

Coptic Monasteries

Egypt's Monastic Art
and Architecture



Gawdat Gabra

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With a historical overview by
Tim Vivian

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To the memory of
Labib Habachi
in deep gratitude

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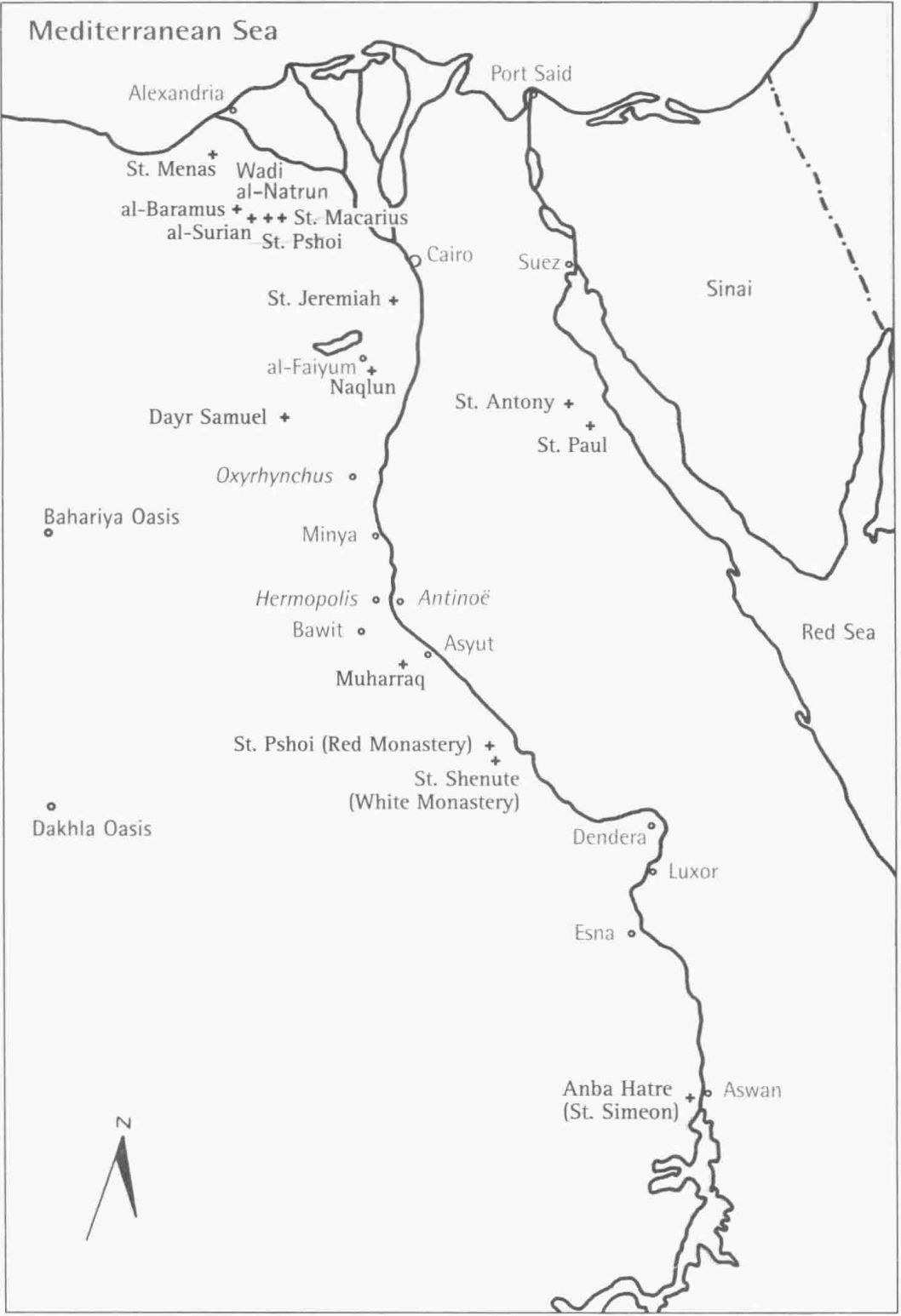
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Preface

In the second half of the twentieth century, especially during the pontificate of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III (1971–), Coptic monasteries experienced a revival of intense interest, providing an impetus for their study and preservation. A number of foreign expeditions became involved in the restoration of monastic paintings that led to the discovery of wonderful new murals. This significant and beautiful heritage is published primarily in specialized periodicals and series. With the increasing number of educated visitors to Coptic monasteries from Egypt and abroad, the lack of an introduction to the sites and their history became increasingly apparent. I hope this book satisfies the needs of such visitors and that students of Coptic Studies, Art History, and related disciplines also will benefit from its content and illustrations.

In writing this book I have incurred debts both institutional and personal. A generous grant from the Aziz S. Atiya Fund, at the University of Utah, freed me to devote myself to the manuscript's preparation. The same source covered the greater part of travel expenses associated with the project, which considerably exceeded expectations. An additional allowance provided by the Dr. Gerda von Mach Gedächtnisstiftung, Berlin, supported my research. I benefited, as always, from the facilities of the Westfälische Wilhelms-University, Münster, Germany, and from the use of the library of the Institute of Egyptology and Coptology in particular. The abbots and monks of many Coptic monasteries alleviated my labors. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Tim Vivian for his excellent contribution on the

history of the Coptic Church and monasticism. I owe special thanks to Dr. Peter Grossmann, whose accurate plans of almost every monastery and church dealt with in this volume enormously enrich the text. Professor Włodzimierz Godlewski has generously provided the plans and the photographs of the hermitages of Naqlun and the Church of the Archangel Gabriel. The photographs of the wall paintings at the Monastery of the Syrians are courtesy of Dr. Karel Innemée; that of the stucco-work is courtesy of Dr. Mat Immerzeel. I wish to thank Dr. Marianne Eaton-Krauss, who has kindly revised my English. I am grateful to all who gave permission to reproduce illustrations. The text owes much to the editorial staff of the American University in Cairo Press and I would like to single out Mark Linz, director, and Neil Hewison, managing editor, Matthew Carrington, and Andrea El-Akshar for special mention.



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Introduction

Monasticism represents the most important contribution of the Copts to world civilization. St. Antony of Egypt (251–356) is known as “the father of the monks.” His biography, which was written by Athanasius shortly after the saint’s death, has influenced the Christian world; it suffices to mention its deep impact on St. Augustine. Egypt is the birthplace of cenobitic, or communal, monasticism. St. Pachom (292–346) established this system of monasticism at Tabennisi in Upper Egypt, based on precise rules that cover almost every aspect of a monk’s life, from when he should pray, attend mass, work, sleep, and take his meals to what punishments were to be meted out for infringements. In 404 St. Jerome translated these rules into Latin from a Greek translation, which had been made for him from the Coptic text. In the fourth and the fifth centuries many European travelers visited Egypt to learn and report about monasticism. Some important personalities of early Christianity lived among the Coptic monks in the Egyptian deserts, among them: John Chrysostomus (ca. 347–407), bishop of Constantinople; Rufinus (ca. 345–410), the ecclesiastical historian; Palladius (363–431), author of the *Historia lausiaca*; Basilus the Great (330–379), author of the liturgy; and John Cassianus (ca. 360–435), author of a monastic rule. Thus Egyptian monasticism directly and indirectly influenced European monasticism. The western monastic tradition, in particular the Benedictine order, owes much to the Coptic predecessors.

Monks played a crucial role in the history of Christianity in Egypt and in the continuity of the Coptic Church. St. Antony came to Alexandria with his disciples to support the Christians, who were imprisoned at the time of persecution. During some of his exiles, Patriarch Athanasius (326–373) found refuge in monasteries; he was the first to encourage the consecration of monks as bishops. Monks were actively involved in the dogmatic controversies and participated in the ecumenical councils; St. Shenute, who attended the Council of Ephesus in 431, provides a prominent example. It is reported of the two great figures of monasticism, St. Antony and St. Pachom, that they defended orthodoxy. Shenute destroyed pagan temples in Akhmim, his region. The patriarchs of Alexandria were supported by monks, who often went to the great city and were apparently responsible for the destruction of the famous Serapeum there. Beginning in the eighth century the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun furnished most of the patriarchs of the Coptic Church from among their monks.

Before the end of the fourth century monasteries rapidly became numerous throughout Egypt. Thousands flocked to the Egyptian deserts to serve an apprenticeship in the art of monasticism. Palladius reported 5,000 monks in Nitria and 600 in Kellia towards 390. At the beginning of the fifth century St. Jerome stated that 50,000 Pachomian monks attended the annual meeting. Sources speak of 2,200 monks and 1,800 nuns under Shenute (d. 464/5) at Atripe, and of 3,500 monks in Scetis ca. 570. Before the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641, hundreds of monasteries flourished throughout Egypt. Although a number of them were sacked by the nomads of the Libyan desert in the fifth century and many monasteries suffered brutal plunder and destruction during the Persian occupation (619–629), the real decline of Coptic monasteries began in 705 when the poll tax was imposed for the first time on the monks. Between the ninth/tenth and the twelfth centuries a large number of monasteries were abandoned; sand covered some of them, preserving their beautiful wall paintings and architectural sculptures for posterity. Subsequent waves of persecution and the confiscation of the monastic