

***Toward an Understanding of the 'Akhmim Style' Icons and Ciboria:  
the Indigenous and the Foreign***[\[1\]](#)

**THE LATE FOURTEENTH**-century painting by Gherardo Starnina, *La Tebaide* in Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, provides perhaps the last medieval visualized [memory](#) of the (ideal) Christian sacred landscape along the Nile in Upper Egypt, densely inhabited by hermits tending their blossoming gardens or praying in private caves and chapels on the edge of the desert.[\[2\]](#) From this glorious late antique and Coptic era in the Akhmim environs, next to two important monasteries built and decorated in the fifth century and beyond, Dayr Anba Shenoute (the White Monastery) and Dayr Anba Bishoi (the Red Monastery), [numerous](#) small monasteries also survived that were revitalized in the Ottoman period.

In 1717 the map of the *Deserts de la basse Thebaide* was painted by or for the French Jesuit Pere Claude Sicard (1676-1726), to be sent to Europe. Considering that Father Sicard came together with an Armenian Catholic artist, Michel, to Egypt in 1712 from Aleppo in Syria, we may wonder if they could know the enigmatic Mattary in Cairo.[\[3\]](#) Indeed, certain data coincide. In this map a cameo is inserted depicting an elderly pilgrim walking across the Western Desert to the Red Sea monasteries who is identified by Sicard as a “‘*Religieux Copte*’ de la basse Thebaide.”[\[4\]](#) Wearing the blue turban and red shoes required by Ottoman rulers, and leaning on a stick, this spirited Christian carries before him a rosary (a symbol of Catholic piety) with a pendant Orthodox cross, arguably, an attribute of an Orthodox convert to Unia.[\[5\]](#)

At this time Latin missionaries were beginning successfully to convert Copts. Significantly, on some Akhmim icons and ciboria eligible for this preliminary survey, even Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints hold the rosary while the style in which they are painted can be associated with the Mattary school, but are less accomplished. The illuminator and painter Mattary, believed to be an Armenian from eastern Syria, painted in Egypt icons on paper in an oriental style imported along the Silk Road.

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This overall stylistic language of the Beylik—Mamluk era would dominate [Coptic art](#) until the 1730s, when a Copt, Ibrahim al-Nasih, started a new workshop in Cairo, but might have lingered in the province.



Map of Deserts de la Basse Thebai'de, 1717, watercolor. Detail. BN Paris: RC.C.7626 (original). After Skalova and Gabra 2003, ill. 42.

After 1517 Egypt was reduced by the new rulers in far Istanbul to a regional status. The remaining Circassian Mamluks became part of larger Turcophone military cavalry elite, their ranks strengthened by Turkish beys. These so-called 'Beylik Mamluks' of quite diverse ethnicity became increasingly independent from the Sublime Porte administration, amassing wealth and thus able to sponsor charities and the arts. With the

new rule came new techniques, materials, and styles, first applied to Islamic art, but also adopted by Christian artisans.

For example, illustrations in the Coptic—Arabic *Maimar*, kept in the Coptic Museum in Cairo and dated to 1687, already hint at a symbiosis of different cultures coexisting in the Middle East: the acculturation of two visual languages, Islamic and Christian, Orthodox as well as Western. [6]

Arabicized [Copts](#) were needed as administrators and translators of these new lords. Among the scribal class, close to the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo, and their relatives in Upper Egypt, we should look for the rich benefactors who sponsored widespread reconstruction of ancient churches and their refurbishments, first in the capital and abandoned major desert monasteries, and later in the provinces. Dr. Magdi Guirguis, specialist in Ottoman Coptic-Arabic archival documents (permits for rebuilding of old churches were needed from the Muslim authorities!), confirms the Coptic notables' affluence and favorable circumstances in this period, as they lived in 'un esprit d'harmonie' with Muslims. [7]

The transformation of the Ottoman Empire influenced the Christians identified as '*Ahl al-dhimma*, or 'people under (Muslim) protection,' circumstances considerably. [8] Only when the Turks granted certain commercial privileges, diplomatic immunity and, importantly, religious leniency, the so-called Capitulations (from 1535), to Western powers, did European consuls, merchants, and missionaries begin to settle in the main cities of the Middle East. In 1690 missionaries obtained the right to teach and 'convert' members of the Eastern-rite Churches to Roman Catholicism, the Unia. The Uniate movement did not require Orthodox converts to give up their language and traditions—or their icons. Easily portable Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, as well as Uniate religious prints circulated widely and were used not as as potent tools of evangelization, but also as models. [9]

The initial (unofficial) Catholic religious missions to the legendary

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Thebai'de coincided with the spiritual awakening of Coptic society, and they found a cooperative clergy. First came the [Jesuits](#) in the sixteenth century. Franciscans established a hospice in Akhmim and a mission in Girga in 1664. It would seem that through their travels the Latin missionaries again linked the Coptic Mother Church and the Ethiopic Church. Akhmim's strategic position for departure to distant Ethiopia was of importance. [10] Carrying printed sacred pictures, the proselytizers provided models for both, Ethiopian and Coptic icon painters; hence a certain superficial 'ecumenical' affinity, iconographical and stylistic, modified by each country's different traditions and political situation.

The [sources](#) of a new Christological iconography for Eastern Christians were multiple. Claire Bosc-Tiesse researched the most influential illustrated books the Portuguese Catholic fathers carried with them into sixteenth century Ethiopia: These were *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, printed in many editions since 1593 in Antwerp (a collection of 153 gospel illustrations, engraved by Flemish masters after Italian drawings) and St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. [11]

Popular among Arabophone Christians, however, must have been the *Evangeliarum Arabicum*, printed in Rome in 1590-1591 for the Middle East. [12]

To these [sources](#) should be added the illustrated *Piscator Bible* and the first Armenian Bible with [Dutch](#) woodcuts, printed in Amsterdam in 1666, which became the pattern books for the Armenian lay craftsmen (*naqqash*), organized in guilds (*hamker*), who also painted icons in Egypt (in the phase preceding Mattary). [13]

As it is evident that the aforementioned Western 'tools of evangelization' also reached [Copts](#) and influenced their art, research in the archives and libraries of the Catholic seminaries in Cairo and in Europe is needed. Father Sicard's missionary visits to Upper Egypt were of lasting influence. He became friendly with the local hierarchy and was able in

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1718 to establish the first Coptic Catholic seminary in Akhmim. [14] His convert, Rufail al-Tuki (1703—1787) from Girga, went to study in Rome, and in 1735 became the first Orthodox Copt ordained as a Coptic Catholic priest, A year later Youstus al-Maraghi was ordained in Akhmim. [15] From that time the province was, so to say, in direct contact with the nascent 'Rome on the Nile,' Cairo, with its multiplying Latin seminaries and the Vatican. [16]

### **Akhmim Architecture, Arts, and Crafts [17]**

While in Cairo there has been a successive series of renewals of ancient patriarchal churches from the early-eighteenth century until today, the Christian monuments in Akhmim province preserved their (arguably) first Ottoman- era refurbishment until the 1980s. On the basis of old photographs and a recent visit to the church of St. Mercurius Abu Sayfayn in Akhmim and five small monasteries—Dayr Anba Thomas, Dayr al-Adra Hawawish Dayr Mari Guirguis al-Hadidi, Dayr al-Malak, and Dayr al-Shehada, scattered along the Nile in the surrounding area—it appears that not only icons and ciboria but also murals were painted, manuscripts illustrated, textiles embroidered, and woodwork fabricated: screens, partitions, icon frames (*maqsurat*) and reliquaries were made for the embellishment of ancient edifices, rebuilt in the same 'Beylik—Mamluk' style.

In the last two decades, however, these compounds have been enlarged to suit the current [renaissance](#) of monasticism and pilgrimages, their refurbishing 'revitalized' and modernized. For an art historian, this progress means that little-known and charming Coptic Ottoman visual culture, almost erased in Cairo, is vanishing before it has been properly documented and studied. The reader is referred to publications in color illustrating these ongoing changes: the *Guide to Ancient Coptic Churches and Monasteries in Upper Egypt* by Samuel al-Suriyany and Badie Habib, [18] books by Nabil Atalla, who photographed icons and ciboria in the Akhmim province prior to their restoration, [19] and a recent survey

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by Adeline Jeudy reproducing ciboria described below in post-restoration  
state. [20]

## Architecture

The renewal of Christian monuments in Akhmim and its surroundings manifested itself in the reduction of the old triconchal churches, into a new shape with a transept. Their original size was most probably respected. Some small desert monasteries, for example, Dayr al-Hadidi and Dayr al-Besada, still have late antique stone-walls, portals, and reused fragments. Abstract patterns, executed skillfully in cheap clay bricks (often hidden today under modern paints), which seem at first glance to derive from Islamic architecture, could appear in more detailed study to echo the chromatography and ornamentation of the aforementioned White Monastery (carved in stone) and the Red Monastery (imitating in illusionist style the luxurious carved patterns of the former). [21] Looking at the old photographs of these small monasteries and their churches, we realize that their Ottoman-era brickwork was perhaps modest but attractive workmanship, emphasizing [Christianity](#) by crosses of different shapes, and symbolic numbers, in imitation of antique usage. [22]



Brick- and woodwork of Dayr Mari Guirguis al-Hadidi. Photograph: Sami Sabri Shaker, 1970s.

## Screens

The *hijab* of this period was made inexpensively: simple rectilinear designs, mainly crosses, were fashioned with pieces of the locally available wood and painted with pastel-tinted curvilinear floral motifs. A few screens preserved their cresting, for example in Dayr al-Shehada. In

Cairo we see such (painted) cresting on the icon of St. George in the [Chapel](#) of Mar Jacoub in the northern gallery of the church of St. Mercurius, Dayr Abu Sayfayn, ascribed to Mattary. [23] His workshop provided the screen for the same chapel, topped by an epistyle with the *Twelve Apostles*, and a ciborium, the last of its kind. [24]

## Ciboria

The eighteenth-century wooden painted ciboria in the Akhmim area survived, perhaps worn-out but complete. They were crafted from thin planks of local wood, probably eucalyptus (*athel*), cut by a saw, some embellished with Islamic decorative elements—stalactites (*mukarnas*) or abstract star dishes (*tabak megmi*) in combination with shells. Shells were placed into squinches and/or in the center of the inner dome, adding parochial intimacy as these were familiar from surviving late antique caves and Early Christian buildings, their symbolism alluding to salvation and rebirth further enhanced by the figurative decoration.

Two kinds of ciboria were produced:

(I) First, a more traditional type follows the ancient form of columned canopy standing over the altar. A sole Fatimid example, carved and painted on its outer side with early medieval floral ornamentation, is in the Coptic Museum. From an early Ottoman period three wooden ciboria remain in the sanctuaries of the church of the Holy Virgin, al-Mu'allāqa, in Old Cairo, the central ciborium now cleaned and appearing to have been painted in the middle or second half of the fifteenth century by the itinerant artist who also decorated the apse of the Saint James [Chapel](#) in the catholicon of the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai (cleaned in 1963). His art echoes Middle Byzantine Sinai icons. [25]

Dayr Anba Thomas has such a canopy ciborium with innovative inner decoration possibly illustrating a liturgical source. [26] Unusually, in its



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dome float angels dressed in short tunics. Their legs are awkwardly distorted. These angels could simply represent sparsely dressed cherubim from Western prints as rendered by a chaste Copt working in Mattary's style. More close to home would be the wish to commemorate children murdered in the Era of the Martyrs, during the memorable Akhmim massacre. In Dayr al-Shehada, in a special room, a corpse of a toddler, dressed in baptismal garb leaving its broken legs exposed to the gaze of pilgrims, could have stirred the artist. A Latin belief that unbaptized innocents dwell as angels in heaven would go a long way to forge a link allowing that this holy relic was in the monastery in the eighteenth century, similarly dressed.



Canopy ciborium in Dayr Anba Thomas. Photograph: Atalla 1989: 121.



Mummy of a martyred child.  
Pamphlet of Dayr al-Shehada,  
2006.

(II) A second type of a ciborium, a so-called 'Cairene dome,' derives from Islamic architecture (see, for example, the Qalamun Mosque in Cairo). Its shallow dome rests on horizontal wooden beams, being part of a wooden ceiling decorated with *tabak megmi*. Inside, heaven with Christian saints is revealed. The church of St. Mercurius Abu Sayfayn in Akhmim has three such ciboria.[27] In the monastic churches in Dayr al-Shehada or Dayr Barsoum and Dalosham are smaller ciboria with reduced decoration.[28]

The blue color of the inner dome represents the heavenly realm where Christ and the Virgin are seated on 'baroque' thrones placed on an Arabic-looking dais.[29] The staring eyes and crossed position of hands of the barefoot saints are familiar from sacred pictures attributed to the

lesser works of Mattary's workshop; here in Akhmim they were painted even more incompetently, directly on wood with coarsely ground local pigments mixed with gum Arabic. The local, probably untrained artists simplified their technique by using primary colors without modeling of schematic clothing. Many finer details and ornamental [motifs](#) are, however, often lost by overcleaning.

Two features are new: the rosary and the head cover. Christ, angels, and male saints wear red scull caps, the bishops black ones, and in the aforementioned Coptic-Arabic *Maimar* from 1687 a yellow scull cap is part of the officiating priest's sacerdotal attire.[30] The Virgin and female saints wear loose veils, sometimes dotted, in reminiscence of clouds on more refined Greek engravings.

## Icons

The workshops that produced ciboria issued icons based on the same miscellaneous models. These are painted in an identical technique on thin plain panels, which are sometimes embellished with carved columns and arches to frame the principal saints; we note that these votive icons belong to a category of Byzantine *proskynitarion*. We note, too, that there are no icons portraying Christ. Votive icons of the Virgin and Christ Child, the angels and local saints and martyrs, Pachomius and his sister Dalusham[31] and Anba Thomas, were numerous.[32]

For example, the ultimate model for the locally popular image of *The Archangel Michael* with large striped wings seems to be a Cretan black and white woodcut (circa 1706), printed in the Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai, which was turned into an emblem by the skillful use of brilliant colors applied into the lines [here figures 4a and 4b—is this correct?]. [33] Once created, the angel was dully replicated.



Icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. Achmim area provenance. Photograph courtesy of Gawdat Gabra..

On the titular icon painted for the monastery bearing his name, *Anba Thomas* (+ 453) stands barefoot, the head covered with thrice-blessed black cap, wearing a striped homespun coat and foreign-looking megaloschema. He is blessing the beholder with a beneficiary cross and displays the rosary. The refined, earlier icon of the venerable Anba Shenoute the Archimandrite (without the rosary) in the church of St. Shenoute, Deir Abu Sayfayn, Old Cairo, might have been a prototype, this visual connection pointing to local [veneration](#) of both saints.[34]

Narrative icons depicting biblical stories in the eighteenth century are less numerous. Scenes of the Flight into Egypt, the Passion, and the

Ascension had Western models, but this would not help to date unsigned icons as the prototypes were reduced to the most rudimental and they were perpetuated even through the nineteenth century. They nevertheless attest to changing Christological perceptions. The ancient iconographic details of these local works, however, continue to surprise us. For example, on the naive Crucifixion icon in the Coptic Museum, signed by Abuna Abd al- Shahid and dated a.m. 1584/a.d. 1868, the Virgin and John acknowledge Christ's triumph over death with a pinkish red garland bound with ribbons resembling a 'lucky knot' or 'lock of fertility', carried by the deceased in pre-Christian funeral or mummy portraits. Possibly such artifacts were fabricated until recently in rural Upper Egypt.[here figure 5]

Another ancient iconographical detail is the Christ Child's gesture of blessing with all the fingers of the hand extended and the hand held up palm out, which is particularly interesting for this volume as it can be traced back to wall [paintings](#) from the eighth century in the ancient Coptic Red Monastery, which were rediscovered two years ago by professional cleaning. It is probable that some images were still visible in the eighteenth and even the nineteenth century.



Icon of The Archangel Michael  
in Dayr al-Salamun.

Photograph: Sami Sabri Shaker,  
1980s

## Conclusion

The Akhmim ciboria and icons with saints displaying rosaries fit into the period between the inimitable Mattary and the sophisticated Ibrahim al-Nasih, who worked between the 1740s and 1780. It is art of a theological and artistic revival, of ecumenism but also of provincial restraint, and lacking major artists. Without documents, with which Dr. Guirguis works so persuasively, this attribution remains preliminary. New discoveries in the illustrated and dated Coptic-Arabic manuscripts from the Achmim region, presented by Father Bigoul al-Suriyani in this volume, will expand our knowledge. The meaning of the rosary as the symbol of the Coptic Catholic faith or as a sign of modernity has to be further researched.



Test cleaning showing saints in the south semidome, sanctuary, Red Monastery Church. After Bolman 2004b (cover).  
Photograph: Patrick Godeau.

Christians in Upper Egypt cling to their traditions. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the modest Akhmim figurative art from the Beylik—Mamluk and missionary eras are those details that are loaned from late antique and early [Coptic art](#) in the Thebaide. Used more than a millennium later on hybrid Coptic- Arabic icons, these local attributes and gestures again demonstrate the remarkable survival of indigenous iconography.

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- [1] Monneret de Villard 1925-1926: vol. 2: 48.
- [2] Krautheimer 1986: 113-17.
- [3] Grossmann 2002a: 533-34 dates the fire that partially destroyed the triconch to the Persian invasion in 619.
- [4] Peter Grossmann kindly shared these drawings with Nicholas Warner, project architect at the Red Monastery, who in turn shared them with me.
- [5] Clarke 1912: 153; Grossmann 2006: 45.
- [6] Clarke 1912: 153.
- [7] Clarke: 169.
- [8] Lefebvre 1920a: cols. 471-475; Emmel 1998: 93-95.
- [9] Severin (forthcoming).
- [10] Grossmann 2002a: 538.
- [11] For the church at Dendera see Grossmann 2002a: 443-446. For Dayr Dosi: Stollmayer 1999: 134 and 148 Nr. 30.
- [12] Monneret de Villard 1925-1926, vol. 2: 129-30. For the nymphaeum: MacDonald 1986: 200 and Fig. 105 (p. 106).
- [13] Monneret de Villard 1925-1926, vol. 1: 47-64.
- [14] Grabar 1946, vol. 1: iii.
- [15] Ibid.: 102-19.
- [16] Ibid.: 328.



[17] Ibid.: iii.

[18] Lavin 1962: 12.

[19] Ibid.: 16.

[20] Grossmann 1992: 190.

[21] Grossmann, 2002b: 124.

[22] Lehmann 1996: 320-21.

[23] Ibid.: 323, 354.

[24] Stollmayer 1999: 140.

[25] Ibid.: 141.

[26] Mark the Deacon, Life of Porphyry, 76, 78, ed. Gregoire and Kugener, pp. 60, 62; trans. Mango 1972, p. 31.

[27] Grossmann 2002a: 445.

[28] [Robinson](#) 2001: 118-31. I am grateful to Sarah Lepinski for directing me to this study.

[29] Ibid.: 134-39.

[30] Behlmer 1998: 346-51.

[31] Grossmann 1992: 188.

[32] Paulinus of Nola, Epistula 32, 10.8-15: trans. Goldschmidt 1940: 38-39.

[33] Paulinus of Nola, Epistula 32, 13.14: trans. Goldschmidt 1940: 40-41.

[34] This study of the Sohag triconches was carried out under the auspices of the Red Monastery Project in collaboration with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Coptic Church. I am grateful to Zahi Hawass, Abdallah Kamel, Magdi al-Ghandour, Abdallah Attar, and Muhammad Abd al-Rahim of the SCA, as well as to His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Bishop Yohannes, Father Wissa, and Father Antonius for their generous hospitality and support. Work is being funded and administered by USAID and ARCE, under the Egyptian Antiquities Conservation Project (EAC) Agreement No. 263-A-00-04-00018-00. Thanks to Michael Jones, Red Monastery Project Manager for EAP/ARCE, and EAC Director for his assistance and on-site advice. I also thank Dr. Elizabeth Bolman for the priceless opportunity to be part of the Red Monastery team.

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