

The Church of St. Mercurius (OLD CAIRO)

THE CHURCH OF ST. MERCURIUS is part of a complex of three churches and a convent, also dedicated to St. Mercurius (Abu Sayfayn). St. Mercurius, “the Father of the Two Swords,” was a commander in the army of the Emperor Decius (249-251). On the eve of an important battle, he received his second sword from an angel, and the next day he destroyed the enemy. As a Christian, he refused to sacrifice to pagan gods and was subsequently tortured and beheaded. In the fourth century, in answer to St. Basil of Caesarea’s prayers, he miraculously appeared on the battlefield to slay Emperor [Julian](#) the Apostate (d. 363). He is one of the most beloved military saints in Egypt, and he is usually depicted on horseback, slaying the emperor.

This church in his honor was probably built in the sixth century as a basilican church with a return aisle, a large apse and side chambers, and possibly galleries. A khurus was built in afterward. At the time of Patriarch Abraham (d. 978), the church was ruined and was used as a storehouse for sugarcane. The patriarch received permission to rebuild the church as a reward for the Miracle of the Mountain: in showing the Caliph that faith can literally move a mountain, he shifted the Muqattam Mountain.⁷⁶

When Abraham restored the church, pillars replaced the columns of the nave and galleries were rebuilt or added. During a riot in 1168, the church was pillaged and largely burned down. The restoration started shortly afterward and the church was solemnly reopened in 1175. At this stage, the dome above the present haykal and the half-domes in the nave were built. The half-domes reduced the width of nave and thereby also the width of the wooden roof. The History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt (ca. twelfth century) reported that private donors of wealthy Coptic families donated money for construction and furnishings. Three chapels to the north of the main church, accessible via a small

courtyard, were also rebuilt at that time.⁷⁷

A small crypt in the north [aisle](#) is dedicated to St. Barsuma the Naked who dwelled here for more than twenty years in the company of a dangerous serpent. Because it was forbidden to live in churches, the authorities arrested him and sent him to a monastery near Helwan, where he died in 1317. The Church of St. Mercurius is one of the most important churches of Cairo. From the middle of the twelfth century until around 1300, the patriarchs resided alternately, sometimes even simultaneously, at the Hanging Church and the Church of St. Mercurius. Two thirteenth-century patriarchs and virtually all patriarchs from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were buried here. In the gallery chapels, wall [paintings](#) from the twelfth-century restoration are preserved. The church houses a valuable collection of icons, dating from the thirteenth century to the present.



The altar screen of the central haykal with a row of feast icons on top. Christ and [the Virgin](#) Mary are painted on the columns flanking the entrance.

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St. Philip converting the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39; thirteenth century). The [conversion](#) of the eunuch made St. Philip, a deacon appointed by the apostles, the saint who introduced Christianity into Ethiopia.

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Icon of St. Mercurius in its original setting, a reliquary (mideighteenth century).

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The main haykal. At the back, the marble steps of the synthronon and a combination of tiles, mural painting, and ivooden [panels](#) fixed to the walls, painted by Ibrahim al-Nasikh (eighteenth century: Christ enthroned in the center) and A[na]stasi al-Qudsi al-Rumi (nineteenth century: the [twelve apostles](#) and Christ carried by two angels).

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The interior of the ciborium of the main altar (eighteenth century, painted by the icon painter Yulianna al-Armani). Christ is surrounded by the Four Living Creatures and the composition is carried by angels.

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St. Shenute (d. ca. 465), abbot of the Monastery of St. Shenute (White Monastery) near Sohag and St. Besa, his disciple and successor (A[na]stasi al-Qudsi al-Rumi, nineteenth century).

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The Twenty-Four Priests of the Apocalypse (thirteenth century). The priests, swinging their censers, belong to the heavenly court, worshipping

[God](#) continuously. They are seen as intercessors for mankind, the incense symbolizing the prayers of the saints.

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