


## ***The Hanging Church (OLD CAIRO)***




THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY VIRGIN was built on the remains of one of the gates of the Roman fortress, Babylon. This high position earned her the name 'the Hanging' or 'the Suspended' (al-Mu'allāqa) Church. Medieval Western pilgrims referred to the church as "the Church of the Steps" (the high stairway to the entrance) or "the Church of the Column." The latter name is connected with the miracle of moving the Muqattam Mountain. Prior to the miracle, Patriarch Abraham (d. 978) fasted for three days and nights in the Hanging Church. On the third day, the Virgin appeared to him, according to some sources near a column, and told him what to do.

The location of the church on top of a fortress gate makes a building date before the Arab conquest improbable. Originally, it seems to have been built on a basilican plan with a nave and side aisles with galleries, and an [apse](#) with side chambers. Over a tower in the southeastern corner, a small church was constructed, connected to the main church by a colonnade. An upper floor was added to the small church around 1100, serving as a cell for the patriarch. Excluding periods of exchange with churches in the Delta or other churches in town, the Hanging Church served as the patriarchal residence from Patriarch Abraham until around 1300. From the eleventh to the fourteenth century, it played an important role in ecclesiastical life: patriarchs were elected, consecrated, and buried in the church, synods convened, and occasionally the Holy Chrism was consecrated here.




During the centuries, the church did not escape pillage, looting, and destruction, and subsequent restorations were carried out. However, an extensive nineteenth-century renovation thoroughly altered its appearance. The western end was rebuilt and a small courtyard was added. Inside, a four-aisled church emerged while the galleries disappeared. The colonnade to the small church was closed, thereby

turning it into a side chapel dedicated to the thirteenth-century Ethiopian St. [Takla](#) Haymanot. The 1992 earthquake caused considerable damage, and the most recent restorations have not yet been completed. Among the treasures of the church are a marble ambon, wooden altar screens of outstanding quality, wall paintings in the Chapel of Takla Haymanot, icons, and the ciboria crowning the three altars in the main church.


  
The [interiors](#) of the domes of the three altar ciboria (fifteenth century?). Four angels are carrying a circular composition of Christ Pantocrator. The [interiors](#) of the domes of the three altar ciboria (fifteenth century?). Four angels are carrying a circular composition of Christ Pantocrator.

  
  
  
A reused marble plaque in the staircase of the ambon, dating to the sixth to seventh century with two different crosses: a Resurrection cross (right) and a cross in a wreath under a canopy.

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The interior of the church, with the ambon to the left. The platform of the ambon probably dates to the fourteenth century.

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Details of wooden screens in the church. Top: Each cross of this all-over cruciform pattern is filled with ebony and has an ivory border. Below, left and center: geometrical inlays of ebony and finely carved ivory or bone make up a rosette pattern. Below, right: the wood is inlaid with translucent ivory.

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Icon of St. Mark, according to tradition the founder of the Coptic Church (fourteenth century), in a setting of reused pieces of woodwork dating from the twelfth to fourteenth century.

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Chapel of [Takla](#) Haymanot, wall painting of the Nativity (thirteenth century).

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The southern part of the Babylon fortress. The gate with the cross gives access to the Hanging Church; to the left are the ruins of a tower and the Coptic Museum.

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The [interiors](#) of the domes of the three altar ciboria (fifteenth century?).

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