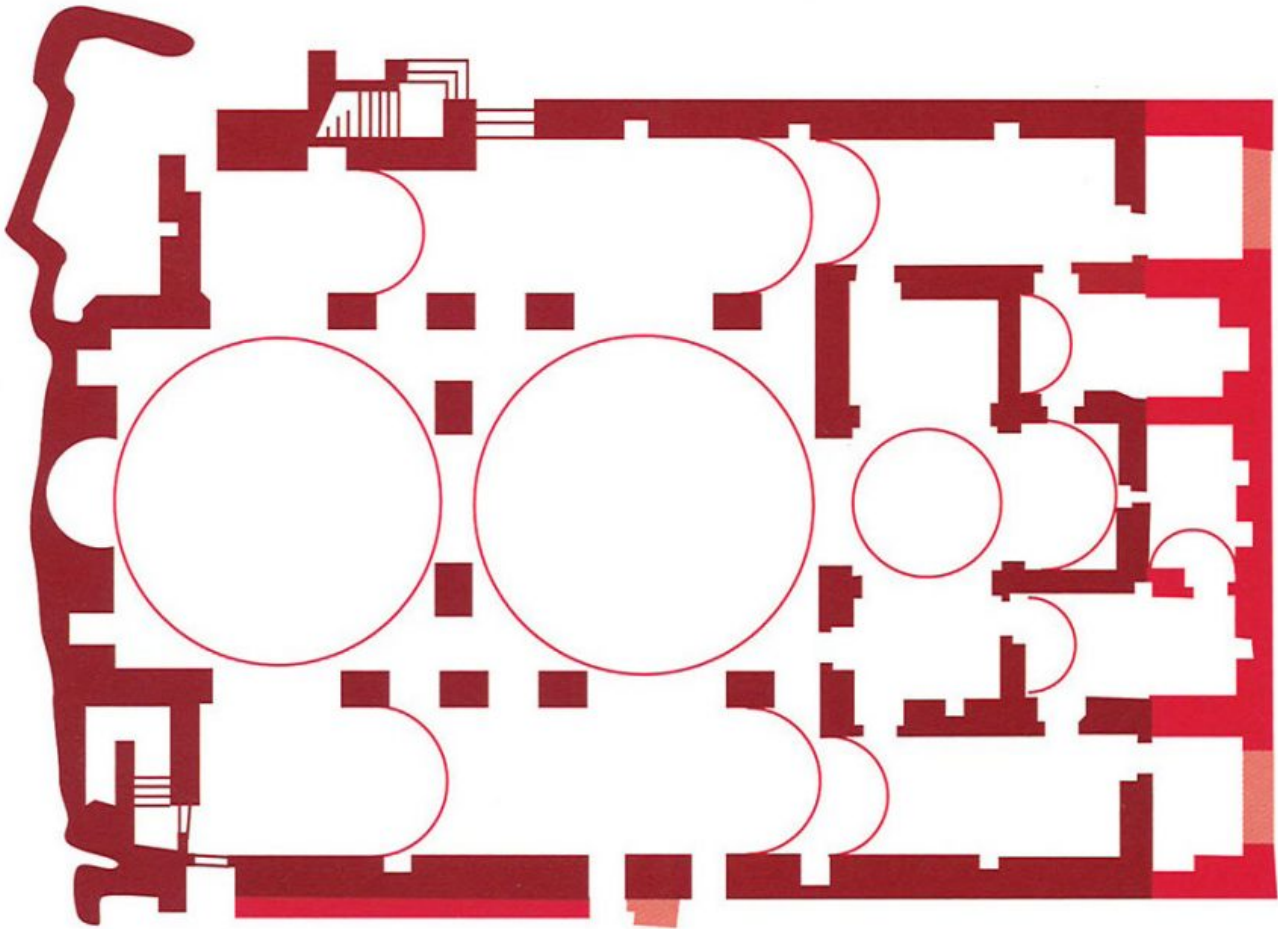


Fig. 14. The Monastery of St. Hatre

Darlene L. Brooks Hedstrom

8 Bradshaw 2004.

9 Frend 1996,199.

10 P. Grossmann, "Early Christian Architecture in the Nile Valley," in *Coptic Art and Culture*, ed. H. Hondelink (Cairo: Shouhdy Publishing House, 1990), 3.

11 Grossmann 1979, 232-36.

12 Similar to a church at Arcadius in Maryut.

13 Emmel 2004.

14 Grossmann 1998b, 281-302.

15 Capuani 1999,51.

16 Kleinbauer 1987,277-93.

17 Grossmann 1982, 7-13.

18 Bolman (ed.) 2002, xvi.

19 Jones 2002, 30.

20 Grossmann 2002, 542.

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