



# CHRISTIANITY IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS

THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

Jill Kamil

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To my children and grandchildren,  
to my extended family in Egypt  
and to Michael



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## PREFACE

A beaming bearded priest led me towards the baptismal font in the cathedral of Saint Mark the Evangelist in the Ezbekieh district of Cairo. I was seven months pregnant and about to become a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church. My husband Nabeeh Kamil, sociologist and artist whom I met when he was studying in the UK, was by my side. With us were his brothers Saad, a lawyer, Waheeb, a classical historian, and his cousin Murad, also a classicist, who was well acquainted with the bishop of the Ezbekieh cathedral and had made all the necessary arrangements for a foreigner to be embraced into the flock. In attendance were two young Egyptian girls in colourful long dresses, their tightly plaited hair tied with red ribbons. They were my appointed ‘bridesmaids’, and the simple white baptismal gown they so carefully carried would, I had been assured, preserve my modesty. ‘Don’t be afraid, the water’s warm, we have buta[ne] gas!’ This assurance came from the priest. It was 1956 and we had just learned that our civil wedding in Germany (between an Egyptian and a British subject) was not recognised in Egypt and, ‘for the sake of the child’, my brother-in-law Saad advised us to be married again. Unable to produce the necessary proof of my Christian faith I agreed to be baptised according to Coptic tradition: total immersion. Later, our two children Tamara Katrina and Waheeb Nabeeh were baptised in the much smaller font in the fifth-century Church of the Holy Virgin on the bank of the Nile in Maadi. Now married and with children of their own, they live abroad, in Canada and the United States respectively.

My late husband, whose Ph.D. thesis was entitled ‘The National Characteristics of the Modern Egyptians’, appraised me of the diversity

of contemporary society at all levels. Murad Kamil, a member of the delegation from the German Democratic Republic sent to Cairo in 1959 to work on the Coptic Gnostic codices from Nag Hammadi, talked to me at length about that discovery, the foundation of the church of Alexandria, and the Copts generally. Waheeb gave me access to his impressive library. More important, at that stage, was my introduction to Abdel-Moneim Abu Bakr, dean of the faculty of Egyptology in Cairo University, a close family friend. He was director of excavations at Giza and through him I was introduced to the ‘age of the pyramid builders’ and had an opportunity to see Egypt’s well-known restorer of antiquities Hag Ahmed Youssef assembling the funerary barge of Khufu discovered by Kamal Mallakh in 1954. I also met Ahmed Fakhry, author of a series of books on the oases of the Western Desert, then working on the funerary temple of the fourth dynasty Pharaoh Sneferu at Dashur; and I was present at Saqqara to share the disappointment of Zakaria Ghoneim when he opened the yellow alabaster sarcophagus in the burial chamber of a second step pyramid complex that same year – only to find it empty. I was early won to Egyptology. I studied ancient history under the guidance of Abu Bakr. I went on field trips with Labib Habachi, formerly director of fieldwork of the (then) Egyptian Antiquities Department, and later took several semesters on Egyptology with Dr Kent Weeks (later the re-discoverer of KV5, the largest tomb in the Valley of the Kings) at the American University in Cairo. My guidebooks to various Pharaonic sites, published between 1973 and 1983, were published in second and third editions.

Cairo is at the crossroads of continents, cultures and religions, and there is a concentration of scholars of various nationalities and disciplines such as one finds nowhere else on earth. All the churches of the world are represented in this great city, and one is constantly exposed to the latest (frequently unpublished) research. Moreover, having benefited from daily life with Egyptians for nearly half a century I have been exposed to cultural continuity as it has survived in a highly religious society for thousands of years. I had cause to visit the law court in Helwan during my first year in Cairo, and my husband drew my attention to the role of scribes seated at small desks outside the building. He suggested that their assistance in drawing up petitions or filling out forms for illiterates was little different from the role of cross-legged scribes in ancient temples. During my early visits to the monasteries of Wadi Natrun I registered surprise that educated monks offered expertise in agricultural

development, cattle rearing or medicine, and Labib Habachi pointed out that high priests in the ‘Houses of Life’ in ancient temples served a similar function. Abu Bakr drew my attention to the well-known parallel between Herodotus’ description of a wine-drinking, boat-festival at Tel Basta (Bubastis) in the seventh century BC with dancing and fanfare and modern *mulids* or holy days in honour of Christian saints or Muslim sheikhs. I attended many and observed that each were shared by Muslim and Christian Egyptians alike; also that Christians frequently trust Muslim sheikhs to bless their homes just as Muslims sometimes trust Christian priests to do the same.

Alongside the differences between Pharaonic, early Christian and modern times, a tradition can be traced that is manifested in art – through familiar imagery – in crafts such as weaving, the skills of calligraphers, copyists and bookbinders, as well as an intrinsic resemblance that stands out less vividly but which shows remarkable continuity in location, tradition, ritual and ideology. There are many places in Egypt known to have a long history of sanctity from pagan through Christian and Islamic times. Pharaonic temples were converted into churches and monasteries, their pagan images plastered over and repainted with saints propagating the new faith. Later, with the coming of Islam in the seventh century, many churches were changed into mosques. Waves of history have rolled over Egypt, and as I attempt to impose retrospective significance on what I have seen and experienced, let me hasten to add that it has frequently left me bewildered because it defies understanding. For example, how can one explain the fact that when the royal mummies from the hidden cache at Deir el-Bahri on the Theban necropolis (discovered by Emile Brugsch in 1881) were transported to the Nile for shipment to Cairo Museum, wailing women followed in their trail, casting sand on their heads as a sign of sorrow as depicted in ancient tombs; or that when archaeologists were excavating in Nubia in the 1960s (prior to its inundation by the High Dam) and two hippopotamus skulls just unearthed were, on impulse, stood on the gateposts of the Pharaonic fortress, women from nearby villages started coming to the expedition’s headquarters to touch the skulls. This is remarkable when one considers how many generations must have passed since a hippopotamus was last seen in the area, and thousands of years since Tauret, the patron goddess of childbirth in ancient Egypt who took the form of a hippopotamus, was regarded as a house deity.

When it comes to Coptic ritual practices, many ring of ancient tradition. It interested me to observe that a painting or photograph of the deceased, placed on the coffin in the aisle of the church during the memorial service, is interred with it. That is to say, as in ancient times, it is considered important that the image, the likeness of the deceased, should be preserved in the grave. I was privileged to attend a family service known as *Saf el-Rouh* ('send away the soul') on the third day after the death of my departed friend, an Egyptologist. It was conducted by a priest in his home, assisted by a young deacon. While the priest was reciting *Iftah Laha Yarub Bab el-Rohena* ('Open the door for the soul, O God'), I saw that candles had been lit and plates of bread and *gargier* (a kind of cress which could replace holy basilicum) put on the table along with two glasses, one filled with water and the other empty. I pondered how closely the scene paralleled Pharaonic mortuary rituals as revealed by ancient texts, and observed that the only missing ingredient was beer, when the priest put his hand in the pocket of his robe and extracted three grains of a brown substance. He put them into the empty glass, poured half the tumbler of water over them and they immediately dissolved and turned the water a light-brown colour! The origins of many rituals have been lost in the mists of time. But the fact is, they *are* carried out. People do not have to ask why they behave in a certain manner. They just do so because, after all, it was always done that way! Any Copt familiar with Pharaonic tradition who has attended a rural church service in Upper Egypt, and witnessed the pious congregation standing with two arms bent at the elbows with palms open, will recognise that today's worshippers stand like the *orant* – the praying figure portrayed on countless third-century funerary stelae from Kom Abu Billo (Thenuthis) in the Delta.

There is a character and identity to Egypt that cannot be rendered in historical sequence because it transcends history. It is transmitted from ancient times to the present in a stream of living culture. My friendship with Michael Dols in the 1970s, late professor of history at California State University in Hayward and author of *The Black Death in the Middle East* (1975) and *Medieval Islamic Medicine* (1984), resulted in many discussions on the remarkable constancy that can, in Egypt, be traced from Pharaonic through medieval to modern times, in rural as well as urban society. We would joke that as his field of study extended backward in time and mine proceeded forward, we could eventually combine our resources and write an original thesis on cultural continuity.

## PREFACE

My interest in Christianity as it developed in Egypt was awakened early and resulted in two publications: *Coptic Egypt: History and Guide* in 1987, which came out in a revised edition in 1990, and a book on the (Greek Orthodox) *Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai* in 1991. During the last decade I have further researched Egyptian (Coptic) Christianity from translated source material and personal observation. For the Islamic period I have relied on the English-language publications listed in the Bibliography (see end of volume), as well as on discussions with Copts and Muslims who have verbally translated some selected Islamic literature for me. In my capacity as Travel and Archaeology Editor of *Al-Ahram Weekly* I have made field trips to Christian sites throughout the country, witnessed current excavations and restoration of churches and monasteries, and progress being made to conserve wall paintings, icons, textiles and manuscripts. This book is designed to reveal and explain cultural change and continuity in Egypt from ancient to modern times.

*Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs* has been in production for over four years, and in it I only brush the surface of a complex subject. Well aware of the perennial debate among scholars accused of ‘coptomania’ and ‘graecomania’, I submit that there is strong evidence of the roots of Christianity within the Pharaonic inheritance.

Jill Kamil  
January 2002



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Countless people have helped me in various ways during the decade or more since I began to concentrate on Coptic history. My grateful thanks to archaeologists who have shown me around current excavations, to restorers of wall paintings, icons and fabrics, and to the holy fathers who have accompanied me through churches and monasteries – particularly Bishop Samuel el-Suryani, author of *The Coptic Dome*, for his interest in my work; Father Maximus of the Monastery of Saint Antony; and the late Athanasius, Bishop of Beni Suef and Bahnasa. Special thanks go to Coptologist Gawdat Gabra for his support and for sharing with me his profound knowledge of the collection in the Coptic Museum, to John Rodenbeck for his expertise on the classical period, to Zuzana Skalova for insight into the complexities of successive and repeated restoration of churches and icons in Egypt, to John Swansen for reading the text and giving valuable suggestions, and to Omayma Abdel-Latif for guiding me in my understanding of Islam. To Hosni Guindi, Editor in Chief of *Al-Ahram Weekly*, go my thanks for permission to use the newspaper's archival photographs, and Edouard Lambelet of Lehnert & Landrock for permission to reproduce some of the icons of Nabil Selim Atalla. To staff members of *Al-Ahram Weekly*, notably Samir Naoum, Rehab Saad, Nevine el-Aref and Sherine Nasr, my gratitude for help with some basic research.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Department, for sharing with me his love of his country and providing me with a practical illustration that change and continuity in Egyptian history and culture is not as paradoxical as it sounds.

# INTRODUCTION

Copts are Egyptian Christians. The word derives from the ancient Hikaptah ('house of the *ka* or spirit of Ptah, the temple of one of the great gods of ancient Egypt) via the Greek 'Aigyptios' and the Arabic 'Qibt' to the English 'Copt'. The Arabs called Egypt 'dar al-Qibt' (home of the Copts). In modern usage the term 'Coptic' refers to Egyptian Christianity (the Coptic Orthodox Church), the liturgy associated with that Church, and the art forms adopted by it. The Coptic language is the ancient Egyptian vernacular written in the Greek alphabet, with the addition of seven extra characters derived from demotic, the last stage of hieroglyphics. After Greek, it was the principal language of 'late antique Egypt', and it continued to be used until the thirteenth century – later probably – when it was eclipsed by Arabic.

Today there are several different Christian sects in Egypt. By far the oldest of these is the Orthodox Coptic Church. The Greek Church, which shares with it a common tradition that stems from the alleged introduction of Christianity to Egypt by Saint Mark, also claims to orthodoxy; that is to say, to the canons or rules formulated by the councils of the early Church Fathers. Egyptian Coptic Catholics assert that their tradition stems from the visit of Saint Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century when he stopped at Damietta on his way to the Holy Land; there is evidence of the presence of Franciscan missionaries in Upper Egypt in the seventeenth century. As for the Protestant Church, this appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, largely as a result of an active American Presbyterian missionary movement. *Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs* is concerned only with the development of Egyptian Orthodox (Coptic) Christianity.

## INTRODUCTION

'The Egyptian identity has been influenced by both time and space', wrote Milad Hanna in his *The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity* in reference to four historical layers (Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic), and to three geographical pillars (the Arab World, the Mediterranean, and Africa). He traced 'the Egyptian Islamic and Coptic Christian stems'. Here, I trace the Pharaonic and Christian link and endeavour to answer such questions as: Why did the new religion of Christianity succeed so overwhelmingly in Egypt, which enjoyed a distinctive and demonstrably successful religious tradition more than 3,000 years old? How and why did early ascetics invent monasticism, and was the movement politically motivated? Why did the Church of Alexandria declare its independence from the Church of Constantinople in 570? How did it survive and develop under Islam?

In order to appreciate the growth and development of Christianity in Egypt it is important to point out that historians have done us no service in dividing the sequence of events into 'Pharaonic' and 'Graeco-Roman' periods. On the one hand, there was a blending of Egyptian and Greek culture long before the arrival of Alexander the Great, and, on the other, 'Graeco-Roman' is a vague term that refers to three distinct eras – Ptolemaic, Roman, and Eastern Roman (Byzantine) rule. Egypt lost its independent status after the conquest by Alexander but, as Gunther Hölbl points out in the introduction to his *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*: 'Political and religious-cultural events were always mutually dependent, closely connected and affected by one another' (Hölbl, 2001: 1). Demotic documents show that the local population suffered no restraint under the early Ptolemies, neither in their private lives nor in their business interests. On the contrary, political stability, growth and production resulted in increased wealth for a large number of people, and many 'native' Egyptians reached high positions. Numerous papyri found in densely populated multicultural communities attest to close collaboration with the rulers. Perhaps the Egyptian elite in Ptolemaic times who proudly claimed Greek descent were much like modern Egyptians who claim to Circassian (Turkish) blood; that is, they set themselves socially apart from the bulk of the population – the peasantry – and acquired status and prestige in competitive spirit as they adopted the language and garb of the ruling power. One has only to look at the unidentified frowning official portrayed in a schist statue known as the Berlin 'Greek head' to recognise a fine example of this calibre of

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Egyptian. It dates to the last Pharaonic dynasty before the Greek conquest in 332 BC when statuary shows a brilliant blend of traditional Egyptian and Hellenistic styles. The black basalt statue of a man found in Alexandria (and now in Cairo Museum) is another of the same calibre; it typifies upper-class society of the period, and, with aesthetic features and wearing a Greek toga, he would not be recognised as an Egyptian were it not for a hieroglyphic inscription on the back pillar which identifies him as Hor, son of Hor, priest of Thoth. Again, the so-called ‘black head’ found at Memphis is a highly polished statue which could also be taken as a Greek portrait were it not for part of a hieroglyphic text on the back pillar (in Brooklyn Museum). Many Egyptians straddled two worlds. In fact, it is fair to postulate that there was as large a percentage of cultured Greek-speaking Egyptians under the Ptolemies as there are French- and English-speaking Egyptians among the elite today. Recognition of social stratification, then as now, did not evince racial superiority – simply, that different levels of culture can, and did, exist independently. While it is true that Greek became the official language in Egypt, the suggestion that all documents written in that language were necessarily written by Greeks is a fallacy comparable to the suggestion that all Muslims who speak Arabic are Arabs.

It is unfortunate that from the abundance of literary evidence that has survived in dump heaps, the Greek and Latin texts have been translated at the expense of demotic and Coptic. Countless publications from the past century (studies, monographs and lecture series) lay bare Egyptian society under foreign rule, but a similar effort has not been made to translate those texts which might locate the roots of Egyptian Christianity within the Pharaonic inheritance. They continue to lie in boxes in storerooms of museums around the world, including the Coptic Museum in Cairo. European accounts of Egypt, which date from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, have untiringly been written from the angle of the Eastern Roman Empire. Modern classicists share this prejudice because classical antiquity still provides most of their source material. True, there has been some change in attitude in recent decades as steps have been taken to set the record straight and give a fair assessment of Egyptian society from the last of the great Pharaohs through to the Roman occupation. But there is still a long way to go. As Janet Johnson writes in her preface to *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond*:

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One serious problem in the study of Egypt during this period is that the Egyptian element in this multi-cultural society has often been undervalued. Classicists, Greek papyrologists, and ancient historians base their studies overwhelmingly on the extensive Greek materials which come primarily from a limited geographical area (the Fayoum) or reflect concerns of the literate, ruling class (in Alexandria). Egyptologists tend to ignore these ‘late’ periods and Egyptian texts, especially those written in demotic, are notoriously difficult to read; the majority of such texts remain unpublished and the richness of literary and religious texts, the wealth of low- and middle-level administrative documents, and the vast number of private documents (legal or otherwise) remain underutilized in our analyses.

(Johnson, 1988: xxiii)

When we come to Christianity in Egypt, we are faced with the same deficiency – bias. ‘Egyptology was born within the fold of French and British imperialism as a means of self-aggrandisement. It was marked by major competition between centres of foreign influence which set up archaeological centres in Egypt . . . associated with Europe’s view of Europe itself at the time . . . [and] the colonial attitude led to a resistance against providing Egyptians with information on their own past’, noted Fekri Hassan, geologist turned Egyptologist currently working in the University of London’s Institute of Archaeology, in an interview with *Cairo Times* (Vol. 3, Issue 2, 18–31 March 1999). In a lecture by Alastair Hamilton of Leiden University, given at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo in April 2000, the speaker talked about ‘The Distorted Image: Relations between the Coptic Church and Europe from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century’. He referred to two conflicting views, one mythical wherein Egypt was widely regarded as a source of worldly wisdom, the other heretical because the country broke away from mainstream Christianity.

‘A strange paradox hangs over the field of Coptic studies’, writes Leslie MacCoull. ‘In any volume of assorted studies on a particular topic in late antiquity or Byzantium, most of the articles are on Constantinople, Syria, Armenia, Gaul, North Africa, and Palestine. Egypt is left off the map, or mentioned only in passing’ (MacCoull, 1993: I, 8).

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Monasticism has long been recognised as Egypt's great contribution to the Christian world, but there has been a notable lack of interest in the Egyptian (Coptic) Church. Any suggestion that Egyptians may have kindled Christian thought or development is dismissed as absurd – as absurd as any implication that they may have participated in the intellectual life of Alexandria under Ptolemy II Philadelphus who launched the Mouseion (Museum) in the third century BC, and the Library. By default it is suggested that Egyptians played no part in the scholarly, scientific or intellectual life of Alexandria; similarly, by careful editorial manipulation, we are led to believe they played no part in the growth and development of orthodox Christianity. Yet, in both cases, there is considerable evidence to the contrary. In studies in medicine carried out in the Mouseion, for example, no mention is made of how much the science of anatomy owed to Egyptian physicians who were highly regarded in the ancient world and who travelled far afield to see patients. A Syrian priest was attended by an Egyptian court physician under Amenhotep II; a medical expert was sent to a princess of Bakhtan in the reign of Ramses II (Gardiner, 1938: 157; Pritchard, 1950: 30); Thales of Miletus who founded the Ionian school of medicine is believed to have been taught by the Egyptian priests; and Egyptian medical practices were praised by Homer. The Greek debt to Egyptian medicine is well-documented (Harris, 1971: 83ff.). Egyptian medical papyri, of which there are over a score, include the Edwin Surgical Papyrus, which dealt with forty-eight carefully arranged surgical cases of wounds and fractures, detailing a dispassionate examination of the patient and prescribing cures. Ancient Egyptian medical practitioners prescribed healing remedies and conducted operations. There were specialists in surgery, dentistry, gynaecology, and ophthalmology. A gifted Egyptian doctor named Arpocras was called on to attend to the seriously ill Emperor Trajan and, in gratitude for his services, he was granted citizenship in Alexandria and Rome. A papyrus fragment which dates to the second century BC refers to an Egyptian specialist resident in Alexandria; a woman writes, 'I understand you studied the Egyptian language. I congratulate you and myself, because now you will go to this city [Alexandria] and teach pupils at the teaching clinic of clyster [enema]-specialists of Phalu, and you will have provision for your old age.' Commenting on this papyrus, Mostafa el-Abbad says that it 'provides an interesting insight. Besides the "teaching houses" of Greek doctors,

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it also documents an Egyptian clyster specialist, Phalu, who had his own training establishment in Alexandria' (el-Abbadi, in Saad el-Din *et al.*, 1992: 94). Egypt's medical legacy to Ptolemaic Egypt, like its intellectual contribution to orthodox Christianity, was, for reasons that will be explored in this book, carefully weeded from the records.

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Egypt was regarded as a member of the 'non-Chalcedonian' churches (a term currently used to denote those who did not adhere to the religious tenets there laid down), not even mentioned by name, its members regarded as heretics, rebels and fugitives. It was not difficult to overlook the contribution of the Egyptian Church in formulating an orthodox Christian creed since educated, bilingual Egyptians frequently bore Greek names. Certain facts were omitted from the public record, others transformed, and it was important to antedate this myth as far as possible in order to give the appearance of 'eternal truth' so to speak. That truth – that myth – when quoted by three or four sources took on the weight of fact.

Alexandria, for example, is traditionally presented as an Hellenic city with a Mediterranean outlook while the rest of Egypt was the *khora* (a term first coined by Emperor Vespasian in a public speech in Alexandria in the middle of the first century), the hinterland, a mere appendage to the capital. Rhokotis (*Re-kadit*), the site chosen by Alexander for his new capital, was described as an insignificant village peopled by nomadic pastoralists and their flocks. Archaeology – including underwater archaeology – reveals the facts: Rhokotis was neither a sparsely populated settlement of nomads and their cattle, nor 'the wretched fishing village' described by Idris Bell (1948: 51). Its strategic suitability as a harbour was recognised as far back as the eighteenth dynasty (c. 1567 BC) when an Egyptian community was settled there. It grew over a period of two centuries and by the reign of Ramses II had a large enough population for him to build a temple in honour of Osiris. During the Saite Period in the sixth century BC a garrison was stationed at Rhokotis, the population further expanded and the temple enlarged. By the reign of Nektanebo II, the last Egyptian king before the Greek conquest, it was so important a community that it made plans (which did not materialise) to develop a royal necropolis for kings to be buried there. Moreover, pre-Ptolemaic ruins found submerged off the western tip of Pharos island attest to a pre-Ptolemaic artificial causeway between mainland Rhokotis and the island. In other words, the Heptastadion dyke constructed by the

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Ptolemies which divided the anchorage into two parts, the Great Harbour to the east and the Eunostos ('safe return') harbour to the west, was constructed on an older foundation. When Dinocrates, an experienced Greek city planner from Rhodes, designed Alexandria on the rectangular blueprint of Hellenic cities, Rhokotis was automatically absorbed within the city limits; today's districts of Mina el-Bassal, Kom el-Shufaga and Kermous are built on its ruins. Egyptians formed Alexandria's largest single community from the start. Apart from the Macedonian (Greek) elite who lived in an exclusive royal area around the Great Harbour, along with Greeks, Persians, Syrians and Jews who had accompanied Alexander's forces, a stream of native Egyptians moved northward to this new centre of activity. People from all walks of life and different ethnic origins mingled in the closest association. Alexandria (whose original name Rhokotis was retained by Egyptians at least until the twelfth century) became a meeting place for East and West with an estimated population of 500,000 in the first century AD.

Worth quoting are Polybius (the Greek historian and traveller known for the unbiased truth of his research, who visited Egypt under the last of the Ptolemaic kings), and Diodorus Siculus (the Greek historian and contemporary of Caesar). The former wrote (in his *History*, Book XV, Ch. 30) that Alexandria was inhabited by three distinct races:

*native Egyptians, an acute and civilized race [my italics]; secondly mercenary soldiers who have learned to rule rather than obey owing to the feeble character of the kings; and a third class consisting of native Alexandrians who have never . . . become accustomed to civilized life but who are yet better than the second class, for, although they are now a mongrel race, yet they were originally Greeks, and have retained some recollection of Greek principles.*

(Marlowe, 1971: 145/6, quoting Polybius)

Siculus described Egypt in his *Biblioteca Historica* as a model country in terms of geography and nature, 'with priests and king's counsellors at study and meditation, temples with libraries, and the best judges in the land chosen from the temples of Heliopolis, Thebes and Memphis'.

When I set out to trace continuity from ancient times to modern, I had no preconceived idea of where it would lead. Yet the more I delved, the

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more apparent it became that Egypt played a decisive role in the development of Christianity. Once that conclusion presented itself, I was encouraged to continue my research, both academically and at a personal level. I discussed my ideas with specialist scholars, archaeologists, restoration experts, museum directors, and scores of Copts – priests, monks and members of the lay public. What has emerged is my conviction, not necessarily theirs, of a close linkage between the Egyptian (Coptic) Church and national identity. The aim of this book is to trace bigger issues than previously addressed. First to describe the elements that Coptic practice and belief have in common with universal Christianity, while emphasising features that are unique to the powerfully Egyptian Coptic culture; and second to demonstrate the close link between the monastic movement and nationalistic consciousness. I have divided the chapters into themes, and attempt to provide some sort of balance between research, oral tradition and personal observation. While I have described, within the physical and historical framework of Egypt, the growth of the ascetic movement, monastic development and reform, periods of faith and persecution, the cult of saints and martyrs, theological debates among educated pagans, and dogmatic disputes, I am aware that I only touch the surface. Wherever you (metaphorically) dig in Egypt – whether through earth strata at archaeological sites, layers of stucco on the walls of churches, or through the living (oral) tradition, you find something new – something that can be studied from a different perspective; soon enough it raises different questions, and opens up new avenues of research.

Chapter 1 covers the whole span of Egyptian history from Pharaonic, through Islamic to modern times. I make mention of the worship of single female deities in Pharaonic times; the role of Isis, mother of Horus, from the earliest Egyptian sources through to Isis' conquest of Rome; the sites associated with the biblical story of the Flight into Egypt and its ever-expanding tradition; contemporary pilgrimage festivals in honour of the Holy Virgin, and her role in the Coptic Church. The status of the Holy Virgin, 'Mother of God', as discussed at the Church Councils of Ephesus in 431 and 449, is covered in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2 illustrates how the Christian ideal of poverty, chastity and piety is acted in different modes of behaviour throughout Egypt. The focus of the chapter is Wadi Natrun. I have traced the phenomenon of men devoting themselves to a life of spiritual contemplation and prayer

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centuries before the Christian era; outlined the earliest evidence of personal piety in the first millennium BC; and pursued the still-debated issue of whether the ancient Egyptian religion was originally fundamentally monotheistic. The chapter provides a framework for an understanding of the great pillars of the Coptic Church: Saint Antony (Chapter 3), Saint Pachomius (Chapter 5), and saints Athanasius, Cyril and Shenuda (Chapter 7).

Chapter 3 spans the historical period from the first century AD, when Saint Mark the Evangelist allegedly preached the Gospel in Alexandria, through periods of persecution in the third century, to the lives of two of the most well-known hermits: Saint Paul and Saint Antony. I have presented the adverse affect of the curbing of the material wealth of pagan temples, which, as I see it, provides the social base for the rapid spread of Pachomian monasticism. Finally, I have described the multicultural nature of Egyptian society, traditionally characterised by a high level of integration and religious tolerance, because it renders more comprehensible the rapid spread of Christianity in Egypt.

Chapter 4 describes the discovery of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in 1946 and the significance of its texts, which draw on Greek, Persian, Hebrew and Egyptian tradition. I place the literature in the context of Egypt's multicultural society described in Chapter 3, and outline ancient creation myths to show that, from very early times, questions were posed in Egypt, and answers sought, to the creation of the physical world and the link between heavenly forces and humanity. I give special attention to the corpus of literature known as the *Hermeticum*, or Hermetic Texts, and to the Memphite Doctrine, and illustrate that Basilides and Valentinus, two of the early Gnostics, formulated a theory based on some of these religious ideas. I submit that the Catechetical School founded in Alexandria at the end of the second century was, in a sense, defensive: to prevent the Christian creed from fragmenting into many creeds. Finally, I make mention of ancient Egyptian 'instruction' literature because it provides a foretaste of Christian morality.

Chapter 5 describes the rule of the Emperor Diocletian towards the end of the third century, which was so harsh that when the Egyptian Church finally separated from the Eastern Church of Constantinople, they drew up a 'calendar of the martyrs' in recollection of their suffering. The persecutions were official, legally motivated by the refusal of Christians to worship the state and the Roman emperor, and there is little doubt

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that Christianity thrived through its legions of martyrs. Pachomius, one of the great pillars of the Coptic Church, grew up in this period of social unrest, and I have outlined his remarkable life which inspired the monastic movement world-wide. What Saint Antony did for a solitary life, so did Pachomius for a communal (in Greek, *cenobitic*) monastic life. They were two manifestations of a lifestyle that spread throughout the Christian world.

Chapter 6 covers the war against paganism and Christian art and ritual. Sarwat Okasha, art historian and politician, wrote in his voluminous work *Egyptian Art* (published in Arabic in 1998) that Coptic art is an essential link in the whole chain of Egyptian art history, an intermediate stage between Pharaonic and Islamic art. He stressed that this is not just a ‘middle position’ but that Coptic art has its original style, which has its roots in ancient Egypt. It can only be best understood by recognising that, for the first centuries of the Christian era, pagan and Christian existed side by side, and that the one was the natural outgrowth of the other. I provide examples to support this hypothesis.

Chapter 7 covers the theological debates that arose after the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. I have briefly described the doctrinal disputes that centred around the nature of Jesus Christ – first between Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, and Arius; later between Athanasius and Arius; and later still between Cyril and Nestorius. Political issues lay beneath the subtle definitions of faith adopted, rejected, or revised. The life of Athanasius is described in some detail, his youth, role in the first of the great Church Councils in Nicaea in 325, through his exiles, and the manner in which he opposed the imperial government and gained popular support. Also described is Shenuda (who had accompanied Cyril to the first Council of Ephesus in 431), and who, following in the footsteps of spiritual leaders like Athanasius and Pachomius, emerged as a national leader himself, the first Egyptian to translate extensively from Greek into Coptic (the Sahidic dialect).

The period between the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (when Egypt and Syria refused to endorse revisions to the creed tabled there), and the Arab conquest in 641, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Eastern Roman (Melkite) patriarch from Alexandria, is described at length. The two centuries that lie between this important Christian synod and the Arab conquest are vital to an understanding of Egyptian Christians (who were

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called Copts only after the Arab conquest). They were persecuted ostensibly for their deviation from the true creed, but in fact imperialist Constantinople made every effort to maintain the supremacy of its own Greek (Eastern) Orthodox dogma in Egypt in order to curb the growing nationalism.

Chapter 8 covers events from 570, when Egyptian Christians appointed their own ‘Patriarch of Alexandria’, resident at Wadi Natrun, and took measures to assert their identity despite the fact that there was a Melkite patriarch from Constantinople on the see of Alexandria, backed by a strong military force. The chapter describes the difference between local architecture and the imperial buildings constructed to plans despatched from Constantinople. Hordes of pilgrims from around the Christian world came to Egypt to visit the well-known shrines and to search out the hermits in remote regions, who were thought to have special powers. This chapter concludes with the arrival of the Arab army under General ’Amr Ibn el-’As, and the last days of Roman occupation.

The aim of Chapter 9 is to introduce the monotheistic creed of Islam, describe the policy adopted in the early years of Arab occupation, and trace the condition of the Copts during successive caliphates. The Arabs were not intent on evangelism, and the Arabisation of the population – use of the Arabic language – was quicker than its Islamisation. There were periods of discrimination, persecution – especially under the rule of the extremist El-Hakim in the eleventh century – and natural disaster like famine and the great plague in the fourteenth century which drastically reduced the population. Islam in Egypt has a distinctive local flavour; like the Nubians, Libyans, Persians and Greeks before them, Muslims adopted some local traditions, especially in burial practices and pilgrimage.

Chapter 10 brings us full circle to modern times. Here I outline the Coptic revival in the last half century, particularly steps taken in the last ten years to upgrade churches and monasteries; I refer particularly to conservation of portable icons and wall paintings. Finally, I describe the history of the Monastery of Saint Epiphanus from pre-Christian to modern times as an example of continuity, and the transformation of the garbage collectors’ community into a thriving monastic centre that offers education and social services to exemplify revival.

# 1

## WORSHIP OF THE HOLY VIRGIN AND THE HOLY FAMILY IN EGYPT

Nearly three and a half million pilgrims a year converge on the village of Durunka, 10 kilometres south-west of the city of Asyut, half of that number during the annual *mulid* in honour of the Holy Virgin. Throughout the Delta and Upper Egypt pilgrims travel long distances to attend such festivals. Those that make for Durunka travel to Asyut by train, road or river and from there by taxi, donkey cart or on footpaths worn by custom beside a canal, past random shacks and occasional trees. Some pitch tents around the church dedicated to the Archangel Michael (el-Malak), others make their way towards buildings constructed to accommodate them on the lower slope of the cliff where the Monastery of the Holy Virgin is located. They bring with them all they need for their comfort: bedding, portable stoves, baskets of food, clothing. For fifteen days, between 7 and 22 August each year, the area is totally transformed. Cafés, sweet and book stalls with holy pamphlets and Christian jewellery are set up around the camp area. Fruit and vegetable vendors choose the more mobile operation of donkey carts to peddle their wares. In the corner of the marketplace, a giant wheel is set up as the focal point of a fun fair where children clad in gaily coloured clothes, the girls with bright head-scarves, delight in all the activity. This is a joyous occasion and the highlight of the celebration is a grand procession, the *doura*, on the last day of the festival. Long before dawn pilgrims start a three-hour walk towards the foot of the mountain where Mary, Joseph and the Christ child are believed to have taken refuge in a rock-hewn cave.

The pilgrims chant hymns as they walk towards the cliff as dawn approaches, clapping and drumming to keep beat. Meanwhile Bishop Mikhail of Asyut emerges from the cave complex built on the slope which

## WORSHIP OF THE HOLY VIRGIN IN EGYPT

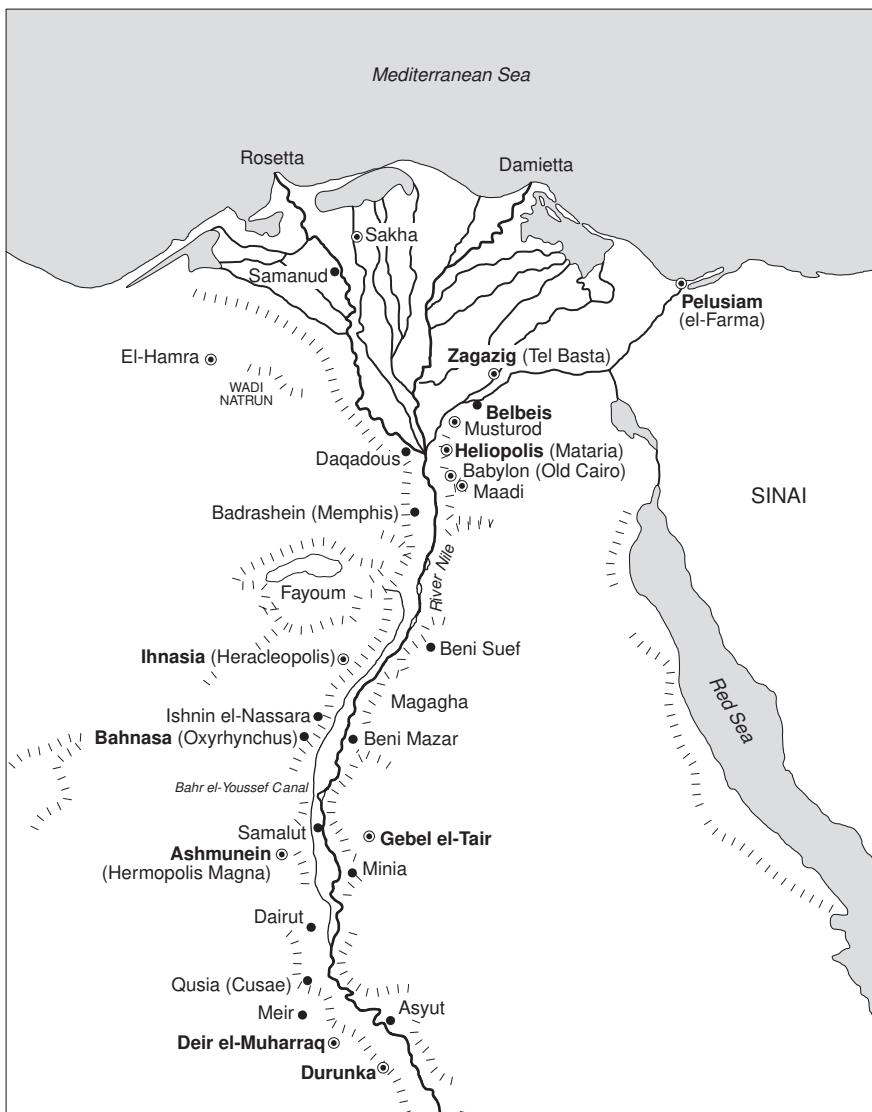


Figure 1.1 Map of sites visited by the Holy Family in Egypt

rises 100 metres above the flood plain. He carries a processional cross and is accompanied by black-gowned priests followed by deacons in white gowns bearing a huge icon of the Virgin and Child. The clergy, in turn, are followed by dozens of other white-clad deacons also bearing crosses walking in four straight lines, heads bare and with broad, red sashes strung over their shoulders and across their chests. As they come into sight, the approaching pilgrims let out a mighty roar; children dart between the legs of adults for a better view; women ululate. As the crowd presses forward my eye comes to rest on the figure of Am Mesiha, an aged water carrier, his body bent almost double with the weight of the bloated animal carcass slung across his shoulder. At eighty, he is the oldest water carrier in Egypt, the living embodiment of a bygone age who, it is said, spends his life moving from mulid to mulid to provide water to the congregations, free of charge or for a small token of their gratitude. The bishop stops and raises the cross. The pilgrims fall silent. He blesses them with consecrated water cast from an urn held by a deacon at his side and the multitude raise their palms to intercept a drop. Incense fills the air. Hymns are sung. As a grand finale, four white pigeons are released to fly over the assemblage. ‘They symbolise the Virgin Mary’, a pilgrim whispers by way of explanation as I watch them soar above our heads.

The sight of the icon of the Virgin and Child borne by white-robed priests and doves being set to flight to carry the joyous tidings to the four corners of the earth is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian festivals depicted in numerous temple reliefs which continued well into the Christian era. For centuries, pagan and Christian existed side by side, and even after Emperor Theodosius took measures to terminate all forms of Pharaonic (pagan) worship and ritual in the fourth century, only in the reign of Justinian (527–65) was the Graeco-Roman temple of the goddess Isis on Philae, south of Aswan, officially closed. By that time Egypt’s most beloved goddess was closely associated with the Holy Virgin.

The myth of Osiris, Isis and Horus is one of the most poignant and probably the most well-known of ancient Egypt. Surviving in oral tradition and variably recounted over the centuries, it has come down to us in many versions and with many contradictions. It is appropriate to describe it as reflected in Christianity for several reasons. First, because the institution of family ideals found its earliest expression in the Pharaohse myth. Second, because it provides evidence of the early worship of relics. And finally because the tales of Isis’ devotion to her son



*Figure 1.2* One of the earliest examples of Mother and Child, showing the king at the breast of an unknown goddess, is in a relief in the mortuary temple of King Unas at Saqqara (c. 2345 BC). The theme became dominant in the New Kingdom, and this relief of Isis suckling Horus in the 'birth house' of the temple of Horus at Edfu (237–57 BC) suggests that it provided inspiration for later images of the Holy Virgin and Child. Photo Michael Stock.



*Figure 1.3* Stone plaque of the Holy Virgin with the Christ Child on her lap in high relief, which reflects a folk simplicity typical of Coptic sculpture. The Virgin raises an arm from the elbow in a gesture of piety. Christianity could not have held its own against the popular worship of Isis in her various forms had not an older cult of the virginal mother goddess been adopted. (Coptic Museum.) Photo Robert Scott.



*Figure 1.4* This well-preserved and delicately painted niche showing the Virgin directing her breast towards the infant Jesus, her head turned slightly towards him, is one of many from the fifth-century Monastery of Saint Jeremias at Saqqara. (Now in the Coptic Museum.) Photo Robert Scott.

Horus whom she brought up secretly in the marshes of the Delta parallel Mary's protection of the Christ child in Egypt.

The earliest Egyptian sources of the Osiris myth are the Pyramid Texts (2345–2181 BC), where the story is not in connected form. The most complete version is given by Plutarch, the Greek writer (*c.* 46–*c.* 126 AD), according to whom Osiris, with his devoted wife Isis at his side, was a just god who ruled wisely and well. His brother Set, however, was jealous of his popularity and secretly sought to do away with him. At a rural festival Set enticed his visitors to try out a marvellously fashioned chest for size. When it came to Osiris' turn, he unsuspectingly obliged, unaware that it had been made to his exact measurements. As soon as he lay down in it Set and his accomplices fell on the chest, shut the lid, and cast it into the Nile to be carried away by the flood. Isis was overwhelmed with grief at the news. She cast sand in her hair, rent her robes in sorrow, and set out in search of the chest. When she finally found it, she hid it beneath a tamarisk tree. Unfortunately, Set was out hunting and came upon the hiding place. He extracted the body, which he brutally tore into pieces, scattering them far and wide. The tormented Isis, this time in the company of her sister, the goddess Nephthys, set out once more on a journey to collect the pieces of the body of her husband. Having done so, she and Nephthys called on the gods to help them bind the parts together and restore the body to life. Isis crooned incantations until breath came to the nostrils of Osiris, sight to his eyes. Then, in the form of a kite, Isis descended on Osiris' phallus and received his seed as depicted in the temple of Isis on Philae. When she gave birth to her son, Horus, she nursed him in solitude, raised him to manhood to avenge his father's death, and consequently take over his throne. His risen father, Osiris, ruled as judge in the court of justice, gateway to the afterlife.

Egyptian texts are full of references to the love and devotion of the goddess Isis as wife of Osiris and the mother of her son Horus, born posthumously. The myth was rewoven time and again in many oral renditions and dramatised in public performances. By the Middle Kingdom (2040–1781 BC) the cult of Osiris had thoroughly captured the popular imagination. Provincial priests who wished to give importance to their temples each claimed that a part of the body, dismembered by Set, was buried in their province. In one variation of the myth the head was buried at Abydos (Abdu). In another version it was the whole body that had been found there, with the exception of the phallus that had been

eaten by an Oxyrhynchus fish. Abydos was by that time fully established as a city of prime importance and a place of pilgrimage. Each year settlers would come from far and wide to witness the ritualistic killing of Osiris by his brother Set, followed by several days of mourning. The worshippers would show appropriate sorrow for the murdered god and weep and lament in the manner of Isis. Funerary wreaths and flowers would be placed on the mummified effigy that was borne through the city. The cortège would be led by Wepwawat, the jackal-god, 'He who opens the way'. The people would sing hymns and make offerings, and at a prescribed site a mock battle would take place between Horus and Set. The murder of Osiris was avenged, and the triumphant procession returned to the temple. The crowning scene, as depicted in the temple of Seti I at Abydos, was the erection of the backbone of Osiris, the *djed* or pillar-like fetish.

Isis did not play a major role in the dramatisation of the myth. However, in the New Kingdom (1567–1080 BC), when Egypt controlled a vast empire which comprised almost all of western Asia including Palestine, Syria, Phoenicia, the western part of the Euphrates, Nubia, Sudan and Libya, the goddess attained a more prominent position. In fact, in view of the role of the virginal mother in many cultures, it is worth noting that the worship of single female deities is a phenomenon that, in Egypt, can be traced to the first millennia BC. Excavations in the Mut temple complex at Karnak in the 1970s, for example, revealed that Mut's role of consort of Amun (chief god of the Theban triad) and mother of their son Khonsu gradually expanded until she became goddess in her own right. The same can be said for Isis; when assimilated with Hathor, the cow goddess of love and nourishment, and with Nut the goddess of the heavens, she became extremely popular with the masses. The worship of Isis at Philae, too, can be dated to a period earlier than the main temple built in her honour in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BC), when it was decorated with reliefs (in the so-called Osiris Chamber) that graphically reveal the sequence of the mythological events related by Plutarch. Blocks of inscribed stone that date to the reign of the 25th dynasty Pharaoh Taharqa (690–664 BC) have been found at the site. Her cult spread beyond the southern border of Egypt, into Nubia. Later, in Graeco-Roman times, it extended to Rome; and later still even as far as the banks of the Rhine. In Egypt, fantastic tales of her magical powers were told. It was believed that Isis' knowledge of secret formulae brought

life back to her husband Osiris; that her spells saved her son Horus from the bite of a poisonous snake; that a single tear shed for Osiris initiated the annual Nile flood, the ‘new water’ used for libations in temples; and that she protected all who sought her. As the cult became diffused, Isis was known as the ‘goddess of a thousand names’. She was associated with the Greek goddess Demeter, and as Isis-Fortuna she was the Egyptian goddess who conquered the Roman world. As early as the first century AD, tokens with Isiac symbols were issued by priests in Rome, and her cult reached its peak under the emperors Severus and Caracalla.

Statues of Isis offering her breast to Horus who is seated on her lap are known as early as the Middle Kingdom and are typical of the Late Period (664–332 BC). A 22 cm high gilded statue of the seated goddess and child found at Abu Sir (now in Cairo Museum) dates to the latter. It shows the naked boy-god Horus wearing a cap with the *uraeus* (cobra) symbol of kingship on his head, suckling from Isis’ left breast, which is held towards him with her right hand. Similar statues have been found in their hundreds in Egypt, and, indeed, throughout the Hellenic world. French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero was the first scholar to relate such representations to the concept of Pharaoh as son and successor of the gods, who, from the moment he became a god (on his accession to the throne), was recognised by the goddess as her son; and she consecrated his adoption by nourishing him as she would her own child. Such images prepared the way for those of the suckling Virgin Mary.

When paganism was outlawed and temples closed in the reign of Theodosius in 379 (Chapter 6) Egyptians saw, in Mary and her divine son, their own beloved Isis and her son Horus. There is little doubt that the Holy Virgin holds as prominent a place in the Coptic Church of today, as did the goddess Isis in the temple at Philae. Each was a mother figure who protected her son from those who wished him ill. The priests who annually bear the icon of the Virgin and Christ child from the cave-church in Durunka today, preceded by a priest swinging an incense burner on a chain, are performing an ancient ritual. Just as Pharaonic priests shuffled their way out of the sacred sanctuary of the temple of Isis on Philae during the spring and autumn festivals in her honour, so does Bishop Mikhail and his white-robed deacons at Durunka bear the icon of the Holy Virgin to carry in procession before adoring pilgrims. *Theotokos*, (Mother of God), occupies a special place in the hearts of Copts. Since pagan worship was only outlawed in the fourth century, perhaps the switch in devotion

from Isis to Mary was never consciously made, at least not on the popular level.

There is a strong tradition in Egypt that supports the New Testament story of the Flight into Egypt: ‘Take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt’ (Matt. 2: 13, 15); ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’ (Isiah 19: 1); and it is shared by Christians and Muslims alike. There are countless sites in Egypt associated with the journey and no comparable stories elsewhere in the world nor, indeed, as many relics associated with it. Although there is neither written nor oral evidence of the biblical episode, many sites enjoy great popularity as places where the Holy Family rested or hid, or where Jesus performed miracles. Traditional stories, popularly regarded as historical, pass from generation to generation and since they describe local phenomena and episodes they tend to become uniform. In his contribution to *Be Thou There: The Holy Family’s Journey in Egypt*, Stephen Davis, professor of New Testament and Early Church History at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, stressed that the study of the subject ‘is a complicated science, full of hidden pitfalls for the casual historian’. He mentions in particular that the date of a given source is often difficult to determine, and that the itineraries presented frequently differ from one another because later scribes ‘updated’ older sources by adding new sites. There is, he points out, no universally agreed itinerary because they kept evolving as new traditions were assimilated (Gabra, ed. 2001). The Coptic *Synaxarion*, a compilation of saints, martyrs and religious heroes commemorated by the Coptic Church (the result of various endeavours by anonymous authors who drew from different sources), lists twenty-two places associated with the Holy Family in Egypt (see Figure 1.1).

Limiting myself to some of the sites that I have visited, and following the most well-established and widely related Coptic traditions, the Holy Family travelled across northern Sinai, entered Egypt via the Pelusiac branch of the Nile (now dried up) and proceeded towards Bubastis (Zagazig) which they reached at sunrise. Joseph walked to the village in search of food and drink but he was harshly turned away and returned empty-handed. At sunset, a farmer called Aqloum, returning home from his work in the fields, spotted the family under a tree and asked who they were. Mary told him that they were a poor Jewish family who had come from Palestine looking for the fortress of Babylon (Old Cairo) and that they would soon be on their way. Aqloum invited them to his house to



*Figure 1.5* Icon of the Holy Family, here portrayed with the suggestion of haloes, is a work by a naïve Upper Egyptian painter. Such icons were employed to teach biblical events to illiterate churchgoers to enable them to visualise crucial episodes of Christianity connected with their country (Coptic Museum). Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

replenish their supplies before continuing their journey. As they approached, Aqloum explained that his wife was ill and could not join them. But Jesus called her name and said, ‘Sarah, you are well, rise and join us.’ She immediately rose to her feet and husband and wife were gracious hosts. Aqloum’s wife told Mary of the city, temple of Bastet (the cat-goddess) where there were colossal statues. She said that religious feasts in honour of the goddess were great celebrations and Mary expressed a wish to see the temple. Sarah accompanied her there with the Christ child in her arms. As soon as they set foot inside, the pagan statues crumbled in a cloud and fell to dust as prophesised (‘The Egyptian idols tremble before him’ – Isaiah 19: 1). News of the incident spread rapidly



*Figure 1.6* Among the many churches of Zagazig, capital of the province of Sharqiya, is the Church dedicated to the Holy Virgin and Saint John the Baptist. It is a fine example of elaborate construction and decoration built in the form of a basilica. It is believed to be on the site of the house of Aqloum and Sarah who offered hospitality to the Holy Family during their Flight into Egypt. Photo Samir Naoum.

and the governor of the region ordered an immediate search for the woman and child. Rumours filled the streets about his determination to deliver the child to Herod. Aqloum and his wife, realising it was no longer safe for them to linger, guided them towards Belbeis and accompanied them part of the way, carefully avoiding the Roman forces.

Christian and Muslim sources alike relate that the Holy Family were warmly received at Belbeis, that the inhabitants befriended the Virgin, played with the child, and talked to Joseph el-Naggar (the carpenter). There was once a tree in the city, which became known as the Virgin Mary's Tree after the visit. According to one of many accounts, it was cut down by Napoleon's soldiers in search of firewood. Apparently at the first strike of the axe, the tree started to bleed and the soldiers were aghast. Near the spot where it is believed to have grown at the cross-roads of El-Ansary and El-Boghdady streets, the mosque of Osman el-Haress el-Ansary stands today, built in commemoration of the visit. Copts and Muslims are not always in agreement on the route taken by the Holy Family, or on the duration of their stay. Copts believe that it was for a little over three and a half years. Muslims – who refer to 'the family of Amran' in their Holy Quran and identify Mary with Miriam the sister of Moses – hold it was seven.

The Tree of the Virgin at Mataria (Heliopolis) is one of the most holy sites associated with the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt. Today's sycamore grew from a shoot planted in place of the original tree. The sycamore was sacred in Pharaonic times. It was depicted in tomb drawings and reliefs as the dwelling place of a tree goddess who poured blessings on the deceased. Of all the sites visited by pilgrims after Christianity was declared the religion of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century, this tree was regarded as the most holy. Originally one of many in the area, tradition holds that it miraculously opened its trunk to enable Mary, Joseph and Jesus to escape from two brigands in pursuit. Pilgrims from all over the Christian world held the leaves to have medicinal properties and began to deplete the trees, even stripping their barks. They also bathed in the nearby pool, which was said to have healing water. In the fifteenth century Felix Fabri, a Dominican monk, visited Mataria and noted that a gate had been built around the tree for protection and that the number of pilgrims that could enter at any one time was restricted to four. He mentioned that two lamps were hung in the hollow trunk of the tree where the Holy Family hid.



*Figure 1.7* The ‘Tree of the Virgin’ at Mataria (Heliopolis) is one of the most famous sites visited by the Holy Family during their journey in Egypt and is frequently mentioned by medieval pilgrims as the place where the Virgin rested, refreshed herself, and washed the clothes of the child in a spring. It is a sycamore tree sacred from Pharaonic times when Egypt was itself alluded to as the ‘Land of the Sycamore’. Photo Michael Stock.

In the Roman fortress of Babylon (Old Cairo) three churches claim the honour of being a place of refuge for the Holy Family: the church known as el-Moallaqa (the ‘Hanging Church’, so-called because it rests on the two south-western bastions of the old Roman fortress), consecrated to the Virgin Mary and to Saint Dimiana; the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George; and the crypt beside the altar of the Church of Saint Sergius (Abu Sarga) where a commemorative mass is annually celebrated in the latter on 1 June, which Copts associate with the biblical event.

From Old Cairo, the Holy Family went south to Maadi, a suburb south of Cairo. In the grounds of the Church of the Holy Virgin, which stands on the bank of the Nile, a flight of steps leads to the river’s edge. Here they are believed to have hired a boat to transport them to Upper Egypt. According to the monks of the Monastery of Deir el-Muharraq in Upper Egypt, there were well-connected Jewish families in Maadi in those days. ‘The Holy Family spent a short time with each’, Father Antonius of Deir el-Muharraq told me. ‘Joseph became acquainted with some local fishermen who agreed to take them to Upper Egypt’, he added. ‘He paid



*Figure 1.8 (left)* The Christ Child is here portrayed in the arms of an elderly Saint Joseph swathed in monastic garb with a shawl covering his head in the Egyptian manner. It was painted by Anastasi el-Rumi el-Qudsi in the nineteenth century and clearly inspired by the local environment. His name is often taken to mean ‘Anastasi the Greek from Jerusalem’, but it could also be translated as ‘Anastasi the Greek (one) who makes sacred paintings’ since ‘el-qudsi’ also means ‘the holy, sacred or sainted one’. (Church of Saint Mary in Haret Zuwaila, Cairo.) Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

*Figure 1.9 (right)* A well in the courtyard of Ashneen el-Nassara village church, 9 kilometres west of Maghagha, is believed to be the one from which the Holy Family drank on their journey southward. It has been covered with a simple protective dome. Photo Samir Naoum.

for the boat with the gold, frankincense and myrrh which had been presented to the Christ child by the three wise men of the east’, commented one of his faithful followers who accompanied me around the monastery. He was a gatekeeper, a pious man and regular church-goer, probably illiterate but anxious to pass on oral traditions.

Unquestionably, one of the most picturesque sites associated with the travels of the Holy Family is the church of the Holy Virgin at Gebel el-Tair (‘Mount of Birds’), popularly known as the Church of the Lady of the Palm. Situated on the eastern bank of the Nile overlooking the valley, it was built on the site of a cave where they took refuge. According to tradition, Mary feared for the safety of Jesus because a large rock threat-



*Figure 1.10* Gebel el-Tair ('Mount of Birds') was the site of a miracle during the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt. An icon of the Virgin and Child is the centrepiece of a rock cave in the Church of the Holy Virgin there. Photo Samir Naoum.

ened to fall on their boat from the mountain above, but Jesus extended his hand and prevented its falling. His imprint remained on the rock and the church was built in commemoration of the event. This relic did not survive but there have been many suggestions of what might have happened to it. One is that it fell into the Nile and was buried in silt; another that it was taken for exhibition in Jerusalem where it remains today; and a third holds that Salah el-Din (the 'Saladin' of the war against the Crusaders) appropriated it and hid it at some unidentified location.

East of Bahnasa is the site of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, an episcopal see in the fifth century but today predominantly Muslim. Local sheikhs quote a passage of the Quran: 'and we have made the Son of Mary and His Mother a portent, and we gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and water-springs'. (XXIII: 50) They claim that Jesus attended school at

Bahnasa when he was a young boy and refer to Arab historian Mohamed el-Bakir (676–731) as their source. 'When the teacher asked Jesus to say the alphabet, he did not recite it, but explained it thus: "The *alif* stands for the good deeds of God, the *da* for His glory, the *geem* for His splendour . . . the *ka* is the Word of God that will never change", said a local teacher. A sacred tree in Bahnasa is known as the Messiah's Tree. 'It grew from a piece of wood put in the ground and watered from a nearby well', a village woman told me. 'It is the very same one that was planted by Jesus', she insisted. I noted that the city council has erected a fence around it, and placed a cover over the well.'

WORSHIP OF THE HOLY VIRGIN IN EGYPT



*Figure 1.11* The newly restored ancient Church of the Holy Virgin, Gebel el-Tair, overlooks the river Nile and the fertile floodplain. Photo Father Angeles.



*Figure 1.12* The interior of the church is partly rock-hewn and modernised with chandeliers. Photo © Al-Ahram Weekly.

Coptic priests at Bahnasa hold that the Holy Family did not enter the city but took refuge beside the Bahr el-Youssef canal in the village known as Ashneen el-Nassara, where they remained in hiding for four days. Oral tradition is strong among local villagers. They say that as the family neared the well Jesus felt thirsty and cried. But the well was deep and the water low, and only when the Virgin took the child's finger and placed it over the well did the water instantly rise to the surface. I was taken to the courtyard of Ashneen village church (today known as Mar-Guircis) where an old well is believed to be the one from which Jesus drank. 'When pilgrims visit in August each year the water still rises', a young deacon assured me. 'It is holy water and it cures the sick.'



Figure 1.13 The restored ancient monastery known as Deir el-Garnus is near the village of Ashneen el-Nassara south-west of Maghagha, a site associated with the Flight into Egypt. According to local tradition, there is a well under the baptistry at the western end of the south aisle of the Church of the Blessed Virgin from which the Mary and Jesus drank. Photo Samir Naoum.

Medieval and modern historians alike have been consistent in describing Deir el-Muharraq (literally ‘the monastery scorched by fire’ in reference to the habitual burning of wild reeds to clear the ground for cultivation) as the place where the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and urged him to take the young child and its mother and return to Palestine because he who had sought to kill the child had died. Coptic literature is explicit on the length of time they spent in Egypt: over six months, 185 days to be precise. Today it is one of the largest and wealthiest monasteries in Upper Egypt, well known for its charitable work among villagers. During the great fast preceding Easter, huge crowds, estimated at some 50,000, make pilgrimage there to receive a blessing from the monks, have their children baptised, or to pray for a cure. Again, one finds that oral tradition is strong. An elderly resident with a weathered face told me that Mary, Jesus and Joseph were tired from their long journey and decided to rest in a deserted house at the edge of the agricultural land. ‘It was made of sun-dried brick with a palm-leaf roof and nearby was a well’, he said, adding: ‘Joseph repaired the house and the dried-out well miraculously supplied water. Then Mary and the child stayed in the upper room of the house and Jesus travelled around the countryside performing miracles. Later the house was converted into a church.’ The slab of stone that forms the altar of the oldest church of the monastery is believed to be the one on which Jesus sat when he was a young child. It was later re-used as a funerary stela but has now reverted to its original use as an altar and bears the date 11 December 747.

Many churches in Egypt are attributed to Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine. Fifteen years after her son’s famous revelation – his vision of the cross on the sun – which resulted in his declaring Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in 313, she travelled to holy places throughout the empire. The Church of the Holy Virgin in the Delta city of Sakha, between the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile, is thought to be one of them. This may be the same place as Birkha Iysous, or the ‘imprint of Jesus’ foot’, described by the Arab historian el-Makrizi as of equal in importance to Jerusalem. An ancient manuscript in the library of Deir el-Muharraq relates that when the Virgin reached Sakha she was thirsty and Jesus touched a stone with his foot and water sprouted. During excavations in 1988, in the grounds of a house next to the monastery popularly known as el-Maghtas, a large block of stone



*Figure 1.14* Numerous places in the Delta are associated with the Holy Family's journeys in Egypt, one of the most popular being Sakha, between the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile. Excavations of property neighbouring the church of the Holy Virgin in 1988 led to the discovery of a piece of rock with the imprint of a foot, believed to be that of Christ. Written prayers have been slipped into the cabinet by pious pilgrims. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

with a distinct imprint of a foot was unearthed. The sacred relic is believed to have been buried there in the thirteenth century during a period of oppressive rule by the Mameluke sultans. It would appear that with the passage of time the place where the relic was hidden was forgotten. Its discovery has revived interest in the area, and the Church of the Holy Virgin has been restored. Among its treasures are candlesticks, a thirteenth-century silver paten, a chalice used for communion, a hand-written Bible and eighteenth-century crosses and marriage crowns.

Churches were built or restored in the time of Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria between 384 and 412. This important theologian of the Coptic Church reputedly had a vision in which places associated with the Holy Family's visit were revealed to him. He carried out a tour of inspection and found that many were in a serious state of disrepair, others totally lost beneath the sand. Daqadous, in the Delta province of Shubra



*Figure 1.15* Eighteenth-century icon in the Monastery of Deir el-Muharraq showing the angel of the Lord (upper left-hand corner) informing the Holy Family that it is safe to return to Jerusalem because Herod is dead. Christ, no longer a babe in his mother's arms, is depicted as a young boy taking her hand. Note the Horus hawk in the upper right-hand corner. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

el-Kheima, is thought to be one of those restored. Its association with the Holy Family is uncertain because the tradition is based mainly on conjecture, supported by the strong conviction of the local population. Daqadous today has few surviving remains. Of the three ancient churches that once stood there, two were swept away by a high flood, and the present building (which dates from 1888) was said to be constructed over the ruins of the third. Recent discoveries give some support to the claim. Bishop Filobbos of Daqahliya, who accompanied me around the church, explained that excavations prior to the reinforcing of the church's foundations had led to the discovery of an earlier construction, along with manuscripts, fragments of several ancient altars, and Coptic graffiti on the walls. He described the church as 'a treasure house'. Indeed, the sanctuary screen is of exquisite design, proportion and craftsmanship. A large collection of icons dating from various periods was found, along



Figure 1.16 The newly restored Church of the Holy Virgin at Daqadous, north of Mit Ghamr on the Damietta branch of the Nile, is the site of one of the largest *malids* in the Delta. It is associated with an early medieval Coptic tradition as one of the places associated with the Flight into Egypt. The church is believed to be built over the cave where the Holy Family took refuge. The well within the church is said to be where the Holy Virgin washed the Christ Child. Photo Samir Naoum.



*Figure 1.17 El-Hamraa is a sweet-water spring in the salt-water lake at Wadi Natrun, which has been tapped. It is one of the places associated with the Holy Family where fresh water miraculously flowed to the surface when they reached its bank. Photo Father Angelus.*

with some hundred sixth-century manuscripts, a Bible exquisitely bound in silver, crucifixes and censers.

When Egyptian Christians recognised their own Coptic patriarch of Alexandria residing at Wadi Natrun in the sixth century, the depression west of the Delta famed for its hermitages naturally gained prominence among the sites associated with the Holy Family. According to legend, Mary, Joseph and Jesus reached a lake after a long and tiring journey. Although extremely thirsty, they could not quench their thirst until sweet water miraculously flowed to the surface as they stood there. This sweet-water spring, known as el-Hamraa, has been tapped and had a wall built around it; a path of large stones across the shallow lake gives access to pilgrims and tourists.

Not everywhere was the Holy Family made welcome. At el-Qusia at the northern end of Gebel el-Qusqam, a range of mountains that extends on the eastern bank of the Nile, there once stood a temple. When they approached, the inhabitants of the town and the temple priests came after the Holy Family with rods and sticks and drove them from the town. ‘They hid in one of the caves in the mountain, and local Christians brought them food and drink’, said a young deacon in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Durunka.



*Figure 1.18* This chamber near the sanctuary of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Qusia is believed to have been the one occupied by the Holy Family. The hollowed stone, now turned into an altar, is held to be where the Christ child slept. Photo Samir Naoum.

The Holy Family must have witnessed the passage of the seasons: the chocolate-brown, heavily charged water rising each year to overflow the banks of the river during the first season of the agricultural year, known as the *akhet*, which started at the end of June. It was when the life-giving waters refreshed the parched land after the summer heat; the time when the peasant farmers withdrew from the floodplain with their possessions, livestock and children to camp on high ground. Offerings would be made to the Nile, of flowers or even a goose, that there should be sufficient water to provide a bountiful crop, but not so high as to sweep away villages and valuable livestock. When the water receded, it left land covered with a layer of rich alluvial soil brought from the sources of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, and the farmers resettled on the land. This was the second season, the *perit* or ‘going forth’ when the soil was tilled and sown with seed. In due time the land became a carpet of green from the germinating clover and grain. Then came the third season of the agricultural year, *shemu*, the harvest, followed by thanksgiving rituals.

Egypt, a land of almost perpetual sunshine, had no shortage of natural resources. Little wonder it attracted settlers from predynastic times through to the movements of the Hebrew patriarchs as recorded in the Old Testament (Gen. 12: 10ff.).



*Figure 1.19* Rural Egypt has changed little since ancient times. The Holy Family on their sojourn in Upper Egypt might well have passed along such a canal lined with palm trees, seen blindfolded buffaloes turning *saqqia* (waterwheels), or bypassed the road along the Bahr el-Youssef canal which runs parallel to the Nile, along which many places have oral traditions related to the event. Photo Michael Stock.

In the biblical record, Jesus lived in Palestine and the only other country that he visited was Egypt. Accompanied by Mary who guided and protected him, it is she, the Holy Virgin, whose name is commemorated in the Coptic Church, where the name of Mary is invoked in every daily hymn and liturgy, and in every canonical hour day and night. Feasts in her honour are celebrated yearly and monthly, thirty-two in all. Her icons today adorn every church and chapel in Egypt.

## DESERT FATHERS ANCIENT AND MODERN

In the remote al-Farigh area of Wadi Rayan in the Western Desert a group of monks have settled in two groups of caves. Separated by a limestone ridge from the fertile and well-populated Fayoum province, cut off at the mouth of a dried-out river by a huge sand dune, these modern-day Desert Fathers lead a monastic life in its fullest sense. They have given up their property, accepted separation from their families, and shunned all contact with the outside world except for a camel caravan which periodically brings their basic requirements. Abuna Matta el-Maskin (Father Matthew the Poor), Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrum, is their spiritual leader. All are university graduates. Father Matta himself is a prolific writer with over fifty booklets and theses on theology, asceticism and dogma to his credit, including his *Church and State, Sectarianism and Extremism, Communion of Love* and a short history of *Coptic Monasticism and The Monastery of Saint Macarius*.

The phenomenon of men devoting themselves to a life of spiritual contemplation and prayer occurred centuries before the Christian era, not only in Egypt but also in Palestine, Persia and India. They were called *anchorites* (from the Greek root meaning to retire or withdraw), a term originally referring to those who withdrew from labour but which soon came to be attached to ascetics who lived in places of strict seclusion. In Egypt they chose the limestone hills flanking the Wadi Natrun depression west of the Nile delta; ancient tombs and caves in the succession of cliffs with deeply trenched ravines running along the Nile in the Eastern Desert; hideouts in the higher and more rugged mountains on the Red Sea coast; and in varied conditions in the oases of the Western Desert: beyond the high scarps of limestone that surround Bahriya oasis;

## DESERT FATHERS ANCIENT AND MODERN

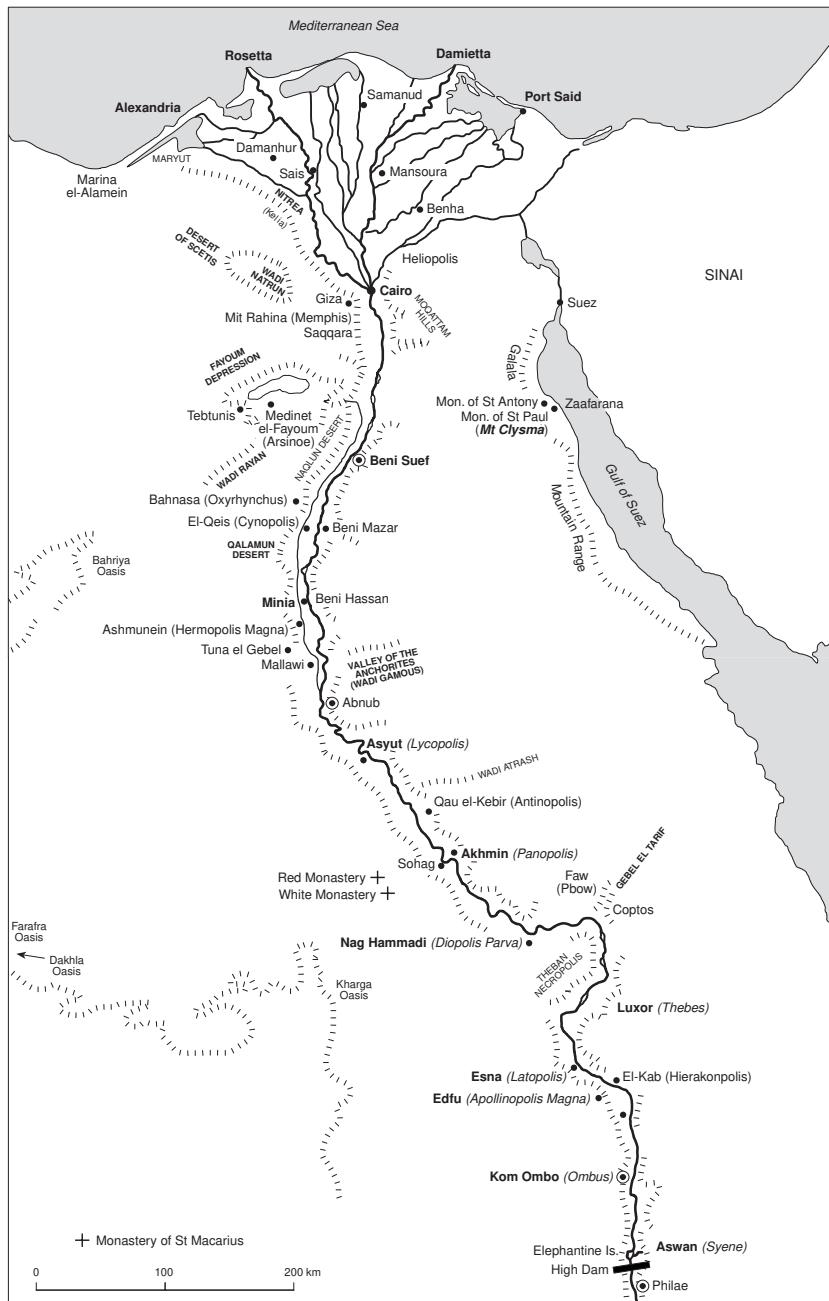


Figure 2.1 Map of Egyptian deserts and cities

in the lowland on the east of Dakhla oasis, and in the rocky outcrops characterised by horizontal strata at Kharga oasis.

Since personal piety is something not usually associated with the Pharaonic civilisation and its pantheistic worship, and as the earliest anchorites can be traced back to the second century BC, one might well question the religious sentiments of hermits not yet bonded in the spirit of the gospel. What religious belief or beliefs did they hold? The 300 BC tomb chapel of a high priest called Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel, the necropolis of Hermopolis (modern Ashmunein) provides a clue. Based on building and decorative considerations it has been assigned to the end of the fourth and beginning of the third centuries BC, and it reveals the priest to have been a particularly devout man. The tomb was built for himself and members of his family in the form of a hall in front of a sanctuary, which was typical of temple architecture of the Late Period of the Pharaonic civilisation. The façade is decorated with traditional Pharaonic reliefs showing the deceased adoring provincial deities. But in the maze of subterranean burial chambers, where one would expect to find standard mortuary formulae, there are original inscriptions on the walls, poetic and highly spiritual. Miriam Lichtheim notes that the fact that they were written in demotic leaves no doubt that ‘Christian’ concepts did indeed pre-date Christianity in Egypt (Lichtheim 1974: III; 44–5). The writings reveal that Petosiris taught his family about the ‘way of life’ which was also called the ‘way of God’, phrases that appear among the Coptic texts in the Nag Hammadi library (see Chapter 4).

Even as far back as the first millennium BC certain important officials, sages and priests who raised statues of themselves in temple precincts were regarded as intermediaries in approaching the deity to whom the temple was dedicated. ‘Say a prayer on my behalf’ or ‘invoke my name’ are frequent phrases left beside such statues (on *ostraca*, scraps of papyrus or pieces of wood) by people who journeyed, sometimes long distances, for the express purpose of submitting personal entreaties. In the tombs of the worker’s community at Deir el-Medina on the Theban necropolis – where craftsmen laboured for generations constructing the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings – are such phrases as ‘poor in spirit’, ‘look upon me and be merciful’ and ‘punish me not for my many sins’ – prayers that pre-date Christianity by many centuries.

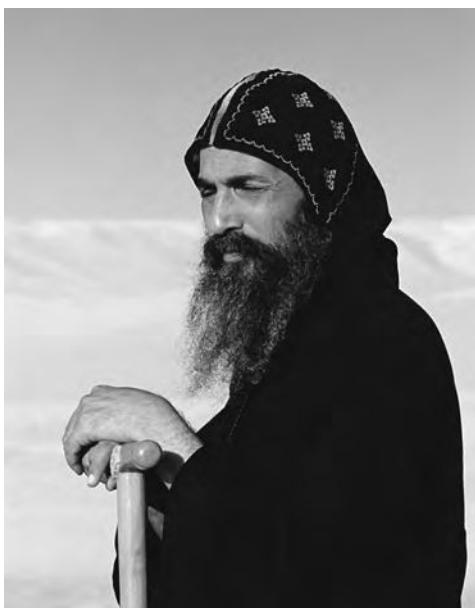
While postulating about the religious sentiments of the earliest hermits it is befitting to quote the twenty-fourth instruction of a demotic



*Figure 2.2* A large number of ascetics sought seclusion in the Qalamun desert, separated from the Nile valley at Beni Suef by a plateau to the east and the Ghalioun hills to the west. According to tradition, two young men, Panine and Panaw, were guided to this hostile environment by the archangel Michael who appeared to them in clerical robes. Photo Michael Stock.

text known as the *Insinger Papyrus* entitled ‘the teaching of knowing the greatness of the god, so as to put it in your heart’. It dates to the first century AD and clearly shows that there was not such a difference in the concept of a single godhead between Pharaonic (pagan) and early Christian Egypt as we are led to suppose:

When people raise their hands the god knows it . . . He knows the impious man who thinks of evil . . . He knows the godly man and that he had the greatness of god in his heart . . . He gives good judgement through the counsel which no one knows . . . He creates abundant value without there being a storehouse behind him . . . It is he who makes the way safe without there being a guard . . . It is he who gives the just law without their being a judgement . . . The hidden work of the god, he makes it known on the earth daily . . . He created light and darkness . . . He created the earth, begetting millions . . . He created day, month, year . . . He created food before



*Figure 2.3* Father Basilios of the Monastery of Saint Samual at Qalamun wears the close-fitting black hood which is made of two pieces of material stitched together along the top of the head and embroidered with thirteen crosses, symbolising Christ and his apostles. Photo Mohammed Mos'ad © Al-Ahram Weekly.

those who are alive, the wonder of the fields . . . He created the breath in the egg where there is no access to it . . . He created sleep to end weariness . . . He created remedies to end illness . . . Great is the counsel of the god in putting one thing after another . . . The fate and fortune that come, it is the god who sends them.

(Lichtheim, 1974: III, 184ff.)

Did the ancient Egyptians believe in one supreme god who evolved into a celestial reflection of the earthly sovereign (i.e. who was made in the likeness, and with the qualities, of early kingship), alongside the provincial gods depicted in tomb and temple relief? This was an issue hotly debated by generations of scholars. Eric Hornung (1982) singles out the French Scholar Emmanuel de Rougé , in 1869, as the 'first explicit exponent of the conviction that the ancient Egyptian religion was originally and fundamentally monotheistic' followed, with some reservations, by the English Egyptologist and historian of religion Peter le Page Renouf, who a decade later published his *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*. The following generation included Heinrich Brugsch, who collected striking passages from various texts to support

his conviction that the ancient Egyptian religion was one of pure monotheism; Paul Pierret, who maintained that the texts clearly indicated that the ancient Egyptians believed in One Infinite and Eternal God; and Auguste Mariette, who shared their interpretation. Gaston Maspero and others were critical of the monotheistic hypothesis, holding that the Egyptians were first of all polytheists.

Whether the ancient Egyptian concept was God first and then provincial gods, or vice versa, when the whole of the New Testament was translated from the Greek into Coptic around the year 300, the ancient Egyptian word *neter* was used to describe God (surviving in Coptic as *nute*). The specific meaning of the word, both in its original ancient Egyptian and its Coptic derivative, has been lost and today scholars are not in agreement on its definition. Suffice it to say that the ancient Egyptians used both the singular *neter* and the plural *neteru* side by side in their literature, and that the Copts chose the singular form because, presumably, there was no other word that so aptly conveyed to their minds the concept of an active force – commanding, guiding, inspiring and ordaining human destiny. Likewise, the ‘hell’ of Coptic literature retains the Egyptian name *amente* along with its population of demons. The Pharaoh Akhenaten (1379–1362 BC) is believed to have written the ‘Hymn to the Aten’, which is worth quoting because of its parallel phraseology to the Insinger Papryus which it predates by some 1400 years:

O living Aten, beginning of life when thou didst shine forth  
 in the eastern horizon, and didst fill every land with thy beauty  
 . . . Being afar off, yet thy rays are upon the earth. Thou are in  
 men’s faces, yet thy movements are unseen . . . The earth grows  
 bright when thou hast arisen in the horizon . . . The entire  
 land does its work. All cattle are at peace upon their pastures.  
 Trees and pastures grow green. Birds taking flight from their  
 nest, their wings give praise to thy spirit. All animals frisk  
 upon their feet . . . the fish in the river leap before thy face.  
 Who causest the male fluid to flow in women and who maketh  
 the water in mankind; bringing to life the son in the body of  
 the mother . . . The chick in the egg speaketh in the shell;  
 thou givest him air in it to make him breath . . . How  
 manifold are thy works. They are mysterious in men’s sight.  
 Thou sole god, like to whom there is no other. Thou didst



*Figure 2.4* The Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1375–1350 BC) worshipping the solar orb, the Aten, as the creator and preserver of mankind. (Egyptian Museum, Cairo.) Photo Robert Scott.

create the earth after thy heart, being alone, even all men, herds and flocks, whatever is upon earth, creatures that walk upon feet, which soar aloft flying with their wings, the countries of Khor [i.e. Palestine and Syria] and of Kush [i.e. Sudan], and the land of Egypt.

(Gardiner, 1961: 225–6)

The social and political conditions in Egypt that drove anchorites to the desert can perhaps be traced to the joint rule between Ptolemy VIII Philometer and Ptolemy IX Euergetes (130–117 BC), when they decided to divide Egypt between them. The former ruled from Upper Egypt, the latter from Alexandria. The result was weakened authority, economic problems and civil unrest. The Theban area, frequently in open rebellion from about 200 BC on, staged a revolt under Ptolemy X Soter II and local sentiment was so strong that only after a three-year siege did Ptolemy Philometer's mercenaries finally subdue the city in 85 BC. Then came a series of low Nile floods. According to Pliny the Elder (the main source of information about the period) it was only five cubits in the year 55 BC, not the sixteen that was considered normal. Agriculture suffered badly and people starved. Leadership was blamed. The last of the Ptolemies were weak and degenerate and allowed the prosperity of the kingdom to decline. They luxuriated in their rich and sumptuous courts and were grossly intolerant of the local population. There were frequent revolts. In an effort to re-establish order commanders in charge of troops and militia in the provinces – called *nomes* by the Greeks – took over administrative and financial affairs. The situation worsened. Countless people who could not pay their taxes and probably feared to involve themselves in active revolt – if the idea occurred to them at all, which is unlikely – escaped from labour. Some were deeply religious individuals of the contemplative solitary type, the forerunners of third-century AD spiritual leaders like Saint Antony and Saint Macarius the Great (Abu Makar), whom Father Matta el-Maskin and his disciples regard as ascetic ideals.

Father Matta was a monk in the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir el-Suryani) in the desert of Scetis (Coptic 'Shihet'), today's Wadi Natrun. When he joined the community it was the best-known and most frequently visited of the four surviving monasteries, inhabited by about fifty monks. Wishing for a place more conducive to a spiritual life however, he and twelve other monks left the monastery in 1958 and

found what they desired in the desolate wastes of Wadi Rayan. Emulating the early Desert Fathers, they lived an austere life. Some refrained from cooked food. Others prepared simple meals in their rock cells using scraps of wood and dried-out desert plants for fuel. In 1969, the late Patriarch Cyril (Kirollos) VI called on Father Matta and his followers to return to Wadi Natrun and help activate a spiritual revival in the Monastery of Saint Macarius. This ancient institution, which became the official residence of the Coptic patriarch in 570 when Egyptian Christians declared their independence from the Church of Constantinople, had the added distinction of once housing that most valuable relic, the head of Saint Mark the Evangelist (Meinardis (1999): 32). The monastery was destroyed and rebuilt many times in its long history, but was inhabited by only six aged monks when Father Matta was asked to return to Wadi Natrun. He found that the outer wall of the monastery had collapsed on the churches and that the ruined buildings were almost totally obscured by drifting sand. The keep (*qasr*) had such great cracks, from top to bottom in several places, that it was dangerous to enter. Today, thanks

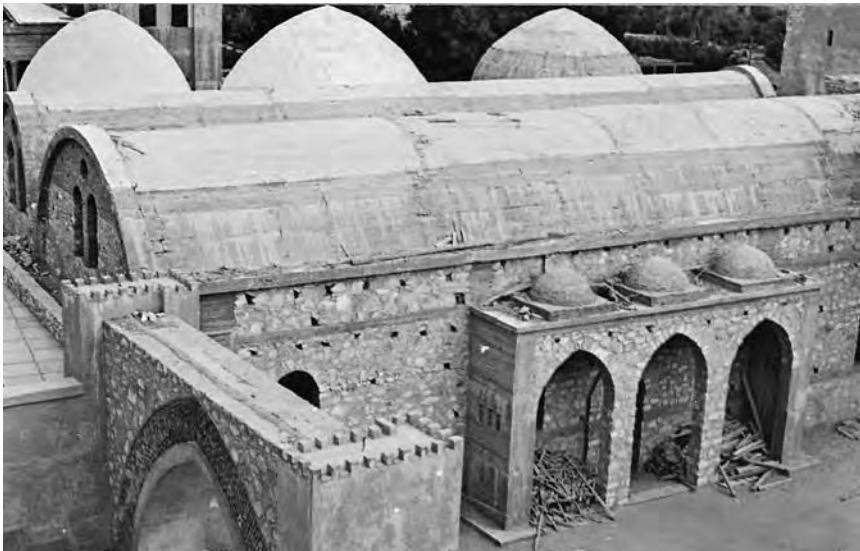


Figure 2.5 The Church of Saint Macarius in Wadi Natrun, the oldest in the monastery that bears the name of the saint, was restored in the late 1970s. This is a view of the transept. Its wooden roof, totally destroyed, has now been replaced by concrete, its walls reconstructed, wall-to-wall carpeting installed and modern crystal chandeliers hang from the roof. Photo by courtesy of the Monastery of Saint Macarius.

to professional restoration the Monastery of Saint Macarius is a thriving community. Its churches have been restored. There are new cells for the monks, a new library, accommodation for pilgrims, a publishing house, and even a conference centre.

Saint Macarius the Great – to distinguish him from Saint Macarius of Alexandria, and Saint Macarius the Bishop of Qau, north of Akhmim – is the spiritual father to thousands of monks of different nationalities, including Armenians, Asians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Gauls, Greeks, Italians, Nubians, Palestinians and Spaniards. The son of a village priest, Macarius was born around the year 300 and drove camels laden with natron (a sodium carbonate compound) for his father. He was a youth endowed ‘with the wisdom of the old’, so it is said, able to teach, comfort and prophesy. While at prayer in the Delta province of Menufiya he had a vision. An angel appeared to him and encouraged him to withdraw to the desert. He journeyed west to Wadi Natrun, a narrow 35-kilometre depression 25 metres below sea level named for its vast quantities of natron. This is obtained from a chain of some ten small lakes and was used for mummification purposes in Pharaonic times; later, in the Roman period, it was used for glass manufacture. Macarius chose a secluded spot where he hewed a cave out of a rock and gave his life to God.

In his short history of the Monastery of Saint Macarius, Father Matta el-Maskin describes Saint Macarius as ‘able to . . . lead all ranks to Christ, holding within his flock violent types like Moses the Black and gentle ones like Zachariah, the handsome boy, or Apollinaria Syneklectica, the courtier’s daughter . . . his greatest quality was the divine power over the cherubim which settled upon him, and was the mainspring of his prophecy, sagacity, and formidable power over evil spirits’. The face of Macarius was said to shine with so much grace that his devotees called him ‘the shining lamp’ and his fame spread. During the twenty-odd years he lived in the desert, disciples abandoned their isolated caves and drew near him. They ranged from illiterate peasants to men of letters, among them Arsenius, a Roman philosopher and tutor to the children of the emperor, and two young Romans, Maximus and Domitius. The latter were inspired by his piety and devotion and eagerly took to a life of asceticism, but they could not support the harsh desert conditions and died a few days apart. Saint Macarius consecrated the cell they had used, calling it the ‘cell of the Romans’. Later, it was enclosed within the oldest and most northern of the surviving monasteries of Wadi Natrun



Figure 2.6 The keep of the Monastery of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrun is one of the largest of any monastery. It was built in the reign of the Emperor Zeno, whose daughter joined the monastic order disguised as monk Hilaria the eunuch. Photograph by courtesy of the Monastery of Saint Macarius.

dedicated to the Holy Virgin. Their relics were placed beneath the altar, and the monastery subsequently became known as ‘al-Baramus’, a transliteration of ‘Pe-Romeos’ or ‘house of the Romans’. In search of greater solitude, at the age of sixty Macarius retired to a more secluded spot to the south of the Wadi Natrun. He hollowed a cave in the rock with a tunnel leading to a cell and lived there until his death. His cell has recently been discovered; his body reposes in a reliquary in the church built in his name.

Wadi Natrun was an ideal location for an ascetic life. Distanced from the inhabited western Delta, yet with a water table near the surface, it had the added advantage of abundant grasses – suitable for making mats and baskets – and clay for building mud structures covered with domes and vaults known as *manshoubiya*. Photographs taken from the roof of the keep of the Monastery of Saint Macarius some fifty years ago reveal wide expanses of barren desert on which, clearly visible, are the outlines

of foundations of the long-disappeared structures. A visiting monk from Jerusalem in medieval times described the monastery as 'a castle surrounded by a thousand cells'. In fact, hermits were so numerous that they sought a new colony. Subsequent to a visit by Saint Antony, and following his instructions, two monks called Amun and Antony partook of their usual evening meal at the ninth hour (3 p.m.), and then journeyed eastward until sunset. They arrived in the desert of Nitrea, west of the Delta city of Damanhur, and marked with a cross the place that they had reached. Then they proceeded to construct two cells, out of sight and hearing of one another. Other monks followed, until the cells (*kelliae*) numbered some 2,500 and extended over an area 20 kilometres long and 5 wide. Both the *manshoubiya* of Wadi Natrun and most of the structures at what became known as Kellia have been lost through modern development – the former when President Sadat allocated 2,000 feddans for desert reclamation in 1978, along with two tractors, and vast areas of land around the Monastery of Saint Macarius were turned to agriculture. Fig and olive trees were first planted, followed by other crops like watermelon, wheat and banana cultivation. All evidence of the *manshoubiya* was literally ploughed away. At Kellia, some excavations were carried out – by a joint mission of the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO), Geneva University, and the Egyptian Archaeological Department of the Western Delta in 1964 – but subsequent development of the Nubariya canal, a railway line, and agricultural expansion devastated that ancient community also.

The only early hermitages that have survived are those in rocky or desert areas. In the narrow strip of the Naqlun desert that divides the Nile valley from the Fayoum, for example, rock hermitages were built in the long hilly ridge. An archaeological mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology excavating there since 1986 found several hermitages in the clefts and valleys of the hills that provide a remarkable picture of life in these communities. Some are a hundred metres apart, others separated by no more than a wall. The partially rock-hewn dwellings, warm in winter and cool in summer, were apparently cut by skilful workers and not by the monks themselves. They were carefully plastered inside and out to smooth the surface of the rock and, although inscriptions or graffiti are rare, some of the walls were painted with crosses or decorative borders. Each dwelling had a courtyard in front and was surrounded by a wall with a well-built entrance. Traces of the doorway

are visible from the inside. Niches are a typical feature of the dwellings, perhaps to hold lamps or for the storage of manuscripts. Hooks have been found in some, probably on which to hang mats to separate rooms. A pit, another feature, was probably for storage of special goods, and a cavity in front of the window suggests that small porous pottery jars were placed there, as today, to keep water cool. What is believed to be the oldest hermitage, No. 44, abandoned when the roof caved in, lies to the north-east of the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel (Deir el-Malak Ghubrail). Excavations have revealed that it comprised two rooms, which may have served as vestibules, one leading to a large, well-lit and plastered hall with a bench running along three sides. It suggests that visits were exchanged – frequently undertaken to ask advice of an elder – and a meeting held, probably on Sunday, to celebrate the liturgy and take a communal meal.

Hermitages in the desert east of Esna in Upper Egypt were underground cells. Like those of Naqlun, they were comfortable atrium-style buildings, not simple caves such as one would imagine were occupied by



*Figure 2.7* In the 1500-metre long hilly range that rises to the east of Naqlun desert large number of hermits took refuge. A monk of the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel (left) approaches one of some eighty-nine hermitages in the clefts and valleys. Photo Michael Stock.

those pursuing a self-denying way of life. In fact, there is surprisingly little evidence of mortification of the flesh among early Christian hermits. Individuals like those who interred themselves in small shrines attached to the Apis tombs at Memphis, deprived of all contact with the outside world and who relied on relatives for food; or Saint Bishoy (Pshoi) who lived in the cave-church in the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun, and who prayed day and night with his hair tied to a hook to prevent his falling asleep, seem to have been exceptions.

The approach to the Monastery of Saint Macarius from the Cairo/Alexandria desert highway bears little resemblance today to the barren and desolate land chosen by the earliest hermits. A turnoff runs westward through an impressive avenue of trees towards the 4-metre high outer wall where a gateway gives access, through another avenue of trees, to a parking area and new façade. We entered through an ancient wooden doorway to find ourselves in an elegant tiled and shaded courtyard with benches, plants and a splendid shaded gazebo built of concrete but simulating wooden beams. Father Iraneous was waiting for us. He offered us refreshments and pointed out the newly constructed two-roomed monks' cells, 150 in number, around the inner wall of the courtyard. 'Each has a kitchen and bathroom', he said. 'They are designed so that each monk can remain in seclusion for many days. His room has a wooden floor where he sleeps and there is a room with desk and wall cupboards for study. He also has a small balcony.' He pointed to a large modern guest-house to the north of the courtyard built for the reception of up to 200 monks. 'As soon as news spread of the spiritual revival of our monastery there was an influx of monks, not only Egyptians but from western monasteries.'

He led us down a broad stairway to the original level of the monastery where three churches – the Church of the Forty-Nine Martyrs (reputedly slaughtered by Berber tribes), the Church of Saint Abscaron, a martyr killed in the time of Emperor Diocletian, and the main one, the Church of Saint Macarius the Great – have been restored under the direction of Peter Grossmann of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo. We passed through a large archway, the central section of red brick being the original seventh-century arch found in ruins beneath the collapsed enclosure wall. Now salvaged, restored and stabilised it has been successfully incorporated into the elegant structure. The area beyond, appreciably



Figure 2.8 The remains of the seventh-century red brick arch leading to the monastery of Saint Macarius (now below ground level) have been restored and incorporated into this elegant archway. Photo Michael Stock.

below the surrounding desert level, was totally obscured by sand when Father Matta and his twelve monks began to supervise clearance. During the removal of the enormous amounts of rubble to reach the original floor level within the Church of Saint Macarius the relics of ten monks who had died in the monastery were unearthed. Among them the three Macarii whose relics were transferred there in the tenth century. They are distinguished one from the other in iconography: Saint Macarius the Great in the habit of a monk traditionally holds a staff, Saint Macarius of Alexandria holds a ladder (symbol of his gradual attainment of virtue), and Saint Macarius the bishop wears a white robe and carries a lamb (symbol of martyr and shepherd). Also discovered were the relics of John the Little, or John the Short, a disciple of Saint Macarius highly respected for his humility and ethereal qualities, and John Colobos, a disciple of Saint Amun of Nitrea. When his mentor became incapacitated late in life John cared for him devotedly for twelve years and, on his death-bed, the aged saint praised his disciple as 'an angel, not a man'.

An even more remarkable discovery was chanced upon when work started on the expansion of the Church of Saint Macarius in 1976. A protrusion was revealed in the side of the northern wall in the form of a

vault covered with blue paint. Inside, a coffin over two metres long was exposed at ground level. Beneath the coffin, in an earth burrow, were bones – some complete skeletons – laid according to Coptic rites of burial with the head to the west and the feet to the east. While carefully removing these relics with appropriate reverence and awe, it was observed that the earth around them contained red dust, probably decayed wood, suggesting that the deceased had originally been placed in wooden coffins. Resident monks thought it possible that these relics might belong to John the Baptist and Elisha the Prophet, as mentioned in eleventh- and sixteenth-century manuscripts in the library of the monastery. Father Matta voiced uncertainty about their authenticity, so, following his annual visit to the monastery during the holy week of Lent, Pope Shenuda III asked deacon and historian Nabeeh Kamel Dawood to research in the Coptic patriarchate and in the monastic library for possible textual evidence. The result was proclaimed in *The Official Account Concerning the Discovery of the Relics of Saint John the Baptist and Elisha the Prophet*.

According to this document, when Saint Athanasius occupied the see of Alexandria in the fourth century, the two sacred relics were brought from Palestine to Alexandria for burial. They were temporarily placed in an orchard until a suitable structure could be built to house them. But Athanasius – later regarded as a heretic and driven into exile on no fewer than five occasions – was unable to fulfil his commitment. Only when Theophilus, the twenty-third patriarch, took over the see (384–412) was a suitable reliquary built. According to Coptic sources, the relics were placed in a chapel in the Church of Saint John the Baptist in the district of Karmuz near the Serapeum (subsequently destroyed). Islamic tradition places the reliquary at the mosque of Daniel in the heart of Alexandria. Wherever its location, the only reference to the saints being buried together appears in the copy of a sermon by John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople, a contemporary of Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria. He addressed the spirit of John the Baptist, saying, ‘I have laid your body with that of the prophet Elisha.’ Apparently, during the period of religious strife between Egyptian Christians (Copts) and those loyal to the imperial Church of Constantinople (Melkites), the relics were taken to Wadi Natrun for safekeeping. According to the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, a sepulchre named after John the Baptist and Elisha was appended to the north of the sanctuary of Saint Benjamin in the Church of Saint Macarius nearly two centuries after the Arab conquest, in 847.

I observed that the relics of the three Macarii and other distinguished personages were preserved in wooden tubes, while those of Saint John the Baptist and Elisha were found in the earth. Father Iraneous explained, ‘We believe that the bodies of saint and martyrs in early Christian times were buried underground, out of sight of the Roman authorities. The custom of putting relics of saints in wooden tubes, as is practised today, is of uncertain origin.’

During restoration of the Church of Saint Macarius, care was taken to conserve early wall paintings that had survived beneath layers of plaster from later restoration. In the sanctuary of Saint Benjamin the wall paintings include a theme popular in Coptic and Byzantine art, showing the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist depicted in medallions, with their hands in a gesture of supplication interceding with Christ on behalf of mankind; a painting of Saint Macarius with a cherub – the many-winged human-headed angel with halo believed to have sustained him throughout his life; and two important biblical scenes. One shows a cherub touching the mouth of Isaiah with a burning coal taken with a pair of tongs from the altar (*Isaiah 6: 1–7*); the other shows the blessing of Abraham with wine (*Genesis 14: 18–20*).

Father Iraneous led the way to the new library building. It was closed, but he informed us that the monastery once had as many as 8,000 manuscripts, including *Apophthegmata Patrum*, or ‘Sayings of the Fathers’, written by resident monks in the sixth century. ‘Unfortunately most of the Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic manuscripts were pillaged by European bibliophiles from the seventeenth century for continental collectors’, he said. ‘Once microfilm and photographs of manuscripts now held abroad are acquired, the library will again become an important research institution. A tenth-century manuscript found in the debris describes how the relics of Saint Mark the Evangelist were brought to the monastery by Saint Athanasius in the fourth century’, he added.

I admired the bell tower beside the library. ‘It is really a water tower that draws from twelve wells’, Father Iraneous explained. We made our way to the large square keep, crossing a narrow drawbridge to get to it. We entered through a heavy wooden door with corroded iron cladding – obviously of ancient date. ‘The keep was in such a terrible state before restoration that the mental and physical energy expended in restoring it was enough to construct a whole new monastery’, Father Iraneous ventured. As we mounted the steps I recalled that the Emperor Zeno



Figure 2.9 The elegant new library of the Monastery of Saint Macarius, Wadi Natrun. Photograph by courtesy of the Monastery of Saint Macarius.

took a great interest in the monasteries of Wadi Natrun when he learned that his daughter Hilaria was living there. She had disappeared from his palace, abandoned her privileged life, became a disciple of Saint Pambo and lived in the Monastery of Saint Macarius disguised as 'monk Hilaria the eunuch'. I asked Father Iraneous if it were true. 'Yes, she came here', he responded. 'When the emperor learned where she was, he sent marble columns and many beautiful gifts with his architects who carried out major construction in the year 482. They built this keep.'

The keep is one of the largest of any monastery in Egypt, both in the thickness of the walls and its ground area. The third floor is dedicated to pilgrims or wanderers (*al-Suwah*), defenders of the faith in times of hardship and persecution. Monastery keeps are not the earliest evidence in Egypt of fortifications that offer security in times of uncertainty. An artificial elevation known as the Palace of Apries (in Memphis, near the modern town of Mit Rahina) was a sort of platform, now much depleted, surrounded by a mud-brick wall. From its construction at the centre of a rambling community said to have extended over an area of some twenty-five square kilometres, it would be reasonable to infer that settlers might have sought protection there in the uncertain Late Period of pharaonic history (c.664 BC) when there was an influx of foreigners.

From the roof we had a fine view of the monastery holdings. ‘The keep served as a watchtower where monks were on duty night and day to sound the alarm to the solitaries in the desert’, Father Iraneous explained. ‘Originally they used a slab of wood beaten with a hammer. Monks were threatened time and again by Berber tribes between the fourth and ninth centuries.’ Thought to be the fierce Masacae tribes from across the wastes of North Africa, who lived on pillaging towns and villages on the fringe of the western Delta, they may – according to Ahmed Fakhry (1973) – have been Libyans who slew or carried monks off captive, wrecked and plundered the monasteries. Moses the Black was a martyr of the first Berber invasion in the fourth century. Chronicler el-Maqrizi described Abu Mussa el-Aswad, ‘Father Moses the Black’, as an Ethiopian banished for insubordination in Roman times who sought refuge in Wadi Natrun. Little else was known about him until, in 1994, the ruins of his monastery were identified by a mission of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute just outside the northern wall of the Monastery of the Romans. Evidence suggests that this may have been the oldest monastery in Wadi Natrun, originally built by Saint Macarius himself but later abandoned. It fell into ruin some time between the middle of the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and was totally obscured when it became the rubbish dump of the neighbouring Monastery of the Romans. Excavations, which continue today, have now revealed that the monastery was more or less square, its surrounding walls about eighty metres in length. The limestone keep seems to have been rectangular. Rubble at different levels near the south-east corner suggests the remains of a collapsed dome.

The third Berber raid in the fifth century is associated with the martyrdom of the forty-nine monks in the year 444. The legend holds that the monk called Ioannis (Arabic Yuhanna), invited others to share in his fate in the face of danger, and some willingly submitted to the swords of the invading Berbers. Others withdrew to the safety of the keep. When the Berbers completed the massacre, they reputedly moved on to the Monastery of Saint Bishoy where they washed the blood from their swords; to this day the water of the well, blessed by the blood of the martyrs, is believed to relieve disease and suffering. Meanwhile, the monks who escaped the massacre took the bodies of the martyrs and buried them in a cave; later they were moved to the Church of Saint Macarius. The names, which survive in ancient manuscripts, are inscribed in the Church of the Forty-Nine Martyrs near the Church of Saint Macarius.



Figure 2.10 Icon of Saint Macarius the Great depicted in the habit of a monk. He was twice visited by Saint Antony the Great who placed the holy belt (*schema*) around his waist and gave him the T-shaped staff of authority known as the Cross of Antony, thereby prophetically assigning to him leadership of monasticism after his death. (Monastery of Saint Macarius.) Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

Literary evidence reveals that in the twelfth century – under the Ayyubid ruler Saladin – there were monasteries representing at least five different national monastic communities at Wadi Natrun: Armenian, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Nubian and Syrian, all of which recognised Saint Macarius as the spiritual father. Surveys and excavations carried out by the Egyptian archaeological teams and Michigan University, in collaboration with Father Samuel el-Suriani, have excavated several impressive ruins, among them the Monastery of the Armenians, the Monastery of the Abyssinians, and the Monastery of the Nubians.

The Monastery of Saint Macarius owns a large tract of land on the Mediterranean coast. In the late 1970s, when Father Matta's disciples were faced with the problem of increasing water salinity in Wadi Natrun, they began to search for alternative locations of productive agricultural land; the northern coast was one possibility. Father Matta travelled there and found a spot that pleased him. It was near the sea, yet suitably isolated and with abundant water. A contract was signed with the bedouin owner of the land, a belt of trees was planted around the plot and a windmill erected from which to draw the subterranean water to irrigate fig trees. Later, seven houses were constructed on the slope facing the sea for use as retreats. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the northern coast was developed by the government for recreational tourism and, as a consequence, the monastery is now recognised as the legal owner of 12,500 square metres (8 feddans) of extremely valuable real estate on the northern coast.

With the voluntary support of wealthy Copts and income from surplus produce, development continues. In 1978 the monastery installed a Heidelberg printing press with machines for folding, stapling and trimming. 'We managed this with the help of enthusiastic supporters who wished to see the publication of Coptic literature', said the Father Iraneous. 'Our monks have become extremely proficient in printing techniques. We have produced over fifty books, including *Saint Athanasius* which is over 800 pages long. We also publish a monthly magazine called *Saint Mark* which is addressed to the spiritual needs of young people, and brochures in English and Arabic. A large number of the monks are professional engineers, agronomists, and scientists who are collaborating with nearby Sadat City in animal husbandry and new farming techniques', he added. These are pious men with vision

and education who combine a life of contemplation, prayer and discipline with study and work. Increasing numbers of youths are taking to the cloth. Indeed, young academically trained Copts in their late twenties and thirties sometimes choose to spend some time at a monastery before commencing their careers. Their aim is to gain spiritual enlightenment while contributing to the community by carrying out research in farming and related small industries. In the confines of a monastery, it is not uncommon to see a monk driving a tractor with farm-labourers; another taking a cellular phone from the folds of his habit; or to learn that they have computers.

The current religious revival among Egypt's Christians rests on many factors, not the least of which is response to the continual growth in both population and economic stability. Pope Shenuda III encourages academic students to join monasteries and become monks, and while this is not new it has reactivated the monasteries. Today they are no longer inaccessible. Even the most remote monasteries have paved roads leading up to them and large numbers of ordinary Egyptians travel to them – either as individuals seeking spiritual reward and redemption or as groups attending *mulids*. Increasingly, one sees bus and car loads of people heading for a monastery as part of a weekend family outing.

An applicant for admission to a monastery has to undergo a period of probation during which he serves the monastic community in love and humility. He lives in a novice's cell close to the utilities area; he prays and makes the prescribed prostration while endeavouring to acquire virtues that will fit him for a life of seclusion, perfect obedience and keeping to the Rule. Only later is he consecrated and accepted to join the community. Monks are awakened by a bell each morning at 3 a.m. to perform their own private devotions. A second bell at 4 a.m. summons them to the church, where they perform a corporate liturgy in which they chant psalms in praise of God, the Creator and Saviour. According to the 'Welcome' pamphlet distributed by the monastery, 'These are the most beautiful moments of the day in the monastery. We have taken care to perfect our liturgical chanting and have been helped by the oldest and most authoritative cantors in the Coptic Church. We attain such harmony in the singing of these melodies that our voices are blended together, expressing the unity of our spirits. We do indeed sing the praise of the Lord with one heart and one voice (Rom. 15: 6) . . . At about 6 o'clock this service of praise ends and we say matins . . .'

There is no precise timetable for the rest of the day. Each monk arranges his own activities under the guidance of a church elder, carrying out tasks for which each is most suited or professionally qualified. All work is regarded as a spiritual activity, whether raising scaffolding around buildings, working in the fields or the kitchen. The monks gather in the refectory at midday to sing psalms, followed by the only communal meal of the day. Silence is kept while the meal is in progress, with one of the monks reading the *Sayings of the Fathers* from a lectern. Following the tradition of the earliest Desert Fathers, the monks celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy once a week on Sunday mornings followed by an *agape* meal of brotherly love.

'We cater for our labourers. Some 700 work on the estate. They are mostly Upper Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian. There is a workers' camp on the perimeter of the agricultural land to the north and they work for periods of 1–2 months at a stretch. Apart from wages, they receive free accommodation, food, clothing and medical care', said Father Iraneous. The dispensary is staffed by monks who include two qualified physicians, an ophthalmologist, a dentist and several pharmacists. It has a large operating theatre, a separate room for sterilisation, dental and eye clinics, and its own laboratory.

So it was in ancient times. Men of the highest education served temporarily in the 'house of life' attached to large temples as a secondary profession. That is to say, doctors, lawyers and scribes carried out semi-religious duties for a period of time to teach their specialisations and serve the surrounding community. A doctor could be a priest of Sekhmet the goddess of disease, for example, trained in a temple; although the Egyptian medical practice was a mixture of rational methods and blatant superstition, the survival of medical papyri reveal that symptoms were observed and an effort made to diagnose them. In disputes over land, water rights or even personal family problems, individuals could approach a priest of Maat (truth and justice), who might be a professional lawyer.

The Christian ideal is acted out in different modes of behaviour throughout Egypt, from ordinary Christian laity, urban priest and deaconesses, to sprawling monastic communities like those of Wadi Natrun, which are restored, self-supporting and visited by tens of thousands of pilgrims each year. Deaconesses are consecrated celebrants, a tradition deeply rooted in the Coptic Church which died out in the

twelfth century and is being revived today. They differ from nuns, to whom ‘the way’ is celibacy and contemplation within monastery walls. Deaconesses are women who, according to the Coptic Church’s bishop of Youth Anba Moussa, have chosen ‘a third way’, regarding active social work as an alternative to marriage. They traditionally dress in grey robes with a pale grey head-scarf and small leather cross. They work in major Delta cities; in Cairo and surrounding areas; and in Minia and Beni Suef and rural areas in Upper Egypt. ‘They are the eyes and ears of the priests’, said Anba Moussa. ‘They can go into the homes of ordinary people and help them in a way that a priest cannot do. They give counselling and even aid in setting up small cottage industries. It is a serious commitment. To become a consecrated deaconess a woman must be between twenty-five to thirty years of age, have a higher education decree, and accept direct supervision of the bishop’, he explained. Regulations regarding the activities and commitments of deaconesses were officially enshrined in a code drawn up in a synod headed by Pope Shenuda III in 1992.

Until today there are solitary recluses, some of whom make their way to the top of the religious hierarchy. A monk called Menas (Arabic Mina), who later became Pope Cyril (Kirollos VI) decided, in 1936, to convert one of several windmills in the Moqattam area of Cairo into a simple dwelling where he could live a reclusive life of meditation and prayer. He sought permission from the then Egyptian Antiquities Department to take up residence and was in luck. The head of the department was Hassan Fouad, who had previously met him in Wadi Natrun and who had admired him for his knowledge and piety. He gave the necessary permission. The 6-metre high round building of limestone brick had neither door nor ceiling at first. With the help of some of the monk’s visitors, it was partly restored and divided into two storeys – somewhat like a keep, with the ground floor used as a cell and the upper storey made into a simple chapel. ‘Mena determined to remain there for the rest of his life’, said a monk of the new Monastery of Saint Menas at Maryut, but when the Second World War broke out the area was taken over by the Allied forces for the defence of Cairo, and he was asked to leave. He went to the churches of the Archangel Michael and the Holy Virgin in Old Cairo, not more than a half hour’s walk from the converted windmill. Abandoned once more, it was partially destroyed, wooden elements were stolen. But after the war Mina, who had quite a large following by that time, bought a piece of land at the foot of the hill of

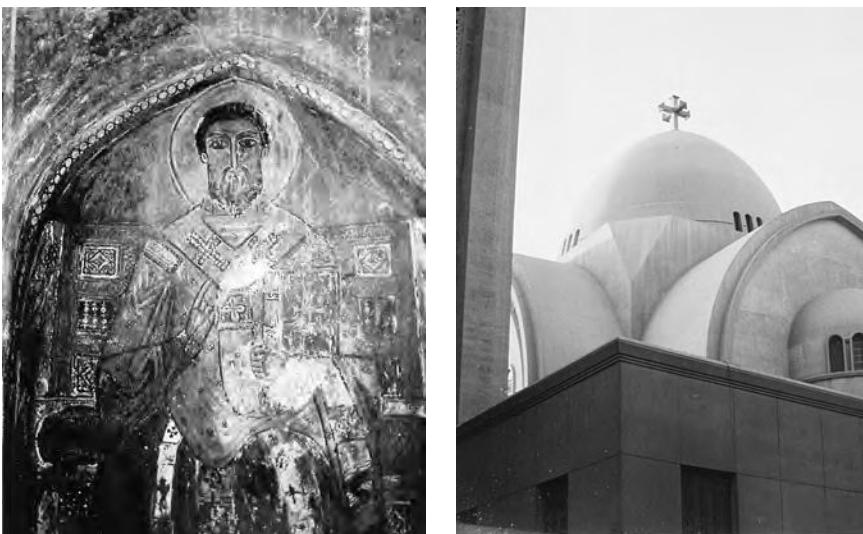
the former windmill and constructed a church which he named after Saint Menas at Maryut. Later, a monastic complex surrounded the church, and today there is even a student hostel. In the 1990s, the historical and religious importance of the windmill-cum-monastery attracted renewed attention because of its association with one of the greatest Coptic patriarchs, and more land was bought nearby. The newly renovated monastery is now supplied with electricity, its interior adorned with neo-Coptic icons.

A six-month exhibition of the exceptional photographs of Father Angelus of the Monastery of Saint Menas at Maryut opened in November 2000. ‘An ascetic life does not mean putting an end to the gifts and skills that God has granted’, he said. ‘I started carving wood, my favourite medium, but when I had trouble with my arm and eyes I was unable to continue. Then the fathers of the monastery gave me a camera. I started taking pictures of flowers, then icons, and then spent six months travelling to villages and cities, monasteries and churches around the country.’ The exhibition included over three hundred unique prints from fifty-four places visited by Father Angelus. They are exceptional works that reveal that this is no ordinary photographic exhibition but a religious experience.

As for Father Matta el-Maskin, he has now left Saint Macarius in Wadi Natrun and has ‘retired’ to the northern coast. Many of his disciples, however, have returned to Wadi Rayan. They have complete confidence in divine providence extending to the harsh, sometimes dangerous, desert environment in which they live. Once a week they congregate in a simple, unadorned cave-church comprised of a narthex, nave and single apse dedicated to the Archangel Michael. Then they return to their caves. Some bear ancient Coptic graffiti and crosses, or contain pottery and glass fragments that date back to the early Roman era – to the time when the Gospel came to Egypt and a system of government was imposed that was highly conducive to the spread of Christianity.

## FAITH AND OPPRESSION UNDER ROMAN RULE

A tradition that Copts hold dear is that Saint Mark the Evangelist arrived in Alexandria during the reign of Nero in the middle of the first century, preached the Gospel, made his first convert, founded the see, and was martyred. The proximity of Alexandria to Palestine and its position as a commercial centre between Rome, the western Mediterranean and the Levant, made it inevitable that the faith would be introduced early there. Commercial shipping rounded the western tip of Pharos Island and then turned towards the deep, protected water of Alexandria's Eunostos or Mediteranean harbour. It was here that Mark the Evangelist would probably have landed. Most Coptic sources refer to the episode: He was walking along the narrow streets leading from the port, not far from the Serapeum (where so-called 'Pompey's Pillar' stands today), when the strap of his sandal was torn and he sought a cobbler to mend it. While doing so the cobbler, whose name was Anianus, accidentally pierced his hand with an awl and Mark miraculously healed the wound. He subsequently baptised Anianus and his family and before continuing his missionary journey to Rome ordained him bishop, together with three priests and seven deacons. When he returned from Rome he was pleased to see that the number of Christians had increased. They had, in fact, become so numerous as to cause concern to the ruling Roman authorities who had banned secret societies by law. Therefore, when it was whispered around the city that the followers of one such society were increasing, they took action. During the Easter service in the year 62 Mark was seized, dragged through the streets and tortured until he died. His faithful followers took his body, dug a grave and carefully enshrouded and interred it. Later it was placed in the church of his name in Alexandria and reposed there until



*Figure 3.1 (left)* This image of Saint Mark the Evangelist is in the niche of the chapel dedicated to Saint Mark in the Monastery of Saint Antony. Until the discovery of the *Codex Sinaiticus* by Konstantin von Tischendorf in 1859, biblical analysts believed that the Gospel according to Matthew was the earliest. Von Tischendorf studied the order of events in the ancient texts, compared biblical stories, and provided evidence – subsequently hotly disputed but today generally accepted – that the Gospel of Saint Mark was written before those of Matthew and Luke; that of John has proved difficult to place precisely. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

*Figure 3.2 (right)* During the patriarchate of Kirolos (Cyril) VI (1959–71) the foundation stone was laid for the new cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo. Each Friday night, thousands attend the assembly hall in the complex to hear Pope Shenuda III, his successor, address them with elegance and eloquence on current issues. Photo Michael Stock.

around the ninth century when two merchants removed the relic to Venice. The head of the evangelist, however, remained in Egypt, and became an important relic, variously reported as having been transported to Wadi Natrun, Cairo or Alexandria. Copts regard Saint Mark as the first in an unbroken chain of patriarchs of whom today's spiritual leader, Pope Shenuda III, is his 117th successor.

Alexandria had a substantial Jewish community in the first century – probably the largest outside Palestine – and this is generally assumed to be the foundation of Christianity in Egypt. However, while it is true that Christianity began as a small sect within Judaism, that did not mean that Saint Mark's earliest converts were necessarily from within that

community. Alexandria was a cosmopolitan metropolis from its foundation in 332 BC. In addition to the local population, and high priests and high-ranking scribes attached to the temple of Serapis (originally the temple of Osiris), there was the Macedonian (Greek) elite; Greeks, Jews and Persians who had accompanied Alexander's forces; and a stream of Upper Egyptians, Greeks, Libyans and Nubians who had moved northward to the new centre of activity. Stonemasons, construction workers, sculptors, painters and craftsmen found employment in the new capital. Soldiers, traders, adventurers and engineers who sought the 'better life' came from the Levant, as well as from Italy and the countries of the western Mediterranean. Successive Ptolemies also brought back large numbers of displaced Jews. Alexandria was a crucible of culture. The race and creed of the earliest converts to Christianity are by no means certain.

As for the diffusion of the new faith, it is generally believed that it was long confined to the Delta, and that it infiltrated the rest of the country only slowly. In fact, distance was no hindrance because communication between Upper and Lower Egypt was far easier than it was across the Delta. All towns were within easy reach of the navigable river, while the Delta was so carved up by its network of streams, canals and dikes, that journeys between major settlements could be made only by travelling indirectly on one of the river tributaries or along footpaths and roads to points where they branched. Christianity, in any case, could spread fairly rapidly through a network of urban–rural commerce. Weekly markets have been a feature of Egyptian society for thousands of years and still exist today, typifying age-old custom. They provide an opportunity for the interchange of news, hope, aspirations and religious ideas as easily as the exchange of agricultural implements and household wares. Christianity was assimilated fairly rapidly in Egypt, in no small part as an antidote to the adverse affect of Roman policy on Egyptian society.

When direct Roman rule was imposed in 30 BC, Egypt's agricultural wealth and strategic position were so important to the Roman Empire, both as its 'granary' and as a base for future expansion, that the Emperor Augustus (perhaps in fear that in so wealthy a country it would be fairly easy for an unscrupulous and ambitious senator to build up a personal power base and challenge him) decided to keep it under his direct control. He laid down a policy that determined the future of Egypt for the next four centuries, until AD 395 when there was a formal partition of the Empire and Egypt fell under the jurisdiction of the Emperor Arcadius

in Constantinople. Augustus appointed his own personal representative, a prefect, as head of civil administration and chief financial officer, and took immediate steps to turn Alexandria into a great trans-shipment depot for the grain fleet. Roman legions were stationed at the port of Alexandria; at Babylon fortress (Old Cairo), which was the key to communications with western Asia and Lower Egypt; and at Syene (Aswan) on the southern border. Garrisons in Thebes (Luxor), Kom Ombo on the caravan route leading to Upper Egypt, and elsewhere, were quartered adjacent to the temples. Their presence was fiercely resisted. A revolt broke out in Thebes (Luxor) when Roman tax collectors appeared in 29 BC, and the Thebaid (the area that extended as far north as Coptos, present-day Quft) was immediately placed under military control. Within five days, five towns in the province were razed. The Romans abandoned the successful agricultural policy previously practised by the Ptolemies and turned over whole areas of land exclusively to the production of grain. To do this they divided the country into three territorial zones: Upper Egypt, Middle Egypt with the Fayoum, and the Delta. A *strategos* (governor-general), inevitably a Roman citizen, was appointed in each for purposes of administration. To ensure that work was carried out without obstruction, some 20,000 soldiers were placed in the major provinces.

The issue of prime importance to a farmer was the fertility of the land that could be maintained under the plough; the amount free of dues as recompense for working the fields; and the proportion of the crop left him after all deductions were made. The climate stable, the Nile flood a constant source of water, and with a rich alluvial soil (prior to the construction of the High Dam at Aswan in the 1960s), farmers in the Nile Valley performed the same activities year upon year. They instinctively made plans for the coming season with the necessary slight adjustment of the original strategy to meet actual conditions. The inevitability of the flood and the ever-present sunshine resulted in their trust in nature and in their own foresight. In case of famine, provincial capitals with surplus produce traditionally distributed grain to needy settlements, sometimes quite distant but easily accessible by river. Foreign rule did not necessarily impinge on their lives. However, throughout the millennia – under whatever rule, native or foreign – there are examples of the misery of the peasantry, who were often exploited, felled, bound and beaten into submission. There is no reason to suppose

that Roman officials performing the complex function of tax assessment (as is evident in the survival of written transactions, receipts and deliveries all over the country) were any more benevolent in their dealings than the Pharaohs before them or, much later, the Ottoman Turks. Failure to deliver grain led to physical trial, fines and confiscation of the land. In addition to the increased and arbitrary requirements now set by the state, soldiers disrupted local economies as they lived off the fruits, vegetables and livestock produced in the local district. This resulted in increased demands on the labour force. Emotional pressure was added when, irritated by the number of Egyptians who escaped their tax obligations by conveniently 'disappearing' whenever tax collectors made their appearance, the Romans discovered a callous method by which to coerce families into revealing their whereabouts. Aware of the value set by Egyptians on proper mummification and internment of their dead, they seized mummified bodies (enclosed in elaborately adorned sarcophagi and kept in the family home to act as a living presence of the deceased until interred in a suitably prepared tomb), and held them to ransom. Evidence of such action has survived from the reigns of the emperors Caligula and Claudius in the first half of the first century (Bell, 1948: 77, quoting Philo (*De Spec. Leg.* ii, 92ff., iii, 159ff.)).

Egyptian temples were powerful and wealthy institutions. They owned land where crops were tended, fruit cultivated, papyrus grown for the manufacture of paper, hemp for linen, and they raised livestock for food and leather-production. Augustus took steps to place this independent economy under government control. He appointed a 'high priest of Alexandria and all Egypt' who was a civil servant in disguise. Temple management was not altered in respect of religious hierarchy or the



*Figure 3.3* Anthropoid coffin being carried to the tomb, preceded by a priest burning incense. Painting from the tomb of Amen-emone, Western Thebes.

performance of duties but – apart from temples built by the Ptolemies in Esna, Edfu, Kom Ombo and Philae, now redecorated with reliefs of Roman emperors paying homage to local gods – their activities were controlled, their numbers restricted. Priests were required to submit accounts and a list of temple personnel and property to the administrative officer of each province. Guards were appointed, their numbers depending on the size of each temple. When temple holdings were annexed by the government, the priests were either compensated by a grant or offered an opportunity to lease back some of the land they once owned. Either way, their enterprises were curtailed, their status undermined. Accustomed to financial security and social standing they now found themselves underprivileged. When they complained they were regarded as trouble-makers.

The social consequence of curbing the material wealth of the temples was more far-reaching than is generally realised, and vital to an understanding of conditions conducive to the spread of Christianity as well as the monastic movement. In the past, a man of wealth would generally set aside a large portion of the income he derived from dues paid to him as a high-ranking official in order to remunerate priests in their professional duties. This included lighting candles, singing as they walked in procession, placing bread and beer at the tomb of a departed relative or praying for the wealthy man's eternal well-being. In short, people depended on priests for the many rituals prescribed by the funerary cult, and they also played an important social function. If a person was ailing or found himself in difficult straits he could take sanctuary in a temple and appeal to a scribe attached to it to write out an appropriate appeal or prayer. This supplication would be placed near a statue of an important official who, it was believed, could serve as intermediary with the god to whom the temple was dedicated. Such pious vows were not much different from today's prayers on slips of paper placed at the shrines of Christian saints and Muslim sheikhs. Temples, moreover, were famous for their treatment of the sick and for their teaching role. In the 'house of life' attached to temples, youths intended for the priesthood or civil administration received 'academic' training. From the age of puberty those aspiring to a career as lawyer, scribe or doctor studied there. Doctors received practical training by attending patients in surrounding districts; lawyers helped solve local disputes; scribes were always in demand for drawing up petitions, writing prayers – or even love letters and magic – for clients.

Without resources for the upkeep of temples, social services and educational facilities came to a halt. Since each town had at least one temple, and a large number of people were engaged in the non-religious duties associated with the running of these complexes, the annexation of land belonging to one of the main organisers of labour in the country, the clergy, would have resulted in economic upheaval.

Egyptian society was highly stratified. It ranged from fluently bilingual city-dwellers (Hellenised Egyptians whose personal names and language did not distinguish them from immigrant Greeks who became Egyptianised through marriage and their Egyptian experience), down the bureaucratic scale to the farming masses. Egypt's middle class included doctors, lawyers, scribes and the captains of seafaring vessels at the upper level; craftsmen, workers in agricultural-related industries, tomb-builders and mummifiers, herdsmen, merchants and those whose means of livelihood was on the water, like fishermen, fowlers and ferrymen, at the next. At the bottom of the scale were farmers and farm labourers. Within each social stratum the people had their own gradations of power and wealth. The elite – who had permanent residences in the cities and towns as well as large estates which were self-supporting – were numerically small but extremely influential. Successive generations of provincial nobles acquired large holdings, some of which they sublet to tenants, and the rest was cultivated with hired and household labour. Such a landlord held a powerful position in the community. He was a village elder, a sort of unofficial mayor like today's *omdah*, a respected individual who solved local problems of a legal as well as a personal nature. He was traditionally the keeper of order, collector of taxes and the one who acted as intermediary between the villagers and the government. True, under Roman rule such individuals were frequently given some local autonomy, but when taxes were calculated not on the productivity of the land measured just before the harvest but on the number of men in a village without regard to age or capacity for work, and when changes in the land under cultivation, brought about by the action of the Nile current on the one hand and poorly irrigated areas on the other, could not be offset through the farmers' inherent know-how; and when, moreover, there was no respect for traditional boundaries, the situation was destined to change.

When Strabo the Roman geographer came to Egypt at the beginning of the first century and travelled as far south as the island of Philae just three decades after the Roman conquest, he contrasted the prosperity of

Alexandria with the hinterland and wondered whether the new administrators had done their best to improve conditions in the country. Papyrus texts written around the middle of the first century AD on tax collection in the Arsinoite *nome* (the Fayoum) records the population in once numerous villages shrinking to a few persons, ‘because some have fled, having no means, and some have died without leaving relatives’. As early as the reign of Nero when Saint Mark came to Egypt, there are records of men having fled leaving no property: forty-three in number, then sixty, then a hundred from a single village (P. Oxy. ii, 284, 285, 393, 394). Some who escaped took refuge in ancient tombs flanking the Nile valley or in caves where their relatives could keep them supplied with food and drink. Others joined robber bands. Many cast their lot with hermits and joined the budding desert communities. In other words, there was a whole spectrum of draft dodgers, tax evaders, criminals no doubt, individuals who went into the desert for spiritual growth, and, increasingly, ‘houses’ of religious and socially minded individuals. The latter, as we shall shortly see, provided human resources for the development of Pachomian monasticism.

The rule of Trajan (98–117) was marked by a famine caused by a succession of unusually low floods, and at one point he was obliged to order back to Alexandria a fleet laden with Egyptian grain destined for Rome in order to feed the local population. Elsewhere in the country the people had to fend for themselves, and what little they could reap was rapidly appropriated. While overall evidence suggests that Egypt shared fully in the general prosperity of the Roman world until the end of the second century, there is little doubt that this was at the expense of the bulk of the population. Further pressure was brought to bear when Egyptians were formed into local militia under the command of Roman officers. Conscription was no innovation, but when men were called into service at those times when the crop was poor and they were most needed on the land, they resisted. Uprisings mark the reign of Trajan. Although he, like Augustus, is depicted as Pharaoh (in the temple of Dendera he presents boats, jewels and other objects to Isis and Horus), it is unlikely that this overt show of respect created much goodwill. The first organised governmental attack on Christians, identified as trouble-makers, was in the reign of Septimius Severus (193–211).

In order to understand the social and political environment in which Christianity spread, it is necessary to stress that Egyptian society was



*Figure 3.4* A Roman residential community is being excavated by a joint Egyptian–Polish mission at Kom el-Dikka in central Alexandria. To the north is the Roman theatre discovered in the 1960s by a mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo; to the south is a luxurious residence known as the ‘villa of the birds’, in reference to its exquisite floor mosaics, which has been restored by a joint Egyptian–American mission. The latter can be dated with certainty to the first century AD. Photograph © Al-Ahram Weekly.

traditionally characterised by a high level of cultural integration and religious tolerance. As far back as the New Kingdom (c. 1567–1080 BC), for example, when Egypt commanded a vast empire that included Syria and northern Mesopotamia as well as Libya and Nubia, among the Asiatic deities popular in Thebes alongside the triad of Amun-Re, Mut and Khonsu, were Baal, a war god of Canaan, Resheph, a Canaanite–Phoenician god of thunder, and Astarte and Hurun, Syrian war-gods. In the workers' community at Deir el-Medina, which housed up to eight generations of artists and craftsmen assigned to build and decorate royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, songs of adulation were addressed to Egyptian and foreign gods alike. In the upper register of the stele of the foreman Kaha, the Asiatic goddess Qudshu is depicted in high relief standing on top of a lion, while on the lower register is an incised relief of Kaha and his family worshipping the Asiatic goddess Anat. On the island of Elephantine (opposite Aswan), within a stone's throw of the Egyptian temple of Khnum (a creator god believed to have fashioned human beings on a potter's wheel from the clay of the Nile), Jews built a temple to their god Yahweh (Jehova) whom they often referred to as a potter (Job 10: 9; 33: 6; Jer. 18: 2ff.; Isa. 29: 16, 45:9). As for Memphis, quarters of the ancient city were marked out for Phoenicians who resided in the 'Tyrian camp', Carians within the 'Carian Wall', and Syrians and other Semitic people built temples to their gods in other sections of the city.

Throughout the millennia foreigners were absorbed into Egyptian society without changing the integrity and homogeneity of the Egyptians. They accepted the teachings of Jesus, a wandering ascetic and teacher who could perform miracles. Christianity shared many aspects with the mystery cults of Egypt and the Hellenistic world, especially the central mystery concerning the resurrection of the body and the afterlife.

In considering the environment to which Christianity arrived and took hold, we are looking at a multicultural and basically tolerant society. This is nowhere more apparent than in the once-important provincial town of Per-Medjet, west of Beni Mazar (Greek Oxyrhynchus, today's Bahnasa). Literary evidence that has survived – in the refuse dumps of a number of large communities like Medinet el-Fayoum (Arsinoe/Crocodilopolis), Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchus) and Nag Hammadi (Diopolis Parva) – gives the impression of orderly self-governing cities in 'Roman Egypt' with law-abiding Egyptians helping the government deal with

local management, tax assessment and payment. Indeed, many wealthy citizens, especially scribes, did join the ranks of the rulers. And, as in every community, there were also entrepreneurs and opportunists who curried favour to gain promotion, not to mention a large segment of the population who earned a living in trade, transportation and industry. But the situation was more complex than is generally realised because of the interrelation between urban and rural areas. Temples in cities owned farm land; high-ranking and wealthy officials had country estates rented out to agents; these estates had related industries.

Texts had been found at many towns, including Tebtunis and Arsinoe in the Fayoum, but none have so far surpassed those of Oxyrhynchus. Oxyrhynchus was described by classical historians as a green and fertile paradise where acacia, sycamore and date palms grew plentifully; where great numbers of wild animals were hunted in the Western Desert; and where streams and lakes harboured fish and crocodiles. The Greek name in fact derives from the Oxyrhynchus fish, which was an object of reverence there. It was a thriving community, which grew to an estimated 30,000 people by the fourth century. Although the site was no more than a rubbish dump (literally *Umm el-Kiman* or ‘mother of dust-heaps’) when two English scholars, B.P. Grenfell and B.P. Hunt, started to excavate there on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund (now Society) in 1898, it yielded great treasure to the papyrus-hunter. The papyrus fragments have been the focus of study for over a century and lay open an expansive community, as professionally diversified and economically stratified as Alexandria, Memphis and other large cities. An astonishing range and variety of Greek grammar, rhetoric, literature, mathematics and philosophical theses came to light, not written on papyrus alone but also on pottery sherds (*ostraca*) and waxed tablets which could be wiped clean and reused. Among the documents unearthed from Oxyrhynchus were part of the *Iliad*, a fragment of the Gospel of Saint John, the *Logia* or Sayings of Jesus Christ, and several apocrypha. One document purports to be the actual copy of the sacred book discovered in the archives of Hermes (the Greek God associated with the Egyptian Thoth, God of Wisdom) which provided a formula for magic based on the one used by Hermes and Isis when searching for Osiris. Texts in the form of inventories of temple property reveal that there were Egyptian/Greek temples built in honour of Amun-Zeus and Isis-Hera; Greek shrines to Demeter, Dionysus, Hermes and Apollo; and temples of the Graeco-Roman gods Serapis and Isis.

The horde of manuscripts from a single province and the diversity of material are remarkable. At the popular level, scribes were sought to write prescriptions for all kinds of requirements ranging from health and wealth, power and fame, virility and sexual pleasure, to success in pleading a case in court, finding a thief, winning a loved one or harming an enemy. They wrote magical formulae to preferred gods, invoking the names of Egyptian, Greek, Persian and Semitic gods with equal ease. Tablets inscribed with charms and curses, spells on papyri, amulets, horoscopes and magicians' manuals proliferated. They reveal the extent and variety of ways in which communication with the divine came to be sought. Judaeo-Christian-Egyptian amulets (known as Gnostic gemstones among early scholars) abounded and have survived in large number from all over the country. They depict pantheistic deities, sometimes winged creatures that combine the features of the hawk-headed Horus, the popular dwarf-deity Bes, other deities and sacred animals.

This was community life in which inter-racial marriage was commonplace, as attested by double names with Greek and Egyptian components; where Egyptian, Greek and Roman law can be distinguished one from the other; and where urban expansion was haphazard. As today in cities all over the country, there were pockets of agricultural land interspersed among spacious districts for the well-to-do. There were concentrations of modest housing for specialised craftsmen like stone-workers and metalworkers, hieroglyph cutters for temple inscriptions, or those involved in the production of codices written by calligraphers of the highest standard. Others practised small cottage industries and lived in simple mud-brick houses like the farming community, which supplied their raw material for baskets and other utilitarian objects. The dozen or more people who lived on an average estate might range from the wealthy owner to poorer relatives, widows, servants and slaves, and they did not necessarily share religious sentiments. Upper-class intellectuals, for example, might read Greek philosophy, or the writings of the Gnostics, while their extended family and retainers could move from one cult shrine to another without any feeling of inconsistency. Members of a single family could honour pagan gods and perform ritual sacrifice, pray to household idols placed in niches in their houses, rely on oracles, put their trust in sacred charms and horoscopes, or speculate about the nature of One God, the world around them, and life after death. In short, there is archaeological and literary evidence that Christianity

in the first two centuries was *one more* religion among a host of religions in Egypt which investigated the principles of nature and thought, the occult, supernatural phenomena, and the mystical philosophies that laid claim to a doctrine of salvation. Christianity gained ground in Roman-ruled Egypt, not because there was something new in its promise or dogma but because it gave a new formula for hope. While a large number of New Testament writings found at Bahnasa, Qau el-Kebir (north of Akhmin) and Nag Hammadi, attest to its early and widespread distribution, Egypt's own prophetic tradition and Christian ideas likewise gained circulation. The Christian message could be variously interpreted, as indeed it was.

The emperor Septimius Severus, like his predecessors, believed he wielded a divine power no less than did the Pharaohs, and redecorated the temples with reliefs of himself and his wife Julia making offerings to the Egyptian gods. He was nevertheless concerned to curb the spread of Christianity and what he saw as its adverse affect on the economy. Wrongly assuming that a system of government could be imposed in Egypt along the lines developed in Rome, Severus decreed that municipal councils be set up in all *nome* capitals. The already dissatisfied population rebelled. The situation worsened when Egyptian troops with no real training were called upon to serve in the Persian war in 232 AD. They frequently deserted; Christian belief of these recruits was blamed and punishment meted out. When Decius (249–51) took over the leadership, official committees were set up in villages with the aim of identifying Christians. To test the inhabitants they were obliged to join in traditional Pharaonic (pagan) rites and made to sacrifice to the gods, for which they were given formal (papyrus) certificates by the committee. Surviving texts, preserved in the dry desert of Egypt, bear such declarations as 'I have in your presence sacrificed and made libations and tasted the offerings with my wife, my sons and my daughter, acting through me and I request you to certify my statement' (*P.Oxy.* 1464: 250). But for every individual who fulfilled the necessary command, there were those who refused. Declared self-professed Christians, they were tortured or killed. Among the martyrs was Father Kaw (Abba Kaw) who refused to worship an idol. He reputedly broke it in two, was imprisoned, tortured and finally executed. The *Coptic Synaxarium*, a compilation of the lives of saints, martyrs and religious heroes, is full of stories of such sufferings by those who

were willing to die rather than abjure their faith. Many, in fear of their lives, sent in false certificates and later repented; Peter, Bishop of Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century, advocated leniency towards them and welcomed them back into the fold (see p. 167). There were, nevertheless, untold numbers who just ran away. Sometimes whole villages were abandoned.

If the origins of monasticism (as distinct from communities of pre-Christian self-imposed solitaries in desert regions) were traced, I submit that it is quite likely to have arisen among discredited and displaced temple priests in towns all over the country. While elegant and beautifully adorned shrines were built by wealthy private donors, there must have been countless others who were unable to maintain themselves. I imagine thousands of impoverished priests who had given their lives to the services of the community, on the loose. They perhaps helped those grieving or ailing in return for a modest meal or drink, and wove



*Figure 3.5* The range of hills that rise above the floodplain on the eastern bank of the river Nile between Beni Hassan and Nag Hammadi provided ideal hideouts both for anchorites escaping from labour in Roman times and Christian hermits seeking seclusion. Numerous Pharaonic rock-tombs were converted into chapels or churches. Photo Michael Stock.



*Figure 3.6 Separating the Nile valley from the Fayoum oases, the narrow desert of Naqlun provided an easy retreat for those evading Roman tax collectors.* Photo Michael Stock.

baskets and rugs, which they traded to supply their needs. Over time, these wandering priests and priestesses of the new ‘inner desert’ – that is to say, unproductive land on the floodplain – grouped into communal dwellings. They were the predecessors of today’s Coptic deacons and deaconesses who live in urban areas, practise ascetic piety, are conscious of their national identity, and at the same time dedicate their lives to social work. To one such community did Saint Antony entrust the care of his orphaned sister when he devoted his life to God.

The Apocalypse of Elijah (five manuscripts or fragments of which survive) is a text written in Coptic which describes an early phase in the development of Egyptian Christianity. Most scholars date it in the second half of the third century. In his introduction to the translated texts, David Frankfurter writes:

No other Christian text of this period represents such a thorough synthesis of indigenous and Christian ideas and traditions . . . when placed in the context of the many other Egyptian prophetic texts copied and composed in this period,

the Apocalypse of Elijah represents a Christian offshoot of this native millennialist literature – the hopes and fantasies of temple priests that a true pharaoh would return and cleanse the land.

(Frankfurter, 1993: 1–3, 20–1)

Elijah ‘prophesies’ about past events. Like the ancient Egyptian who wrote a text known as the ‘Prophecies of Neferti’ (a Middle Kingdom composition of about 2000 BC which is a fictional guise in which Neferti described the nation destroyed by civil war, and its eventual redemption through the rise of a great king ‘Ameny’, who was Amenemhet, the Middle Kingdom Pharaoh himself), Elijah writes about the demonic dynasty that will rule,

when the whole land will tremble . . . the priests of the land and all the saints will be seized . . . He [the demonic leader] will shut the holy places. He will take their homes. He will take their sons as prisoners. He will command (that they) perform sacrifices and abominations and bitter acts upon the land . . . At that time the priests of the land will tear their garments. Woe to you, rulers of Egypt, because your time has passed.

(Frankfurter, 1993: 1–3, 20–1)

The prophetic discourse on the signs of woe is followed by the appearance of an anti-Christ, a ‘Lawless One’ – who can fortunately be recognised by distinctive signs which Elijah outlines – followed by the ‘Righteous One’ who ‘will see the sinners punished, and herald a time of grace when the Lord will judge heaven and earth’.

But that time had not yet come. Egyptians who could no longer support the ‘abominations and bitter acts’ described by Elijah escaped. They increasingly took to a solitary life all over the country, choosing secluded places in Wadi Natrun west of the Delta; in desiccated areas in the Western Desert like Naqlun, Wadi Rayan and Qalamun; and, in the Eastern Desert, the rock tombs around Minia and Beni Hassan. So many took refuge in tiny caves in the hills which rise steeply above the cultivated land between Amarna and Abnub, that the area is known as the Valley of

the Anchorites. While some hermits lived in crevices in mountain ranges where they dug their way into deep caverns, others found shallow caves, which they plastered with mud or reinforced with mud-brick and decorated with crosses. Others again took refuge in ancient cemeteries, like the Middle Kingdom noblemen's tombs at Beni Hassan (2133–1786 BC) and New Kingdom tombs at Thebes (from 1567 BC). Countless others withdrew to the isolated mountains and valleys in the sparsely populated peninsula of Sinai, which was well beyond the sphere of Roman persecution.

Saint Paul (228–c. 341), known in Arabic as Apa Boula Abu el-Motwahadin ('father Paul the poor'), is one of the most well-known hermits of the time of Decius. As a result of his *Life* (written by Saint Jerome between 374 and 378) Western tradition credits him with being



Figure 3.7 The monastery of Saint Paul lies in a rugged mountainscape about twenty kilometres south of Zaafarana on the Red Sea coast. This saint, one of the earliest and best-known Egyptian hermits, is little known from Egyptian sources. He is not regarded as atypical of the time in which he lived. The oldest part of the monastery is the 'underground church' built over the cave where the saint's relics lie three metres below ground level. The architectural conservation, carried out by the American Research Centre in Egypt and the Supreme Council of Antiquities between 1997 and 1998, is being followed up by a project to clean and conserve its wall paintings. Photo Michael Stock.

the first hermit. Copts, however, do not regard his ascetic ideal as atypical of the period in which he lived. All over the land individuals whose ideals lay in acquiring salvation through fasting and prayer wandered 'over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth' (Heb. 11: 38). Some remained in total seclusion, relying on passing bedouin for sustenance. Others found spiritual leaders to teach and guide them. Falasi, a man of great inner strength, was one such man in the Naqlun Desert; Ebonkh, an aged spiritual leader who lived in a cave near the modern village of Qasr wa-el Sayed near Nag Hammadi, another. Saint Tomas (Anba Tomas al-Sa-ih), a pious and gifted man near Akhmim, famed for healing the sick, a third.

It is Saint Antony the Great, the 'father of monks' (Abu el-Rubban), who is regarded as one of the great pillars of the Coptic Church. He was an Egyptian born of Christian parents in the small village of Koma (Quoman el-Arus), south of the Fayoum in 251. According to his *Life* written by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, later excommunicated and labelled an enemy of the state, Antony was obedient to his father and mother, regularly attended 'the Lord's House' as a child, and lost his



*Figure 3.8* The Monastery of Saint Antony near the Red Sea coast nestles beneath the rugged mountains along the Red Sea coast fortified by high walls of modern construction, over ten metres high in some places. The oldest part of the monastery is the church of Saint Antony, most probably built over his tomb. Among ancient objects are a corn mill decorated with carvings and inscriptions in Arabic; a millstone used to break olives before pressing; and an olive press. Photo Michael Stock.

parents at the age of eighteen. Inspired by Christ's admonition to a rich young man, 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Matt. 19: 21), he sold his inheritance and distributed his wealth. Antony devoted his life solely to God, modelled on a daily routine of prayer and manual labour. He first went to visit holy people outside his own village, then he travelled further afield. Athanasius noted that he 'learned thoroughly where each surpassed him in zeal and discipline . . . he observed the graciousness of one; the unceasing prayer of another; he took knowledge of another's freedom from anger and another's loving kindness; he gave heed to one as he watched, to another as he studied; one he admired for his endurance, another for his fasting and sleeping on the ground; the meekness of one and the long-suffering of another he watched with care, while he took note of the piety towards Christ and the mutual love which animated all. Thus filled, he returned to his own place of discipline, and henceforth strove to unite the qualities of each, and was eager to show in himself the virtues of all'.

Athanasius described Antony's resolution when the devil, time and again, tried to lead him into temptation. But he was a man of extraordinary physique and mental strength, and zealously continued his discipline, accustoming himself to an ever more severe mode of life. He was able to sustain long periods of fasting, and stayed in solitude for twenty years, never going forth and seldom seen. 'A rush mat served him to sleep upon, but for the most part he lay upon the bare ground. He would not anoint himself with oil, saying it behoved young men to be earnest in training and not to seek what would enervate the body; but they must accustom it to labour, mindful of the Apostle's words, "when I am weak, then am I strong".' Athanasius described Antony as 'mindful of the words spoken by the prophet Elias, "the Lord liveth before whose presence I stand to-day" and used to say to himself that from the life of the great Elias the hermit ought to see his own as in a mirror'.

Athanasius wrote: 'After this when many were eager and wishful to imitate his discipline, and his acquaintances came and began to cast down and wrench off the door by force, Antony, as from a shrine, came forth initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God . . . He spoke to them in the Egyptian tongue: "Always have the fear of God before your eyes. Remember Him who grants death and life. Hate the world and all that is in it . . . Renounce this life, that you may be alive to God . . .



*Figure 3.9* Icon of Saint Antony and Saint Paul in the Monastery of Saint Antony near the Red Sea. The former wears a monk's habit, while the latter is dressed in a tunic of plaited palms with two lions at his feet. Between them is the bread-bearing crow alluded to in an anecdote associated with Saint Antony's visit to Paul: each day the crow provided Paul with half a loaf of bread but on the occasion of Antony's visit he appeared with a whole loaf. The icon is one of many portraying this theme in churches throughout Egypt. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness . . . test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God; despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls” (Apophthegmata Patrum, translated by M.C. Steenbergh on the Internet).

In the small church of Saint Antony at Maimun, near Bush (north of Beni Suet, a dependency of the Monastery of Saint Antony), the local priest guided me to in a tiny burrow located near the sanctuary screen in the right-hand aisle. In this 2-metre deep, 0.8 metre wide, and 1.75-metre long dreary cell, Saint Antony lived for many years. ‘He was able to fast for long periods of time. Seeping water provided his only drink. His disciples brought him bread from time to time’, the priest told me. ‘When Antony was troubled by too many visitors he had to leave the Nile valley and go to the Red Sea for more seclusion. But his disciples followed him there. They lived in natural caves in the foothills.’

Antony simply gave his disciples two principles that had been revealed to him in a vision: prayer and work. Under his rule, hermits could continue to live in isolated cells within walking distance of a worship centre, where they came together once a week for mass and a communal meal. They were otherwise free to pursue a life of penance and prayer; to work alone tending a small garden; or to weave mats and baskets and carry out any mechanical task which occupied their hands but left their minds free to meditate on spiritual matters. He introduced monastic garb comprising a tunic of flax fastened by a leather belt, an outer sheepskin cloak when needed, and distinctive headgear (see Figure 2.3). His ascetic ideal spread rapidly. Antony was visited by Macarius, who later introduced his monastic way of life to Wadi Natrun. Hilarion (born in Gaza in 291) made a pilgrimage to the South Galala range for the express purpose of visiting Antony and emulating his spiritual life; he subsequently founded an ideal retreat in north-west Sinai, where he lived in a tiny cell for fifty years and spread Antonian monasticism to all parts of the Levant. This was the growth of monasticism in its semi-cenobitic phase, known as *laura* in the West. No vow of obedience to a superior was imposed.

The Monastery of Saint Antony is the most beautiful in Egypt, largely because of its setting nestled beneath the deeply desiccated, 1,200-metre high South Galala range of mountains. It is well supplied with sweet water from a spring which emerges from a natural crevice deep inside the mountain behind the south wall of the monastery which maintains a

constant daily flow of 100 cubic metres, and a constant temperature of 23 degrees centigrade summer and winter. After supplying the needs of the community, the water is channelled to a garden planted with olives and palms, vines and vegetables. Father Maximous el-Antony met me at the entrance to the complex, just inside two modern bell-towers which lead into the vast monastic holdings. Inside, lanes twist between the churches and chapels, habitations for monks, flour mills and bakery. The keep, which is in the middle of the compound, was built over a channel from the spring. I was immediately struck by the changes since my earlier visits. ‘Yes,’ agreed Father Maximous, ‘the monastery has undergone considerable development since 1980, and another spate of activity since 1994. There is now a new water tower, a huge dining room where pilgrims are provided with simple meals, workshops, two new generators and a subterranean water tank. The old cells have been restored and a new guest wing for visitors is reserved for pilgrims only ‘because some of our foreign guests do not treat the place with due respect.’

The oldest part of the monastery is the Church of Saint Antony, part of which is built over the saint’s relics. When I first saw the church it was



*Figure 3.10* An old grinding mill in the Monastery of Saint Antony, now used as a museum; inscriptions in Arabic indicate that it was set up in the ninth century. Photo Michael Stock.

completely blackened by smoke. The abandoned monastery was occupied by bedouins in the fifteenth century and used the church as a kitchen. The shadowy wall paintings have now been cleaned and restored, and revealed in the pure, clear colours in which they were originally painted (see Chapter 10, p. 262ff.).

The cave in which Antony took refuge is situated 300 metres up the mountain and is not visible from the monastery itself. The walls are covered with graffiti, most of which date to medieval times. A narrow terrace, which commands a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains, is believed to be where Saint Antony sat and wove baskets from palm leaves, when ‘his eyes were dimmed with age’ and his ‘teeth worn to the gums’. ‘. . . not for his writings, nor from worldly wisdom, nor through any art, was Antony renowned, but solely from his piety towards God’, wrote Athanasius. ‘For from whence into Spain and into Gaul, how into Rome and Africa, was the man heard of who abode hidden in a mountain, unless it was God who maketh His own known everywhere, and also promised this to Antony at the beginning?’ So wrote Athanasius, Antony’s friend and biographer. Athanasius also recorded that Antony personally made two missionary pilgrimages. The first visit was made to the hermitages of Naqlun some twenty years after he took up his solitary life on the Red Sea coast, where, under Antony’s guidance, there was some relaxation of the strict solitude practised by the monks in favour of his loosely formed monastic community and the introduction of a measure of communal life. The second was carried out in his later years, at the express request of Athanasius himself, whom he accompanied on a mission which will be described in Chapter 7.

## 4

## KNOWLEDGE VERSUS FAITH

In 1946 a remarkable discovery was made in Gebel el-Tarif, a lofty mountain range east of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. Beneath Pharaonic tombs hewn half way up the precipitous cliffs, behind the yawning entrance of one of the countless caves, thirteen ancient books or codices were found, eleven complete in their bindings and two further volumes represented by a few scattered leaves from each. In one account of the discovery a huge boulder fell off a slope revealing a rock-cave which was chanced upon by two farmers, Mohammed and Khalifa Ali, residents of the modern village of Qasr wa-el Sayad, near Chenoboskion, an area occupied by a Roman garrison in the fourth century. Inside the cave was a large pottery jar, sealed with bitumen. The brothers, raised in the tradition of Ali Baba and sure that they had chanced upon priceless treasure, broke into it there and then. They were sorely disappointed to find that it contained no more than old books. Nonetheless Mohammed wrapped them up in his robe and took them home. Unaware of their value, he placed them in a corner of the house near the oven, and some loose leaves appear to have been burned as kindling by his mother.

What happened after that is unclear. It would appear that a local priest of nearby Deir el-Malek (the Monastery of the Archangel Michael) saw some of the pages, but could not read them because they were written in dialects other than the Bohairic used today. A history teacher in a local school, able to make out some of the texts, was wide-eyed at what he read. But the Antiquities Service (then under French control) was left ignorant of the discovery. Even today villagers in the Delta and Upper Egypt who chance upon ancient objects when ploughing land or digging in urban areas withhold such tidings from the government. They know

from long experience that inspection and the subsequent excavation can cause serious delay to their planned activities, frequently with drastic economic repercussions. In any case, farmers may be illiterate but they are well aware of the high esteem in which antiquities are held in the Western world and are not averse to reaping some financial reward. However, finders are at the mercy of unscrupulous antiquities dealers, and ere long word of the brothers' discovery reached their ears and some texts began to appear on the market. Fortunately, the Antiquities Service managed to track down the source of the texts and promptly confiscated those that remained. To prevent their being split up and dispersed on the open market they were consigned to the library of the Coptic Museum in Cairo. One codex 'escaped', passed through the hands of Albert Eid, a Belgian antiquities dealer in Cairo, and ended up in the Jung Institute of Zurich where it was eventually published in German. A brief announcement of the discovery of 'some texts in Upper Egypt' appeared in the Egyptian press. A slightly longer report (some fifty words) appeared in *Le Monde* of 23 February 1948, followed by articles with more detail in *Archaeology*, *Newsweek* and the *Manchester Guardian*. But there was no great excitement, certainly nothing like the announcement of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the cliffs of Qumran in 1947.

Yet what the brothers had in fact found was the most rare and valuable literary discovery of the twentieth century. It was a library containing religious texts written on papyrus paper scrolls that had been cut into sheets, folded and bound in leather covers to form codices. The Nag Hammadi library, as it has come to be known, comprised a total of fifty-two individual texts written on 1,239 pages, of which 93 per cent has survived in whole or part. The material covered a wide range, including Greek literature, philosophy strongly influenced by Neoplatonism, Persian mysticism attributed to Zoroaster (the teacher and prophet of ancient Persia c. 628–557 BC), reflective descriptions of the creation of the universe, Hermetic texts, and Old and New Testament writings. Christian texts included some half-a-dozen hitherto unknown Gospels and Epistles, including the Gospel of Thomas (or the 'Secret words of Jesus'); the Gospel of Philip, which credits Jesus with acts and sayings different from those of the New Testament; a 'secret book' of John to whom Jesus revealed mysteries; the Gospel of Truth; and the Gospel of the Egyptians. No biography of Jesus came to light, but about 114 sayings are attributed to him in the Gospel of Thomas. The texts are all

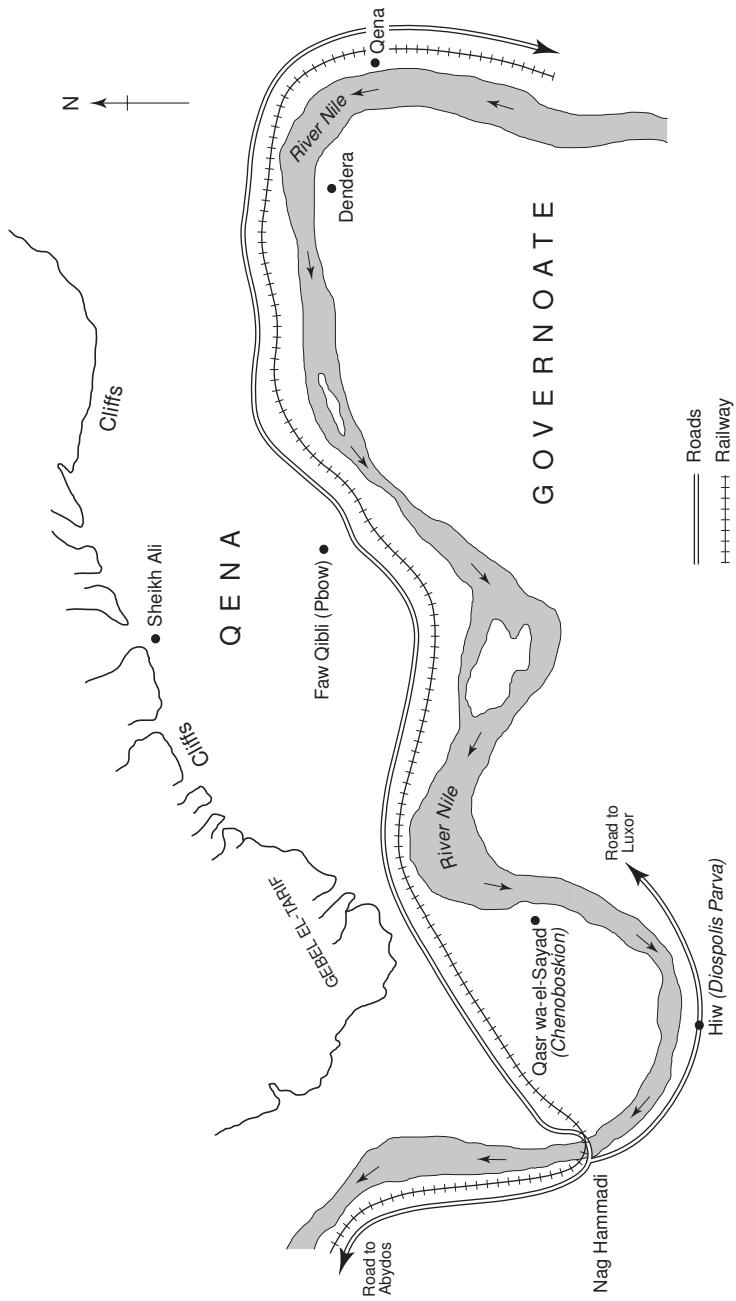


Figure 4.1 Map of River Nile between Nag Hammadi and Qena

written in Coptic, mostly the *sahidic* dialect of Upper Egypt, but with two in the *akhmimic* of Middle Egypt. Coptic was the spoken Egyptian language written with Greek letters, with the addition of seven extra letters from the demotic alphabet to accommodate the sounds for which there were no Greek letters. Coptic began to be used in Egypt when, after Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC, Greek was adopted as the language of the government. The third century Papyrus Heidelberg is the oldest known document to represent an early phase of the language, but it may have been developed much earlier than is generally supposed; the earliest feeble, but important, attempt to write an Egyptian alphabet with Greek letters dates to the 25th dynasty, 720 BC. Greek was widely used in Egypt from the 26th to the 30th dynasties (*c.* 664–332 BC), when commercial routes were opened up and there was large-scale Greek settlement. Greek texts have had priority in translation. Countless Coptic papyri still lie unattended in storerooms and basements of the museums around the world.

The Nag Hammadi codices represent a collection of literature much larger and more wide-ranging than the Dead Sea scrolls of the Essenes, yet few people apart from a handful of scholars knew about it for almost twenty-five years after its discovery. Among the first researchers who had access to the codices were Togo Mina, director of the Coptic Museum; Étienne Drioton, then director of the Antiquities Service; Albert Eid, the Belgian antiquities dealer who took the Jung codex from Egypt to New York and then to Belgium; Jean Doresse of the French Institute and author of *Les livres secrets des Gnostiques d'Egypt* in 1958 (translated into English as *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* in 1960); and a delegation from the German Democratic Republic to Cairo in 1959. Why the inordinate delay in publication of what was clearly an unprecedented discovery? Doresse suggested Egyptian government indecision in the post-Second World War period, the fall of the monarchy, and the revolution in 1952 as possible causes for the delay. Certainly preoccupation with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and subsequent wars with Israel may have been contributing factors; Doresse referred also to 'commercial and scientific covetousness'. I would add that intellectual discussions, not to mention disputes, among scholars on the significance of the texts; their relation to those found at other sites including Thebes, the Fayoum and Oxyrhynchus; and the advantages and disadvantages of publishing them piecemeal – all this contributed

further to the delay. A quarter of a century was to pass before an international committee was formed with the help of UNESCO to study the texts. *The Coptic Gnostic Library* in eleven volumes only slowly became available to world scholarship between 1972 and 1977.

One of the first questions raised, and quickly solved, was when were the codices (which were clearly translations into Coptic by monks) hidden. Realistic dating could be established because it was found that the leather bindings had been stiffened by sheets of papyrus glued together. When carefully separated, layer by layer, these sheets proved to contain miscellaneous texts, some fragments of the Book of Genesis, and Coptic and Greek letters with dates and names of people and places. The cover of Codex I, for example, was lined with a document mentioning Chenoboskion, where Saint Pachomius became a monk in the fourth century and where one of the monasteries that took his name was founded; the papers in Codex VII span the period AD 333 to 348 (the reign of Constantine, when Christianity was recognised as the official religion of the Roman Empire and doctrinal disputes threatened to undermine the essence of the faith). However, based on palaeographic characteristics, the texts themselves proved to date from a much earlier time: some between AD 50 and 250 (the period of persecution under the Roman emperors Septimius Severus and Decius), others to AD 250–350 (the period to become known as ‘the era of the martyrs’ under Diocletian). The second question was why such a wide assortment of miscellaneous texts had been collected and translated into Coptic? Since quite a large proportion of the gospels were heretical, scholars reasoned that they must have been written later than the gospels of the New Testament. Yet this was evidently not the case because along with versions of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve were ancient religious texts. An issue that must have arisen, was what to publish first: Old Testament references, texts of Christian content that pre-date Christianity, or hitherto unknown Christian writings? If the latter, then how should they be handled, especially in view of the observation that some appeared to be nearer to the spirit of Christ than the authorised version of the New Testament?

The word ‘Gnostic’ (from the Greek *gnosis*, ‘knowledge’) refers to a religious and philosophical movement that developed in Syria (Antioch), Egypt (Alexandria), Jerusalem and Persia during the early centuries of the Christian era. Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, all that was known about it was from its critics. Contemporary Christians



*Figure 4.2* Pahor Labib (right) supervised the first plexiglass conservation of the Nag Hammadi Codices from 1959 to 61. Photo by courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California.



*Figure 4.3* A delegation from the German Democratic Republic to Cairo in 1959, working on the Nag Hammadi codices, included Alexander Bohlig (second from left), Mourad Kamil (centre) and Johannes Leipoldt (right). Here they are received by Mirrit Boutros Ghali, President of the Coptic Archaeological Society (left). Photo by courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California.

viewed Gnostics as heretical and spoke disparagingly of them. The distinguished church leader Irenaeus of Lyons (130–200) composed a work entitled *Gnostics Unmasked and Overthrown*, in which he treated their writings with unrestrained sarcasm. Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, (315–403) expanded on the earlier censure and based his own criticism on a claimed personal encounter with Gnostics in Egypt. He accused the different sects, which he identified in some detail, of every kind of perversity: secret initiation ceremonies in which beautiful prostitutes offered themselves as enticements; adulterous, immoral, debauched, evil individuals in every way, fit only to be sought out and banished. Every opportunity was taken to mock the Gnostics. Saint Jerome (347–419) wrote: ‘When you have learnt by heart all your books by Basilides, Manes, Barbelos and Leusiboras go sing them in the weaving-women’s workshops, or offer to read them to the unlearned in the taverns that you frequent; such twaddle will make them drink more deeply’ (Doresse, 1960: 5). The discovery at Nag Hammadi obliged scholars to reassess the religious and intellectual fervour of the Gnostics, and their clearly syncretistic writings that drew on various religious heritages.

That the codices should contain texts of Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew and Persian origin, along with Christian writings, should in no way surprise us. All were part of the cultural environment documented and recorded in Egypt as far back as the third century BC when Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247) founded twin academic institutions in Alexandria, the Mouseion and Library. The former accommodated learned scholars, including doctors, men of letters, engineers, scientists, artists, poets and philosophers; the latter went to great lengths to collect the accumulated literature of the world. Contemporary evidence of how all-inclusive was the Library of Alexandria, and to what extent the works were translated into Greek, is lacking. Its reputed 490,000 original codices, and the collection of 42,800 papyrus scrolls in the so-called ‘sister’ library in the Serapeum, have been lost – the former (according to Plutarch) went up in flames during Caesar’s presence in Alexandria; the latter when a wave of destruction swept the land as Theodosius, Bishop of Alexandria, launched his war against paganism towards the end of the fourth century. We do know, however, that among major works translated there were Greek classics, the complex Zoroastrian Bible (Avesta Zend) and the Hebrew scriptures.

The religious ideas of Zoroaster, the teacher and prophet of ancient Persia (c. 628–557 BC), were probably brought into the country when



*Figure 4.4* Relief of an unknown syncretic god with head of a lion surrounded by a nimbus, four wings and body of a goat (Pan); beside the figure, which holds in its hands two keys with a thunderbolt between, are curling serpents. Found at Bahnsa (Oxyrhynchus) and now in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria.

Egypt was annexed as a province of the Persian Empire. Cambyses killed the last of the Egyptian kings in 525 BC and Persian rule lasted until the arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 BC. The Persians took over the organisation of their rich province, introduced Aramaic in official reports alongside demotic, and equated the Persian sun-god Ahuramazda with the Egyptian solar god Amun-Re, in a strategy that was to be adopted by Alexander and his heirs, the Ptolemies. The Persians wrote inscriptions in translation on the same Egyptian monuments. A larger than life statue found in the Persian capital of Susa (Bastan Museum, Tehran) shows Darius in Persian attire standing on a base bearing Egyptian motifs and inscribed with texts in the key languages of diplomacy in the first millennium BC: Egyptian, Babylonian and Persian. There is little doubt

that the Persians brought their religious beliefs with them to the Nile Valley.

Greek culture was introduced during the reign of the Pharaoh Amasis (568–525 BC), when Greek immigrants settled in Egypt, predominantly at Naucratis (near the modern village of el-Niqrash on the Canopic branch of the Nile (Figure 1.1)), and in ancient Memphis. Their long association with Egyptians resulted in a mixed culture long before the Greek conquest. While traders and adventurers came in search of entertainment – Naucratis was famed for its beautiful women – distinguished poets and men of learning visited famous places like On (Iunu), the centre of the sun cult, which the Greeks called Heliopolis, today a suburb of Cairo. Plato, the Athenian philosopher, visited Egypt. Pythagoras of Samos, philosopher and mathematician, spent twenty years in the country. Solon, the Athenian politician and poet, was also attracted to the wondrous land described by travellers and traders. Later, under the heirs of Alexander, a mixed culture emerged, such that royal decrees like the Rosetta Stone and the Canopic Decree were written in three scripts: hieroglyphics, hieratic and Greek. Ptolemy II's chief librarian Callimachus, a Homeric scholar, amassed Greek literary heritage, including Aristotle's library.

As for the Hebrew scriptures, Jews became more numerous in Egypt following their expulsion from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Over the centuries they lost the use of their native tongue in Egypt and, by the second generation, spoke the local language and their children bore Egyptian names. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of parts of the Old Testament (biblical scholars attribute parts of the Pentateuch to the third century BC; Isaiah and Jeremiah to the first half of the second century BC; and the Psalms and the rest of the Prophets to the second half of the second century BC) demonstrate certain Egyptian folkloric tradition. In the tales of Joseph and Moses, Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, Joseph and his brethren, Egypt appears alternatively as a place of slavery and of refuge, a land of plenty for the foreigner, or a place from which he could flee. Circulation of these biblical stories resulted in their spreading through the popular traditions of East and West. Tradition holds that the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek in Alexandria. Eleazar, high priest in Jerusalem, reputedly sent the most learned Jewish scholars who produced a collaborative work, the Septuagint or 'seventy', in reference to their number.

There was considerable freedom of religious expression in those days. How could it have been otherwise? The concept had not yet arisen that one religion was true, others false. The question that presents itself is whether the Gnostic movement, which, in its many forms, spread across the whole of the Mediterranean world, started in the East and travelled westwards through Persia to Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Greece, or moved from Egypt – where Gnosticism flourished on a more widespread scale than elsewhere – into Syria and Palestine to the East, and Rome to the West? Were the writings of Zoroaster in the Nag Hammadi library imported from Persia or disseminated in Egypt by Persian settlers? Was Neoplatonism a revival of Plato's original ideas, or was Plato's philosophy inspired by Egypt, where he is said to have studied under the sages of Heliopolis? These are provocative questions, which numerous scholars have tried to answer.

Doresse noted that the bulk of the texts in the Nag Hammadi codices were previously unknown and new in content, and could be divided into four classes: the largest were purely Gnostic revelations, with some commentaries expounding the myths they contain; followed by some 'authentically Christian *apocrypha* infiltrated by Gnostic speculations'; there were some half dozen treatises 'of which some belong properly to what is known as Hermetic literature'; while the rest 'exhibit a curious transition between Hermeticism and Gnosticism' (Doresse, 1960: 146). He raised the issue of which, if any, of the Gnostic ideas derive from Egypt, and pointed out that the cosmogonies (or creation stories) of the Pharaonic religion were numerous in the codices – that some described the formation of an Ennead (group of nine gods) from a primordial god; others the Ogdoad (group of eight gods) through pairs of gods; and others again ascribe the creation to the 'heart' and the 'tongue' – i.e. the Word or Logos, all of which derive from Egypt. I shall follow his lead.

Reference has already been made to Hornung's *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* and the long-debated issue of whether the Egyptians were first monotheists or polytheists (pp. 39–40), and to the Osiris myth which provides an early expression of family ideals and evidence of the worship of relics (pp. 14–19). Here I would like to emphasise that ancient Egypt was an organised society with a centralised government that was largely undisturbed by outside influence for a far longer period than any other part of the world. It maintained its identity for over three thousand years. It was a society in which religion pervaded every aspect of the daily

lives of the people, and where temple ritual – daily, seasonal and annual – was geared to the forces of nature. When learned sages (religious philosophers in modern jargon) considered, and reconsidered, the nature of the universe, their ideas were based on observance of the world around them, and the many creation stories of ancient Egypt should be considered as alternative interpretations of the same reality, not as conflicts. Chaeremon the Greek Stoic tells us in his exposé about Egyptian priests that they ‘were considered also as philosophers among Egyptians . . . they chose the temples as the place to philosophise. For to live close to their shrines was fitting to their whole desire for contemplation’ (Porphyry’s *De Abstinentia* IV, 6–8, trans. Van der Horst [1984]).

One of the earliest creation stories is the Heliopolitan doctrine, fragments of which appear in the Pyramid Texts (2686–2181 BC). It describes the beginning of the physical world up to the triumph of Horus as king and was based on the claim that Heliopolis, the centre of the sun cult, was the site of the creation. The sight of the flood waters subsiding each year, leaving mounds of earth on which plants grew – which could be witnessed annually in the Delta until the completion of the High Dam in 1971 – triggered the idea that in the beginning there was a watery waste, Nun, that filled the void that was the universe. Within these waters reposed the sun-god Atum (whose name may have meant either ‘not being’, ‘being complete’ or, in Christian parlance, ‘unbegotten’). When the flood withdrew a primordial hill appeared and the intense rays of the sun brought forth plant life. On this hill Atum manifested himself as the physical sun Re. Atum-Re’s emergence dispersed darkness and created light. Alone he masturbated to produce pairs of gods: Shu and Tefnut (the god of the air and the goddess of moisture), and Geb and Nut (the earth-god and the sky-goddess), whose union created Osiris (the legendary ancestor associated with the fertile land) and his wife Isis, along with their counterparts Set (associated with the desert) and Nephthys. These were the nine gods of the Heliopolitan doctrine or *Ennead*. It was a doctrine that brought the marvel of the creation closer to the people by explaining the physical environment in mythological terms they understood.

The regularity of nature’s forces provided the basis of the ancient Egyptian sense of order and balance. The king, Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis the nature gods, was of solar descent. Epic battles being the stuff of oral tradition, the confrontations between Horus (representing good)



*Figure 4.5* Heliopolis, the ‘city of the sun’, was the religious and scientific centre of Egypt from the earliest Pharaohs (c. 3100 BC) through to Ptolemaic times when it attracted distinguished scholars from Greece. Little remains today apart from the granite obelisk of Sesostris I (c. 2760 BC). Photo Michael Stock.

and Set (representing evil) were eagerly recounted because of their dramatic content. They had terrible clashes, recounted in myths, from which Horus always emerged victorious. The battle between good and evil and the emergence of ‘good’ lay at the very heart of Egyptian culture. Variations came with the passage of time, until the popular myth came to penetrate spheres unrelated to society. The sun hidden by clouds symbolised the loss of the eye of Horus at the hands of his enemy Set. Every offering at a shrine or to a deity was a sacrifice known as the ‘eye of Horus’. The Heliopolitan doctrine reveals that questions were posed and answers sought from very early times to ‘the beginnings’ (the creation of the physical world), and the link between the heavenly forces and humanity.

A variant of the Heliopolis creation story was formulated at the ancient Egyptian town of Khmun, sacred to Thoth, known to the Greeks as Hermopolis (today’s Ashmunein). Here the doctrine centred round an *Ogdoad* or group of eight primordial gods, four male and four female, who rose from the waters of chaos. This concept could have been inspired by observance of slimy creatures that emerged on the mounds of earth



*Figure 4.6* Ashmunein (Hermopolis Magna) was a great metropolis in Graeco-Roman times and the site of the temple of Thoth–Hermes. In the third century the city became an episcopal see, one of the largest and most important, and the ruins of early churches have been found within the temple enclosure. Other churches were built in the city later, including a three-aisled basilica from the first half of the fifth century of which these elegant columns stand as evidence of its size and wealth. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

revealed by the receding flood – again, a phenomenon that could be annually witnessed the length of the Nile before its waters were harnessed by technology in 1971. One pair represented Nun (water), a second Huh (eternity), a third Kuk (darkness) the fourth Amun ('the hidden one'). When the power of the physical sun dried the earth, these reptiles and animals retired into the underworld while the sun carried out the task of creating the visible world. Geb and Nut, the earth and the sky, were at first joined together. Then Shu and Tefnut forcibly separated the two, lifting Nut the sky-goddess to span the heavens and leaving Geb prone on the ground to sprout vegetation. Before their separation Geb and Nut had conceived the nature gods, Osiris and Isis, Set and Nephthys. In other words, the Hermopolitan doctrine, like that of Heliopolis, traced creation from watery waste (from which an *Ogdoad* emerged), through the nine gods of the Ennead, to the rule of Horus.

The cult centre was Hermopolis (modern Ashmunein) where, Thoth the moon-god was the ‘second eye of Re’ the heavenly hawk. Through its waxing and waning, he came to be regarded as the keeper of time, the god who divided the year into twelve months, giving his own name to the first. These months he grouped into seasons and, thus regulating time, became regarded as the keeper of the divine archives, the inventor of writing, the author of books of age-old wisdom, magic and astrology. When Thoth was identified with the Greek god Hermes in Ptolemaic times, the temple of Thoth/Hermes became one of the most important in the land. A corpus of literature known as the *Hermeticum*, or Hermetic texts, was attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (‘thrice-greatest Hermes’, a Greek adaptation of an Egyptian title ‘Thoth the very great’). The corpus consists of forty-two books and, although Plato wrote of ‘Theuth’, its author, as a ‘man of letters’, it is unlikely to have been the work of a single writer. The majority of scholarly opinion today sees the *Hermeticum* – handed down in corrupt form from numerous translations – as composed in the first to the third centuries AD in an Egyptian milieu by individuals fascinated with what they understood about ancient Egyptian religion and drawing upon all kinds of Egyptian and non-Egyptian sources. Some segments of the texts were in the form of dialogues between the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, and others between Hermes and Asclepius (the Greek god of healing associated with Imhotep, the Egyptian sage and builder of Djoser’s Step Pyramid at Saqqara). G.R.S. Mead’s translation in *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (London 1850) is regarded as reliable by modern scholars. It reveals that although it is mostly indebted to Greek classical philosophy, certain ideas are unquestionably Egyptian. For example, in Chapter IV Hermes says: ‘With Reason . . . not with hands, did the World-maker make the universal World’ in clear reference to the creator-god Atum, the solar god of Heliopolis, whose act of procreation was by means of his hand (see p. 93). Chapter XIII (sections 17–20) relates to worship being performed twice a day, ‘at sunrise facing east, and at sunset facing south’. In Pharaonic tradition the east was the place of the daily ‘rebirth’ of the sun, the source of life, and morning hymns in temples throughout the land heralded its rebirth at dawn. As for worship facing south, this was the source of the annual flood, the cause of the rebirth of the Nile, and the text of a seasonal hymn addressed to Hapi, the Nile-god (preserved in two papyri in the British Museum), calls on the Nile to awake and ‘to give life to Egypt . . . creator of corn,

maker of barley . . . creator of all good things'. When the Egyptians did not treat their river as a personification of the god Hapi, they called it the 'sea' or the 'great river'.

In reference to the Logos, the 'Word', although this concept is usually attributed to Philo (the Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher of Alexandria between about 20 BC and AD 50 whose doctrine had great influence on both Jewish and Christian writings), it cannot be found in the Old Testament, nor, indeed, among any theological reasoning on Greek soil. However, reference to the Logos is made in the Memphite Doctrine, or cosmogony – which is regarded as a more sophisticated story of the creation than those of Heliopolis or Hermopolis. It has survived as a fragmented text in a late copy on what is known as the Shabaka Stone, now in the British Museum (so-called after the Kushite king who found the text around 720 BC and had it copied). The original text is ascribed to the 6th dynasty, about 2345 BC, when Memphis rose to political importance and the priests of Ptah wished to give greater importance to their deity than he originally enjoyed as a patron of the arts (Figure 4.7). The text is in the form of a drama, with the dialogues recited by priests in mythological language. Ptah is presented as Ptah Ta-Tjenen ('Ptah the risen land'), the first cause, or, in other words, himself the primeval mound that arose from the eternal ocean containing all the elements necessary for life and political order. It was, as Theodor Gaster points out, live theatre presenting the ancient Egyptian view of the world and society in six acts. The first act, introduced by a 'presenter', confirmed political unity between Upper and Lower Egypt and provided a legal base for the rule of Horus as king. The second act featured the story of Osiris, the legendary ancestor, Set's attack on Osiris and his dismemberment, the recovery of his body by Isis and her sister Nephthys, battles between Horus and Set, and the crowning of Horus as king. Act three centred around a council of gods and their decision to build the royal city and construct the 'White Wall' (i.e. Memphis), which was said to be the place where Isis beheld the body of her beloved husband drowning in the water, where she saved him and conceived Horus (see p. 16). Act four mythologised the building of Memphis, and the installation of the king in a newly constructed palace. Act five described the final pacification of the Two Lands and the establishment of continued prosperity within them. Act six is mostly lost. The epilogue is a hymn to Ptah, prime god of Memphis. (Gaster, 1961: 399–405.)



*Figure 4.7* Little remains of ancient Memphis, capital of Egypt for most of its ancient history and an important religious and commercial centre. The city's size and importance are suggested by the extent of its necropolis at Saqqara and by literary accounts of classical authors such as Herodotus and Strabo. Most of the temple of Ptah (foreground) lies beneath the modern village of Mit Rahina. Photo Michael Stock.

Ptah's most characteristic quality, as described in the texts, was that of creator-god: he conceived of the world in his heart (believed to be the seat of thought) and brought order by being pronounced by his tongue (that is, by means of the spoken word). In translation the text reads:

The heart and tongue have power over all limbs because of the doctrine that it [the heart] is in every body and that it [the tongue] is in every mouth of all gods, all men, all cattle, all reptiles, all that lives, in that it thinks all that it [the heart] will and commands all that it [the tongue] will.

(Holmberg, 1946: 21–2, quoting Herman Junker)

Holmberg describes it as ‘the earliest example of the concept of identity between the word and the objects it describes’.

Commenting on the Memphite theology, James Breasted wrote that, in the idea of all things at first existing in the thought of the god (his heart) and then assuming objective reality by the utterance of his tongue, ‘we are reminded of the words in Genesis, as the Creator spoke, “And God said.” Is there not here the primeval germ of the later Alexandrian

doctrine of the Logos?’ he asks, and refers to the striking resemblance to the opening verse of Saint John’s Gospel in the Bible: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (Breasted, 1959: 46–7). The Memphite doctrine further provides the earliest concept of a god of destiny. Ptah metes out time: a different destiny awaits ‘him who does that which is loved’ and ‘him who does that which is abhorred’.

The text has been known to scholars since the middle of the nineteenth century and has been the subject of many translations and controversies. Certain abstract qualities of kingship reflected in the Memphite doctrine were discussed by Alan Gardiner, Herman Kees, Henri Frankfort and others. The latter made specific mention of the attributes: ‘Authoritative Utterance (*hu*) is in thy mouth. Understanding (*sia*) is in thy heart. Thy speech is the shrine of truth (*maat*)’ (Frankfort, 1965: 51). *Maat*, generally described as ‘authority’, ‘perception’ and ‘truth’ or ‘justice’, developed into the spirit of national guidance in ancient Egypt. *Maat* was a common epithet of early kings and referred to divine harmony – the state of the universe which was seen to be ‘in order’, with the sun ‘reborn’ daily in the eastern sky, the land unfailingly ‘reborn’ after the death of the crop each year – as well as to good rule and social justice. There were periods in Egypt’s history when the country erupted into political disorder, the spiritual vigour of the nation declined under foreign occupation, and national harmony was temporarily disrupted at the death of a king, but *maat* was inevitably reinstated at the coronation of a new king. There was confidence in the order of things. ‘Do *maat* . . . speak *maat*’, ‘great is *maat*, lasting and effective’, ‘a man lives on who conforms to *maat*’ – these are the words of Ptahhotep, an Old Kingdom sage whose writings, surviving in late copies, were used as a model text for schoolchildren for thousands of years. Among the epithets of Ptah in the New Kingdom is a text in the Ramasseum in which he is called ‘the lord of *Maat*’, ‘father of *Maat*’, ‘Ptah, who has fortified *Maat*’, ‘Ptah, who has lifted *Maat*’, and ‘Ptah who is pleased with *Maat*’. These phrases were part of the religious terminology and it is not surprising that one of the gospels that came to light in the Nag Hammadi library should be called the Gospel of Truth, nor that it should be attributed to Valentinus, a Gnostic of the Egyptian school founded by Basilides in Alexandria early in the second century AD. Basilides and Valentinus endeavoured to formulate a theory based on the religious ideas then in circulation in Hadrian’s Egypt. The latter

presented a doctrine of an ‘unbegotten’ Father as creator of the universe. This was neither an original nor an imported concept. In a hymn to the god Ptah-Tatenen, which might date to the third century BC, he is described as:

Father of the fathers of all the gods . . . He who raised Nut and [extended] Geb. He who begat everything on the surface of the earth . . . The Fashioner, the Mother who gave birth to the gods. He who begot all Mankind and created their sustenance of life.

(Pap. Berlin 3048, quoted by Holmberg, 1946: 32–3)

The similarity with Christian creeds cannot be ignored, nor the fact that – whatever the date of the original text – it was important enough to be copied onto stone in the eighth century BC. The drama was presumably performed in the capital of Memphis, where, by the Late Period of Pharaonic history, there was a regular flow of foreigners. Coins and sculptures found in the ruins of the once rambling and heavily populated city show that Attic Greeks, Carians, Jews, Lydians, Macedonians, Persians and Syrians lived there in large numbers. Throughout Ptolemaic rule the heirs of Alexander continued to be crowned at Memphis, attend the annual New Year Festival there – a cyclical rejuvenation ritual – and also synods in the ancient Egyptian city (Höbl, 2001: 162–3). Romans, too, followed the Egyptian Pharaonic system because it presented a suitable and well-established ideology that had been accepted throughout the millennia. Is it not possible that the Memphite drama and its doctrine of the Logos may have provided inspiration to the author of the Gospel of John?

Parts of the Hermetic texts which appear in the Nag Hammadi codices contain the names of many of Egypt’s most well-loved deities, including Isis, who is referred to as ‘Isis the virgin’ with the epithet ‘bearer of God’. Interestingly, the question of Mary’s virginity that erupted in the fifth century at the Council of Ephesus (Chapter 7) was a theological debate that can be traced back to the Gnostics. The disciples of Valentinus presented two theories: one, that the Saviour was spiritual at birth because the Holy Spirit had already descended on his mother (the description of divinity passing through the Virgin ‘like a sunbeam’, leaving her virginity intact, is reminiscent of tomb representations of the sky-goddess

Nut's body arched across the heavens, and the setting sun, in dying, passing through it from mouth to vulva to emerge, reborn each day); the other, that the Saviour gained spirituality from the Logos which descended upon him in the form of a bird at baptism.

Under the influence of monotheistic trends, the very active Gnostic movement constituted a real challenge to almost all other religions. Gnostics dismissed the traditional pagan religions, even as they rejected the principle of revelation. While not denying the account of the creation over six days, Valentinus dismissed the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden with the forbidden fruit. He and other Gnostics appear to have found Egyptian ideas of the creation more credible. The Gospel of Truth in the Nag Hammadi collection expounds a creed in which there are pairs of gods (like the Ogdoad of Hermopolis), but each less perfect than its predecessor, with Sophia ('wisdom'), the female of the thirteenth pair, as the least perfect of all. She bore a son (like Isis) who ruled a world – not wisely and well, like Horus, but in sadness and confusion. It was a cynical view of the creation, but one consistent with prevailing conditions. They saw Jesus as a mortal, the legitimate son of Joseph and Mary, but a sage, one selected as an instrument to restore order and the worship of God, invisible and eternal. To quote an example provided by Doresse (1960): 'Indeed the Father knows the beginning of all as well as their end . . . Now the end consists in contemplating that which is hidden. And that which is hidden is the Father, from whom came the Beginning' (Nag Hammadi Codex XIII: 37–8). This can be likened to 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' (Rev. I: 8).

The theological argument on the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ, for example, which was later to surface in what is known as the Arian controversy in the fourth century (Chapter 7), and continued to play a crucial role in the growth and subsequent schisms within the Church, had its origin among Egyptian Gnostics. Valentinus claimed that when Jesus suffered on the cross it was his human nature (which was not perfect), not his divine, which suffered. Continuity *can* be traced in Egypt, and hopefully those qualified to study primary source material will research this question.

The first important institution of religious learning in Christian antiquity was the catechetical school of Alexandria. Candidates were admitted for religious initiation and a study of the scriptures. The scope

of the school was not limited to theology; science, mathematics and the humanities were also taught. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius mentioned that it was founded by Pantaenus around the year 180 but, according to the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, its roots must be traced much further back: ‘Its rise to prominence from humble beginnings must have been a long and evolutionary process parallel to the spread of the new religion among Jewish and pagan inhabitants of Alexandria’ (Atiya, 1991: 2, 469). With many of the keenest minds in the country – pagan and Christian – circulating different gospels, and the Christian faith threatening to fragment into as many creeds as polytheism, the school was designed to curb this possibility. Coptic tradition holds that its distinguished teachers and their graduates later became patriarchs, the leaders of their churches, and the ‘guardians of orthodoxy’.

One of the earliest scholars of the school was Clement of Alexandria, a convert from paganism. Born in Athens about 150, he came to Alexandria to study philosophy but, after attending the lectures of Pantaenus at the catechetical school, became a convert to Christianity. He eventually succeeded as head of the School and became one of the most distinguished scholars. He communicated with the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem on such important matters as regulating liturgy, the hours of prayer, and periods of festival. Both puritanical and intellectual, he appeared to have been offended by the rich and opulent society in Alexandria, which, judging from the writers of Alexandrian history, was a hallmark of the capital. He appreciated that Christianity would not long survive if it attempted to uproot the past totally and he was the first Christian writer to claim that all learning, whatever the source, was sacred.

Clement drew up a rule to govern moral behaviour which appears to have been based on Egyptian ‘instruction literature’ in its stress on manners, correct speech and restraint from vulgar behaviour. The Instruction of Amenope – which has been assigned to the Ramasside period 1320 to 1080 BC, although all the manuscript copies that have survived are of a later date – is a carefully composed and unified work divided into thirty numbered chapters. Miriam Lichtheim points out that two basic themes are covered. The first depicts the ideal man as a ‘silent man’ and his adversary as the ‘heated man’. The second exhorts honesty and kindness. When Amenope urges consideration towards the afflicted, about a ‘poor man . . . weighed down by reproaches’, and admonishes ‘Never let a powerful man bribe you to oppress a weak one

for his own benefit', he provides a foretaste of Christian morality, as do the following selections of the same instructions:

'Give your ears, hear the sayings . . . it profits to put them in your heart, woe to him who neglects them! . . . They'll be a mooring post for your tongue. If you make your life with these in your heart, you will find success; You will find my words a storehouse for life, your being will prosper upon earth' (Chapter 1).

'Don't start a quarrel with a hot-mouthed man, Nor needle him with words, Pause before a foe, bend before an attacker, Sleep (on it) before speaking' (Chapter 3).

'Do not move markers on the borders of fields, Nor shift the position of the measuring-rod. Do not be greedy for a cubit of land, Nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow' (Chapter 6).

'Better is praise with the love of men, than wealth in the storehouse; better is bread with a happy heart, than wealth with vexation' (Chapter 13).

(Lichtheim, 1974: II, 146ff.)

'It can hardly be doubted that the Jewish author of (the Book of) Proverbs was acquainted with the Egyptian work and borrowed from it,' writes Lichtheim, 'for in addition to the similarities in thought and expression line xxii, 20: "Have I not written for you thirty sayings of admonition and knowledge" derives its meaning from the author's acquaintance with the "thirty" chapters of Amenope' (Lichtheim, 1974: III: 185).

Origen, Clement's formidable successor, was born of Christian parents, in Alexandria or elsewhere in Egypt, in the reign of Septimius Severus (193–211). He was witness to his father Leonides' martyrdom and joined the catechetical school at an early age. He attended the lectures of Pantaenus and Clement, later taught in the school for twenty-eight years, and proved to be one of the greatest and most prolific scholars of the early Church. The thousands of works attributed to him, which have been debated over the centuries, are now assumed to be 'the totality of all scholars in the Catechetical School of Alexandria (who) pooled their

literary works under the name of their great mentor who presided over the institution, and Origen happened to be that leading personality' (Atiya, 1991: 6, 1852). He was the first theologian to clarify the Christian principles of faith: doctrines on God, Creation, the Holy Spirit, Christ, the pre-existence of the soul, and universal salvation. Like his predecessors he did not hide his conviction that Christianity was heir to the past and he set rules governing the teachings of the Church which, he admitted, were edited and copied from older writings. During an anti-Christian riot in 215 Origen was forced to leave Egypt for his own safety and took refuge in Palestine. Before he returned to Alexandria he travelled widely in response to invitations to mediate in church disputes or make public speeches. He lectured in Arabia, Greece (Athens), Cappadocia, Nicomedia, Palestine, Syria and Rome, the capital of the empire. Through him the ethical and theological ideas formulated in the Catechetical School of Alexandria spread throughout the Roman world.

Gnostic communities, meanwhile, continued to flourish. Basilides, Valentinus and Plotinus, and their Christian counterparts Clement and Origen, were all influenced by the scholarly environment of Alexandria where mysticism, philosophy, pseudo-prophetic concepts, 'instruction literature', the Hermetic Texts, Old Testament writings, and Christian gospels and epistles abounded. They were reflected on, deliberated over, sifted, and either grafted on to the stockpile of Christian teachings, or discarded. Even as some Christians saw the Gnostic gospels as a betrayal of the true faith, many Gnostics regarded themselves as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. What is clear, is that the Nag Hammadi library comprises diverse texts that were assiduously collected and translated by Coptic monks into their own language. The question that presents itself is why they set themselves the task. To this there is but one possible answer: they formed part of an Egyptian literary heritage.

Throughout the country's long and enduring ancient civilisation, periods of disharmony or change were inevitably accompanied by a desire to store away knowledge. An example can be traced even as far back as the 6th Dynasty (*c.* 2145 BC) when the highly centralised Old Kingdom government (the Great Pyramid Age) threatened to collapse as provincial lords rose to power and rebelled against the crown; faced with the possibility that their heritage might be lost, and having reached a stage in the long evolution of hieroglyphic writing where it could be used to convey sophisticated – and frequently misunderstood – information,

scribes compiled and updated a king list, gathered mortuary texts and inscribed them in the pyramids, and set ‘instruction literature’ and kingship rituals to the written record, thus creating a lasting record for the future. After the rulers of Sais in the Delta liberated Egypt from Assyrian domination in 664 BC they recaptured ‘the time of the ancestors’, for ‘lo, their words abide in writing’. Scribes were ordered to collect, document and re-copy proverbial wisdom, medical prescriptions and mortuary texts. Such was Egyptians’ pride in their heritage that they propagated the legend of divine descent, and to antedate as far as possible the origin of royal and noble families, they even extended their historical record beyond the limits of time to a pre-dynastic era of gods and demi-gods that ruled Egypt. For a nation that accepted foreigners with alien creeds within their cities, and where scribes were employed to invoke the names of gods of different cultures by Egyptianised immigrant settlers and native and Hellenised Egyptians alike, it should come as no surprise that Coptic monks should have made every effort to preserve the full range of literature in their country when it was threatened with total extinction in the fourth century.

Possibly the Nag Hammadi texts were assiduously gathered and translated into Coptic as had been the Hermetic corpus, assembled earlier and translated into Greek. The monks made no more attempt to collate the texts than had their forebears, even as far back as the Old Kingdom.

North of Qena the river Nile flows towards the west and then, as it approaches the Gebel el-Tarif, describes a semi-circular loop to the south before resuming its flow northwards at Nag Hammadi (Figure 4.1). The northern bank of the Nile opposite Hiw (*Diospolis Parva*) is honey-combed with caves and rock-tombs that were occupied by early hermits. The semi-circle of land bounded by the river is about five kilometres across, and when Labib Habachi, the Egyptologist (not to be confused with Pahor Labib the Coptologist), accompanied me there in 1975 he explained its important role in early Christianity. We visited three small villages: el-Sayad, el-Dabba and el-Qasr, the latter near ancient Chenoboskion where, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Saint Pachomius, the founder of cenobitic monasticism, began his life as a Christian. To the north, beyond the fertile fields, the Gebel-el-Tarif, where the Gnostic codices were found, blocks the horizon from west to east. We walked around the Monastery of Saint Palomen (*Deir Anba Balamun*), its high

wall unadorned, surrounding churches and chapels dedicated to Saint Palomen, Saint Mercurius and Saint Dimiana clustered close together. Habachi mused about the codices. He recalled that a boulder had not fallen off the mountain range to reveal a cave in which they were found, but that the two brothers from the village of Hamra Dom had actually chanced upon the jars while they were digging for fertiliser in an early (pagan) burial ground. He mentioned that a family feud resulted in the Antiquities Service being informed of the discovery, and added: ‘One of the reasons why the documents were not made available for study for so long was due to the endless formalities necessary before they were declared the property of the Egyptian government. It dragged on for years.’ I asked what such a wide range of texts – Egyptian, Persian, Greek and biblical, philosophical, folkloric, the mystery cults and Christianity – had in common. He promptly responded, ‘They were all translated into Coptic’ – as though that answered my question. Then he walked on a few paces, stopped, and added: ‘It is not lack of unity that should worry you. You should consider that despite the diversity of the sects and texts they were all united in the worship of a common Father, one creator-god. The Gnostics were given a bad name by Christians in the fourth century, and by archaeologists in the nineteenth century. Many objects dug up in Egypt have been labelled “Gnostic” which are not Gnostic at all. Because Gnostics were labelled heretics does not mean that all of them were. There is a link between Egyptian religious heritage and Christianity, and it lies with Gnostic intercessors.’

## 5

## MARTYRS AND PACHOMIAN MONASTICISM

Although the social and intellectual climate of Alexandria has already been described, it is necessary to remind the reader that it was primarily a port, well-situated with reference to its twofold function – commerce by sea on account of its excellent harbours, and commerce by land via the River Nile – it was also the seat of the Egyptian church, and a universally admired centre of learning. The Mouseion, the Library, the pagan temples, and the medical schools catered to the needs of its diverse population. There were circles of theologians, philosophers and mathematicians, who reflected on metaphysics, debated pagan religious literature, studied astrology and magic, and produced books on divination and astronomy. Fortune-tellers mingled with Christians, Christians with pagans. Lying at the crossroads of East and West, Alexandria was fertile ground for the dissemination of all kinds of knowledge. Webs of economic, intellectual and religious relationships were created among its inhabitants.

Not long after the catechetical school had set rules to govern the teachings of the Church, attracting students to study the interpretation of the scriptures and their doctrine of the Holy Trinity, there was a revival of a parallel philosophical school of thought. Its founder was Ammonius Saccus, a Christian dock-worker who took to a study of religious philosophy. None of his teachings survive, but among his pupils were Plotinus, the son of Christian parents in Lycopolis (Asyut) – who attempted to work out a philosophy that would embrace the whole spectrum of religious ideas in circulation – and Porphyry, his most devoted disciple. The latter collected his mentor's lecture notes (which may have included Saccus' original theses) and published them in nine volumes called the Enneads – not to be confused with the Ennead of

Heliopolis mentioned on pp. 93–4. Plotinus rejected the principle of divine revelation and set forth a single all-powerful God who himself had three grades – Father, Mother and Son. He pondered that all things flow from the Eternal Father and strive also to return to Him. To glimpse God, who is in fact our true selves, was the goal of his philosophy, and this was possible by mystic vision. He presented a somewhat pessimistic view of the actual world – it was believed that creation was due to a colossal blunder – but described the path by which a reversion to God could be attained:

This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see; you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision the birth-right of all, which few can see . . . Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful; he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, that purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work . . . When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity – when you perceive that you have grown to this . . . call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step – you need a guide no longer – forward yet a step – strain and see . . . Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the first Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

(Forster, 1922: 67, quoting S. McKenna's translation)

Perhaps the chief attraction of the pagan school was that, while Christianity demanded absolute recognition of the authority of the Church and faith in its creed, paganism allowed a certain amount of intellectual freedom. The students of ancient Alexandria felt special pride in their schools, and there were undoubtedly discussions among teachers and students of all nationalities on the advantages and disadvantages of each. Both, of course, dealt with the same question – the relationship between God and human beings – so rivalry was only to be expected.

Pagans became Christians, and naturally the Church Fathers were vexed when some converts to Christianity had second thoughts. Among those who studied at the pagan school and later joined the teaching staff of the catechetical school was an Upper Egyptian called Horapollon. An intellectual and leading religious figure in Alexandria, his family owned an ancestral estate in Panopolis. His *Life* survives in two versions, as well as in a papyrus letter composed in Greek and translated into French (Maspero, 1914: 163–95). In the latter, he proudly notes that he came from a family of philosophers and teachers. Horapollon was raised in an intellectual environment outside Alexandria.

In this still largely pagan world in which the Christian faith was rapidly spreading, the accession of the Emperor Diocletian in 284 forms a milestone. A staunch believer in pagan gods and imperial power, he was intolerant of Egypt's rebellious population, whom he identified as 'Christians', and ordered the 'great persecution' – the event Copts later named the 'era of the martyrs' (Chapter 8). His tyranny is revealed by later Coptic estimates of between 144,000 and 800,000 deaths during the nine years of his rule. Yet Diocletian has gone down in history as a magnanimous and incisive ruler. Can such widely disparate concepts be reconciled? Indeed they can if we recognise the social implications of his policy in Egypt.

When Diocletian appointed Maximianus as proconsul there was rebellion in the Egyptian countryside, strife verging on civil war in Alexandria, and troublesome tribes on the western frontier. The southern border was relatively quiet. Aswan was a natural terminus for river traffic passing between Egypt and the Sudan but was regarded as a non-revenue-raising area, so Maximianus reasoned that his troops could be more advantageously deployed elsewhere. He ordered their withdrawal. What he failed to realise was that the southern border had remained stable only because of a strong military presence. When that was withdrawn the long-time enemies – the Blemmrys (aggressive tribes of the Eastern Desert, today's Bisharin) and the Nobodai tribes of the Western Desert (who may have migrated from the Sudan) commenced warfare. Maximianus promptly returned southward with military reinforcements, slaughtered large numbers of the rival tribes, invited the Nobodai to settle in the area of retreat and act as a buffer, and, by taking hostages from the Blemmrys, compelled them to enter into an agreement to keep the peace for a hundred

years. In return they were granted religious freedom. Ardent devotees of Isis, they were allowed to make an annual pilgrimage to the temple on Philae and transport the sacred statue of the goddess to their villages once a year. A strong fortress was built on the island of Philae where the Blemmys and Nobodai could meet on friendly terms under Roman direction and swear oaths of loyalty. To mark the signing of the treaty, access to the temple of Isis was enlarged in the name of Diocletian and a massive gateway was built to the west of the complex, adorned with his famous relief of the source of the Nile.

No sooner had the problem on the southern border been resolved than disturbances broke out in Alexandria. Since the subsistence of the Roman Empire depended on Egypt's grain exports to feed the Roman army, Diocletian decided to come in person to bring the rebellious population under control. He cut off the aqueducts that conveyed fresh water for about twenty-seven kilometres from the Canopic branch of the Nile to the city. The cisterns – some of them three-storey constructions of immense proportions – began to run dry. Nevertheless it took Diocletian's forces eight months to take full control. Thousands perished in the looting and killing that followed. To mark his victory Diocletian ordered his prefect Publius to build a monument in his honour, a great granite column



*Figure 5.1* The Emperor Hadrian constructed a gateway in the Temple of Isis at Philae recording an ancient tradition: the cataract region was the edge of the world, where the 'first water' from the annual inundation rose from the primeval ocean Nun. The relief shows blocks of stone heaped one upon the other with a vulture (representing Upper Egypt) and a hawk (representing Lower Egypt) standing on top. Beneath the rocks a circular chamber is outlined by the contours of a snake within which the Nile-god Hapi crouches. He clasps a vessel in each hand ready, at the appointed time, to pour the sacred water of the Nile towards each of the Two Lands. Photo Michael Stock.



*Figure 5.2* ‘Pompey’s pillar’ in Alexandria, drawn by the Commission of Arts and Sciences set up by Napoleon during his campaign in Egypt in 1798.

subsequently misnamed Pompey’s Pillar by the Crusaders. It was erected on the site of the Serapeum, partly constructed from robbed stone from neighbouring buildings and crowned by a Corinthian capital. The text extolled the virtues of the emperor and there is some evidence, but no conclusive proof, that a statue of Diocletian adorned the top. Its completion was inaugurated with great pomp and ceremony, although it is doubtful that the mourning population shared the jubilation.

Diocletian was not tardy in realising the difficulty in governing a country with a sprawling, largely fertile Delta in the north, and a long narrow valley between two deserts in Upper Egypt. Not all the provincial governors were exercising full control. To ensure the efficient collection and trans-shipment of grain and raw materials, he saw the advantages of reducing the size of the provinces by setting up artificial boundaries, separating military from civil power, and grouping single provinces into larger dioceses. This unprecedented change, along with tax increases, resulted in considerable distress. If grain was rejected due to poor quality,

villagers were obliged to place themselves under the protection of the government, which meant, in effect, abandoning their legal right to their property. Solidarity among the farming masses, traditionally derived from direct contact with one another in their reliance on a common water source, was severed. In areas like Thebes where national sentiment ran high there was stricter government control than ever before. The people rebelled forcefully and this was countered by a stronger military presence. Luxor Temple was turned into a Roman military fortress with circuit wall and barracks, and the entire section east of the hypostyle hall was dismantled. The central doorway to the south was blocked by masonry; reliefs of Pharaohs making offerings and pouring libations to ancient gods were plastered over and replaced with figures of Roman emperors in toga and sandals. In 304 Diocletian issued an edict calling upon Egyptians to make sacrifices to pagan gods and venerate imperial effigies. If they refused they were declared guilty of belonging to the subversive sect, Christianity, and suffered the consequences. Men were rounded up from all over Egypt for trial and execution. Temples, including those at Esna, Oxyrhynchus, Samanud and Alexandria, were used for prisons and trials. The result was the growth of the cult of martyrs – the honour of holy people through their relics.

Peter Brown, a leading scholar on early Christianity, dismisses the suggestion that the Christian cult of martyrs was a continuation of the pagan cult of leaders (1981: 6). Yet pilgrimage and public veneration in burial grounds is a tradition in Egypt that can be traced to the earliest Pharaohs. Art, literature, ritual ceremony, and archaeology provide proof that over the millennia dead heroes were honoured in burial grounds. As early as 3000 BC, annual pilgrimage was made to burial sites to honour the ‘souls of Nekhen’ and the ‘souls of Pe’, early leaders of Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. About 2686 BC King Djoser buried stone vessels in his tomb inscribed with the names of virtually all the kings that came before him, whom he honoured. In settled societies, where the deceased are buried close to the living, there is awareness of and respect for the dead, a form of ancestor worship. The myth of Osiris as an ideal ruler, for example, occurs in so many different forms that it must contain an element of truth. It is not beyond the bounds of reason to suppose that he was originally a leader who exercised ingenuity and led his people to an understanding of the benefits of water control. Perhaps he judged cases of disputed embankments, canals, or catchment basins, because

he was associated throughout dynastic times with water as a source of fertility, the soil, sprouting vegetation, and judgement. According to the myth he was slaughtered, and over the millennia people paid homage to sites associated with his relics. Likewise, in Christian times, there was pious regard for the bodies of dead heroes, now called saints and martyrs.

Martyrologies are necessarily vague and frequently contradictory. However, they tend to follow a recurring plan: a revelation, a confession of faith, arrest and invitation to worship an idol, refusal, subjection to torture – from which the saint suffered no harm – followed by death by witnesses who are converted by such steadfastness. Take as examples, Buqtor (Victor) el-Gabrawi, and Castor (Abu Qastur). The former was a soldier in the fortress of a little-known area called Shu near Abnub in Middle Egypt – an early convert to Christianity who was tortured for refusing to obey the Diocletianic edict ordering soldiers to perform sacrifices as proof that they were not practising Christians. He was cast into the furnace used for heating baths and is venerated as an Egyptian martyr to this day. The latter was a resident of the village of Bardanuha, near the city of Qais (Cynopolis in Graeco-Roman times). He was among those



*Figure 5.3* The bell tower of the newly-restored single-storey church of Abu Qastur near Bardanuha in Middle Egypt (left), and its interior (right) showing chandelier, sanctuary screen and altar. The central apse of the church is believed to be above the tomb of the saint. Photo Samir Naoum.

taken to Alexandria and, obdurate to the end, he was eventually beheaded. His relics were transported to the place of his birth where a church was built in his honour. Uniform pattern and content of legend suggests a school of scribes. Some of the martyrologies reveal how the cults of local saints and martyrs were diffused. Cyrus (Abu Kir) came from a wealthy family in the city of Damanhur. He and his brother Philip agreed with two priests (one of whom was named John [Yuhanna]), to confess to the governor of the province to having embraced Christianity. A confirmed pagan, the governor commanded that they be shot with arrows, burned in a furnace, bound to the tails of horses, and dragged out of the city. All this was done, but the saintly men suffered no harm. At last they were beheaded by sword. Some men recovered the body of Cyrus, buried him and built a church at the spot where he was found. The bodies of the other three saints were wrapped up and returned to the city of Damanhur where they were buried. Later their relics were transported elsewhere. Those of Cyrus were first placed in the Church of Saint Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria, later moved to a church in his name near the seashore, and are now in Old Cairo: in the Church of Saints Cyrus and John (Deir Mar Tadrus), and in the northern transept of the Church of Saint Barbara.

Christians in peril of their lives frequently moved elsewhere, seeking refuge in what they imagined to be safer places. This may account for legends on the transference of the relics, giving rise to new myths. Saint Abscaron (Ishkiron) grew up in a Christian family in Birket Qallin in the Delta governorate of Kafr el-Sheikh. Like many young men he was recruited into the Roman army and ordered to burn incense at the altars of pagan gods. When he refused he was tortured and martyred. A church was built in his name in his village in the Delta where it was customary for the peasant farmers to celebrate group weddings following the annual harvest. On one such occasion, Roman soldiers lurked outside the church and threatened to burn it down. But at the very last moment, by divine providence, the church and the worshippers were miraculously transported to a new location at el-Biho, a remote village five kilometres south of Samalut in Middle Egypt – over 400 kilometres from its original location. Not one member of the congregation felt the church being moved and only after the service did they realise they were in a different place. A version of this miracle in a manuscript in the Coptic Museum (No. 863/155), transcribed from Amharic into Arabic, recounts another version of the legend:



*Figure 5.4* This mound within the Monastery of Saint Isaac (known as Deir el-Hammam after the village where it is located) is believed to contain the bones of martyrs from the time of Diocletian. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Abram Weekly.

Desiring to set some matters right in his community and dissatisfied with the location of his church, Saint Abscaron proceeded on horseback to the village of el-Biho. He arrived in the evening and was greeted by the local residents who were gathered together in friendly discourse as is customary at sunset. He told them that he wanted to buy a plot of land, pointed with his spear to the spot where the church stands today, paid the agreed price and disappeared. The following morning the people were astonished to find a church on the very place which had hitherto been vacant and they marvelled at the miracle.

Today's restored church of Saint Abscaron in Samalut has been built on an older foundation, and incorporated into its structure are some of the elements of an earlier building. Father Bishoi Rami pointed to a well in the church grounds. 'This was miraculously brought here along with the original church', he said. 'It is the ancient well, in the same spot in relation to the church as in the village of Qallin in the Delta.' As for Lake (Birket) Qallin, it has been dredged several times but no evidence of the original church has been found. The relics of Saint Abscaron lie in churches in the monasteries of Saint Samuel of Qalamun, Saint Bishoy in Wadi Natrun, and several churches in Old Cairo.

The monastery in Esna (Latopolis) is known as the Monastery of the Three Thousand Six Hundred Martyrs (Deir Manaos wa el-Shehuda). In the oldest church in the complex a metre-high granite column is held to mark the place where Egyptians were beheaded during the harsh measures of Diocletian when the temple was used for trials. Their number may be a magnification of the truth, but it is not a fable. It probably represents a myth based on communal recollection of the cruel repression under Decius (AD 249–51) and Diocletian. The name of Decius in the small Graeco-Roman temple at Esna, built in honour of the ram-headed Khnum, is the last to appear in a royal cartouche. His reign, as already noted, saw the first of the great persecutions when thousands of anchorites abandoned society and took to desert and mountain range. It was where Saint Paul chose a solitary life on the Red Sea coast, and where, later, Saint Antony became spiritual leader of a large community. In and around Esna, hermits lived in ancient tombs, in isolated caves, and in a communal settlement in the Eastern Desert (see pp. 46–47). The area was heavily populated with Christians, among whom stories of saint and martyrs have proliferated.

Among Egypt's youngest recorded martyrs is Abnub of Samanud (the Pharaonic capital of Theb Nethr known as Spentios in Greek times), the birthplace of the Egyptian historian Manetho who compiled the famous 'king list'. Here, according to a manuscript in the Monastery of the Syrians in Wadi Natrun (No. 270), nearly eight thousand people, including young

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*Figure 5.6 (opposite)* The new Monastery of the Martyrs of Esna is a large and elegant construction built in neo-Coptic style dedicated to Saint George, the Holy Virgin and Saint Michael. Its paintings are by pilgrims who annually come to the monastery for the *mulid* of Saint Amonius, Bishop of Esna. Photo Michael Stock.



*Figure 5.5* In one of the surviving ancient rock-hewn chapels of the Church of the Martyrs in Esna (above) a saint can be identified to the right. Today, the site, situated near a Muslim burial ground on the outskirts of the town, is dominated by the new church (below). Photo Michael Stock.





*Figure 5.7* The modern church of the Virgin Mary at Samanud in the Delta is built on the ruins of an ancient temple. Surviving blocks show Hapi the Nile god bearing fruits of the land. According to a manuscript (No. 270) in the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun, this was the scene of countless massacres in the reign of Diocletian.

boys and girls, were murdered for refusing to kneel before idols. There was a large prison in the city in which they were incarcerated before being killed and tradition has it that Abnub was only twelve years old when he proclaimed his Christian faith and was tortured to death. ‘His body was carried to the Church of the Holy Virgin by the people of his village and is kept here to this day’, Father Abnub, one of the priests of what is now known as the Church of the Holy Virgin and Abnub the Martyr, told me. ‘During the annual mulid Abnub appears to children and plays with them’, he added. His is not an isolated claim. The story is repeated by many Copts of my acquaintance. Each measure taken to eradicate Christianity won new converts. According to the church historian Eusebius (*c.* 263–339), who saw many martyrdoms in Egypt, Christians suffered with fortitude and received the final sentence of death with joy and gladness. Their myths, artfully embellished, drew an ever-increasing number of devotees.

Dimiana is one of Egypt’s most widely revered martyrs. The origin of her cult is uncertain. According to the Arabic *Synaxarion*, she was the only

child of Marcus, a Roman governor in the northern Delta, who refused to marry the man of her father's choice. At the age of fifteen she preferred to practise the Christian virtue of virginity, and her father built a large residence for her on an area of about fifteen acres. Soon the daughters of other noblemen joined her and followed her example. When Diocletian summoned Marcus to Rome demanding obeisance, much to the displeasure of his daughter, he responded. She admonished him for abjuring his faith, and so persuasive were her arguments that her father eventually repented. When the emperor learned of Dimiana's influence over him, he sent one of his generals and a hundred soldiers and ordered that the young woman and her colleagues renounce their faith or be put to death. They stood firm in their belief and all were decapitated. The *mulid* on the martyrdom of Saint Dimiana and the forty virgins is celebrated annually in the church of the village of Zafaran constructed on the site of their graves. It is attended by thousands of pilgrims. Dimiana is particularly popular among women because she is regarded as a patron saint of health and fertility. The present Church of Saint Dimiana, in the monastery that bears her name, is a twentieth-century construction on a square plan with four cross piers at the centre supporting a lofty dome. Below ground level are water tanks with vaults held up by arches, believed to be part of the original structure which was destroyed by a particularly high flood. Her relics lie in five churches in Cairo.

Many Egyptian martyrs are well-known throughout Christendom, among them Saint Menas (Abu Mina). Contradictory stories about his birth and martyrdom have merged into complex myth. According to Coptic sources, the saint was born in Maryut (Mareotis), joined the Roman army when his parents died, refused to take part in the required imperial sacrifices, deserted and declared himself a Christian. He was killed and buried at Maryut where his grave, obscured by wind-blown sand, was lost. However, according to legend, a shepherd observed that a sick lamb that crossed a certain spot in the desert immediately became well; subsequent digging revealed the relics of the saint. A church was built on the site, and Menas' relics were placed beneath the altar. In another version of the myth, Menas, as a soldier-saint born to wealthy parents in Phrygia in western Asia, was widely respected for his piety and miracles. In 296 he suffered terrible torture at the hands of the Romans: the soles of his feet were torn off, his eyes gouged, and his tongue dragged out by the roots. But despite these terrible mutilations Menas was



*Figure 5.8* Icon of Saint Dimiana and her forty companions, all martyred in the time of Diocletian for adhering to their faith, in the Hanging Church (el-Moallaqa) in Old Cairo. It is signed by 'Ibrahim' – undoubtedly Ibrahim el-Nesikh, the prolific Egyptian painter, copyist and scribe. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

still able to stand and address his spectators. Finally the emperor drew his sword and slew him. Menas' body was supposed to be cremated in western Asia, but his colleagues managed to set his coffin adrift on the Mediterranean. It was cast ashore in Egypt where some Bedouin reputedly found it, loaded it onto a camel and proceeded into the desert. At a certain point the camel refused to move further and there the relics of the saint were buried. The church built in his honour became famous as a health spa. Cures were attributed to the therapeutic effects of the water, which came from springs in the limestone rocks (since dried up).



*Figure 5.9* This fine fifth-century limestone statue of Saint Menas with the ailing lamb, discovered in Maryut, is now on display in the garden of the 'old wing' of the Coptic Museum. It presents a decided, if decadent, classical style. Photo Robert Scott.

When the Emperor Constantine's only daughter, who suffered from leprosy, was cured there its popularity as a place of healing increased.

A martyr whose fame spread well beyond the borders of Egypt is the virgin Saint Catherine of Alexandria, better known for her monastery in Sinai. Her *Life*, written in Greek, follows an established pattern of chastity, martyrdom, and angels transporting relics. The daughter of a wealthy family, she was tall, beautiful, gracious and well versed in poetry, philosophy and mathematics. According to one popular tradition she witnessed with anguish how Maximianus promoted the worship of idols and tried to convert him. Unsuccessful in her attempt she nevertheless astonished him by the breadth of her knowledge. He forthwith put her under guard while he sent out a search for fifty learned men whom he charged to dissuade Catherine from her faith. But her arguments were so persuasive that the sages were themselves converted. The outraged proconsul ordered that she be beheaded. On her death, milk not blood was said to have flowed from her wound. Several traditions purport to explain Catherine's association with Sinai. According to one, five centuries after her martyrdom, a monk in Sinai had a vision in which he

saw the dead saint's body become radiant with light as it was lifted by angels to the peak near Mount Sinai (subsequently known as Mount Catherine), where it remained incorruptible. When monks ascended the mountain in the ninth century they found the intact body. It exuded sweet-smelling myrrh, which was periodically collected in small bottles because it was believed to have healing properties. Tales of her suffering and martyrdom were elaborated as her legend spread. It was said that she was strapped to four wooden wheels, which were set to rotate in opposite directions, two to the right and two to the left. When they began to rotate, far from cutting Catherine to shreds and subjecting her to a terrible ordeal, the wheels spun on their own and her flesh was not torn. The fourth-century monastery dedicated to the Holy Virgin in Sinai was renamed in honour of Saint Catherine in the eleventh century and her martyrdom and the news of her relics spread throughout Europe at the time of the Crusades. Today, the church houses her skull and left hand. As for the place of her actual martyrdom in Alexandria, the church built in her honour has long disappeared. On the site is a huge neo-classical basilica with baroque curves. It was built in 1847 on a plot of land presented by Mohammed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt, designed by Italian architects. Inside the chapel is a block of marble said to have come from the very column to which Saint Catherine was bound and beheaded on 25 November 305.

When Christianity was declared to be the state religion after Constantine's famous conversion at the beginning of the fourth century, relics were transported from obscure graves and helped spread the message throughout the Roman Empire. The bodies of Saint Andrew, Saint Luke and Saint Timothy were recovered and transported with appropriate solemnity to Constantinople. The relics of Saint Barbara, a young martyr from western Asia, were brought to Egypt and first housed in the Church of the Holy Virgin, 'the Hanging Church' (el-Moallaqa), in Old Cairo, before being transferred to another, also in Old Cairo, built in her own name. In the northern part of the Church of Saint Barbara are chapels dedicated to saints Cyrus and John, the martyrs of Damanhur already referred to. The relics of saints Sergius and Bacchus, two Roman officers who were martyred in Syria in 303, were brought to Egypt, and the church known as Saint Sergius (Abu Sarga) was built over the crypt where the Holy Family is believed to have taken refuge. Those of Saint George, one of Egypt's most popular saints, are widely distributed throughout

Egypt. Otto Meinardus writes that he personally saw eighteen bolsters (wooden tubes enshrined in velvet) containing the relics in the name of this saint (Meinardus, 1999: 315). The location of the relics of Saint Mark the Evangelist, as already mentioned (p. 61), are uncertain. As for the body of Saint Antony, according to the Coptic *Synaxarion*, it was buried in a place known only to Saints Athanasius and Serapion. Today his relics are claimed to lie in the Monastery of Saint Antony in Itfik in Middle Egypt (a dependency of the monastery of the same name on the Red Sea coast), and in churches in Constantinople, Bruges, Antwerp and Rome.

Christianity flourished on a willingness to suffer even death for a principle, and the bodies or fragments of the bodies of martyrs placed in reliquaries or situated beneath the altars of churches came to be regarded as sacred. The faithful approach them to light a taper or leave a plea written on a scrap of papyrus or an *ostraca*, assured that their prayers will be answered. It is tempting to hearken back to the Late Period of Pharaonic history when similar objects placed near or on statues of influential people erected in temples served the same purpose (see p. 65).

Saint Pachomius (Anba Bakhum) (290–346), the founder of the form of monasticism that took his name, was born to pagan Egyptian parents in Esna during the ‘era of the martyrs’. An impressionable youth, he learned Greek only late in life in order to communicate with strangers. He was recruited into the Roman army, received hostile treatment at Thebes and was imprisoned. There he had an opportunity to talk with Christians and was so impressed by their solidarity and what he heard about Christ the Saviour that when he was released in 320 he became a professed Christian. He took to an abandoned brick kiln in the region of Pbow (Faw), east of Gebel el-Tarif where the Nag Hammadi codices were found, and sought spiritual guidance under Palomen, a pious and learned hermit in the area. After a period of strict religious instruction, Pachomius left Pbow, and, taking with him a group of followers, travelled north towards the village of Tabennese near Akhmim. This region, too, was heavily populated with individuals searching for ‘the way’. Not all of them lived in self-imposed solitude in harsh conditions, the image usually invoked by the word ‘hermit’. As already mentioned, there were true ascetics who chose remote valleys in the Western Desert, or caves separated by hilly ridges in the Eastern, there were also pious individuals who embraced a semi-solidary



Figure 5.10 Icon of Saint Pachomius and his sister Dalusham portrayed in the Monastery of Saint Pachomius near Akhmim. It is painted in authentically Egyptian style probably by a priest, monk, youth, or even a peasant farmer (Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock).

life in urban areas. That is to say, men and women who withdrew from family life but not from society; those whose devotion to God did not preclude them from using their talents and helping those more needy than themselves. Largely supported through offerings of the faithful, such people often grouped together to form some sort of organised community, such as that of the aged Ebonk in the region of Pbow (see p. 77). Pachomius was mindful of them. He realised that, with a little discipline and guidance, such communities could be made to re-group for the greater interest of society as a whole, and he introduced the 'cenobitic' way

of life – a word derived from the Greek ‘common’ and ‘life’. Earlier, godly men like Saint Paul, Saint Antony and Saint Macarius had set an ascetic ideal, which they realised by withdrawing from society; theirs was largely a desert phenomenon. Pachomius looked to the Nile valley, to the many spiritually inclined individuals who willingly and spontaneously grouped together, and formulated a formal written code of behaviour and practice to govern their lives.

Pachomius had no resources with which to build monasteries. Yet walled communities were built – at the edge of the floodplain within easy reach of towns and villages, in deserted villages, and on mounds that rose above the floodplain. How can one explain this except through voluntary contributions of those that followed his rule – pious individuals who either perceived the wisdom of organisation, or who simply admired him and willingly gave their time and expertise? It is not without significance that Pachomian monasteries were named, not after Pachomius himself, or any single individual, but after the town in which each was built. His was a lay movement and the early monastic establishments did not even possess a church in the beginning. A priest from the neighbourhood would come to the monastery once or twice a week to celebrate the liturgy for the monks, and share a communal meal. According to the rule, each monk had a room, and those of special trades were grouped into ‘houses’ each with its own supervisor. There were communal facilities such as kitchens, bakeries, water-cisterns, wine-presses and workshops. A schedule of activities was drawn up to govern each hour of day and night. Food was served in a special refectory once a day. Pious, enlightened communities were established, and soon enough they became self-sufficient and set an example to others. Pachomian monasteries provided services to surrounding settlements, sometimes entire villages. They offered alms to the poor, cared for widows and orphans, ministered to the ailing, gave brotherly love, and aided the bereaved by praying and blessing their dear departed. Leading disciplined lives, Pachomian monks brought productivity to the soil and revived crafts. They gathered their own materials for baskets and buildings, constructed their own boats for travel on the Nile or to nearby islands suitable for agriculture, and built churches which were open to the public for worship – except on certain religious occasions.

An applicant for admission to a monastery did not have to exhibit spectacular feats of mortification of the flesh. A candidate merely had to



*Figure 5.11* The tiny monastery on the summit of a hill to the east of the village of Tod at the edge of the desert south of Luxor was inhabited by three socially active monks when this photograph was taken in 1990. They said it was dedicated to a local saint, Anba Ibshai, and pointed to a number of inscribed blocks of stone in its structure – clearly taken from a Pharaonic temple. Photo Michael Stock.

undergo a period of probation as a novice during which he served the monks while learning and submitting to the ‘rule’, after which he was clothed in the habit and officially joined the community. Pachomius chose those with leadership qualities to instruct others in their daily religious ritual, behaviour and responsibilities, towards themselves and society, thus establishing social stratification and order. No personal visitors were allowed, but each monastery had a guest-house outside the walls. There is no doubt that the latent aspirations of the people were stirred. Copts say that when Pachomius’ sister Mary came to see her brother she was refused entry. He sent a message with the gatekeeper: ‘You know that I am living, therefore grieve not that you did not see me. But, if you would renounce the world and find mercy with God, you shall possess your soul. And I trust the Lord to call unto you many who would join you . . .’ Inspired by her brother’s words, Mary chose a cave near his monastery and women of similar inclination joined her. Pachomius appointed a teacher called Peter, an aged monk noted for his

piety and devotion, to instruct them in the same rules as those laid down for the men. We know that by the time Pachomius died in 346 there were nine Pachomian monasteries for men and women along the length of the Nile valley, from Aswan to the Mediterranean. The word 'monastery' is generally used for both men's and women's monastic orders in Egypt.

Some religious communities strictly followed Pachomius' 'rule'. Others adopted some of the instructions and supplemented them with their own. Others again preferred to remain independent, while nevertheless adopting the charitable aims of the institution. To contend that Pachomius could single-handedly have achieved this – bearing in mind the nature of the land with a long and narrow floodplain in the south and a sprawling delta in the north – is impracticable, indeed impossible. Therefore, we must consider the human resources at his disposal. The poverty-stricken but intellectually vigorous priests from the defunct temples throughout the land were religious and social-minded individuals, who through their impoverishment had learned



*Figure 5.12* The small, recently restored monastery dedicated to Saint Pachomius (Anba Bakhum) in Luxor is popularly known as Deir el-Shayeb ('the elderly man's monastery') in remembrance of the saint's apparition to an elder as a venerable old man. Pachomius was the founder of the form of cenobitic monasticism that took his name. Photo Michael Stock.

humility, and to whom Christianity provided a new formula for hope. They had been disciplined in temples which, although dedicated to a multitude of local deities such as the hawk, crocodile or cow, were nevertheless united in daily and seasonal religious ritual. Temple priests ranged from the largest group of low-ranking ‘pure ones’ – who abstained from certain foods, and carried out many duties in connection with running temple workshops, farmlands, the building or rebuilding of houses – to prophets, scribes of sacred liturgy, and astrologers. Although there were deep differences in the function of the Egyptian priesthood, and the monastic organisation of Pachomius, similarities can nevertheless be found. To quote the Greek author Chaeremon the Stoic’s exposé about the Egyptian priests:

They practiced frugality and restraint, self-control and enduring, in all things justice and freedom from avarice . . . During the time of the so-called purifications and fasts they did not even have contact with their nearest kinsmen and those of their own breed . . . except with those who were pure and fasted together with them for necessary duties . . . But the rest of the time they moved easily among those who were of the order . . . Priests were considered also as philosophers among the Egyptians, [and] they chose the temples as the place to philosophize. For to live close to their shrines was fitting to their whole desire for contemplation; it gave them security because of the reverence for the divine . . . They renounced every other employment and human labour, and devoted their whole life to contemplation and worship of the gods. Through this (worship) they procured for themselves honor, security, and piety; through contemplation they procured knowledge, and through both a certain esoteric and venerable way of life. For to be always in contact with divine knowledge and inspiration keeps them far from all kinds of greediness, represses the passions, and incites them to live a life of intelligence . . . They divided the night for the observation of the heavenly bodies, sometimes for ritual; and the day for worship of the gods, in which they sang hymns to them three or four times, in the morning [and the evening], when the sun is in mid-heaven, and when it is descending to

the west. They spent the rest of the time with arithmetical and geometrical speculations, always trying to search out something and to make discoveries, in general, always about science . . . Their limitless and incessant labor bears witness to the endurance of these men, the absence of desire to their self control.

(trans. Van der Horst, 1984: 6, 8)

The ancient Egyptian priesthood was confirmed in its social standing and had an assured livelihood, as is clear from stelae of some Late Period priests which carry lists of up to seventeen generations of forebears. They conducted official business outside their temples, as did later monks. They likewise travelled on religious errands, took part in seasonal festivals, and were available to help the bereaved and conduct funeral ceremonies. For a nation dependent on the temples for religious and community services for thousands of years, it should not go unnoticed that both temple priests and Christian monks were called ‘servants of god’ or ‘prophets of god’; that each observed ritual purification before entering the ‘order;’ and that each made sure that the laity did not set foot inside the sacred place in a state of impurity – ritual purification (baptism) was carried out. Pachomian monasteries – which, judging from the White and Red monasteries near Sohag, may have resembled walled temples from a distance – provided direction in the new Christian environment. Not all were large walled settlements. Early churches, large and small, each had resident monks who served the community so each was, in a sense, a monastery – a Pachomian monastery if it adopted the ‘rule’.

Shortly after Pachomius’ death, his *Life* was written by fellow monks and through the accounts of Theodorus of Tebennese, and the founder’s other disciples, we know about the beginning of his popular form of monasticism. This biography was copied many times, rearranged, combined with other sources in various compilations, and has been transmitted in many forms: in Sahidic (the original version), Bohairic (the most complete), Greek (no fewer than eight *Lives*), and Arabic. These have been compared and re-evaluated, and recent studies by Goehring (1999) suggest that Pachomius’ monastic communities were not so much an innovation as a resolve to co-ordinate an already existing and widespread system. Perhaps his military training honed his talents for order and discipline. Perchance his awareness of groups of pious individuals seeking

strength in community living excited him. Whatever his inspiration, Pachomius encouraged them to lead socially active lives. The monks were looked upon as mortals to whom God had given power of healing, but that did not prevent them from supplying medication to those who came for a cure. There were professional doctors in Pachomian monasteries, just as in Pharaonic temples, and, indeed, in today's monasteries in Wadi Natrun, the Desert of Qalamun and elsewhere. A collection of antique surgical instruments in the Coptic Museum include some for use in gynaecology and childbirth, and these, along with utilitarian objects made of metal (like musical instruments, bells, etc.), and even wooden toys for children, reveal the extent of their activities. Monks acted as mediators in rural and urban disputes, they owned their land, they cultivated, manufactured, sold and traded. Business and legal documents in Coptic (rather than Greek or Roman) begin to appear in abundance.

In continuing the charitable aims of the ancient temples, the Pachomian monasteries attracted many non-Christians. They did not have to be converts to work alongside the brethren in cultivating their fields, raising cattle, or performing menial duties. How many voluntarily became Christians because the monasteries gave a sense of order to their lives is not known. What is clear is that, inspired by their charismatic leader, Pachomian monasteries served as foci for the spiritual and cultural life of the people in both rural and urban areas. Soon other leaders emerged. Pisentius of Coptos, for example, helped the needy well beyond the limits of his diocese and others, as attested by written records, arbitrated with local officials on their rights. With land reclaimed, village dignitaries acquired renewed status and some were anxious to recount their virtues to the monks. One such individual informed the monk Paphnutius that he was ever hospitable, never ceased to offer shelter to a stranger nor allowed a poor man or stranger to leave his village empty-handed or without sustenance. Social obligation was part of a long-standing tradition, which recalls ancient inscriptions. Harwa, an important official in the 25th dynasty (720–671 BC), wrote, 'I have done what people love and gods praise . . . who gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked . . . assisted the unfortunate.' Evidence that monks in Pachomian monasteries came to be regarded as intermediaries with the divine survives in many Coptic texts. There is also a wall painting from the Monastery of Saint Jeremias at Saqqara (in the Coptic Museum) which shows a sinner kneeling in prayer at the foot of monks (Figure 5.13). Pachomius was a



*Figure 5.13* This rare surviving early Coptic wall painting shows two figures of haloed monks and two church fathers with codices, with a fifth, smaller figure kneeling at their feet (Coptic Museum). Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

broad-minded and pious individual who brought back a sense of order to the people and encouraged them to reach God through work and charity.

The death of the founder of cenobitic monasticism, during a plague epidemic, was bound to have widespread repercussions. Indeed, there was some dissension in the movement for years afterwards. On his deathbed Pachomius had named Petronius, one of his disciples, as his successor. But he too died of the plague. The elders of the monastic community subsequently appointed Harsiesius to succeed him, but it appears that he had neither authority or respect. Then Theodore, born of a Christian family and consecrated by Pachomius when he was fourteen years old, became the worthy head of the chain of monasteries. Among his innovations was to shuffle supervising abbots among the monasteries twice a year, during Easter and in August – a practice which still continues among remaining Pachomian monasteries.

In 367, Theodore ordained that the thirty-ninth paschal letter of Saint Athanasius, issued on the occasion of Easter, should be translated into Coptic and read in the monasteries throughout the country; interestingly,

he criticised the books compiled by heretics ‘to which they attribute antiquity and give the name of saints’. Clearly, Gnostic literature was still being circulated.

All communal Christian monasticism stems, either directly or indirectly, from the Egyptian example. Saint Basil, the first of the great Cappadocian fathers, spent several years in Upper Egypt as a disciple to Pachomius before going to Caesaria in 358, where he began his solitary career laying down the rules that came to characterise Eastern monasticism in Asia Minor. There is a similar monastic institution in Tibet. Saint Pachomius’ combination of solitude and communal life served also as a model for Saint Benedict, the spiritual leader of all Western monks who founded monasteries in the sixth century on the Egyptian model but in a stricter form (the Benedictine Order). Egyptian Christians (Copts) had missionaries in northern Europe – Saint Moritz the Theban, was drafted into the Roman army and ended up preaching the Gospel in the Swiss Alps where a small town and a monastery are named after him – and there is some indication, but no conclusive evidence, of a Coptic missionary movement even as far afield as Ireland; Irish monasticism is notably closer to that of the Coptic Saint Pachomius than to that of Saint Benedict.

Eight kilometres north-east of Luxor, is the small monastery of Deir el-Bakhum (Monastery of Saint Pachomius), popularly known by his devotees as Deir el-Shaieb (‘the elderly man’s monastery’ (Figure 5.12)). They claim that the saint frequently appears as a venerable old man with a grey beard who performs miracles. The monastery was in a sorry state of disrepair in 1994 when Pope Shenuda III aided it materially and consecrated new monks. It is now a thriving community. In 1999 I found there a well-laid-out visitors’ garden and guest-house, a gift shop selling monastery products, a library with an audio-visual division and a separate area enclosing the monks’ cells. Some of the architectural elements of the original fourth-century church survive, including a stone relief of a cross encircled with foliage, an ancient baptismal font, and a large cymbal used for mass and church services.

Probably influenced by the Old Testament description of God presenting the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the revelation of the Holy Quran to the Prophet Mohammed, Copts have come to cherish the belief that an angel of the Lord appeared to Saint



*Figure 5.14* Ancient doorway of the Monastery of Saint Pachomius, Luxor. Photo Michael Stock.

Pachomius and gave him a copper plate on which was inscribed the ‘rule’. He is depicted holding it in some neo-Coptic icons. More frequently Pachomius is portrayed with his father-confessor and spiritual mentor Saint Palomen. During ‘the era of the martyrs’ the teachings of Saint Pachomius came like a fresh breeze. One day his disciples asked him, ‘Is there anything we can do to have the power of making miracles?’ He answered with a smile:

If you desire to continue on the spiritual way to the Kingdom of Heaven, do not ask for this power because it brings pride to beginner monks; pray and seek for the divine power for making spiritual miracles. Should there be a man who resists god’s way and you bring him back to the real knowledge of god, then you have already raised the dead; if you bring a heretic back to the Orthodox, the right way, then you have already opened the eyes of one born blind; if you could change a money-lover’s hand to open it to the poor, or can make a lazy person active in spiritual work, then you have already cured a

paralysed man; if you can cause an adulterer to repent, then you have already extinguished flames and fires; if you make the mad calm and humble then you have already got an evil spirit out of him. Do you think there is anything greater than these we can look forward to.

(From the brochure ‘Saint Bakhomious Monastery  
Al Shaieb’, Luxor)

Diocletian tried to give moral unity to the Empire by enhancing his own divinity, but such lack of modesty had no chance of success in Egypt because the blood of martyrs blotted the landscape and his reforms and persecutions fired religious zeal. When Diocletian left the stage and retired before the Emperor Constantine had his famous revelation during a battle on Milvian Bridge at Rome, which resulted in his conversion to Christianity in 312, Egypt was already largely Christianised. There were remote Antonian monastic communities from Wadi Natrun to the Red Sea coast, along the fringes of the Eastern and Western Deserts, and even as far as Kharga oasis. There were monasteries within urban and rural areas throughout the Nile valley and the Delta that wholly or in part followed the rule of Saint Pachomius, and there were many Christian sympathisers in pagan communities, even within Roman legions stationed in Egypt.

## THE WAR AGAINST PAGANISM AND CHRISTIAN REFLECTION OF ITS ART

A turning point in the fortunes of Christianity in Egypt came in the reign of Theodosius (347–395), the first of the Roman emperors to be baptised in the Christian faith. In 379 he branded non-Christians as heathens and took steps that had a more far-reaching effect on his Egyptian province than elsewhere in the still undivided Empire. He expressly forbade all forms of traditional worship on the threat of being charged with treason; he ordered temples closed, he outlawed mummification, and sought out and destroyed pagan writings. Even the Hermetic texts (widely circulated in edited versions between 150 to 300) were targeted. Land used for pagan sacrifice was confiscated by the state; the use of the demotic script was forbidden; and ancient records ‘exorcised’ by painting crosses and the name of Jesus Christ on them. Hermits all over the country came out of hiding. On the Theban necropolis alone, monasteries were built near the cliff face west of the Valley of the Queens, between the tombs of noblemen Nabamun (65) and Hapuseneb (67) on the hillside above the village of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, and beyond the Valley of the Kings.

With Pharaonic temples officially closed it was only to be expected that these enormous edifices, or parts of them, would be converted into Christian chapels and churches. The curbing of their material wealth had, in fact, long rendered them ineffectual, and Pachomian monasteries provided many of the services traditionally performed by pagan priests, so it was a simple step to convert them. Among the best known so transformed were a Ptolemaic temple on the west bank at Thebes and the upper terrace of Queen Hatshepsut’s mortuary monument, which are, even today, known by their Arabised names, Deir el-Medina and Deir el-Bahri, although these *deirs* (monasteries) have long ceased to be evident.

Also transformed were the festival temple of Thutmose III to the rear of the temple complex of Amun at Karnak, part of the temple of Seti I at Abydos, and the hypostyle hall of the temple of Isis on Philae. At Dendera blocks from the ruined Roman 'birth house' of the temple of Hathor were used in the construction of a church adjacent to it. The Egypt of the Pharaohs officially ceased to exist. Reliefs of gods were stripped of their 'likenesses' (faces), Min and Amun-Re in the form of 'the bull of his mother' of their phalluses, and the *ankh* (the 'key of life') was consciously converted into a cross. Inscribed walls were sometimes plastered over and Christian figures painted onto the stuccoed surfaces. These plaster layers were later removed by nineteenth-century Egyptologists. In the small graceful temple of Deir el-Medina the Christians inadvertently preserved, in an excellent condition, a relief of the judgment scene in the court of Osiris, widely portrayed in the mortuary text known as the Book of the Dead (of which the Ani Papyrus in the British Museum, dating to about 1250 BC, is one of the best-preserved examples). Closely resembling the Christian doctrine of The Last Judgement, it is a convincing example of continuity with the Pharaonic past with which to start this chapter.



Figure 6.1 One of the few churches to have survived in Pharaonic temple complexes is that in the temple of Hathor at Dendera (right foreground); it is built from blocks of stone usurped from the neighbouring Graeco-Roman 'birth house'. Photo Michael Stock.



Figure 6.2 The upper part of an apse, with the Holy Virgin and Christ child at the centre, found in the ruins of the church built in the temple complex of the goddess Hathor at Dendera. Photo Michael Stock.

Osiris is seated under a canopy with the goddesses Isis and Nephthys behind him. Four genii of the dead, known as 'the sons of Horus', stand on a lotus flower before him, with Anubis and Horus in attendance along with forty-two judges of the dead (actually the images of gods of various provinces). The heart of the deceased (regarded to be his conscience) is weighed against *maat* (justice), represented as a feather of truth or sometimes as a statuette of the goddess with that feather on her head. Thoth, the god of wisdom, watches the balance and, as revealed by the text beneath the vignette, the deceased beseeches:

O my heart which I had from my mother! O my heart of different ages! Do not stand up as a witness against me, do not be opposed to me in the tribunal, do not be hostile to me



*Figure 6.3* Judgement scene in the temple of Deir el-Medina in Luxor. The deceased is led by the wolf-god Wepwawat ('he who opens the way') to witness the weighing of his heart (representing his conscience) against the Feather of Truth. Anubis tests the scales, and Thoth, the god of wisdom, records the verdict. If satisfactory the deceased gains eternal life, if not he will be devoured by the awaiting monster.

in the presence of the keeper of the balance, for you are my ka which was in my body, the protector who made my members whole. Go forth to the happy place where we speed; do not make my name stink to the entourage who make men. Do not tell lies about me in the presence of the god; it is indeed well that you should hear.

(trans. Faulkner, 1998: Plate 3)

Then the deceased utters his 'negative confession' before Osiris that he has not stolen, killed, lied or made any rash decisions. That he did not have sexual relations with another man's wife, insult the king or any god, or raise himself above his station. Thoth, the god of wisdom, writes the verdict on a tablet and pronounces the judgement of the gods: 'Hear this word of very truth. I have judged the heart of the deceased, and his soul stands as a witness for him. His deeds are righteous in the great balance, and no sin has been found on him.' Should the scales balance,

then truth prevails and the deceased is vindicated; he is given offerings in the presence of Osiris and ferried across water, ‘the lily lake’, to gain admission to a blessed place of peculiar fertility where wheat grows seven cubits high in a ‘field of reeds’, an Egyptian version of paradise. Should the scales show that the deceased has erred, a monster is waiting to devour him or, as represented in the tomb of Ramses IX on the Theban necropolis, he will be consigned to fire. The beautifully preserved relief in Deir el-Medina attests to the Egyptian view of salvation having been reached long before Christianity came to the Nile valley.

It is a measure of the constancy of Egyptian society that when the worship of ancient gods came to an end, Christian martyrs and saints were readily seen as dignified replacements. Cities, towns and villages all over the country laid claim to a relic, or relics, of a holy person, and martyria (later converted into churches) were built to house them. We know from papyri that their deeds, sufferings or miracles were told in legend and the faithful came to pray at these holy places. As already mentioned, the sanctifying of local relics is reminiscent of each province in Pharaonic times claiming to possess part of the body of the legendary ancestor Osiris,



*Figure 6.4* The Egyptian concept of paradise in the tomb of Sennudjem at Deir el-Medina on the Theban necropolis. The painting, which is on stucco, shows the deceased with his wife Iynefert dressed in white linen, ploughing and reaping flax and wheat in the mythical ‘fields of Iaru’, a place of plenty. A similar wall painting in the tomb of Userhet shows the owner, his wife and mother seated on carved chairs beneath a sycamore tree being served the water of paradise. As for hell, the eternal fire is depicted in the tomb of Ramses IX in the Valley of the Kings. Photo Robert Scott.

dismembered by his enemy Set and erecting shrines in his honour (see pp. 16–17). In different versions of the myth, the number of parts of Osiris buried are fourteen, sixteen, and forty-two (the latter being the number of provinces in Egypt). All such sites became places of pilgrimage. Some classical sources assert that Isis caused effigies of Osiris to be made in a great number which she distributed to various cities in order that Set (Typhon), ‘might despair of ever finding the true tomb’ – which might explain the recent discovery of such tiny effigies of Osiris found near Giza during construction of a ring road. The Greek writer Plutarch (c. 46–c. 126) wrote that at each of the so-called tombs of Osiris, Isis held a funeral for a part of the body of her husband when she found it.

In these practices might lie the origin of the veneration of reliquaries containing entire bodies (or parts of bodies) of saints – and especially of ‘Desert Fathers’. Just as the head of Osiris was regarded as the most important relic in ancient times so have the heads of Christian saints been hotly disputed and often stolen. The Coptic and Ethiopian *Synaxaria* record that ‘Saint George’ is buried, without a head, in a church in his name in the ‘oasis of el-Bahnasa’ (identified by Egyptologist Ahmed Fakhry as Bahriya Oasis). Whether this is Saint George of Alexandria (son of a merchant whose wife was sister to Armenius, the governor of the city, who was tormented for his Christian beliefs until he died), or the ‘Saint George’ whose body (according to Abu Salih, based on a claim made by the priests) was brought to Egypt by the Coptic patriarch Gabriel II in the twelfth century, is no longer relevant. Copts still celebrate his martyrdom. The relic is brought out of the shrine, a new veil is put over it, and it is carried in procession all over the town. The old veil is cut into pieces, which are themselves kept as sacred relics. Christianity thrives on the cult of saints. Parts of the skeletons (probably of tenth-century saints) found recently in the Naqlun Desert lie in reliquaries in the churches of the Archangel Gabriel in the Monastery of Naqlun and in the monastery known as el-Azeb in Fayoum city; smaller relics have been taken to Coptic churches abroad.

The official closing of temples resulted in two trends. One was to increase still further the number of itinerant priests who, known and trusted even as they became more and more impoverished, retained respect and some social power. The other concerned the lay-pagan population who had recourse to their own house deities and were, perhaps understandably, more inclined to seek spiritual sustenance in magic than

on Christian rites. Magic spells written on papyri and addressed to specific patron gods were thought to be extremely powerful. Charms of the ‘Horus Eye’ were worn for protection, the *ankh* for life everlasting and Bes, the bandy-legged dwarf, for aid in childbirth. Among the Egyptian amulets listed by Wallis Budge are two that are particularly relevant to this thesis: “the two fingers of Horus” (the index and middle fingers held together) by means of which he assisted Osiris to mount the ladder when he ascended to heaven – which may be the earliest example of the theological concept of the unity between “father in heaven” and “son on earth”; and the open hand, symbol of liberality and generosity, which may be the origin of the Hand of Fatima in Islam’ (Budge, 1961: 173).

Despite Emperor Theodosius’ decrees, ancient rituals long persevered. ‘I was the son of a pagan priest and as a child I watched my father making sacrifice’, wrote a fifth-century Christian in the Theban area. At Menuthis, a city on the Canopic branch of the Nile west of Alexandria, textual evidence reveals that some villagers were found worshipping a statue of a deity in a private house as late as the sixth century AD.

The single most devastating consequence of the emperor’s action concerned burial customs. When a ban was put on the long, complicated and costly art of mummification, a whole industry was brought to a halt. It affected such diverse activities as transporting natron from Wadi Natrun for the mummification, to the manufacture of funerary objects. Archaeological evidence shows that the dead continued to be mummified, despite the spread of Christianity, and – depending on their social standing – placed in simple or lavishly decorated anthropoid sarcophagi. The traditional period of mourning was forty days – presumably the time needed for completion of the mummification process, after which the ‘opening of the mouth’ ceremony was performed with an adze (to restore the use of the senses in the afterlife); sacred water was sprinkled during a purification ceremony, and the family and guests of the deceased partook of a funerary feast. El-arba’in (Arabic ‘the forty’) is still performed by relatives of the deceased, Muslims and Orthodox Christians alike.

Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian from Sicily, wrote a lucid account in the first century of what traditionally took place after the body of the deceased pagan was returned to relatives after embalming:

Egyptians keep the bodies of their ancestors in costly chambers and gaze face to face upon those who died many generations



*Figure 6.5* A priest wearing the mask of Anubis prepares the mummy for burial in a traditional scene painted on coffins. Thus was an animal formerly a despoiler of graves converted into a guardian of the dead. Photo Robert Scott.

before their own birth, so that, as they look upon the stature and proportions and the features of the countenance of each, they experience a strange enjoyment, as though they had lived with those on whom they gaze. Those who have private sepulchres lay the body in a vault reserved for it, but those who possess none construct a new chamber in their own home, and stand the coffin upright against the firmest wall

(Doxiadis, 1995: 44, quoting Diodorus)

The practice continued at least until the time of Saint Antony the Great who died in AD 360, as is evident from his *Life*. On his deathbed he entreated his friend and biographer Athanasius to order the people not to embalm his body that they might do honour to him, but to dig a grave and bury him unobserved.

Diodorus' reference to 'likenesses' of honoured ancestors being regarded as a living presence and worthy of veneration pre-dates the similar function of the icon. The disciples of the Gnostics Basilides and Valentinus made mention of 'likenesses' of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Jesus (Doresse,

1960: 23–4, quoting Irenaeus I, xxxv). The earliest written evidence of icon painting ('icon' being a Greek word used for religious images whether directly on walls or portable) is presented by Linda Langen in her contribution on 'Icon-painting in Egypt' in *Coptic Art and Culture* (ed. Hondelink, 1990). She quotes a second-century apocryphal text found in Egypt:

John the Evangelist was preaching and a large crowd of people came to listen to him. Lykomedes, one of his disciples, had a friend who was a painter. He hastened to him and said: 'I will take you to my house and show you the man I want you to paint, but he may know nothing about it.' The painter agreed and chose a house whence he could observe John without anyone noticing him. The first day he painted only the outlines but the next day he added the colours and gave the portrait to Lykomedes who was very satisfied with it. He put the painting in his bed-room and adorned it with wreaths. But John had noticed something and asked Lykomedes: 'Tell me, what are you doing when you go into your bed-room after you have had your bath. Are you hiding something from us?' And when he was asking this he went into the bed-room and saw a portrait of an old man, adorned with wreaths, with candles at the sides and an altar in front of it. John was surprised and said: 'Lykomedes, is this one of the pagan gods; are you still living as the pagans do?' But Lykomedes brought a mirror and convinced John that he was looking at his own portrait. John said: 'This is not my own portrait you are looking at but this is my carnal image. What you have done is childish. You have painted a portrait of a dead person.'

(trans. Langen, Hennecke and Schneemelcher (1964: 147))

Did John the Evangelist regard icons as pagan, Langen asks, and observes: 'This was probably the general attitude in the Christian world in those days' (in Hondelink, 1990: 56–7), reflecting the Old Testament prohibition of images, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath' (Exodus 20: 4–5). These Christian portraits became, nevertheless, objects of intense personal devotion because 'magical' power was

attributed to them. It is believed that, with a candle lit before them or an appropriate prayer, they could heal the sick, grant a wish, or even (especially the icon of a warrior-saint) give protection in dangerous situations. Portable icons were consequently hung in private homes, in hermits' cells, and even taken on journeys.

If icons indeed existed as early as the first century, they would have been in the same style and technique as the realistic portraits painted in tempera and the encaustic (wax-based) technique, which began to be inserted into mummy wrappings in place of three-dimensional funerary masks between the first and fourth centuries. They are now known to have been widely produced – they have been excavated in burial grounds from Luxor to the Mediterranean, but mostly in large cosmopolitan communities like the Fayoum, Oxyrhynchus, Antinopolis and Akhmim. Over a thousand known paintings, which adorn museums around the world, are of a wealthy group of patrons: elegant women with hairstyles in the latest fashion, handsome athletic men, a priest of Serapis with a seven-point star on his forehead and with his hair and beard painted in a manner that anticipates representations of Jesus Christ. These mummy portraits of racially mixed, Romanised inhabitants of Egypt – men, women and children – fall well within ancient Egyptian burial customs. Greek painter Euphrosyne Doxiadis emphasised, in her book *The Mysterious Fayoum Portraits* (1995), that they bear a remarkable similarity to later Christian icons, especially in the large expressive eyes of the subjects.

When British archaeologist Flinders Petrie found a hoard of coffins in the Fayoum in 1888, in which portraits (the so-called Fayoum portraits painted on wood or linen) were inserted in the mummy wrappings, he noted that many showed considerable signs of wear and tear before burial, confirming Diodorus' description of their being placed in houses. He also observed that the two upper corners of the tablets were often cut off in order for them to fit within the mummy wrappings and suggested that they were originally painted from life and hung on the walls of their houses. On the death of the individual the naturalistic portrait was undoubtedly removed from the wall, placed over the head of the deceased,

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*Figure 6.6* Egyptians developed the art of portrait painting, a fruitful blend between Hellenistic and ancient Egyptian art and an important stage in the development of icons. This portrait of a middle-aged man was painted on wood and inserted in his



mummy wrappings to preserve his 'likeness'. These extraordinary 'Fayoum portraits' have survived in great numbers, from Upper Egypt to the Mediterranean coast, but most abundantly in the Fayoum (where they were first found) and Middle Egypt.  
Photo Khaled el-Fiqi © *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

and bound into the mummy wrappings. These ‘portrait-mummies’ – a term adopted by Lorelei H. Corcoran in her dissertation *Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt (I–IV Centuries A.D.)* because she deals with wrapped mummies with painted faces and not with portraits extracted from the mummy wrappings and evaluated as works of art – were decorated in accordance with Pharaonic burial ritual practices and beliefs. All the scenes painted on the sarcophagi fall well within established Egyptian tradition, and, as Corcoran points out, elements of continuity can be traced even to the boot-like casings and feet to ensure (according to ancient mortuary literature) that the deceased would be able to stand upright in the afterlife. John the Evangelist was not wrong to regard icons as of pagan origin.

Perhaps to avoid such sacred relics from being seized by the Christian authorities and destroyed under the Theodosian decrees, the family mummies were rapidly interred. That is to say, mass burials were carried out. In the ruins of a Roman settlement on the northern coast at Alamein, Wiktor Daszewski of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology – who has been excavating the area for over fifteen years – discovered a large number of portrait mummies seemingly hastily interred. He suggests that they may originally have stood in the niches in the houses, or even



*Figure 6.7 Mummified bodies encased in decorative coffins undergoing a ritual service prior to burial. (Theban necropolis.) Photo Robert Scott.*

in the large open colonnaded courtyard, but could give no explanation for their sudden discarding. Likewise, there is no other explanation for the discoveries in Bahriya Oasis in late 1999 through to 2001 of literally hundreds of decorated coffins in what is now called Valley of the Mummies. True, the few so far studied date to the Late Period of Pharaonic history through to the Ptolemaic period, but the area – according to discoverer Zahi Hawass – is sure to yield more. In fact, haphazard group burials have been found in the upper strata of burial grounds all over Egypt, including several different areas in the Fayoum and the newly excavated sites to the north of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. Perhaps the burial of 300 mummies in what was originally a family vault at Kom el-Shufaga in Alexandria could be thus explained.

Following the application of the Theodosian decrees, the dead started to be buried in the ground – the rich wrapped in shrouds, the less fortunate in their daily garments as evinced by worn clothing found on those excavated (darned or carefully ‘run’ with additional threads in thin places). No longer could the departed be venerated in the traditional manner described by Diodorus. They were laid to rest with no more than a magical or biblical text. A fourth- or fifth-century Coptic Psalter, one of the oldest complete biblical texts (today in the Coptic Museum) was found in a shallow grave in a cemetery near Beni Suef, beneath the head of a young girl. The manuscript is made up of thirty-one quires stitched together and preserved in its original leather covers (Gabra, 1999: 110–11).

In considering the emperor’s war against paganism, it is tempting to draw a parallel with the Pharaoh Akhenaten’s war against polytheism (another word for paganism). Both rulers were religious fanatics. Akhenaten decreed about 1375 BC that henceforth one god, the Aten (the solar orb), should be worshipped to the exclusion of all others and gave instructions that temples all over the land be destroyed; if too massive to be dismantled, the name of national god Amun should be scored from reliefs. Emperor Theodosius’ decrees likewise resulted in the destruction of temples and the obscuring of undesirable ‘pagan’ reliefs. The former, Akhenaten, tried to lift worship of a single god, the creator and preserver of mankind, from the suffocating cloak of accumulated ritual, spells, oracles and all the awesome journeys through monster-infested subterranean channels of the underworld, and he failed; traditional polytheistic worship was reinstated when the priests of Amun returned to power.

Neither was Theodosius' sixteen-year battle to annihilate paganism entirely successful. It managed to survive – albeit in a hybrid form. The habit of worship is not easily broken.

Christianity gave Egyptians familiar altars and priests and ‘messengers’ from heaven. They knew well that ‘the sanctuary of God abhors noisy demonstrations’, and that they should ‘not chant God’s offices too loudly’, because ancient ‘instruction literature’ had survived in written and oral tradition. The rite of baptism or purification with water had its origins in the remote past, as did the vapour of incense used to create an appropriate atmosphere for drawing man and God together. The story of Christ healing a blind man is reminiscent of the myth of Thoth, the moon-god, who spat on the wound in Horus’ eye (lost during one of his battles with Set in the Osiris myth) in order to heal it. As for the concept of the Holy Trinity, this was perhaps easier for the Nile valley dwellers to understand than it was for many other early converts to Christianity in view of their own triads (triple deities in one temple, or threefold names representing different aspects of the same personality under which an ancient god was addressed). Egyptologist Siegfried Morenz wrote in his *Egyptian Religion* that scholars have failed to appreciate the influence that Egypt exerted upon the entire Hellenic world in which Christianity was destined to take shape. He referred to the phenomenon whereby three gods were combined to form one and pointed out that ‘the doctrine concerning the nature of Christ and especially his pre-existence before creation and time revolves around questions which had been posed earlier by Egyptian theologians and which they resolved in a strikingly similar way. These questions’, he continued, ‘are discussed in the doctrines concerning Shu, the son of the Heliopolitan primary god Atum, which the Coffin Texts have preserved for us; here the deceased is equated with the son of God: “I am Shu whom Atum has made the day he [himself] came into being.”’ He refers to the union of Ptah–Sokar (a god linked with Ptah of Memphis)–Osiris in the mortuary literature, in which the triad is rendered a unity by the singular pronoun: ‘may he offer . . . the gifts’, and points, also, to the ‘trinity as unity’ as revealed in the text known as the ‘Leiden Hymn to Amun’ (‘All gods are three: Amun, Re, Ptah; they have no equal. His name is hidden as Amun, he is perceived as Re, and his body is Ptah’), and a text in the so-called Opet temple at Karnak in which Thoth is praised as ‘the twofold Great One, Lord of Hermopolis . . . the heart of Re, the tongue of Ta-taten [i.e. Ptah], the

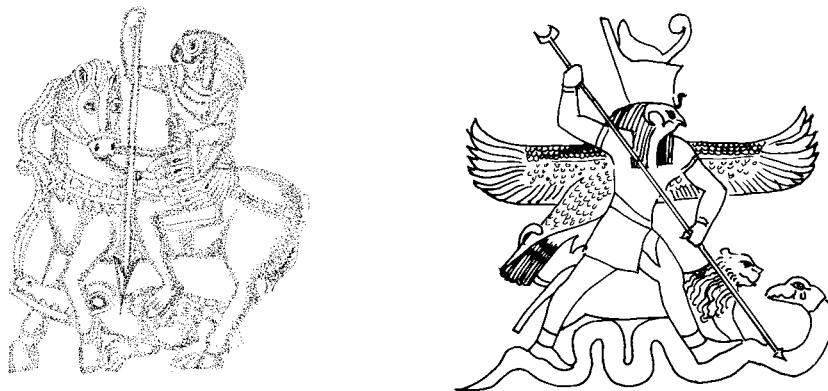


*Figure 6.8* An unusual stone stela in the Coptic Museum shows the deceased lying on a burial couch with female figures at his head and feet, and a series of distorted figures carved below. Photo Robert Scott.

throat of the one with the hidden name [i.e. Amun]' (Morenz, [1960] 1973: 253–7). Morenz has not found widespread acceptance among scholars. I find his arguments persuasive.

Often, when accompanying visitors around Egypt, I have been asked how Egyptians, with a 3,000-year ancient history, could suddenly have abandoned their traditional beliefs and adopted Christianity. In fact, when Pharaonic temples were converted into churches, their walls plastered over and repainted with images propagating the new faith, it was not difficult for them to adopt artistic themes from their own mythology for an interpretation of Christian beliefs. Egypt's goddess Isis, frequently represented with the ideogram for a throne on her head, could be transformed, with slight modification, into the Virgin Mary enthroned. Mary Magdalene and Salome preparing to anoint with sweet spices the body of Christ after he was taken from the Cross repeated a ritual from Egyptian mythology – the goddesses Isis and Nephthys cleaning and lamenting over the body of Osiris in the myth. The ancient Egyptians magnified the heroic and beneficent qualities of their gods and related their deeds in numerous legends. Likewise, local martyrs, saints, patriarchs, monks and hermits (some honoured throughout the Christian world) received special distinction in Egypt. Their relics continue to be the focus of worship, their images indispensable adornments of churches.

The god Horus was unquestionably a prelude to the dragon-slaying soldier saints like Saint Abscaron (Ishkiron) of Qallin, Saint George (Mar



*Figure 6.9 (left)* Relief of Horus as a Roman soldier spearing a crocodile, from the temple of Bawait. (Louvre.) Drawing by Elizabeth Rodenbeck, adapted from the original.

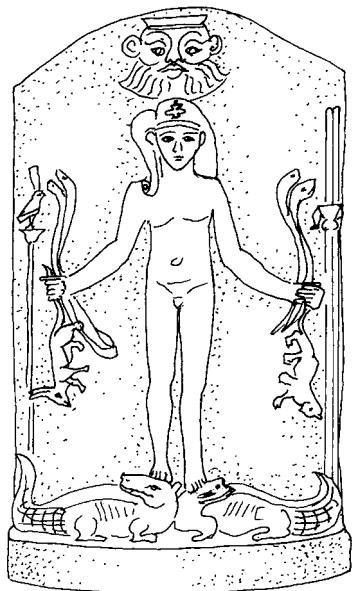
*Figure 6.10 (right)* The Great God Horus spears a large snake in a relief in the temple of Hibis at Kharga Oasis. The representation is inspired from the mortuary literature, known as the *Coffin Texts*, in which the deceased is frequently depicted spearing evil in the form of a snake or crocodile that might hinder his journey to a triumphant afterlife. It is unquestionably a prelude to dragon-slaying soldier saints. Drawing by Elizabeth Rodenbeck, adapted from the original.

Girgis), Saint Menas (Mar Mina) the Wonder-worker, Saint Mercurius (Abu Seifein), Saint Theodore (Tadros el-Shubti) and Saint Victor (Mar Boktar). The subject has interested many scholars who have sought explanations. I myself delight in detecting a direct link with ancient Egypt, one of the most obvious of which is the relief from the Monastery of Apollo at Bawait, now in the Louvre, depicting Horus as a mounted soldier saint spearing a crocodile. In the outer corridor of the temple of Horus at Edfu are two earlier representations of the same theme. One shows Horus holding a rope tied to a harpoon already plunged into the flesh of a hippopotamus, the other features him dressed in military gear plunging a spear into a huge reptile. The motif is of unmistakable Egyptian tradition, being based on ancient royal hunts by the Pharaoh ('the divine harpooner') in the guise of Horus who killed the mighty hippopotamus with the aid of Neith (skilled in the use of weapons) or Isis (who was learned in magic and who directed the harpoon).

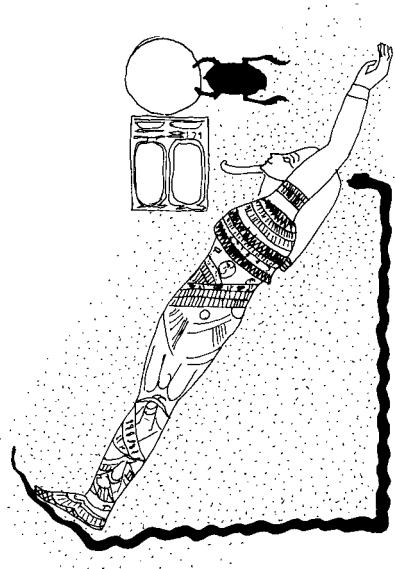
A Late Period Pharaonic stela, made of hard, black stone with rounded top, portrays a figure of Horus as a child (Harpocrates) sculpted in relief.

He stands on two crocodiles, and in his hands he grasps serpents, scorpions, a lion and a horned animal. The largest and best known of such magical stelae was found in 1828 by workmen digging in the grounds of a Franciscan Monastery in Alexandria, and given to Prince Metternich by Muhammad Ali. Known as the Metternich Stela, it was made for a certain Ankh-Psamtek, prophet and scribe in the reign of Pharaoh Nectanebo (361–343 BC), and the text makes clear that it was intended for the protection of some building, possibly a temple, from the attacks of scorpions. On both sides of the monument, as well as on its sides, are figures of nearly three hundred gods, celestial beings and sacred animals which, along with symbols, probably represented guardians for each day of the year. Such magical texts reveal that notwithstanding the whole-hearted belief of the Egyptians in their protective deities, when they were in serious difficulties they turned to arcane magic, even to convert the image of Horus on the crocodiles to Christian soldier saints like George, Menas, Mercurius and others, spearing a dragon.

In Pharaonic mortuary literature known as *The Book of What is in the Underworld* (inscribed in royal tombs, on sarcophagi and papyri), a theme on the containment of evil is tirelessly represented on a cosmic plane of cyclic rebirth: the triumph of the sun-god passing in his barque through



*Figure 6.11* This Alexandrian stela is one of many of its kind showing Horus standing on two crocodiles with magical texts and spells to avert evil from the building or tomb in which it is placed. The protective deities inscribed on the base stood for every day of the year, the seasons, months and hours of the day and night. They included the gods of heaven, earth and the underworld; the gods of planets and stars; the signs of the Zodiac and the Decans (ten-day periods); the gods of cities, provinces and towns, as well as many provincial deities. (Cairo Museum.) Drawn by Elizabeth Rodenbeck from original by Faucher-Gudin. (See Maspero, 1894: 215.)



*Figure 6.12* In the tomb of Ramses IX the dead king ascends to heaven riding a serpent as he travels through infinite space. Drawn by Elizabeth Rodenbeck from the original by Guilmart. (See Montet, 1965: 56.)

each of the hours of night guarded by the ‘enemies of Osiris’ in the form of a snake, ass, or crocodile. In the seventh division of the ‘book’, painted on the walls of the tomb of Thutmose III in the Valley of the Kings (*c.* 1430 BC), Apophis, a giant serpent who was the main obstacle to cosmic order, is butchered. His defeat was essential because he daily tried to prevent the sun-god setting on the horizon as a prelude to rising at dawn. Apophis is depicted bound in chains, stabbed with spears, cut and dismembered with knives, or consumed by fire. Only with his destruction could the powers of darkness be overcome and order reinstated.

The link between the Pharaonic and the Christian art of Egypt – in function, technique, style, medium or symbolism – cannot be dismissed because so much of it falls well within tradition. Moreover, it provides a satisfactory answer to these basic questions: how did the Egyptians, with a distinctive civilisation, come to accept the divinity of Christ, and why was Christianity so successful in Egypt? If we allow that Isis/Horus may have foreshadowed Mary/Jesus and that the combatant image of Horus was the antecedent of equestrian saints, is it not timely to reassess other typical local features in early Christian art in the Nile valley? ‘Coptic antiquities . . . form a connecting link between the Egyptian art in the Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman periods on the one hand, and the



*Figure 6.13* Funerary stelae from Kom Abu-Billo (Gr. Therenuthis) in the Delta fall into two types: a figure reclining on a couch holding a cup in the right hand (left) or the deceased depicted with arms uplifted, palms facing outward (right), often flanked by two small jackal-like dogs representing Anubis, or by the hawk, Horus. Egyptian Hellenised art is important to an understanding and evolution of the origins of Coptic art. The open hand has its roots in palaeolithic times, an ancient symbol to ward off evil. It was known in early Christian times as ‘Mary’s hand’; later, under Islam, it survived as ‘Fatima’s hand’. (Coptic Museum.) Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

Arab period on the other’, wrote Pahor Labib, director of the Coptic Museum. ‘We are not faced with a particular style of an artist or another one, but with an artistic popular trend which is authentically Egyptian’ (Atalla, 1998b: 4, 42, trans. in Atalla, 1998a II: 5).

Coptic art underwent a great variety of influences in the course of its development. It is difficult to define or to detect a unity of style. In its freedom of expression, however, it is possible to discern pagan ideas inherited from the pharaohs as well as Hellenistic and later Roman influences. Kingship (both on earth and in the afterlife) was idealised in



*Figure 6.14* Three stone-carved monuments in the Coptic Museum are from unknown burial grounds. One shows a squat figure of the deceased with the *ankh* in the pediment; the second two female figures on each side of the bier on which the deceased lies (both in accordance with Egyptian tradition); and the third (pictured here) is a blend of Egyptian and classical elements: the funerary stela, unusually in vertical design, shows the cross enclosed within a façade topped by a Hellenistic conch and flanked by two forms of the *ankh* each surmounted by two crosses. (Coptic Museum, Cairo.) Photo Robert Scott.

Egypt. A triumphant Christ – reborn, benevolent and righteous – was analogous with the much-loved legendary ancestor, Osiris, who likewise died and was resurrected to rule the celestial region of the underworld (see p. 16). The resurrection of the body, and a life after death lay at the very root of their culture, and it can be traced back to the beginning of recorded history. Egyptians saw their dead as ‘the imperishable ones’ in heaven, as evinced in a First Dynasty inscription (c. 3000 BC) that there, in heaven, the deceased became an *akh* or glorified spirit (*akhs*, like the stars, ‘know no destruction’). A representation in the tomb of the pharaoh Sheshonk III at Tanis (834–784 BC) shows the king being awoken with the ‘key of life’ and raised towards two barges: the night-boat to take him through the various channels of the netherworld to the judgement hall of Osiris, and the day-boat to raise him towards heaven (Figure 6.12)

Post Byzantine (Greek, Melkite and Coptic) icons of the Archangel Michael – in the churches of the Holy Virgin in Haret Zuwaila in Cairo, and the Church of Saint Mercurius (Abu Seifein) in Old Cairo, as well as



*Figure 6.15* A relief in the tomb of Sheshonk III in Tanis shows his mummy being prepared by Anubis on the funerary couch. The *ba* bird is depicted giving breath to his nostrils with a sceptre and a wind-filled sail which is the emblem of breath and of new life. Drawn by Elizabeth Rodenbeck from original by Faucher-Gudin. (See Maspero 1894: 179.)

in the Coptic Museum – show him dressed as a general, supreme leader of the angelic hordes. In one hand he holds the Scales of Justice (familiar from pharaonic mortuary literature and tomb reliefs) and, in the other, a cross in the form of a long standard which is a lance ending in a cross to symbolise divine power, which bears a marked resemblance to the *djed* pillar. This fetish, common in faience amulets from the Late Period of pharaonic history, represented the backbone of Osiris. The earliest details of the rites associated with the *djed* are preserved on the stela of Ikhernofret, now in the State Museum of Berlin. A treasurer in the reign of Sesostris III (c. 1850 BC), the text describes Ikhernofret as having taken part in the mystery play enacted by the priests each year to celebrate events in the life and death of Osiris. Following the mock battle that took place between Horus and Set, the triumphant procession returned to the temple. At this stage of the ritual, the *djed* pillar was set upright,



Figure 6.16 Icon of the Archangel Michael holding a standard in one hand, and, in the other, the scales of justice as portrayed in Egyptian mortuary literature. The scales as a means of weighing human actions recall to mind the ancient Egyptian 'negative confession' on the day of judgement. The theme was repeated on many icons painted by Ibrahim and Yuhanna, two eighteenth-century painters with the same sensibility and spiritual background who produced these works, usually individually, sometimes together. Frequently the face and clothing give the impression of Byzantine influence. (Coptic Museum.) Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

symbolising the rebirth of the land, and the resurrection of Osiris (Figure 6.17).

Day by day, through the centuries of Roman rule, traditional Egyptian customs survived, transmitted from mother to child or, in the case of Professions, from father to son or. One has only to look at the well-known sixth or seventh-century encaustic panel painting of Saint Peter in the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, or the newly-discovered wall painting in the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun (attributed by some scholars to the same period), to recognise that master painters of the so-called Fayoum portraits passed on their expertise. In a lecture at the Czech Institute of Archaeology in Cairo in 1998 conservator and art historian Zuzana Skalova, who has worked with icons in Egypt since 1988, argued that Christian icon painting may owe a greater debt to pharaonic and Graeco-Roman Egypt than hitherto recognised. While conceding that a great deal has to be learned, she observed a link between mummy portrait painting and Christian portraits of saints, in the similarity of style, materials and technique, 'as well as in cultic function, which is to say the living addressing the portraits of the dead'. She pointed to the fact that a large number of icons in the Nile Valley are



Figure 6.17 The *djed* pillar is erected as a sign of rebirth, tomb of Seti I, Abydos. Photo Robert Scott.

painted on sycamore panels not only because the wood was readily available (in pharaonic times a synonym for Egypt was the 'Land of the Sycamore') but because the tree was sacred. Skalova noted that large icon panels were manufactured of this unsuitable wood even through to medieval times, as attested by narrow, often roughly-assembled panels and burdensome planks produced at a time when Byzantine icons were painted on finely finished supports (Skalova 1995a).

Borrowing from one age or culture to another is a natural process of cultural growth, and the question that presents itself is who borrows from whom. Robert Bianchi, Egyptologist and art historian, observed in his investigations into the nature of pharaonic and hellenistic art created in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period, that 'pharaonic art remained impervious to fundamentally Greek stylistic tenets whereas contemporary Greek art was much more receptive to incorporating into its stylistic repertoire formal elements derived from pharaonic visual traditions'. He emphasised that 'the Greeks, but not the Egyptians, were



*Figure 6.18* The embalmment of Christ's body is twice depicted according to ancient Egyptian tradition in the Monastery of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrun. On the left, the artist has positioned figures at the head and feet of Christ, as the figures of Isis and Nephthys were portrayed on ancient coffins. On the right, two figures bear an embalmed figure in the manner of ancient Egyptian priests (see Figure 3.3). Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.



*Figure 6.19* This eighteenth-century icon of Christ, resurrected above a closed coffin, is from the village of Banga in Tahta in Upper Egypt. The symbolic angled forms are reminiscent of an ‘utterance’ in the Pyramid Texts of the third century BC: ‘The arm of the sunbeams is lifted with King Unas’ (Deir el-Muharraq). Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

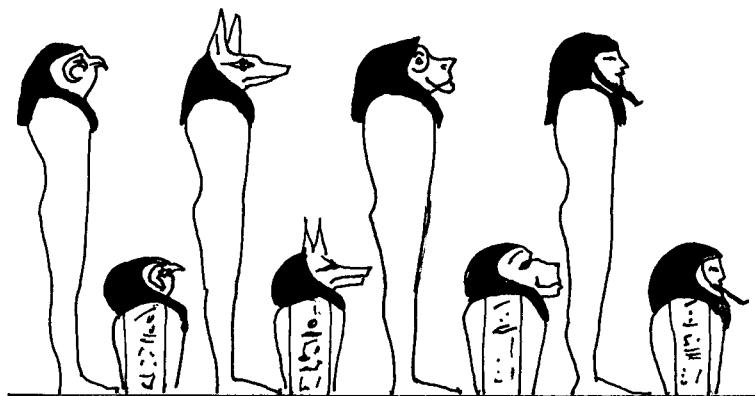
the borrowers of culture and more often than not their borrowing of the pharaonic visual legacy was accompanied by concomitant written epitomes.’ (Johnson (1998); Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: 15).

The persistence of ancient Egyptian symbolism in early Christian art (still a controversial issue among conservative art historians) should not be overlooked. Wall paintings in the sanctuary of the remaining part of the Church of Saint Macarius in the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Wadi Natrun, for example, show unusual images of Christ being embalmed and bound in linen according to Egyptian tradition (Figure

6.18). He is painted also with two figures standing at his head and feet (reminiscent of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys at the head and foot of sarcophagi) and as an embalmed body being borne on the shoulders of two figures – comparable to priests in pharaonic times (Figure 6.8). As for the moment of resurrection, nineteenth-century icons of Coptic inspiration show Christ is depicted rising above the still-closed coffin, like a sarcophagus (Figure 6.19), a tradition shared with the Catholics.

Additionally, it is tempting to cite a possible connection between the heads represented on the lids of the canopic jars which contained the internal organs of the deceased in pharaonic times – the human-headed Imsety, ape-headed Hapi, jackal-headed Duamutef and hawk-headed Qebhsenuef – and the four creatures of the Apocalypse portrayed with representations of Christ Pantocrator, which came to be symbols of the four evangelists: a man (Saint Matthew), ox (Saint Luke), lion (Saint Mark) and eagle (Saint John). The Coptic *Synaxarion* commemorates the Four Bodiless Animals that bear the throne of the God and mentions that churches were dedicated to them. They later came to be depicted with human faces, as on the thirteenth-century wall painting in the chapel of the old church in the Monastery of Saint Antony near the Red Sea. Likewise, an argument for a connection between Anubis, the ‘lord of the mummy wrappings,’ and the two saints Ahrauqas and Augani who are portrayed wearing dog-like masks on a side of an eighteenth-century triptych in Cairo Museum is strong (Figure 6.21). Egyptians represented their gods with human bodies and animal heads and, according to Budge, the Egyptian Anubis is probably the antecedent of the sometimes dog-headed Saint Christopher via Gnostic intermediaries. (*Amulets and Talismans*: 206). A seventeenth/eighteenth-century icon in Saint Catherine’s monastery in Sinai shows a dog-headed Saint Christopher standing on a dragon.

As for the nimbus, the halo of light around the heads of holy people, that it is of pagan origin there seems little doubt. It may originally have been a symbol of power rather than holiness and possibly represented the rays of the sun. Solar imagery is present in many ancient cultures, but in Egypt the sun is an insistent presence. Its worship, in one form or another is apparent throughout ancient history. The pharaoh himself was regarded as ‘son of the sun-god’ and important deities like Amun, Min and Khnum, under the influence of the solar worship, bore the sun disk on their heads from the Middle Kingdom (2133–1786 BC). In the Coptic



*Figure 6.20* Four funerary demi-gods (Qebehsenuf, Duamutef, Hapi and Imsety), known as the 'four sons of Horus', were regarded as representatives of the cardinal points of the compass. They form the lids of canopic jars which contain the internal organs of the deceased. The chest containing them was placed in a niche on the east wall of a burial chamber in the line of vision of the deceased. Drawn by Elizabeth Rodenbeck from original by Faucher-Gudin. (See Maspero, 1894: 143.)



*Figure 6.21* In the upper section of this famous sixteenth-century niche from one of the chapels of the Monastery of Saint Apollo in Baurit, Jesus Christ is enthroned at the centre, supported by the four creatures symbolizing the Apocalypse: the eagle, ox, lion and man; Christ is portrayed with an open book in his left hand while he raises his right hand in blessing. This theme was copied by eighteenth-century artists like Ibrahim and Yuhanna. One masterpiece in the Coptic Museum (Reg. No. 3362) shows how the bodiless beasts came to symbolize the four evangelists, each holding a gospel. Photo: Robert Scott.



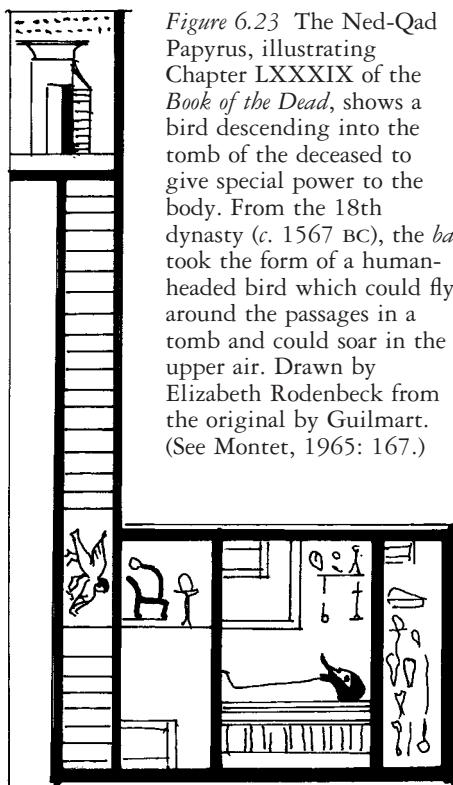
*Figure 6.22* On the left side panel of a triptych in the Coptic Museum two saints, Ahrauqas (right) and Augani (left), wear masks like the jackal-god Anubis who was the 'god of the mummy wrappings' associated with the preparation of the bodies of the deceased. A fresco of a priest actually wearing a mask of the god Anubis, from the Temple of Isis at Pompei and now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale of Naples, supports the suggestion that masks of gods were actually worn by priests performing religious duties. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

Museum is a pharaonic limestone stela complete with the winged sun-disk at the top but with the central panel re-sculpted by Christians to show a man on horseback; an angel is in the act of placing a crown on his head, around which are rays of light. Was this astral radiance, the solar disk of ancient Egyptian tradition, the same cosmic force that descended on Jesus at his baptism? A tradition does not die when it is meaningful to a community.

When Emperor Theodosius prohibited the placing of wreaths, the ‘crown of justification’ – made of olive leaves, blue lotus flowers and corn-flowers (as found on the forehead of King Tutankhamun’s first mummiform coffin and on anthropoid coffins of the Late Period) – on statues, and burning incense before them, soon enough floral decorations were laid and candles lit before icons of saints and martyrs. The Eastern Roman Church of Constantinople may at first have looked askance at such acts, which rang strongly of paganism, and, indeed, to the Old Testament commandment against the making graven images. But in Egypt, a Byzantine province with its long tradition of religious themes inscribed or painted on walls, icons were eventually legitimised as ‘teaching devices’ necessary to an understanding of the faith. The fifteenth-century Arab historian El-Maqrizi remembered that Cyril of Alexandria authorised such paintings in all the churches of Alexandria and later, in the year 420, issued another decree permitting them in the other churches of Egypt as well. Such major feasts as the Nativity, Flight into Egypt, Baptism, Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, and his Resurrection and Ascension became subjects of the ‘histories’ icons for public veneration. Devotional icons of Christ himself, the Virgin Mary and Child, and the saints proliferated in private.

When we come to the art forms of the ascendant Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, I submit that the strong tradition of their Egyptian colony influenced the repertoire of imperial art. In biblical passages such as Matthew’s description of the baptism of Christ, the spirit of God is likened to a dove, and a search for the origins of the concept of the Holy Spirit in the form of a bird will be fruitless except in Egypt. Scholars have long grappled with the significance of the *ba* or soul-bird image of ancient Egypt, usually depicted with a human head and, on occasion, with human arms raised in a gesture of adoration when scooping up water. Recurring in tomb representations, either descending down to the mummy through a shaft or hovering over it the *ba* is loosely translated

'soul'. However, Frankfort pointed out that *ba* actually meant 'animated' and suggested that the translation 'spirit' would be more appropriate (Kingship and the Gods: 64). According to Hornung, 'all sacred animals are the *ba* of the deity, the visible manifestation of an invisible power . . .' (*Concepts of God in Ancient Egypt*: 138) Finally, Breasted described a ritual Pharaonic ceremony that survives in the contract of Hepzefi, an important nobleman in the twentieth century before Christ. It was performed by the living 'for accomplishing the transformation of the deceased into a "glorious one," precisely as he was transformed also into a "soul" (*ba*) by an analogous ceremony performed by the living, a ceremony indeed which may have been much the same as that of glorification.' (*Development of Thought and Religion in Ancient Egypt*: 265 n.) It is surely no coincidence that in icons of the baptism of Jesus Christ by John in the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends as a white bird with outspread wings in a ray of light, in a ritual ceremony associated with



*Figure 6.23* The Ned-Qad Papyrus, illustrating Chapter LXXXIX of the *Book of the Dead*, shows a bird descending into the tomb of the deceased to give special power to the body. From the 18th dynasty (c. 1567 BC), the *ba* took the form of a human-headed bird which could fly around the passages in a tomb and could soar in the upper air. Drawn by Elizabeth Rodenbeck from the original by Guilmart. (See Montet, 1965: 167.)

water, in an act of 'making glorious'. The Gospel of Saint Mark reads: 'And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him' (1: 10).

Egyptian popular art was created by priests, monks, perhaps even laymen, and we are fortunate that later copyists preserved the spirit and content. The eighteenth-century artists Yuhanna el-Armani (the Armenian) and Ibrahim el-Nesekh (the scribe or copyist whose full name is 'Ibrahim el-Nessekh ibn (son of) Sam'an the Egyptian'), almost certainly followed the tracks laid down by Egyptian Christians.

Religious painters who lived in Egypt in the medieval period



*Figure 6.24* The baptism scene on the left is in popular Egyptian style showing Christ standing in the River Jordan, which he blesses. (Hanging Church (el-Moallaqa) in Old Cairo.) Immersion in flowing (i.e. living) water is evident from Gnostic writings, which suggest that the ritual pre-dates Christianity. The icon on the right reveals a feeling of intimacy and delicacy unknown in Byzantine style before the twelfth century. (Coptic Museum.) Note that both icons show the Holy Spirit in the form of a bird descending in a ray of light. Photos Nabil Selim Aralla © Lehnert & Landrock.



clothed many holy figures in contemporary local garments and placed them into contemporary local environments. A nineteenth-century icon of Jesus in the arms of Saint Joseph, for example, shows the latter swathed like an Egyptian peasant (Figure 1.8) was painted by Anastasi el-Rumi (the Greek).

The mood of the country was naturally unpredictable following the Theodosian decrees to crush paganism. The bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, in response to the imperial decree in 391, attempted to close the temple of Dionysus near the western harbour and convert it into a church. There was serious rioting. Thousands of people from the industrial centre of the city (where salt, oil, perfume and glass were manufactured), were joined by manual labourers and dock-workers, and the masses grew as people from the densely-populated slum areas joined the throng. Filled with foreboding – no doubt remembering the destruction of the Serapis temple at Canopis (Abukir) in 389 and realising that the temple of Serapis on the spacious summit of a rock in Rhokotis would be the next goal, the pagan throng moved in from the northern causeway, intent on protecting their magnificent temple with its colonnaded halls, storerooms and library. However, there were three approaches to the temple. As they made their way from the north, Theophilus strode up the two hundred stairs to the east, even as his Christian followers mounted the southern causeway. The bishop reached the summit first and reputedly gave the first blow to the statue of Serapis. His followers ran amok. They smashed the statue and destroyed golden images and vases. From archaeological evidence along with the description of the church historian Rufinus, the Serapeum was a magnificent structure, rectangular in shape and, to judge from rare varieties of stone found on the site, adorned with marble, glass and probably also mosaics. Surviving blocks suggest that considerable material from earlier pharaonic structures had been reused in its construction, including columns and sphinxes. The vast structure, which had been the centre of worship in Alexandria since the rule of Ramses II in the thirteenth century BC was burned. Theophilus ordered a church to be built in its place, named after Honoriouss, the emperor's younger son. Mindless destruction continued throughout the country.

## CONVERSION, CONTROVERSY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 and the Edict of Milan a year later, which established the principle of religious toleration throughout the Roman Empire, set in motion an avalanche of commentary, doctrinal discussion and discord. Three Apostolic Sees were at first involved: Rome in the West, Alexandria in Egypt, and Antioch in Syria. The names that dominate early Church history are the Emperor Constantine; Athanasius, the young deacon of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, who came to symbolise, for Egyptians, the expression of their independent will; and Arius, the intellectual elderly parish priest in the church of Baucalis in Alexandria, whose doctrine (the Arian creed) was eventually adopted as imperial policy. One of the earliest controversies took place in Egypt and concerned Christians who had been rounded up from Upper and Lower Egypt during the Diocletian repression and imprisoned in Alexandria. Melitius, Bishop of Lycopolis (Asyut) was among them. While still interred, he had discussions with Peter, then Bishop of Alexandria, nicknamed 'The Merciful', and senior in the Church hierarchy, on how to deal with Christians who had 'lapsed' but repented. The Bishop of Alexandria advocated leniency. He suggested that provincial priests who renounced their faith under pressure of torture and imprisonment should be allowed to return to the fold. Melitius was harsher. He opined that they should never again be permitted to resume their sacred ecclesiastical duties. On his release from prison, however, Melitius undertook personally to ordain priests and consecrate bishops in Upper Egypt, independently and without authority from Peter of Alexandria, thus creating a power base of his own.

The next dispute arose when two presbyters, Alexander and Arius,



*Figure 7.1 Map of the eastern Mediterranean*

became candidates for the episcopal seat of Alexandria, a highly coveted position. Alexander, supported by a large segment of the Alexandrian population as well as monks and hermits in the western Delta, was elected and consecrated as the senior bishop of Egypt and Cyrene (Libya). But Arius did not take the defeat lying down. He persisted in advancing his doctrine, which became known as the Arian creed, which concerned the relationship of Christ the Son of God, to God the Father. Arius, a Libyan theologian, argued convincingly that the Son was ‘totally and essentially’ different from the Father; that they were of ‘like’ but not of the ‘same’ substance. Alexander held the belief that Jesus was both divine and human, but that these two natures were united in one. The two men met in heated personal discussion, which grew more and more fiery and, on

two occasions, resorted to public debate. Arius remained adamant. Alexander, exasperated, eventually convened a council of 300 Egyptian and Libyan bishops in Alexandria in 320 before whom he gained support for his creed. Arius was accused of heresy and excommunicated along with some dozen other clergy.

Unfortunately, Alexander had little time to count his blessings because Arius, persuasive of speech, soon gained influential sympathisers, among them the chronicler Eusebius of Caesaria who used his contacts with the imperial court to promote the Arian creed. When a theological school was founded in Antioch in imitation of that of Alexandria it was a setback for Egypt because it carried the debate on the nature of Jesus Christ to western Asia. Letters were exchanged, pamphlets distributed, regional councils held in support of one party or the other. What began as a local controversy had become a political and theological issue of concern to every province of the now-Christian Roman Empire. One could say that the founding of a theological school in Antioch was the event that triggered the eventual break between the Egyptian Church and the rest of the Christian world, not the Council of Chalcedon over a century later as suggested.

Egypt suffered another setback when Constantine became sole emperor in 324 and, six years later, founded a new imperial capital on the site of the ancient Greek town of Byzantium on the Bosphorus. Bounded by a harbour and protected by the Sea of Marmara, it was called Constantinople ('Constantine's city') and embellished with grand monuments taken from ancient cities, including an obelisk over thirty metres high from Egypt. This was the 'new Rome' of an empire that had for long been evolving into a separate Latin West, and Greek East. Its older name survived in the parlance of historians, who called the 'new' state the Byzantine Empire. Arabs, Persians and Turks, however, called it 'Rum' (from 'Rome'), which referred to the whole of Anatolia. The new foundation became prosperous and culturally active, and, as the focus of world events shifted to the East, Constantinople soon gained the importance and prestige that had once belonged to Rome and Alexandria.

Greek remained the official language of Egypt and also the language of the Church, but the Bible is generally believed to have been earlier translated into Coptic, in the third century. Constantine tried to unite the opposing factions in Alexandria by sending his religious adviser (the Spanish Bishop of Ossius) to the latter city, to mediate between Alexander

and Arius, but his mission was a failure. And since instability in the economically important province of Egypt was a threat to the imperial government, the emperor took action. He convened, on the shores of the Black Sea, the first and greatest of the Church councils.

The Council of Nicaea took place in the imperial palace in 325, attended by 310 bishops and their delegations from all over the Christian world: Alexandria, Antioch, Asia Minor, Assyria, Greece and Rome. The aim was to formulate a doctrine to which the bishops would be bound to agree. Alexander was accompanied by a large body of monks and hermits, many of whom bore disfigurements from Roman persecution. In his published lectures, *The Eastern Church*, Arthur P. Stanley mentions Potamon ('dedicated to Amon'), the bishop of Hierakleopolis (Ihnasya), and Paphnutius ('dedicated to his God') from the Theban area, each of whom had had a right eye gouged out with a sword and the empty socket seared with a red-hot poker. The Council was presided over by the Emperor Constantine, a majestic figure dazzlingly attired in royal purple with a profusion of pearls and precious stones, who urged the importance of unity and the need to compromise. However, being no theologian himself, he did not honour all the sessions with his presence. The delegates deliberated for two months and agreed on many issues, among them that pagans should not be ordained unless well instructed in the Christian faith, and that members of the clergy should not castrate themselves. Although official head of Egypt's delegation, Alexander let his deacon Athanasius act as chief spokesman for Egypt and the young man proved to be a persuasive and eloquent mediator, especially when abstract issues on the nature of Jesus Christ were put up to debate. The twenty-one canons worded by Alexander, Eusebius and Athanasius were approved and signed by the members of the Council. The Nicene Creed was adopted:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things both visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, the only begotten Son, the Firstborn of every Creature, begotten of the Father before all worlds, by whom also all things were made. Who for our salvation was made flesh, and lived amongst men, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father, and shall come in glory to judge the quick and the dead. And we believe in One Holy Ghost. Believing each of

them to be and to have existed, the Father, only the Father, and the Son, only the Son, and the Holy Ghost, only the Holy Ghost: As also our Lord sending forth His own disciples to preach, said, ‘Go and teach all nations, baptising them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost . . .’

(trans. Stanley, 1861: 158)

Constantine formally received the decision and issued a decree of banishment against those who refused to subscribe to it. Arius was officially denounced as a heretic and banished. Melitius was allowed to retain his title and rank in Asyut but not to ordain. Those already ordained by him could resume their functions after a second ordination and take their places below those earlier recognised by the Bishop of Alexandria. Alexander and Athanasius returned to Egypt, and when Alexander died a few months later fifty bishops from neighbouring dioceses convened and chose Athanasius to be his successor to the see of Alexandria.

The historical appearance of Athanasius is well recorded. He was born in Marea near Alexandria in 295 and, according to legend held dear by the Copts, he and a group of children were playing on the shore of Alexandria’s western harbour when Bishop Alexander, entertaining the clergy in his home, observed that the boys seemed to be enacting a religious ceremony. He sent for them and asked what they were playing. They finally admitted that they had been imitating the sacrament of baptism and that one boy, Athanasius, had enacted the role of bishop and baptised his playmates. When Alexander observed that he had recited all the proper questions and rituals, leaving none out of his address, and had, moreover, totally submerged the boys in the sea, he declared that the baptism was valid. He personally confirmed the boys and took Athanasius under his charge, later making him deacon.

Athanasius was bilingual, as easy with men of education as he was familiar with the masses with whom he spoke the Egyptian vernacular. It was natural that he should succeed to the see after the death of Alexander. Early in his office he made personal visits throughout Egypt, travelling, like the ancient Pharaohs, by boat. But Arius took advantage of his absence to bounce back into the picture. He had not taken his expulsion lightly and, manoeuvring with great subtlety, wrote to the emperor criticising the inexperience of Athanasius and re-presenting the logic behind his own doctrine. Constantine paid no heed, but his



Figure 7.2 Thirteenth-century wall painting of Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in the Monastery of Saint Antony. A great pillar of the Coptic Church, Athanasius was a theologian and national leader who defended orthodoxy and preached unity. He wrote some of his greatest works while in exile in Kharga Oasis and they provide an important source for Christianity in the fourth century. He lived to be a national hero. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

daughter Constantia was moved by Arius' intellect and powers of persuasion and became one of his most ardent followers. She pressured her father to revoke his order of banishment, and Constantine wrote to Athanasius ordering him to receive Arius. He refused, and in so doing set in motion a series of events that are hard to imagine. His act undoubtedly instigated a great deal of lobbying, not to mention slander, because Athanasius was subsequently called to attend a council at Caesaria – ostensibly to answer charges of breaking a consecrated chalice (that did not in fact exist), consecrating a church without the emperor's permission, and preventing the trans-shipment of grain from Alexandria. He prudently declined. He had no intention of laying himself open to his enemies. However, when the Council of Tyre was called in 335, and he was warned that he would be punished if he failed to appear, he had no option but to acquiesce. Accompanied by fifty Egyptian bishops and his supporters he confidently attended the Council – no doubt with

recollections of his success at the Council of Nicaea in mind – and was stunned when he was declared the enemy of the imperial government, condemned and banished. His followers were set to flee at the point of the sword, and at a council hastily convened at Jerusalem, and with Arius now dead, an Arian bishop was officially appointed to the see of Alexandria. Imperial policy thenceforth became the Arian creed, the imperial government supported with military force its own nominee, and Egyptian opposition to occupation was set in motion. They referred to the appointed bishop as Melkite (emperor's man) and his forces as Melkites.

In the diverse fortunes of the Roman Empire from Augustus to Constantine, one can discern a constant factor: Egypt's economic importance to the Empire. Not only was it the source of grain but Alexandria was the centre of vital industries, including textiles, papyrus paper, glass, oil, perfumes, wine, ivory and ebony work. Trade was carried out with the countries of the Mediterranean, with Arabia, Ceylon and India. Turbulence in Egypt would shake the foundations of the Empire. Therefore, whomsoever fired dissension was a threat. Athanasius was one such man. His refusal to reinstate Arius and his subsequent degradation and banishment at the Council of Tyre drove him to zealous propaganda.

Constantine's son and successor Constantius, like his father, favoured the Arians and tried to end Athanasius' political career. At a gathering at Antioch in 341 a decision was taken that a bishop, once deposed by synod, could not resume his post unless absolved by the judgement of an equal synod. It was clearly aimed at Athanasius who was declared 'public enemy' of the imperial government. Five times in his chequered career he was driven into exile: once by Constantine, twice by Constantius between 338 and 356, by Julian in 362, and by Valens. Once he escaped to Rome, where he studied Latin and negotiated with the Latin clergy who were sympathetic to his ideal. On another occasion he went to Palestine; and once to Gaul. But most of the time Athanasius, pursued as a fugitive, set his goal as spiritual leader of his own people. He lived with the hermits in the Western Desert, visited Saint Antony on the Red Sea coast, and spent many years in Kharga Oasis. Far from having his image tarnished, he gained popular support. He was unflagging in opposing all efforts to compromise with the Arian point of view or to back away from the original Nicene Creed. He spent more than a third of his forty-five years as bishop in exile, during which time he became a national



*Figure 7.3* There are some 250 fourth-century tomb chambers and chapels of sun-dried brick in Bagawat cemetery at Kharga Oasis, which was a place of banishment for criminals and political or religious undesirables from Pharaonic through to modern times. Among Christians sent into exile there were Athanasius of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople. Photo Amr Gamal © Al-Ahram Weekly.

hero. Athanasius' early writings, *On the Incarnation*, foreshadowed his gifts as a theologian, biblical interpreter, and spiritual writer:

In regard to the making of the universe and the creation of all things there have been various opinions. For instance, some say that all things are self-originated and, so to speak, haphazard. The Epicureans are among these; they deny that there is any Mind behind the universe at all. This view is contrary to all the facts of experience, their own existence included. For if all things had come into being in this automatic fashion, instead of being the outcome of Mind, though they existed, they would all be uniform and without distinction . . . But in point of fact the sun and the moon and the earth are all different things, and even within the human body there are different members . . . This distinctness of things argues not a spontaneous generation but a prevenient Cause; and from that Cause we can apprehend God, the Designer and Maker of all.

Others take the view expressed by Plato, that giant among the Greeks. He said that God had made all things out of pre-

existent and uncreated matter, just as the carpenter makes things only out of wood that already exists. But those who hold this view do not realize that to deny that God is Himself the Cause of matter is to impute limitation to Him, just as it is undoubtedly a limitation on the part of the carpenter that he can make nothing unless he has the wood. How could God be called Maker and Artificer if His ability to make depended on some other cause, namely on matter itself? If he only worked up existing matter and did not Himself bring matter into being, He would be not Creator but only a craftsman.

Then, again, there is the theory of the Gnostics, who have invented for themselves an Artificer of all things other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . Such are the notions which men put forward. But the impiety of their foolish talk is plainly declared by the divine teaching of the Christian faith. From it we know that, because there is Mind behind the universe, it did not originate itself; because God is infinite, not finite, it was not made from pre-existent matter, but out of nothing and out of non-existence absolute and utter God brought it into being through the Word . . .

(Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Calvin College:  
[http://www.ccel.org/a/athanasius/incarnation/  
Ocontent.html](http://www.ccel.org/a/athanasius/incarnation/Ocontent.html) Chapter I, 2–3)

Athanasius preached vigorously, cultivated the leaders of the growing monastic movement, and mobilised the support of Rome. He introduced Egyptian monasticism to the West through his biography, *The Life of Antony*, which, as noted by many scholars, represented his own views as much as those of the hermit. One of Antony's visions, for example, made reference to the Arians which were not of his time:

Once as he was sitting and working, he fell, as it were, into a trance, and groaned much at what he saw. Then after a time, having turned to his bystanders with groans and trembling, he prayed, and falling on his knees remained so a long time. And having arisen the old man wept . . . 'O, my children, it were better to die before what has appeared in the vision come{s} to pass . . . Wrath is about to seize the Church and it is on the point of being given up to men who are like senseless

beasts . . . For I saw the table of the Lord's House, and mules standing around it on all sides in a ring, and kicking the things therein, just as a herd kicks when it leaps in confusion . . .'

These things the old man saw, and after two years the present inroad of the Arians and the plunder of the churches took place, when they violently carried off the vessels, and made the heathen carry them . . . Then we all understood that these kicks of the mules signified to Antony what the Arians, senselessly like beasts, are now doing . . . define not yourselves with the Arians, for their teaching is not that of the Apostles, but that of demons and their father the devil; yea, rather, it is barren and senseless . . . like the senselessness of these mules.

(Internet Medieval Sourcebook,

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>)

The biography continues with Antony comforting his disciples and promising that a Saviour would have the 'persecuted restored, and wickedness again withdrawn to its own hiding-place, and pious faith (restored) in every place with all freedom' (*ibid.*).

Athanasius twice came close to death in Alexandria. Once was in the Caesarium, formerly pagan, which had been given to the Arians by Constantine as a place of worship. Athanasius entered at the head of a procession towards the main door as his armed rival came through another and confronted him. He made a hasty retreat. The other occasion was on 9 February 358, in the Church of Saint Theonas on the western harbour. Athanasius was keeping vigil through the night in preparation for the Eucharist the following day when suddenly the doors burst open and the military commander Syrianus came in at the head of a large contingent of soldiers. Swords struck and arrows flew. Dead and wounded fell to the floor, some to be trampled. Nuns were seized and the church plundered. Athanasius managed to escape but only, it was said, because he fainted and was carried to safety by monks. Rewards were offered for his capture alive or dead and severe penalties were threatened for those who dared protect him. Many did. He was taken into homes, secreted in tombs, and took refuge with monks.

There is a delightful story of his enemies pursuing him up the Nile and, hailing a boat descending the river, asking 'Where is Athanasius?' only to hear a remote response 'not far off'. In fact, the voices of his enemies

had been carried on the prevailing north wind and Athanasius had taken advantage of a bend in the river to turn, meet, and mislead his enemies. He became a mythical character, suspected of witchcraft by his enemies, admired for his piety, energy and humour by his followers. When he visited Saint Antony in the Qalala range near the Red Sea he was so impressed by the life of this 'man of God' that he showed deference to him by pouring water over Antony's hands as he washed. Antony was unable to speak Greek but the two men entered into the liveliest theological discussions in the Egyptian language and became close friends. Athanasius stamped Antony's informal monastic movement with approval and, theologian and politician as he was, realised that the saintly man could help him expound his doctrine among desert communities. He persuaded the then 86-year-old Antony to lead a delegation to Wadi Natrun where a reputed 5,000 hermits received them with joy. From there they moved to the desert of Nitrea. Athanasius put words into the mouth of the hermit that were undoubtedly his own invention: 'remember the admonition you have heard from me. Have no fellowship with the schismatics, of their hostility to Christ, and the strange doctrines of their heresy . . .'

Athanasius, as is clear from his *Life of Saint Antony*, did not oppose the principle of a universal Christian empire but he did react to what he saw as its injustice. His exile was the subject of great indignation all over the country. Monks and hermits served him as guards, secretaries and messengers wherever he went. Devout, worldly, and a shrewd judge of his people, Athanasius managed to become effectively the popular leader of Egyptians, Christian and pagan. During the many years he spent in Kharga he wrote some of his greatest works. Among them were descriptions of the rigid fasts and abstemious diet of the Desert Fathers, the rules imposed and practised by them, and their responsibilities towards society. Already, under Pachomius, Egyptian monasticism had expanded and developed in the Nile valley, in or near urban areas. Athanasius, for his part, drew hitherto isolated desert communities together. The monastic movement gained momentum, not only in Egypt but beyond its borders. Athanasius is said to have consecrated Saint Frumentius and sent him to Ethiopia to preach his religious dogma.

Constantius was aware of the growth of Athanasius' sympathisers, and Egypt's drift towards independence. Mindful, too, that his defiance represented a very real threat to the imperial government, he despatched

his prefect, together with a garrison from Constantinople, to exercise control over the Egyptian province. Papyri of the period reveal frequent policing and imprisonment of Egyptians on the one hand; on the other, much of the state-owned land was sold off into private ownership. Administration costs soared and to offset these some communities, notably in the Fayoum and Oxyrhynchus, were given the right to settle their tax commitments directly to the government. Wealthy and powerful magnates emerged and a new lifestyle was introduced to Egypt, in which Greek gymnasia were supplanted by Roman racing stables and racecourses. The well-established bureaucracy, which ranged from bilingual clerics to influential officials and their lackeys at border posts, as well as those who earned a living in trade and transportation (like the proprietors of caravanserais and owners and captains of ships), became wealthy members of the community. Some wealthy members of the community even owned a fleet of Nile boats. Individual cultivators with smallholdings, or those who rented land from lessor proprietors, found themselves in dire straits. When taxes fell into arrears, raids were ordered. Houses were sacked. Fields were laid waste. Petitions found in papyri describe the distress of the last remaining inhabitants of abandoned villages. Deeply suspicious after centuries of pressure at the hands of official tax collectors, Egyptians resisted all government attempts to pry too closely into their personal lives. As under the later Ottoman Turks, the largely passive rural population probably lied about their number during census.

In Alexandria, following the death of Bishop Theophilus who had so actively pursued the war against paganism (see p. 164), there was bitter rivalry for supremacy of the see. His nephew Cyril, an Egyptian monk of the traditional order, had strong local backing. But the powerful imperial generals and soldiers supported their own nominee, George the Bishop of Cappadocia, who had been consecrated by an Arian synod. A devout Christian and monarchist, George has gone down in history as a cruel and avaricious tyrant who regarded religious discord as a menace to imperial authority and hounded out and persecuted ‘heretics’. Young soldiers from the imperial corvees, 3,000 in number, were brought into Egypt and, guided by Arian priests, marched from Alexandria to the nearby monasteries of Nitrea, then occupied by some 5,000 monks. They gave the monks the option of renouncing their adherence to the teachings about the two united natures of Christ, and taking their places as loyal supporters



Figure 7.4 Icons of Saint George of Cappadocia are numerous. The cruel tyrant of Egyptian Christians was honoured as a saint in the sixth century when he assumed the mask of a martyr. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

of the Arian creed or dying (Gibbon, 1910: II, 482). The monks who refused were slaughtered. And so began a scandalous period in Egyptian history when the Christian government of Constantinople, with stakes, swords and chains, attacked monasteries. Bishops hid behind the altars and terrified monks were reviled, kicked and trampled.

Under the leadership of George, and with strong imperial support, the government devoted resources and energy to the adornment of churches. The senior clergy was recruited from the educated class with bishops and presbyters who ordered around deacons and lectors drawn from the lower orders of the community. The honouring of popular local cults, which was part of the government policy aimed at securing the willing obedience of the masses, created a bizarre situation. For, although every effort was made to promote themselves as benevolent leaders, eager to evangelise

and institute charitable institutions, the fact that they were the persecutors of yesteryear was not lost on Egyptians. George was murdered, and the government supported the late Egyptian bishop Theophilus' archdeacon Timothy as his successor. Egyptian monks continued to support Cyril. Several days of fighting ensued before Cyril was elected bishop on the throne of Saint Mark the Evangelist in 412.

Cyril I, the twenty-fourth Bishop of Alexandria and the great champion of Christian Orthodoxy, had, as a youth, and under the guidance of the abbot Serapion in the monastery of Nitrea, zealously studied the works of Christian theologians, particularly the writings of Clement and Athanasius. He had grown into a powerful and learned man, regarded with great respect by a large body of Egyptian Christians. But his appointment aroused strong opposition and provoked particular resentment from Orestes, the prefect of Alexandria representing Constantinople. The conflict between Cyril and Orestes led, ultimately, to the cruel murder of Hypatia, a brilliant and beautiful pagan mathematics teacher and philosopher who was dragged from her chariot and torn to pieces. Such, of course, is the stuff of legend, and Hypatia's life and death, like that of Cleopatra, has been embellished, distorted, and enjoyed wide popularity for centuries. Only recently have attempts been made to reconstruct the era in which she lived. Maria Dzielska (1995) suggests in her *Hypatia of Alexandria* that a power struggle lay at the root of the tragedy.

Hypatia was born around 355 and grew up in an intellectual environment. Her father Theon, a member of the Alexandrian Mouseion in the reign of Theodosius, was a highly educated scholar and mathematician with interests in astrology. She herself studied mathematical sciences, conducted astronomical experiments and acquainted herself with diverse religious literature. In Alexandria, as already mentioned, pagans attended the classes of Christian teachers, and Christians those of pagan intellectuals. Hypatia gave lectures in her house and in the city halls and she had a wide following, not only in Alexandria but elsewhere in Egypt and abroad – in Syria, Constantinople and Cyrenaica. Synesius, Bishop of Cyrenaica, had grown up in Alexandria and greatly admired Hypatia's spiritual and intellectual gifts. His 156 letters to her, along with Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History*, form a valuable source for her circle and followers. While she attracted the attention of the prefect, it is clear that Cyril was not among her admirers. She was the enemy, not because

she was pagan but because of her close relations with the prefect and his lackeys. Quoting Socrates, Dzielska writes that Hypatia's 'friendships and influence among imperial functionaries and hieratics of the church would surely have generated anxiety among Cyril's followers' (1995: 83, 89). In fact, it did more than that. One Saturday, when Orestes was in the theatre to announce an ordinance regarding dance performances – such as that actually in progress at the time – Jews in the audience cried out that there were agents of Cyril present and that they had come to sow disorder. Orestes listened to the Jews' grievances, and when he asked them what they wanted they demanded the dismissal of Hierax, an Alexandrian teacher and one of Cyril's most devoted followers. They accused him of fomenting disorder, and Orestes ordered him arrested and tortured. Cyril was outraged. '[He] summoned the leaders of the Jewish community and threatened them with serious consequences if they continued to taunt and antagonize Christians', wrote Dzielska.

This interview increased the Jews' rancour, and they began to carry out ambushes against Christians. One night some of them raised an alarm that the church of Saint Alexander was on fire. When the Christians ran to save their church, the Jews attacked them, killing many. In response Cyril rushed with a large crowd to the Jewish district, surrounded the synagogue, permitted plunder of Jewish property, and started chasing the Jews out of the city. Socrates claims that every one of the Jews, who had lived in Alexandria since Alexander the Great, was driven out. Although he surely exaggerated, undoubtedly a great many Jews did leave, and their expulsion must have adversely affected the city's economy.

(Dzielska, 1995: 85–6)

Both bishop and prefect reported the incidents to the emperor, and among those who came to the support of Cyril were 500 monks from Nitrea. At their head was the gentle monk Ammonius who, in a sudden and unexpected fit of frenzy, aimed a stone at Orestes' head. It found its mark and the prefect fell to the ground and lay bleeding. When he recovered he sentenced Ammonius to death. Cyril claimed him as a martyr. Hypatia's continued support of Orestes generated further anxiety among Cyril's followers. She was seen as the enemy of the people, portrayed as a

witch who practised black magic, seen as the one behind Orestes' decision to sentence Hierax to torture and the monk Ammonius to death. The city that had earlier witnessed the murder of George, the Arian bishop, now saw the pagan philosopher Hypatia delivered to a cruel death in 415. Orestes was recalled. Events were now spiralling towards disunion.

Cyril of Alexandria had another problem to contend with when Nestorius, a preacher educated in the famous theological and biblical school of Antioch, which was at odds with the longer-standing and more famous school of Alexandria, was consecrated Bishop of Constantinople in 428. He deviated from the doctrine concerning the union of the natures of Christ, presenting that Jesus possessed two distinct natures but that it was his human nature that was born, suffered and died. He submitted that since Christ was both divine and human, Mary was the mother of his human not his divine nature. Cyril, with his thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, insisted that Christ did not have two separate natures; that he was both human and divine; and that Mary was the Mother of God, pure Virgin undefiled. The two men entered into fanatical disputes on the Immaculate Conception. Treatises and epistles flowed from the pen of Cyril and, when unable to respond to the logic of the Bishop of Alexandria's arguments, Nestorius resorted to personal slander. Over a century and half had passed since doctrinal differences had been reconciled at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and now the flames of theological dissension were reignited. When Cyril shrewdly sent copies of one of the letters in which he clearly outlined his theological argument, to Aleppo and Antioch, Jerusalem and Rome, all branches of the Church were drawn into the controversy. Cyril summoned a local synod in Alexandria, which resulted in twelve anathemas against the principal tenets of Nestorius. Nestorius countered with twelve anathemas against Cyril's pronouncements. It was a deadlock. Emperor Theodosius II consequently summoned the first Council of Ephesus in 431 to settle the matter. Cyril was elected to preside.

Nestorius failed to appear. He was declared a heretic *in absentia*, excommunicated, and exiled to Kharga Oasis. The title 'Theotokos', the Greek term meaning 'God-bearer', was solemnly recognised. However, six days later the influential John of Antioch arrived on the scene, and with a great deal of lobbying Nestorius received his support and it was Cyril who was accused of heresy. Pandemonium broke lose. Where once pagan philosophers had debated in quiet discourse, great acrimony was



*Figure 7.5 Nineteenth-century icon of Saint Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria between 412 and 444, and champion of Christian orthodoxy, was a monk of the traditional order honoured for his defence against Nestorianism and for his definition of faith. (Church of Saints Cyrus and John, Old Cairo.)*  
Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

demonstrated by Christians in their ongoing dispute. A story in the *Life of Shenouda*, attributed to his disciple Besa, describes a remarkable scene to which Shenouda was witness. The chairs in the church where the Council was convened had been arranged when Nestorius entered and saw that all but one was occupied, and on that the four gospels had been placed:

The vile heretic Nestorius entered with great pride and insolence, picked up the four holy books of the Gospel, put them on the ground, and sat on the chair. Now when my father Apa Shenoute saw what Nestorius had done, rightly incensed, he jostled a way through the throng of the holy fathers; he picked up the Gospels from the floor, and struck the chest of Nestorius a blow. ‘Do you want the Son of God to be on the floor while you sit upon a chair?’ he said. The impious Nestorius replied, saying to my father Shenoute, ‘What business have you at this council? You are not bishop or archimandrite or priest. You are a monk.’ And our father



Figure 7.6 Icon of the Holy Virgin, probably imported into Egypt and showing Mary in a gesture of acceptance of the title *Theotokos* or 'Mother of God,' in the church in her honour at Samanud in the Delta. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

replied to him, 'I am one whom God has willed to come here, that I may reprove you for your sins and lay open your errors, Seeing that you have rejected the passion of the only begotten Son of God, which he endured for our sakes, that he might

deliver us from our sins.' Thereupon the holy Cyril arose and laid his hands upon the head of our father Apa Shenoute and kissed him. He put the mantle which was upon his own shoulders upon the shoulders of Apa Shenoute, gave his own staff into his hand, and made him archimandrite. And all who had come to the council cried out, saying, 'Worthy, worthy, worthy archimandrite.'

(trans. of Basa's *Vita*, Shore, quoting Harris, 1971: 128)

The emperor ordered Cyril and Nestorius confined and the verdicts of both synods declared null and void. Three Church representatives were forthwith despatched from Rome to settle the matter. Nestorius was again condemned and exiled, first to Petra in Arabia and later to Kharga Oasis where he died. Cyril was vindicated. His *Thesis* against Nestorius is expressed in the *Coptic Synaxarium*:

The Union of the Word of God with the flesh is as the union of the soul with the body, and as the union of fire with iron, which although they are of different natures, yet by their union they become one. Likewise, the Lord Christ is One Christ, One Lord, One Nature and One Will.

(trans. Burmester, 1967: 4)

Meanwhile, in the Egyptian hinterland, Shenuda – who had accompanied Cyril to the first Council of Ephesus – emerged on the scene as a great social reformer and the first and most prominent theologian to write in Coptic. Born in a village near Akhmim, he was a charismatic figure, ardent nationalist, and strict disciplinarian who encouraged literacy by requiring monks to read and engage in the art of manuscript copying and illustration. He constantly preached to peasant farmers, defended them from greedy landlords, and gave them faith in the face of oppression. Shenuda was, in fact, one of the most important monks of his day. Legend holds that his father was a farmer who kept a flock of sheep and, as a young boy, it was Shenuda's duty to attend to them. Each day he gave his food to the other shepherds and went down to the river (even on the coldest of winter days) to stand in the water and pray. Shenuda's father observed the boy's devotion and took him to his uncle, Yagul (Pigol), the well-known spiritual leader of what later became known as

the White Monastery (so-called in reference to its white limestone walls), that he might bless him. Tradition holds that Pigol looked at the youth, took his hand in his own, and put it upon his own head saying ‘Bless me, for you shall be a great saint for a great multitude.’ When Pigol died about 385, Shenuda took over leadership of the monastery. There were about thirty monks in residence and he reorganised the institution. Under his leadership, the monastery opened its doors during times of famine, provided medical treatment, solved personal problems and disputes among the rural population, and offered a weekly meal for those in need. So inspiring was his charitable institution that it reached out to encompass some 4,000 monks and nuns, whose monasteries eventually occupied an area of about 12,800 acres. Farmers and craftsmen from neighbouring villages waited for Shenuda, followed him, and sought his advice.

A well-educated man with a profound knowledge of Greek language and literature, both ecclesiastical and classical, Shenuda tried to purge Greek influence from Coptic writings, thus gaining wide renown as the first important author of Coptic literature of that time. The White Monastery once had one of the greatest libraries. The manuscripts were mostly in the Coptic Sahidic dialect (the earliest being bilingual Sahidic/Greek texts and later Sahidic/Arabic). Although written on parchment, some of the later ones were found on paper – true paper made of old rags. As for content, the texts are remarkable both for their number and variety. They included biblical manuscripts, both the Old and New Testaments; fragments of codices that record the decisions of the great Church Councils of Nicaea and Ephesus; hagiographic texts intended for the spiritual edification of the monks; and writings of the Church Fathers, their works and sermons. There were texts about Egypt’s most popular saints, including Antony, Athanasius, Pachomius and his disciples, Samuel of Qalamun, and the prolific writings of Saint Shenuda himself and his successors. How rich would be our knowledge of the early Church had the White Monastery scriptorium survived intact. Unfortunately, it was plundered towards the end of the nineteenth century. Texts were removed from their bindings, dismembered, and different folios ended up in different libraries or museums. Worse, individual folios ended up in different libraries on different sides of the world. Fragments are dispersed among the University Library in Cambridge, Biblioteca Laurentiana in Florence, Rijksmuseum in Leiden, Deutsche Staats-



*Figure 7.7* Part of the monumental apse of the church of Saint Shenuda in the Monastery of Saint Shenuda, the so-called White Monastery near Sohag. One of many in Upper Egypt believed to have been founded by Helena, mother of Constantine, it is difficult to determine the original form of the building from surviving remains and countless reconstructions. The nave of the basilica is now a huge open courtyard and the Coptic church occupies what used to be the transept and the sanctuary of the original structure. Photo courtesy of the White Monastery.

bibliothek in Berlin, the Public Library of Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), the British Library in London, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, and the libraries of Michigan, Moscow, Naples, New York, Oxford, Paris, Strasbourg, Venice, Vienna and the Vatican – not to mention collections in Cairo: in the Coptic Museum, the Egyptian Museum and the Institute Français d’Archéologie Orientale.

Shenuda severely criticised the Gnostics and threatened to wipe them out unless they acknowledged Cyril and his teachings. He seized their books and it is fortunate that ‘the secret words of Jesus’ or the ‘Gospel

according to Thomas' (Codex X in the Nag Hammadi Library, which is believed to date from the second half of the fourth century) was spared. It is the complete text of a lost work, fragments of which were found elsewhere in Greek and led scholars to suppose that such a collection in fact existed. Codex X should not be confused with the 'Book of Thomas', which is attributed to Matthias the Apostle, one of the 'three witnesses' to whom the resurrected Jesus Christ entrusted the care of collecting and transcribing his authentic teachings. This work – the most noteworthy of the codices emanating from Chenoboskion – is made up of about 120 sayings and incidents attributed to the Saviour, each starting with: 'Jesus says . . .', and Doresse notes that the text is not so much a gospel – i.e. a form of biography like the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – but teachings, didactic works or collections which 'Jesus the Living spoke and which were written down by Didymus Jude Thomas'. Doresse noted that some of the material is identical with the canonical gospels, others differ in both form and spirit. He translated 115 'sayings' as Appendix II in his *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (1960), of which the following are my personal choice:

- 1 Jesus says: 'Let him who Seeks cease not to Seek until he finds: when he finds he will be astonished; and when he is astonished he will wonder, and will reign over the universe. (1)
- 2 Jesus says: 'If those who Seek to attract you say to you: "See, the Kingdom is in heaven!" then the birds of heaven will be there before you. If they say to you "It is in the sea!" then the fish will be there before you. But the kingdom is within you and it is outside of you!' (2)
- 3 Jesus says: 'I will give you what eye has never seen, and what ear has never heard, and what hand has never touched, and what has never entered into the heart of man.' (18)
- 4 The disciples say to Jesus: 'Tell us what our end will be.' Jesus says: 'Have you then deciphered the beginning, that you ask about the end? For where the beginning is, there shall be the end. Blessed is the man who reaches the beginning; he will know the end, and will not taste death!' (19)

- 5 The disciples say to Jesus: ‘Tell us what the Kingdom of heaven is like!’ He says to them: ‘It is like a grain of mustard: it is smaller than all the <other> Seeds, but when it falls on ploughed land it produces a big stalk and becomes a shelter for the birds of heaven.’ (23)
- 6 His disciples say to him: ‘Instruct us about the place where thou art, for we must know about it!’ He says to them. ‘He who has ears, let him hear! If a light exists inside a luminous one, then it gives light to the whole world; but if it does not give light, <it means that it is> darkness.’ (29)
- 7 Jesus says: ‘Blessed are the solitary and the elect, for you will find the Kingdom! Because you have issued from it, you will return to it again.’ (54)
- 8 His disciples said to him: ‘On what day shall rest come to those who are dead, and on what day shall the new world come?’ He said to them: ‘This <rest> that you wait for has <already> come, and you have not recognised it.’ (56)
- 9 Jesus says: ‘Seek to See Him who is living, while you are living; rather than to die to Seek to See Him <only> when you can no longer See Him!’ (64)
- 10 Jesus says: ‘He who knows the All, but has failed to know himself, has failed completely to know, <Or: to find> the Place!’ (71)

(trans. Doresse, 1960: 355–70)

When Shenuda died, tens of thousands of devotees paid homage to him, and the monastery at Sohag (still more popularly known as the White Monastery) became known as the Monastery of Saint Shenuda, one of the best known in Egypt. His legend, as with all heroes, was embellished and expanded. He was said to have performed miracles, to have had the power of prophecy, and to have lived 120 years.

The altercation on the nature of Jesus Christ was by no means over. Cyril died in 444 and was succeeded by his nephew, Dioscorus. The second Council of Ephesus, which was held in 449, has been labelled the ‘Robber’s Council’ because of the highly unusual events that took place. It appears that Dioscorus took steps, originally implemented by his predecessor Cyril, to separate Church and state. Unfortunately he was not

as rational or patient in his arguments. When a decree tabled at the First Council of Ephesus was ratified, which gave the see of Constantinople precedence over those of Alexandria and Antioch, the Egyptian delegation was humbled and Dioscorus openly hostile. In one unfortunate scene he flung the Bishop of Constantinople to the ground and walked out of the meeting (Stanley, 1861: 113). The relationship between Alexandria and Constantinople became more and more strained. The former refused to acknowledge the authority of Emperor Marcianus who had succeeded Theodosius II in 450. Marcianus himself, who co-ruled with his sister Pulcheria, was vehemently opposed to Dioscorus. The latter declared, ‘You have nothing to do with the Church’, a stance which may have led Marcianus to inform Leo, Bishop of Rome of his wish to call a new council in the hope of exiling the ‘renegades’, whom he undoubtedly saw as a threat to his authority.

The controversial Council of Chalcedon which took place in 451 is regarded as a turning point in ecclesiastical history. It caused the division into what are today labelled ‘Chalcedonian’ and ‘non-Chalcedonian’ churches. The Council was the largest ever. Estimates range from 520 to 630 in attendance, and there were between sixteen and twenty-one separate meeting sessions. There were representatives from all over Christendom, including Dioscorus of Alexandria, ‘a fact that did not please many there, and open protests were made’. It was suggested by the imperial commissioners that Dioscorus should be dismissed and deprived of his vote. In the third session this was done. But in a further session Dioscorus and his partisans were pardoned and allowed to attend. Theological discussions became confused by misunderstandings, and the lack of knowledge of Greek by the Latin Church. The whole issue was charged because when, at the fifth session, the creed of Chalcedon affirmed ‘the equal parts of the human and divine Christ in one body, one being’, far from ending the controversy rapidly boiled over. ‘After looking under the surface, it would seem that the schism that resulted from Chalcedon, like the others that would follow centuries later in the Reformation, were largely political in nature, and not the result of *true* religious differences’ (*A History of Christianity in Egypt: The Council of Chalcedon*, <http://interoz.com/egypt/chiste4.html>).

Egypt’s refusal to endorse the doctrinal decrees tabled at Chalcedon was a nationalistic statement of cultural independence from foreign occupation. Every effort made by the imperial government to coerce Egyptians



*Figure 7.8* This icon of the Holy Virgin and Child painted in simple Coptic style, surrounded by angels and with the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, is noteworthy because, while most representations of the Christ child show his fingers held in the symbolic gestures adopted to denote various creeds on the nature of Christ – co-equal and co-eternal with his Father; separate and yet one; two natures indivisibly one; and two natures that were nevertheless perfectly distinct – this is a rare example showing him with his fingers splayed. (El-Maghaga.) Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

to accept compromise failed. After a five-year civil war waged by the imperial government of Constantinople against the religious hierarchy of Alexandria, Proterius, the Melkite bishop, was killed – torn to pieces by the mob it was said. Then, in conformity with the pattern of the Egyptian Church, Timothy II was selected from among the monks to the see in 457. As Bishop of Alexandria, he set off on an inspection tour of the monasteries, talked with monks, dealt with disciplinary issues among the religious institutions, and successfully tabled codes of behaviour which were later incorporated in the law of the Coptic Church. But on his return Timothy was expelled from office by a Melkite force. The struggle for the see of Alexandria continued.

Ever anxious about their rich Egyptian province, the imperial government made an effort to draw it back into the fold. Emperor Zeno, the successor of Marcianus – whose daughter had joined the Monastery of Saint Macarius (see p. 52) – sent his architects to develop and lavish gifts on the institution, and issued a compromise doctrine in 482 aimed at establishing harmony. The ‘Instrument of Union’ (*Henotico*), was based on the doctrine of Cyril in which the word ‘nature’ was omitted from the text. The paper was rejected out of hand.

In the reign of Emperor Anastasius (491–518) there was famine in Egypt, and a further insurrection of Alexandrians on the occasion of the imposition of a bishop from Constantinople. Yet another attempt at reconciliation was made. Paul, a monk from Upper Egypt, was appointed to the see in 538. But the untimely arrival of a new contingent of Melkite troops in Alexandria under General Apollinarius revealed it as the political manoeuvre it was. Apollinarius arrived at the Mediterranean capital donned in robes fit for an emperor, entered the church and conducted a service expounding the doctrine tabled at Chalcedon. He called on Egyptians to abandon their creed on threat of being declared heretics and killed. Opposition was only to be expected and, true to his word, Apollinarius ordered his troops to attack. Two hundred people who had assembled to hear him fell to the ground. Unable to intimidate the Egyptians the imperial forces had resorted to slaughter. The result was that untold numbers fled Alexandria after the massacre and joined monastic communities in Maryut and Nitrea. Melkites occupied their abandoned churches, demolished houses and expropriated land. When they came up against defiant citizens, as they did in almost daily battles, they failed to understand what they regarded as bigotry, seeing them as

no more than ruffians. The rivals raised arms against one another, ravaged one another's holy places, and set one another to flight at the point of the sword.

Meanwhile, the chain of monasteries founded by Pachomius continued to flourish. Long self-supporting, they owned land, cultivated, manufactured, sold and traded. They aided people economically, and played an active part in sheltering them against a hostile alien army. Legends of Egyptian saints and martyrs proliferated. The biography of Father Isaac (Appa Ishaq), for example (whose monastery is near el-Lahun), records a visit by Saint Antony to whom an angel appeared and said, 'Go to the desert of the fellowship in the Fayoum because there you will find a community of monks, of priests, and high priests, who will listen to your call.' Antony reputedly set off until he came to Lake Arsanius (unidentified), crossed it by walking on its waters to the opposite shore, and found Father Isaac. He asked him to call a gathering of monks and hermits, invested them with the sacred mantle, and confirmed them to the monastic life. Father Isaac travelled to Gebel el-Barmil in Giza, then to an area called Gebel Mofset further south, with his final destination being Gebel el-Khazain near Alexandria. Everywhere he went Isaac delivered sermons, inspired monks and hermits carrying the spiritual message to a new generation of monks.

The economic and social situation in the Nile valley had undergone such drastic change, as is evidence from papyri, that eventually Emperor Justinian took steps to exercise political control over the country in the sixth century as we learn from his incomplete thirteenth edict. The principal features of the government of Egypt were thoroughly reorganised. The prefect ceased to have control over the provinces. Instead, a governor who was granted both military and civil power was appointed in each. As a result of this reorganisation, wealthy and powerful magnates emerged. Through successive generations they filled the highest positions and enjoyed immense wealth. A record of the activities of one of these families, Flavius Apion, is preserved among the papyri found at Oxyrhynchus. It had large estates, not only in the Oxyrhynchite but several in the Fayoum. They owned public baths and hospitals, banks and counting-houses, and they had a host of officials, secretaries, accountants and tax-collectors at their beck and call. Entire villages belonged to them. 'Like other wealthy families, it had its private army of mercenaries, including men of Germanic race and private prisons a 'practice forbidden, but in vain, by

Imperial constitutions', writes Bell (1948: 120). The opportunities for corruption do not have to be underlined. Such families undoubtedly exploited those who pandered to them, regarded with contempt the apathy of the rural population, and, since privileges were granted to several monasteries and churches, no doubt despised the itinerant monks as fanatical heretics.

Egypt, as throughout its history, had no shortage of political and religious activists, and Samuel of Qalamun was one of them. He chose to live an ascetic life at an early age and had joined a long-established community of hermits between the Qalamun plateau and the Ghalioun mountains in the Western Desert. Well respected for his piety and spiritual guidance, he had a talent for organisation which earned him a reputation far beyond the semi-circle of barren land where the monastery in his name is located. His fame spread even into Nubia, where he was known as 'the mighty Saint Samuel'. Like Pachomius and Athanasius before him, Samuel visited semi-cenobitic communities and encouraged hermits to defend themselves in fortified settlements. When he saw how heavily militarised was the Fayoum province, he persuaded the monks of Naqlun, for their own safety, to join his community further south. A large keep was built in which they could protect themselves, and the monastery of Saint Samuel became one of the more worthy ecclesiastical institutions of the sixth century. Regarded as a dissident by the imperial government, he was captured and flogged time and again. In one terrible and humiliating confrontation he lost an eye. Many others like Samuel must have taken an active stand against the Melkite government. What is clear is that a national body, of which Egyptian Christians were an important part, was extremely hostile to Byzantine rule. This was not because of an aversion to the Hellenistic culture as a whole, nor because of the subtle differences in doctrine. It was a strong desire to assert independence.

Alexandria had become Melkite-dominated; Egyptian Christians were expelled from the great city that saw the martyrdom of Saint Mark the Evangelist. In 570, as a consequence of centuries of misrule, they took a decisive step and appointed their own patriarch (an exalted title of bishops of sees adopted in the fifth century) residing at Wadi Natrun.

I stood with Bishop Basilius at a cave entrance beneath a huge modern relief of Saint Samuel carved into the rock face in 1995. From our vantage point 180 metres above the plateau, 15 metres below the escarpment, we



*Figure 7.9* The Monastery of Saint Samuel at Qalamun is in honour of a monk who took a firm stand against the occupying Melkite forces. There are three churches in the complex: the ‘catacomb church’, the earliest, which probably dates to the fourth century; the Church of Saint Misail on the first floor of the keep; and the Church of the Blessed Virgin built in 1958, and recently restored, which houses the relics of Saint Samuel. Photo Mohammed Mos’ad © Al-Ahram Weekly.

had a panoramic view of the Western Desert. Before us spread a huge semi-circle of flat land bleached by the midday sun and coated with small dark rock chippings. It was protected to the north and east by the lofty Qalamun plateau, and to the west by the Ghalioun mountain range. ‘These are our walls’, said the bishop. ‘Deir Abba Samwil (the Monastery of Saint Samuel) is one of the most naturally protected monasteries in Egypt. As you can see, we have blocked the only access route.’ Following his finger, I saw a vast wall extending in a straight line across the valley between the escarpments. There seemed to be guard-houses at regular intervals along the wall and I questioned their purpose. The bishop smiled and assured me that they were cells, ‘for our brothers who prefer to live in partial seclusion’, he explained, adding: ‘The wall is necessary to mark the limits of our sacred land and prevent squatters from moving in from the Nile valley and claiming it for themselves.’

There seemed to me to be little likelihood of this because the desert is largely unproductive. From a distance the land around the monastery walls is dark, giving the appearance of arable soil, but, as the bishop

explained, this is because the rather brackish water is near the surface. 'It is easy to dig catch basins for our agricultural needs but unfortunately olive and palm trees are the only ones that will grow in this soil', he said. 'Even water from a 300-metre-deep well is unsuitable for human consumption. Sweet water is brought in for the use of the monks.' As we talked, I saw groups of pilgrims, from Samalout or Beni Mazar no doubt, sauntering up the stairway leading to the cave. One was a young woman carrying a plump and obviously heavy baby. 'She has come to ask a blessing from the saint for her child', the bishop explained.

Where once only the most resolute of pilgrims would attempt to climb to the cave, it is now accessible by concrete steps. Bishop Basilius guided me past an altar at the entrance into the natural crevice. I had to bend to enter and soon felt the sides of the rock close in on me as we turned a corner. Candles had been lit to guide us. 'The saint lived here for the last years of his life, visiting the monastery only infrequently. But the cave, we believe, has always been inhabited by hermits, from the earliest escaping Roman persecution and even until today. At the end of the nineteenth century,' Bishop Basilius went on, 'our dear father, the blessed Yuhannas, lived here, and also father Ishaq. The passage extends for some thirty metres into the hillside, ending with a reservoir which is maintained by annual rainfall.'

I only half heard his words. My thoughts were centred on Samuel, and monks like him, who took his courageous stand against the occupying forces. I pondered on how they may have encouraged farmers and urban dwellers to disrupt the garrisons, not so much by withholding food supplies as by blocking roads with cattle on the move and opening dikes to flood access routes. In rural areas where the land is broken up into parcels separated by dikes, it was not difficult to redirect grain and other produce transported on donkeys to be stored in the safety of the monasteries. It crossed my mind that some of the attacks on the monasteries, generally attributed to the Berbers, may have been by Melkites. Take the legend of the forty-nine monks of the Monastery of Saint Macarius, who were reputedly slain in the year 444 by Berber tribes (see p. 53), or other Desert Fathers, including Abram, Girgis, and Daniel, who was taken prisoner. Were they indeed captured by Berbers sacking monasteries, as suggested in the written record, or could they have been victims of armed Melkites seeking to undermine the monastic movement? In the case of Father Daniel – who later became a bishop in the Monastery

of Saint Macarius – legend holds that the first time he was captured he was held ransom, the second time he escaped, and the third time he managed to kill his captor before he escaped. What possible cause would Berbers, bent as they were on booty, have had to take monks captive? But there was every reason for the Melkites to do so. Legends evolve. Oral traditions are woven and re-woven to form a complex and contradictory myth. New traditions, motivated by familiar factors, slowly reshaped the Coptic perception of its heroes and martyrs.

## COPTIC CHRISTIANITY DEVELOPS ITS OWN STYLE

The year 570 marks Coptic Egypt's severing of religious ties with the Church of Constantinople when Patriarch Theodosius I established himself in the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Wadi Natrun, followed by many priests and monks. Until then the country's resistance to oppression had been largely passive. Egyptians resented political control and the Melkites' ostentatious display of power, but they had not fled to remote areas in large numbers, as had their forebears in the third century. Not only had they developed a strong sense of identity that had been lacking in the earlier period but monasteries firmly replaced some of the services of ancient temples. Each church, however small, had its own resident clergy that looked after the spiritual and social welfare of the community. However, after the massacre of 200 innocents by the imperial forces in 538, Egyptian Christians became increasingly disenchanted with the Melkite-dominated Alexandria. Incensed that monasteries like that of Samuel at Qalamun had to erect huge keeps for personal protection against alien forces in their own country, and no longer able to support oppression, persecution, and monks being rounded up, brutally beaten and imprisoned – probably even murdered to set an example to others and enforce subservience – they took this major step. They appointed their own patriarch to take up residence in the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Wadi Natrun in the Western Desert. Thenceforward, Egypt witnessed the coexistence of two 'Patriarchs of Alexandria', one representing the Greek Orthodox (Chalcedonian) Church and the imperial government at Constantinople; the other the national church of Egypt, known after the Arab conquest as the Coptic Church. Both claim to orthodoxy; that is to say, to the canons and rules formulated by the councils of the early Church Fathers.

Copts adopted a ‘calendar of the martyrs’, which starts its era (*anno martyrorum*) on 29 August 284, in recollection of those who died for their faith in the reign of Diocletian. Like the ancient Egyptian agricultural calendar, it is divided into twelve months of thirty days, and one month with five days, or six if it be a Leap Year. Each month is named after an ancient Egyptian god – names which survive until today. The Arabic Tut, for example, derives from Thoth, the god of wisdom; Hatur from the goddess Hathor; and Tubah from ‘botti’, an ancient festival known as the ‘swelling of the barley’. In Pharaonic times the year was divided into three agricultural seasons, based on the annual Nile flood. These, too, are used until today, in the liturgical rites of the Coptic Church, and in Arabised poetry concerning the waters of the Nile, the wind, crops, and labours to be performed at certain times of the year.

Monks resident at Wadi Natrun started to collate what was to become known as *The History of the Patriarchs* of Alexandria, a composite work by authors of various epochs comprising biographies, political and social history. It forms an important, though not comprehensive, source of Coptic history. They compiled the Acts of the Martyrs in commemoration of the bloody persecutions carried out by Diocletian, and also took steps to translate biblical, theological and liturgical literature into the Bohairic dialect of Lower Egypt, a colloquial form of the Coptic language suitable for reading aloud, thus enabling Christian writings to become available to a wider Egyptian audience than ever before.

It is important to point out that Copts reject the term ‘Monophysite’, adopted by the Church of Constantinople for those churches that did not subscribe to the decrees of Chalcedon:

[Our] church has never believed in monophysitism the way it was portrayed at the Council . . . which meant believing in one nature. Copts believe that the Lord is perfect in His divinity, and He is perfect in His humanity, but His divinity and His humanity were united in one nature called ‘the nature of the incarnate word’, which was reiterated by Saint Cyril of Alexandria.

(‘The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt’,  
Coptic Network Archives,  
<http://cn-request@pharos.bu.edu/Coptic/Home.html>)

When today's spiritual leader of the Coptic community, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Shenuda III, visited the Vatican in 1973 on the occasion of the 1,600th anniversary of the death of Athanasius the Great, he and Pope Paul VI signed a document agreeing on the meaning of the Christological formula of Saint Cyril on the 'incarnate word'. This historical meeting was followed by others in subsequent years and 120 Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian and Indian bishops and theologians responded to Pope Shenuda's invitation in 1991 to a formal gathering at the Monastery of Saint Bishoy in Wadi Natrun with view 'to end once and for all the historic polemic that for centuries had mistakenly accused the Copts of denying the human nature of Jesus Christ. In an attempt to remove mutual anathemas, an agreement was reached that the Christological mystery was expressed in different words and in different traditions, though adhering to the same fundamental faith' (Meinardus, 1999: 126), and the term *Mia physis* was adopted. Pope Shenuda had this to say at one of his Friday evening gatherings in the new Cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo: 'Others must know that semantics and terminology are of little importance to us. Faith is what matters.'

Copts take pride in the fact that the first catechetical school was founded in Alexandria and there Christian thinkers, who later became prominent bishops in many parts of the world, had the opportunity to discuss and interpret their beliefs in the philosophical and intellectual environment of the city that had been the centre of culture since the third century BC. They are proud that Antony, an Egyptian hermit, is the spiritual father of monasticism; that Athanasius, his disciple and biographer, played an important part in formulating the original Nicene Creed and was its first spokesman in the West; that Cyril I, an Egyptian monk of Nitrea, was champion of the orthodox faith against the Nestorian heresy; and that all Christian monasticism stems, either directly or indirectly, from the Egyptian example as set forth by Pachomius, one of its most revered sons.

There is a paucity of early churches in Egypt, which is due to many reasons. First, they were originally modest structures soon replaced by larger foundations. Second, they were subjected to damage or destruction during foreign invasions, Berber attacks, doctrinal disputes, earthquakes, and pillage during times of famine. Third, they were built of mud-brick in or near town sites and were demolished by peasant farmers from the nineteenth century for their valuable organic material (*sebakh*) that served as excellent fertiliser. Finally, churches and chapels built inside, or

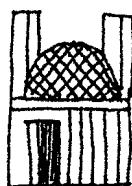
against, ancient temples were frequently destroyed by early Egyptologists who regarded them as mere encumbrances on the much more ancient and, to them, more interesting monuments they obscured. Nevertheless, domed chapels of local inspiration and of early date have survived within monastic complexes that have, themselves, been destroyed, restored and rebuilt over the centuries. In recent years, basilicas – a term that describes buildings used by Christians around the world because they resemble the large rectangular structures erected by the Romans for transacting business and conducting legal affairs – have been excavated at many sites in Egypt. In a country divided by politics if not by faith, it is not surprising that two architectural styles should develop. One was indigenous and modest in execution, a continuation of mud-brick technology and with limited resources; the other spawned splendid buildings sponsored by the government with columns of marble and porphyry, altars and reliquaries elaborately adorned with silver altar tablets and crosses. Plans were sent by the ‘Imperial Office and Works’ to Ephesus and to Gaza (Krautheimer 1992: 87–9), doubtless to Egypt as well since the ruins of such grand structures have been found in Gaza and el-Farma (Pelusiam) in northern Sinai; in Maryut, west of Alexandria; and, in Upper Egypt, the basilica at Ashmunein (Hermopolis), and the basilica at Faw Qibli (Pbow) near Gebel el-Tarif.

The simultaneous construction of two types of religious architecture provides a clue to the socio-political conditions in Egypt during the crucial century and a half between Egypt’s declaration of religious independence from Constantinople, and the Arab invasion which resulted in the withdrawal of the Melkite patriarch from Alexandria. To simplify understanding, I shall take the liberty of referring to them as ‘churches’ and ‘basilicas’ to make the distinction between indigenous and imported architecture (although Romans built churches, and basilicas later became Coptic churches). The expanding cenobitic community (Pachonian monasteries) was situated in inhabited land. As pointed out in Chapter 5, monks lived in towns, villages and in the countryside, as well as just beyond agricultural areas at the edge of the desert, all within easy reach of urban and rural communities. The fact that monasteries were surrounded by walls did not preclude monks from taking excursions to gather materials required for their livelihoods and to serve the needs of the community. They were frequently built side by side, just as, in earlier centuries, Egyptian temples and Greek shrines were not separated (see pp. 70–1).



Figure 8.1 It is not certain whether the massive circular building excavated at el-Farma (ancient Pelusiam) was a church or a courtyard for pilgrims. It is one of several Christian buildings in the area which were excavated in 1999 when the construction of the el-Salam canal across northern Sinai threatened to undermine historic monuments built along the ancient 'Road of Horus'. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

Coptic churches were undoubtedly simple structures built over the tomb of a saint or martyr, such as one finds in contemporary Egyptian villages. Indeed, they were probably much like shrines built to local deities at the dawn of history some 5,000 years ago as shown in this pharaonic hieroglyph. Made of a simple mixture of Nile silt and chaff which is cast in wooden moulds and dried in the sun, mud-brick was used in hermitages in proximity to the floodplain with its alluvial soil, and it continues to be used today (despite a government ban on its manufacture due to lack of replenishing silt following the construction of the High Dam), not for any lack of technological know-how but because of its surprising durability in the prevailing climate and its welcome insulation from the extremes of temperature. Mud-brick technology has evolved little since the time of the Pharaohs. It was a favoured medium for domestic housing, frequently employed in funerary architecture, and the material proved ideal for the construction of domes



and vaults, which, by their very simplicity, revealed the monastic ideal. The dome has a long history in the Nile valley. As an architectural feature, it can be traced to the Old Kingdom. British archaeologist Flinders Petrie, excavating on Saqqara necropolis at the end of the nineteenth century, found long sloping corridors with an arch of bricks leading to the tomb chambers of 6th-dynasty noblemen, and observed that they were the oldest brick vaults known (2686–2181 BC). More recently, in 1997, a brick dome was uncovered during excavations of the Workers' Community at Giza by Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass. The earliest known example carried on pendentives – perhaps the earliest in the world – is also on the Giza necropolis, in the Old Kingdom tomb of Seneb. Other examples have been found at Dendera, Tuna el-Gebel, and the necropolis of Hermopolis, not to mention the long vaulted granaries of the mortuary temple of Ramses II on the Theban necropolis built around 1300 BC. Therefore we must amend the prevailing idea that only in medieval times was the dome introduced as an architectural feature.

Churches in early monastic communities, such as those of Kellia and Marina el-Alamein on the northern coast, feature narrow naves and aisles which suggest that the buildings did not allow for many domes. Nor were domes used exclusively for religious architecture. In urban communities they covered wells (Figure 1.9), pigeon lofts, and even bean stores. Coptic churches have undergone change over the millennia, but the characteristic dome has remained a distinctive feature, varying in form (high, shallow or 'Nubian'), in number, and in relative size. In *The Coptic Dome* (1996), Father (later Bishop) Samuel noted that although the material was largely dried mud-brick, rubble stone, burnt brick and wood were also used. In the fifth century, the dome was constructed above the three apses; in the sixth century it took the form of a large apse in front of the sanctuary; while churches of the seventh and eighth centuries tended towards a large central dome, with smaller domes for the neighbouring sanctuaries. 'The dome is the suitable cover for monastic buildings because it suits the deep spiritual life of the monks and hermits. It confirms that the monastic building is an earthly heaven and a heavenly earth', wrote Bishop Samuel, who made reference, also, to the circular dome featuring heaven with its astrological adornments in the temple of Dendera: the famous Zodiac now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

The dome over the altar of the small church at the Monastery of Saint Tomas at the mouth of Wadi Sarga, a dried-out river bed 16 kilometres



*Figure 8.2* Above: the Monastery of Saint Bishoy at Wadi Natrun was constructed in the seventh century and has undergone restoration many times in its long history. All the buildings are of sun-dried brick, plastered with adobe made of clay and crushed limestone. Successive applications have resulted in the disappearance of all sharp lines. Ornate narrow slit windows, originally probably cut out on completion of the walls and obscured by later additions of plaster, have now been revealed through restoration. Left: the original refectory of the monastery (now a museum) roofed with a series of domes. Photos Michael Stock.



Figure 8.3 This large central apse in the Church of Saint Macarius in the monastery that bears the name of the saint in Wadi Natrun, is eight metres in diameter and probably dates to the seventh century. Mud-brick technology has evolved little since the time of the Pharaohs and the medium proved ideal for the construction of domes and vaults. Photo by courtesy of the Monastery of Saint Macarius.

north of Akhmim, is worth mentioning (see Figure 8.4). It has a crude and delightful painting of the crowning of the Holy Virgin seated on a throne surrounded by angels on one side and Christ enthroned on the other. The Virgin wears a blue robe uniquely decorated with lozenge-shaped highlights – a somewhat strange embellishment, unless one considers representations of the sky-goddess Nut in tomb reliefs in which her body spans the vault of heaven and is adorned with shining stars. The Virgin is similarly robed in the central panel of a triptych in the Coptic Museum, which represents the Holy Family with the archangels Michael and Gabriel on the side shutters. Since this is probably the work of a nineteenth-century Coptic artist, the suggestion of inspiration from Pharaonic times would be to stretch the argument of continuity to absurdity, were it not for the fact that for centuries early churches were built beside, or even inside, ancient temples.

Many features of Coptic church architecture, if not directly inspired by Pharaonic temples, clearly conform to an ancient tradition. The internal arrangement of three eastern chapels, for example, parallels the three



Figure 8.4 The painting in the dome of the old church in the Monastery of Saint Tomas the hermit is a fine example of Coptic art in its most spontaneous form. The Holy Virgin and angels are painted with delightful *naïveté* in a style that has been labelled the 'Akhmimic'. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.



Figure 8.5 The newly restored Monastery of Saint Tomas stands at the mouth of Wadi Sarga, north of Akhmim. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

shrines in an ancient temple dedicated to the Holy Triad, the chief god (at the centre), his wife and son. The central apse or *haikal* of a Coptic church, the high altar which contains the holy relics, invariably has a canopy resting on four tall pillars, which is reminiscent of Pharaonic myths of four mountain peaks at the edge of the world holding aloft the heavens. As for altars, there are two types in the churches of Egypt: slabs of marble with raised edge and those of semi-circular or horseshoe shape. The former abound in monastic churches. ‘That the marble slab was designed with special reference to the ancient ceremony of washing the altar, cannot I think be doubted: for it is proved by the presence of the raised moulding, by the break in the border generally found on the western side of the slab to let off the water, and in one example by a drain in the centre of the slab’, wrote Alfred Butler (1970: II, 9–10). Tradition is hard to break. In a carving of the Last Supper in the Church of Saint Sergius in Old Cairo (one of a series on the sanctuary screen) Jesus sits with his disciples at such a table.

Alfred Butler regards the rock-hewn church of the Holy Virgin at Gebel el-Tair on the eastern bank of the Nile north of Minia (Figures 1.11, 1.12) as a replica of the Pharaonic rock-cut temple at Girga. He points out that both are descended by a flight of stairs, each has a division of the body of the structure from the side aisles with an equal number of columns, the stairways ascending to the transept are exactly the same, and both church and temple are partly subterranean with the open sector pillared (Butler, 1970: I, 348ff.). There are other examples of direct influence. At Abydos, where the temple of Seti I is uniquely dedicated to seven major Pharaonic deities whose painted reliefs are shown on the entrance to each doorway, the nearby church in the monastery of Saint Moses (sometimes known as the Monastery of Saint Dimiana) likewise has seven rectangular sanctuaries, with an icon above each of the seven doorways to identify the patron saint to whom each is dedicated. A stone pulpit from the Monastery of Saint Jeremias at Saqqara (now in the Cairo Museum) bears a marked resemblance to the stairs leading to ‘false shrines’ in the Heb-Sed court of the adjacent Step Pyramid complex of Djoser (*c.* 2686 BC) situated a mere 500 metres away. A decorative frieze of the grape harvest from the same monastery likewise recalls scenes of rural activity depicted in the Old Kingdom tombs of noblemen in the neighbouring necropolis.

The main altar of a Coptic church is traditionally built of brick or stonework, and on its east side is a doorway revealing an inner recess. This



Figure 8.6 Early Coptic sculpture, somewhat crude in execution with disproportionate limbs of figures. This fourth/fifth-century fragment of a rural scene from Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchus), which shows figures entwined within stylised vine-scrolls derived from Hellenistic tradition, recalls similar harvest scenes in ancient Egyptian tombs. (Coptic Museum.) The stylised curled hair and the large staring eyes add to the charm of the fragment which is full of movement. Photo Robert Scott.

was not meant to be sealed after the relics, probably laid in a wooden box, were deposited. It could thus be easily removed if required for healing the sick or to be carried in procession on special occasions. The latter is reminiscent of Pharaonic rituals when the deified ancestor (the nobleman Heqaib of Elephantine for example) ‘appeared’ before the populace on special occasions. Today relics are frequently sewn up in bolster-like cases and covered in silk brocade, while the altar itself is covered by a tightly fitting case of silk or cotton that reaches the ground. The side altars, dedicated to other saints, are used only during important festivals like Easter, Christmas, Palm Sunday, and the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross when more than a single celebration is required; Coptic tradition forbids more than one ritual at the same altar on the same day. The Coptic Church today is the only one that confers ordination not by imposition of hands but by the act of breathing, another ancient tradition; the expression ‘giving the breath of life’ is a common one in Pharaonic texts.

A sense of awe and mysticism surrounds the sacerdotal functions in a Coptic church. The priest conducting the service stands facing the altar, which contains the relics of the saint to whom the church is dedicated.

The altar is separated from the main body of the church by a screen with doors or curtains and the priest, with his back to the congregation, fills the opening in the sanctuary screen, obscuring all view of the shrine behind it. In some smaller churches like that at Bush, which was built over the rock-cave in which Saint Antony sought seclusion (see p. 80), and in the old church in the Monastery of Saint Bishoy at Wadi Natrun, one can peer through the centre of the sanctuary screen into a domed apse which contains the altar and suspended lamp, as dark as the 'holy of holies' of an ancient Egyptian temple. In the Monastery of the Martyrs of Esna (Deir Manaos wa al-Shahuda), the oldest church within the complex, three rock-hewn sanctuaries dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, Saint George and the Holy Martyrs of Esna appear today little different than some seven centuries ago (Figure 5.5). Coptic churches are built not as places where the community of faithful can gather for thanksgiving and prayer so much as places where honour can be paid to a relic of a saint or martyr who died for the Christian cause.

Compare the above to basilicas. All had a wide nave surrounded by aisles and galleries on three sides with a vast vaulted semi-dome or apse



*Figure 8.7* Worship in Coptic churches takes place in the holy inner chambers. The priest conducting the service faces the high altar which contains the relics of the saint, his back to the congregation. The service being conducted here is in the old church in the Monastery of Saint Bishoy in 1998. Photo Michael Stock.

spanning the nave, often terminating in three semi-domes. The central apse, with its depiction of Christ Pantocrator, was the focal point of worship beneath which the bishop, representing the emperor, sat in splendour on an elevated throne approached by steps, the benches to the left and right of the throne being for the presbyters. A low sculpted stone wall – later the iconostasis – separated the nave from the sanctuary. Thirty-two columns of green marble were imported from Anatolia for the cross-church at Gaza. Marble and granite were used in the newly discovered church at Pelusiam, which is a fully circular construction and unlike any other apart from one in Jerusalem. The roof of the T-shaped basilica of Abu Menas at Maryut was supported by fifty-six marble pillars. Marble and granite were used in the basilica at Hermopolis. The clergy were exempt from taxation and it was legal for them to receive grants and hold property and estates which generated great income.

Construction workers, artists and craftsmen were easy to come by. Egypt had a long tradition of such throughout ancient history, who worked under the direction of a supervisor and in turn oversaw the work of a group of apprentices. Naturally the master craftsmen had experience in handling large groups of men and throughout Roman rule there was a tendency for architects, artists and craftsmen to move around the Empire, gravitating towards those centres that would pay for their professional services. They worked in Alexandria and were summoned by the emperors to Rome and Constantinople. From the second part of the fourth century ships delivering cargo of wheat to Rome and Constantinople returned to Egypt with cargoes of marble capitals, or blocks of stone, which were finished in Egyptian workshops. Among the works that art historians ascribe to local carvers are a casket now in the museum in Wiesbaden sculpted with a sphinx and the allegory of Father Nile; a small box in the British Museum showing the squat, typically Coptic figure of Saint Menas in a niche; three plaques from the side of Maximian's throne at Ravenna Museum; and the capitals of countless columns in the Delta, Middle and Upper Egypt. In prosperous cities like Oxyrhynchus and Heracleopolis, which were governed by wealthy families of Greek-Egyptian descent, as reflected in their names, provincial sculptors' workshops were set up. In the words of László Török there was interaction between Hellenistic traditions, other centres of Mediterranean art, 'and an imprint of local religious traditions'. Török sees a number of limestone funerary stelae in the Coptic Museum in Cairo as stylistically connected to the relief of the Hunting Centaur in

Budapest, the subject of his book, as ‘products of Egyptian art from the first part of the fourth century (Török, 1998: 58, 60).

Meanwhile the Coptic church struggled to establish its identity, and Coptic architecture is little understood because its independent development, distinct from constructions sponsored by the imperial government, has been largely disregarded. Cave churches like the Monastery of Apa Hor (Figure 8.9), the so-called ‘suspended monastery’ north-east of Asyut (Figure 8.10), and others have received little attention until relatively recent times and have been restored only in the last decade.

It is appropriate to mention here the Church of Saint Sergius (Abu Sarga) in Old Cairo, described in most literature as a model of the early churches in which Copts worshipped. I question this hypothesis. The original shrine was built over the cave where, according to Coptic tradition, the Holy Family hid (see p. 23). Later, when the relics of two Roman officers Sergius and Bacchus – who were martyred at the fort of Rusafa in Syria in 303 and whose cults radiated outward as far afield as Armenia and Egypt – were brought to Egypt it became known by its present name. It is a small timber-roofed basilica which, according to Butler, ‘resembles a type common among Syrian churches of the sixth and seventh centuries . . . [and] in some Anatolian churches’ (1970: I, 183–4). I submit that this church was built not by Copts but by the imperial government to serve as a focal place of worship for Roman soldiers stationed in the fortress of Babylon, and a place where candidates for baptism were received in a small antechamber and then descended into the baptistry where the rite was carried out. The church reverted to the Copts after the withdrawal of the Melkite forces following the Arab conquest. If the church is popular among Copts today, as indeed it is, this is more likely to be because of its association with the biblical event than with the relics of two Roman martyrs. The commemorative mass celebrated annually is in honour of the Holy Family.

Pilgrims from all over the Christian world flocked to Egypt. One of the most popular destinations was the Monastery of Saint Menas in Maryut. The church was enlarged by Emperor Arcadius at the end of the fourth century when the relics of the saint were transferred there, and further transformed by Justinian around 527 into the ‘Great Basilica’, a massive T-shaped building with domed roof supported by marble columns, the sockets of which can still be seen. Pillar drums and other architectural elements scattered around an area of one square kilometre attest to its size.

The main pilgrimage route has been excavated and reveals that it was colonnaded, had shops and workshops to the left and right, leading to the Church of the Martyr. Pilgrims appear to have gathered in a great square where a semi-circular structure may have been a rest place for the ailing. It is not clear how many priests and monks were attached to the sacred area, perhaps several hundred. Most archaeologists agree that there must have been thousands of shopkeepers and workmen living in the vicinity. A great city grew and flourished. Recent discoveries in the labyrinthine ruins include two hospitals, a building which may have been used for church administrators and, surrounding the square, hostels on the north where the monks took care of those who came to the shrine to be healed, as well as two large bath houses and wells. Pilgrims took home sacred water – or oil from the lamp that burned before the tomb of the saint – in tiny pottery ampoules shaped like a flat, two-handled jar and stamped with the figure of the saint between two camels. These were manufactured locally to fulfil the requirements of religious tourism.

Justinian, the emperor who took drastic measures to contain the national movement (see p. 193), was an enlightened patron of the arts who built great foundations all over the Christian world. He acceded to a request by Greek monks in Sinai to reconstruct the buildings on the site of the ‘burning bush’ after damage suffered during attacks by desert nomads who perceived the monastery as a wealthy institution. Indeed, aristocratic pilgrims and travellers from various parts of the Christian world had brought donations ever since the original chapel was built by Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine. Justinian gave orders in 530 for the governors of Egypt to send architects and builders to construct a fortification, and then ordered the Church of the Transfiguration to be built. It is a fine example of ecclesiastical architecture. Justinian presented to the monastery 200 Egyptians and 200 Wallachians (Bosnians) to serve the monks as servants and guards. The monastery gained international importance when Gregory of Tours, patriarch of Antioch from 570 to 594, served as a monk there soon after Egyptian Christians declared their independence from mainstream Christianity. Later, Gregory Pope of Rome (590–604) the Great sent a letter to John, the spiritual leader of the monastery at that time, offering to provide furniture for a rest-house for travellers. Pilgrims described multitudes of monks bearing crosses and singing psalms climbing Mount Sinai.

In Upper Egypt Justinian had less success. Steps taken to demolish the modest chapel at Pbow and replace it with a larger foundation in honour of Saint Pachomius, the founder of cenobitic monasticism, did not meet with the expected response. The reason why a concerted effort was made to honour one of Egypt's most popular saints was undoubtedly political; urban monks continued to present a much more direct challenge to ecclesiastical and political authority than hermits in their cells or monks in desert monasteries. It was possibly an attempt to win over the bishop of a popular pilgrimage centre, along with his vast following, to the imperial cause by drawing it under the umbrella of Constantinople. Father Abraham was not so easily wooed. He turned his back on Pbow, took temporary refuge in the Monastery of Saint Shenuda, and then founded a modest monastery within his own native town at Farshut, not too far distant from Sohag. Many of his disciples joined him. When a Melkite abbot was appointed at Pbow, resident monks loyal to Abraham left the monastery (Goehring (1999: 243–4)). With its decline in importance, the grand five-aisled basilica slowly fell to ruin. It was plundered and only scattered ruins have come to light.

Egypt's solitary recluses who lived in remote areas continued to attract visitors from around the Christian world, both curious sightseers and pilgrims. Christian aristocrats, bishops and nobles came to seek them out, hear them, touch them or receive a blessing. They were believed to have great power. The fourth-century hermit John, who chose as his abode an ancient rock tomb on the west bank of the Nile in Middle Egypt, attained great celebrity for his miracles and prophesies. Pilgrims travelled long distances to see and hearken to the wisdom of a Pachomian monk called Apollo who spent forty years in isolation. Elias, a monk who lived in the 'inner desert' at Arsinoe (Medinet el-Fayoum), was regarded as having gained perfection in his devotion to God. Epiphanius, who had a reputation for healing, exorcising and performing miracles, was sought out in the darkened cell where he lived for eighteen years. And Hor, an aged hermit who had a 'radiant face' and a 'brilliant white beard down to his chest', was regarded as the most pious of men.

Hor the hermit should not be confused with Apa (Father) Hor. The latter is a popular saint, little known outside Egypt, who lived towards the end of the third century. According to legend he went to Pelusiam where he made a public confession of faith, managed to convert the governor and his family to Christianity, and later went to Arsinoe where



*Figure 8.8* Onophrios (Apa Nofer) is venerated, both inside Egypt and elsewhere. He was one of the Egyptian hermits of the 'inner desert', a term that referred either to barren areas in the floodplain that lacked water or to mounds that rose above the level of the agricultural land. A saintly man, who appears in religious literature and in worship and art, he was chanced upon by Paphnutius in the course of his travels in remote areas. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

he was tortured and suffered martyrdom for attempting to continue his missionary movement. His name derives from the ancient Egyptian god Horus, and his tiny monastery lies in a remote mountain range east of Minia. It was originally a temple carved entirely in the rock face, like the Pharaonic tombs at Beni Hassan in construction. A dark, narrow corridor opens onto a court with an ancient well, and the church is rectangular in shape with a vaulted nave. The altar beneath which the saint's relics lie is believed to be on the site of the cave where Apa Hor hid from his pursuers.

The rock-church in Deir al-Moallaq (the 'suspended monastery') was built in honour of another saint, Mina el-Agaibi (the miraculous), who is popular among Egyptians and little known elsewhere. It is located



*Figure 8.9* The Monastery of Apa Hor is carved into the rock face east of Minia. Entered through a stucco-adorned doorway which leads down a flight of stairs through a tunnel to the nave, there are four well-fashioned pillars and a decorative frieze dividing it from one of the side aisles. The natural rock gives an unusual charm to the interior. There are two sanctuaries, one dedicated to Apa Hor to the north and the second to the Holy Virgin to the south. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

170 metres above the floodplain, nestled high between two massive rocks on the mount of Abu Foda on the eastern bank of the Nile near Asyut. Trekking up the mountain in the company of Bishop Lukas towards the tiny, recently restored monastery built on the site of the cave where the hermit lived, I caught sight of the ruins of a vast hermitage in the desert below us. ‘It is typical of the hermitages around Asyut’, the bishop explained. ‘Many holy people like Mina el-Agaibi lived in this region from the third century. Saint Yuhanna el-Asyuti was another. He lived in a two-room cell with a window through which he could see those who came to visit him. Saint Yuhanna had a reputation of knowing the unknown. He could predict the rise and fall of the flood, and anticipate the crop yield. During the annual celebrations at the beginning of the flood season, he would be asked to bless the water of the Nile.’

Bishop Lukas’s comment is interesting because, again, it provides an example of continuity. By the Late Period of Pharaonic history, nilometers which measured the height of the annual flood (on which taxes were calculated) became almost sacred. They were built in temple precincts, and at many of the major sanctuaries small underground structures were built to provide easy access to the sacred water, the ‘new water’, which was used in libations. A liturgy for the Nile flood which survives in a parchment leaf in Vienna (Coptic MS K9740) is a prayer to Saint Shenuda calling on him to act as intermediary with the god and ‘make, we beseech thee, the waters of the river to rise; bless, we beseech thee, the fruits of the year; for we expect them all for our nourishment . . . Oh Lord . . . multiply the harvest of the earth, since thou art good and the lover of man.’ This liturgy, scholars have observed, has been transmitted in Egyptian, Syro-Palestinian and Chalcedonian traditions (MacCoull, 1993: XIII, 129–35).

Egyptian Church ritual – apart from in Cairo which is a watershed of diverse cultures and traditions – has changed less over the centuries than that of any other Christian community in the world. When Egypt became independent from the Greek and Latin Churches, it was able to preserve

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*Figure 8.10* The recently restored, little-known monastery known as Deir el-Muallaq, the ‘suspended monastery’. It overlooks the ruins of a large, unexcavated fifth-century Coptic community and is so called because of its perch on a narrow ledge of Abu Foda mountain north-east of Asyut. On the second floor of the keep is the rock-hewn sanctuary in honour of the patron saint. Photos Aymen Ibrahim © Al-Ahram Weekly.

COPTIC CHRISTIANITY DEVELOPS ITS OWN STYLE



many ancient forms and practices. One can clearly perceive ceremony in its earliest years because it still happens today. In his *The Egyptian or Coptic Church*, Burmester (1967) provides a reliable manual of the manner in which the Coptic Church performs services and administers sacraments, and how this differs from developments in other Churches. Here I share with my readers my own personal observations. When the faithful enter a church, they bow, cross themselves or touch specific icons that they regard as models of the Christian ideal; that is to say, they represent the presence of living souls within the church. They do not kneel. They remain seated or standing with lowered heads, often raising their arms at the elbows with palms open. Each church has a holy relic, usually under the altar and sometimes in a casket beneath an icon of the saint. The icon is an object of devotion and a reminder that the saint or martyr existed in the flesh. The faithful do not kiss an icon directly, but the lower part may be touched, and then the fingertips kissed to bring the person into direct contact with the divine. Coptic churches, like ancient Egyptian temples, are frequently regarded as places of healing; places where prayers are answered. Names are written on the glass with the wax of candles, or little scraps of paper bearing prayers and pleas are often stuck on the edge of the frame of an icon. In the rock vault in front of the shrine of Saint Benjamin in the Church of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrun, countless strips or folded pieces of paper have been dropped through the metal grating by pious pilgrims. Likewise, in the cabinet that holds the sacred relic of the ‘foot of Jesus’ in the Church of the Holy Virgin at Sakha, similar written appeals can be seen (Figure 1.14).

Coptic music is vocal. Hymns, with no trace of musical notation, were composed in the style of popular songs. In common with the Greek Orthodox Church, instrumental music may not be used as an accompaniment to hymns in Coptic churches. Only the clashing of cymbals and the striking of metal triangles are permitted. Demetrios of Phaleron, the librarian in Alexandria in 297 BC, told of ceremonies in honour of Egyptian gods using seven vowels to produce harmonious sounds; and to this day these same seven vowels are chanted in Coptic hymns. It is tempting to proffer that they are the seven extra letters in the Coptic alphabet, derived from the demotic to accommodate the sounds for which there were no Greek letters. The bulk of the Coptic liturgy is believed to stem from that introduced by Saint Mark the Evangelist, memorised by bishops and priests of the early Church, and followed by Saint Cyril.

Other liturgies are those of Saint Basil the Bishop of Caesaria, and Saint Gregory the Nazianzus. Seven being a sacred number, Copts (like other Christians) observe seven canonical sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, orders, matrimony, and unction of the sick.

As Egypt opens up and promotes biblical tourism, sites associated with the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt are being restored and made more accessible; and it occurs to me that we are disposed to market this product in much the same way as we market Pharaonic monuments: that is, as religious buildings rather than a religious experience. While this is only to be expected in a country abounding with antiquities of all ages, what troubles me is that religious tourism is being promoted with an emphasis on the historic, artistic and architectural aspects of traditionally religious sites, thus inevitably obscuring the true significance of the religious experience no doubt being sought. If religious tourism is to have any spiritual meaning, it should combine a reverence for the past with what is tangible in the present. How better to appreciate the spirit of Coptic Christianity than to participate in the Easter Sunday celebration known as the 'feast of the palms'. Easter, the most important annual celebration for Copts, usually falls several weeks after that observed by Western Christians, and is a tradition that has long endured on the banks of the Nile. Holy Week starts with a mass on Palm Sunday when there is a solemn midnight service at which the bishop blesses branches of a palm. A grand procession forms, in which the clergy bear the cross, incense tapers and palm branches as they make their way around the church, singing before each altar and all the principal icons and reliquaries. In the early years of Christianity, the procession passed from the principal church through the town or city bearing sacred branches. Today Copts weave them into crosses, exquisitely designed rosaries or intricate angels' wings which the faithful purchase and carry home with them.

One of the most touching services I have attended was a mass baptism in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Maadi. Babies, some fifteen to twenty, robed in white and with golden crowns on their heads, were borne by proud parents to be blessed by a bishop in full ecclesiastical regalia. It was a joyous occasion, the church and its garden filled with people, children playing and buying sweets and postcards of the Holy Virgin from shops within the compound. Inside the church families lined up to have their children blessed and receive the Eucharist. Afterwards, the bishop walked down the aisle casting holy water to left and right, and I

watched as the congregation pressed forward, raising their hands to intercept the benediction of myron. This unction cooked with oil and herbs was originally prepared in the Church of Saint Mark in Alexandria, but when the Copts withdrew from that city the ritual began to be carried out in the Church of Saint Macarius, the seat of the Coptic patriarch in Wadi Natrun. Sufficient holy oil is annually consecrated to distribute to bishops throughout Egypt. As for Eucharist – this is freshly baked leavened bread made of the finest wheat flour, stamped with a cross at the centre and with twelve small crosses representing the twelve disciples, baked in a special oven by a member of the church. The bishop carefully inspects each to select the most perfect. It is always broken by hand, never cut by knife. The pieces are dipped in the holy wine (unfermented, made by soaking dried grapes in water and distributed to churches in large wicker-covered jars). The Eucharist is received standing. The priest consumes the balance of the bread and wine. The Hermetic writings preserve the earliest reference to ‘sacred and bloodless food’, which evolved into the Christian Eucharist thanksgiving (Rudolph, 1977: 230).

It is difficult, indeed impossible, to speculate how long the imperial government of Constantinople would have maintained political power, had not fate played a hand. In the year 617, the Persian army under Chosroes II marched on Egypt. Persia had twice before conquered and ruled the country between 525 and 332 BC, and they proved as powerful and aggressive as ever. Within a year they ousted the imperial forces in Alexandria, overthrew the garrison in the fortress of Babylon, and occupied the Fayoum. Coptic ecclesiastical history records damage and destruction of settlements, churches and monasteries all over the country during the ten years of occupation: 600 on the northern coast west of Alexandria (including the basilica near present-day Alamein and another at Burg el-Arab), and as far as Luxor on the Upper Nile. The bright side of the picture so far as the Copts were concerned was that when Emperor Heraclius finally managed to oust the Persian army in 629 they had an opportunity to take over administration in some areas hitherto occupied by Melkites. Heraclius appointed Cyrus, a bishop from the Caucasus region, as ‘Patriarch of Alexandria and Prefect of all Egypt’, with the express command to curb the obstinate Coptic community and bring its members to Chalcedon obedience. Apparently still under the delusion that the differences between Constantinople and Egypt again rested on

the finer points of religious doctrine, Cyrus arrived as an envoy of peace armed with a new formula. He found, to his dismay, that he had no spiritual authority over the Copts. They saw him as no more than an official in priestly garb. The Coptic clergy responded to his invitation to attend a synod, but took advantage of the occasion publicly to reject the new creed and reaffirm their independence. An era of violent hostility ensued. Cyrus' savage campaign of persecution, backed by imperial troops, reached a peak when he tried, unsuccessfully, to assassinate the Coptic patriarch. Alexandria was torn by factions. Babylon (Old Cairo) was under Melkite control. Copts formed a solid front in Upper Egypt. Monks were led to attack each others' holy places. Gangs of opposing factions stripped churches and monasteries of silver altar tablets and crosses, silk and linen hangings. It is likely that as much damage was caused to holy places by people of the cloth as by any Berber tribes who are usually accused of the damage. In his *Chronicle*, John, Bishop of Nikiu, wrote of 'the hostility of the people to the emperor Heraclius, because of the persecution wherewith he had visited all the land of Egypt in regard to the orthodox faith' (Nikiu, 1916: Ch. CXV: 9).

Stories of Melkite garrisons being surrounded and starved to death, and of magistrates fleeing following the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642, may be exaggerated. One thing is certain: the eventual withdrawal of the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria – broken in health and in spirit it is said – put an end to centuries of hardship for Egypt, especially during the last three score years and ten, and the population rejoiced. One can imagine Egyptians taking to the streets in the same spirit as when they watched the last British soldier leave Egyptian soil following the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956.

## CHANGE AND CONTINUITY UNDER ISLAM

When ‘Amr Ibn el-‘As’ the Arab general, entered the eastern Delta in 639, the leading Church officials were Cyrus (‘el-Muqawqas’ in Arabic), the Melkite patriarch in Alexandria and one of the worst oppressors of Egyptian Christians, and Benjamin the Coptic patriarch in residence at Wadi Natrun. There were allegedly some 200,000 Christians loyal to the former, and some two million Copts formed the nucleus of a widespread national movement hostile to the government in far distant Constantinople. The fact that there were warring factions was not lost on General ‘Amr. The Arabic word *Rumi* (Roman) was adopted to identify the Melkites, while Egypt was referred to as *dar el-Qibt* ('home of the Copts').

In order to understand the transformation of Egypt into a Muslim country it is necessary briefly to outline the monotheistic creed of Islam as taught by the Prophet Muhammed, one of the great figures of history. Born of a noble family in Mecca on the Arabian peninsula around 570, Muhammed was forty years old when the Islamic creed came to him in separate revelations. It was memorised by his followers, passed in oral tradition, and set to writing in classical Arabic towards the middle of seventh century under the caliphate of Othman, the Prophet’s secretary. The Muslim holy book, the Quran, is divided into 114 *suras* or chapters. Islam means ‘surrender (to God)’, and it is not just a religion but a code of social behaviour. Muslims (‘those who have surrendered’) adhere to five tenets: worship of the single god ‘Allah’; prayer five times a day facing the holy city of Mecca; the duty of alms-giving; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan when neither food nor drink is taken between sunrise and sunset; and the obligation to make, once in a lifetime, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammed’s creed was received with hesitancy in

his native city of Mecca and in July 622 he was obliged to flee with his followers to Medina. This flight, known as the *begira*, is the start of the Muslim era. The creed gained acceptance and through the following century Islam continued to expand – eastward through Syria and Mesopotamia, and westward to embrace Egypt, North Africa, Morocco and Spain. The reason for the march on Egypt with a force of 3,500 cavalry was twofold: the country was a rich source of revenue in the form of food supplies for the Hejaz (holy site in Mecca) and, as a province of the Byzantine Empire, it posed a threat to the Arabs' newly conquered territories in Syria and Palestine.

Arab accounts of the conquest, written centuries later, are contradictory. Nevertheless they do agree on many points – on the overcoming of the Melkite garrison at el-Farma (Pelusiam); the victory at Heliopolis; the subsequent occupation of Misr (an ancient word that referred to the whole country in pre-Islamic times but which was subsequently applied to the area around the old Roman fortress of Babylon); the signing of a peace treaty; and 'Amr's goodwill towards the Qibt by virtue of Islam's traditional kinship through Hagar, the Egyptian mother of Ismail, the ancestor of the Prophet Muhammed. The *Chronicle* of John, Bishop of Nikiu and 'rector' of the bishops of Upper Egypt (who was born about the time of the Arab invasion), provides a more contemporary account. It is difficult to follow because large sections have been lost, and it has, moreover, suffered in the course of transmission from its original Greek into Arabic. Nevertheless it provides, on the one hand, evidence of Egyptians aiding the Muslims, and on the other a clearer picture of the events leading to the withdrawal of the Melkite patriarch from Alexandria than can be obtained elsewhere.

John of Nikiu wrote: 'And after the capture of the Fajum with all its territory by the Moslem . . . ('Amr) mustered all his troops about him in order to carry on a vigorous warfare. And he sent orders to the Prefect George to construct for him a bridge on the river of the city Qaljub with a view to the capture of all the cities of Misr, and likewise of Athrib and Kuerdis. And people began to help the Moslem' (Nikiu, 1916: Ch. CXIII, 1). 'But 'Amr was not satisfied with what he had already done, and so he had the Roman magistrates arrested, and their hands and feet confined in iron and wooden bonds. And he forcibly despoiled (them) of much of (their) possession(s)' (*ibid.*: 4). 'And when the Moslem saw the weakness of the Romans and the hostility of the people to the emperor



*Figure 9.1* The cobbled streets within the old Roman fortress of Babylon. It was in Melkite hands at the time of the Arab conquest.  
Photo Michael Stock (1975).

Heraclius . . . at the instigation of Cyrus the Chalcedonian patriarch, they became bolder and stronger in war' (*ibid.*: Ch. CXV, 9). 'And subsequently the patriarch Cyrus set out and went to Babylon to the Moslem, seeking by the offer of tribute to procure peace from them and put a stop to war in the land of Egypt. And 'Amr welcomed his arrival, and said unto him "... let there be no enmity from henceforth between you and Rome: heretofore there has been no persistent strife with you.' And they fixed the amount of tribute to be paid . . . The Roman troops in Alexandria were to carry off their possessions and their treasures and proceed (home) by sea, and no other Roman army was to return. But those who wished to journey by land were to pay a monthly tribute' (*ibid.*: Ch. CXIX, 17–18).

According to the terms of the treaty preserved by Nikiu, 'Amr granted the people of Misr, Egyptians, Romans, Nubians and Jews, peace and freedom of worship provided they pay the *jizya* (per capita poll-tax excluding women, children and aged men), a land-tax, and hospitality to the Muslim army. A clause stipulated that should the Nile flood be less than usual, the tax would be reduced in proportion. And that

whosoever rejected the treaty and chose to go away, would be protected ‘till he reach a place of safety or leave our kingdom’. With his priestly entourage, the Melkite patriarch sailed out of Alexandria harbour on 17 September 642. His army began their withdrawal soon afterwards, apart from those who chose either to join ‘Amr’s army or settle down with their families in Egypt. ‘And Abba Benjamin, the patriarch of the Egyptians, returned to the city of Alexandria in the thirteenth year after his flight from the Romans, and he went to the Churches and inspected all of them’ (Nikiu, 1916: Ch. CXXI, 1). The *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* records that when Benjamin took over the vacant see of Alexandria he was received with jubilation by the Egyptians.

Firan Oasis (biblical Pharan), which had been declared an episcopal and spiritual centre in Sinai (until nomadic attacks caused many to retreat farther inland and join the community around the Monastery of Saint Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai) remained in Melkite hands. Part of a document in the Monastery of Saint Catherine known as the ‘Covenant of the Prophet’ (written in Arabic allegedly by Muhammed himself, but probably tabled by Umar Ibn el-Khattab, the second of the caliphs) states explicitly that there should be no change in their status:

If a priest or a hermit retires to a mountain, a hermitage, a plain, a desert, a town, a village or a church, I shall be his protector against every enemy, I, personally, my troops and my subjects . . . One should not take anything from them, except voluntary contributions, without forcing them to do so. It is not allowed to move a bishop from his diocese, nor a priest from his religion, nor a hermit from his cell . . . He who does not conform to this would be going against God’s law and that of his Prophet . . .

(trans. Meinardus, 1977: 521–2)

This promise was renewed by successive rulers and can thus be taken as an indication of Muslim policy after the conquest.

‘Amr ibn el’As set up his permanent garrison city near the fortress of Babylon, which was strategically situated at the apex of the Delta and central to caravan movements to and from Arabia. The new city was first known as Misr, but then as Misr el-Fustat (meaning ‘the entrenched camp’) to distinguish it from later districts of the town like el-Askar



Figure 9.2 Excavations within the old Roman fortress of Babylon in 1999, near the Coptic Museum, revealed a gateway leading to the Mosque of 'Amr. Photo Sherif Sonbol © Al-Ahram Weekly.

(‘the cantonments’) to the north. The Muslims were not bent on evangelism. Initially Arab rule was marked by liberal policies with little interference in the social and religious practices of the native population. Christians and Jews were accepted alongside Muslims as ‘People of the Book’, a reference to the monotheistic creed of the Bible.

In and around Misr el-Fustat, churches and monasteries damaged during the Persian occupation and the Arab conquest suffered various fates. Within the walls of the old Roman fortress the Church of Saint Sergius became an episcopal see of Misr el-Fustat, and the first Coptic patriarch to be elected there was Isaac (681–92). The Church of the Holy Virgin, known as Qasriyat el-Rihan ('castle of the pot of basil'), remained in the hands of the Greek community and was later burned; a magnificent golden gospel casket covered with silver sheets embossed in foliage and bearing a quotation of the opening lines of the Gospel of Saint John in Coptic was found at the site in the twentieth century (Coptic Museum).

Outside the fortress walls the church and monastery of Saint Mercurius, a Roman legionary who died a martyr's death in Palestine, was turned into a sugar-cane warehouse and only came into the possession of the Copts in the ninth century. The neighbouring Church of Saint Shenuda was likewise used as a storehouse, then restored under the patriarch Benjamin II (1327–39). As for the construction of new churches, among those that can be accurately dated soon after the Arab conquest are the Church of Saint Menas at Fom el-Khalig (in the el-Hamra area of Cairo), which was built in 735 under the governorship of el-Walid el-Rifa'a (Kubiak, 1987: 45), and the church of the Holy Virgin called el-Damshiriyya in the monastery complex of Saint Mercurius in 786, under the caliph Aaron el-Rashid.

'Amr Ibn el'As built the first mosque in Egypt, known as the 'mosque of 'Amr' or *el-Jamea el-Atik* ('the [most] ancient mosque') within a stone's throw of these buildings. It was at first a simple mud-brick structure, rectangular in shape, its roof supported by columns and covered with palm trunks and branches. When no longer able to accommodate the growing garrison it was replaced by a new mosque, built by the governor Maslama, in 673. It was designed with a minaret at each of the four corners and was richly decorated in marble, mosaics and gilded Quranic inscriptions on a blue background. It served as a place of worship, council chamber, post office and lodging for travellers. In 710 the governor, Kurrah, built a palace, a sort of government house in the vicinity. Local labour was easy to come by. There were Egyptian craftsmen in the fields of stone, woodwork and glass manufacture and, within fifteen years of its foundation, el-Fustat had expanded to the north. New mosques were built. They were originally simple structures consisting of four *iwans* or porticoes round a central court, one deeper than the others with a *mihrab* (a kind of apse surmounted by a pointed arch and dome), to mark the direction of the holy city of Mecca towards which the faithful faced in prayer. In this expanding city, Muslim and Coptic households were not separated.

Some churches became subject to dispute over jurisdiction after the withdrawal of the Melkites. Among them the famed and wealthy pilgrimage site, the Monastery of Saint Menas at Maryut. It fell victim to serious and prolonged bedouin attacks that continued off and on for thirty years. Stripped of magnificent architectural elements, the buildings began to fall to ruin but nevertheless survived through to the eleventh century



*Figure 9.3* The new Monastery of Saint Menas (Abu Mina) at Maryut, with its lofty surrounding wall and twin towers, is a lavish new construction of grand proportions. Built 100 metres from the ruins of the ancient pilgrimage site, it was one of the great projects of Pope Kirollis VI who laid the foundation stone in 1959. The cathedral is shaped like a cross and the finest materials have been used in its construction: marble from Italy, and black and rose granite from Aswan. Stained-glass windows, set in white plaster, cast coloured tints on the marble floor, and the walls have been designed with a plethora of crosses in filigree and mosaic. Photo Michael Stock.



*Figure 9.4* The ruins of the early Christian Monastery of Saint Menas, one of the most famous and massive pilgrimage sites in early Christendom. It was thought to be legendary until the site was discovered by the German archaeologist Carl Kaufmann in 1905. Photo Michael Stock.

when the Arab geographer el-Bakri wrote about it in glowing terms. The Monastery of Saint Antony near the Red Sea was held by Melkite Greeks after the conquest, and the *Ethiopian Synaxarion* records that Coptic monks disguised as bedouins went there in 790 to retrieve the relics of Saint John the Short and return them to Wadi Natrun. They found the task more difficult than they had anticipated when they discovered Melkites guarding the sanctuary. According to the legend:

the judge from among the Arabs said to the Melkite bishop who sat in the sanctuary, 'Make all your men get out of the church, for I wish to enter the church myself and stay here this night.' The bishop did as the judge commanded, and the Coptic monks made ready their beasts . . . and entered by night and took the body and returned to the desert of Scetis.

(Meinardus, 1989: 7)

Copts officially took over the monastery of Saint Antony in the late twelfth-century under the patriarch John VI (1189–1216).

'Caliph' was a title given to the Muslim leader regarded as the political successor of the Prophet Muhammed, and the caliphate was the area under his control through appointed governors. Between 641 and 671, during the rule of Caliph Umar (leader of the Ummayad dynasty of Sunni Muslims, the Islamic sect to which the bulk of the Egyptian population still adhere) there was little discord. Successive governors who arrived with Arab armies – sometimes as many as 20,000 men – displaced the Melkites, established their own military garrisons, levied taxes, and despatched regular shipments of grain to Arabia overland. Confirmation of their mingling with the local population as part of the policy adopted by General 'Amr is provided in Ibrahim Ahmed el-Adawi's *The History of the Islamic World*. He points out that the Arab conqueror initiated Nizam el-Irtiba'a, or 'the Spring Tours System', which lasted for three months from the end of the winter to the beginning of summer when Arab tribes living in el-Fustat were encouraged to travel around Egyptian villages for shooting and other recreational activities. The Islamic authorities decided on the places to be included on the tour and the governor issued a booklet addressing each of the tribes with details of their destinations. At first these were near el-Fustat, but later they were extended to include the Delta and Upper Egypt. El-Adawi quotes from



*Figure 9.5* There is a timeless quality in the Egyptian countryside. Despite the construction of the High Dam and introduction of modern technology, the farmer still tends his land with his wooden plough, one of Egypt's oldest inventions; and he draws water by such ancient devices as the waterwheel driven by patient buffalo. Soil-bound and conservative, the Egyptian farmer preceded Egypt's first period of great development thousands of years ago, and has outlived many others. Photo Michael Stock.

an address given by 'Amr prior to their departure each spring, 'You should treat the Copts who are your neighbours well', and he reads into this statement encouragement to intermingle with the natives, not to cause harm or inconvenience to them. He comments further, 'As a result of these obligatory tours, a new society began to emerge as Arab tribes mixed with the local population' (El-Adawi, 1982: Part I, 124–6, trans. by Omayma Abdel-Latif).

Unlike Palestine and Syria there was no large Arab settlement in Egypt before the advent of Islam, and because the new rulers had neither practical knowledge nor aptitude in governing a country the size of Egypt they came to depend on the local population for material and administrative expertise. The various provinces were kept much as they were, with Egyptian provincial governors and officials carrying out bureaucratic duties. Taxes were collected locally, either by large landowners or village notables under central supervision. Conversion to Islam was not



Figure 9.6 Skyline of modern Cairo. Photo Sherif Sonbol © Al-Abram Weekly.

as rapid as is generally supposed. The earliest were probably peasant farmers or those with small incomes who wished to avoid taxation levied on non-Muslims. Among them were many pagans and perhaps some borderline Christians who had earlier wavered between Christian creeds. Among the Coptic- and Greek-speaking lower administrators who formed a professional bureaucratic class, there is little evidence of conversion, even though Egyptians developed a collaborative response to the principles of Islam and its simple creed: God is eternal, God is alone, God is great, there is no God but God, and Muhammed is the Prophet of God. The call to prayer five times a day from a minaret by a *muezzin* did not demand attendance at a mosque. Ablutions and prayers could be made in the privacy of a home, in the fields or at places of work. Islam sat easily on Egypt because the new faith came to a country traditionally tolerant of diverse beliefs and practices. The sympathetic attitude between Copts and Muslims was based on shared religious concepts – the immortality of the soul, resurrection, future rewards and punishments in paradise or hell, good and evil spirits (*genii*), fasting, pilgrimage, and sacrifice. Alms-giving, an age-old practice since Pharaonic times and a Christian virtue, is an absolute duty under Islam.



Figure 9.7 The restored church of the Holy Virgin known as Qasriat el-Rihan ('castle of the pot of basil') in Old Cairo belongs to the Greek Orthodox community in Cairo. It was, according to a report by the Egyptian Committee for the Preservation of Monuments, originally a banquet hall (*qa'ab*), converted into a nunnery at the end of the fourteenth century. This icon of Saint Menas the Martyr is signed by 'the humble Hanna el-Armani for the Lady at Qasriat al-Rihan and is dated 1497. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

The fifteenth-century Arab chronicler el-Maqrizi notes that the Arab governor, Abdel-Aziz ibn Marwan, ordered a census of monks, levied taxes on them, and had each branded with an iron ring bearing his name and the monastery to which he was affiliated. Monks were easily distinguished by their garb and so – if there is any truth in the claim written so many centuries after the event – it is difficult to grasp the reason for the exercise, unless we consider two facts. First, the monasteries possessed land and cattle and monopolised industries such as weaving and leather production. Second, monks were less sedentary than is usually fancied. They moved freely from monastery to monastery, were involved in social transactions, and they inhabited every quarter of cities and towns. It would have been extremely difficult for the authorities to keep track of such individuals. Therefore the statute, however oppressive it may be regarded, was probably not discriminatory so much as economic strategy; the monks were branded not for being Christians but in order to establish orderly control over monastic holdings and a mobile section of the population.

Alexander II, Coptic patriarch of Alexandria from 705 to 730, wrote a Paschal letter (Berlin Papyrus No. 10677) in which he quoted Egypt's greatest theologians Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, defined icon veneration, and encouraged his flock to have faith and hold fast to their beliefs (MacCoull, 1993: XIX, 27–40). When the Byzantine Emperor Leo III banned images of worship in the empire, and then, in 730, condemned the depiction of the saintly or divine forms of art as heretical, Copts – who had severed ties with mainstream Christianity – bitterly resented Caliph Yazid II's edict that churches should be stripped of their precious altar vessels and that crosses and images should be destroyed. Despite the fact that Egypt was out of reach of Leo's powers, the country nevertheless suffered in the period known as iconoclasm. The monastery of Saint Catherine, isolated in barren Sinai alone escaped. When the movement failed and figurative imagery was permitted, churches all over Egypt were repaired, and walls replastered and decorated with new images.

Arabic, the language of the Holy Quran and of communication and culture of the new power, slowly came into general use all over the country. The earliest administrative papyri after the Arab conquest were all in Greek. Half a century later a decree was tabled that government affairs should forthwith be compiled in Arabic, and Copts who wished to keep



*Figure 9.8* When Arabic became the language of communication and culture after the Arab conquest in the seventh century, it came slowly into general use all over the country. Icons, like these from the Hanging Church (el-Moallaqa) are identified in Arabic script. The parents of the Holy Virgin pray for a child (above left), and (above right) is the 'Presentation of the Virgin' in the temple of Jerusalem. Zacharia's house (below left) depicts the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary (pregnant with Jesus) with Joseph and Salome to the right. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

their posts in the administration learned the Arabic script. Bilingual Greek–Arabic tax registers, receipts and the like began to appear. The first-known purely Arabic papyrus dates to 709. As for Coptic manuscripts, they too reflect the increasing Arabisation of the country – that is to say, Egyptians were Arabised but not Islamised. Greek–Coptic bilingual texts had been progressively replaced by Coptic (Bohairic) in the fifth

and sixth centuries. When Caliph Walid I prohibited the use of Greek in 715, Coptic–Arabic bilingual texts began to appear. It was not, however, until the twelfth century that Islam became so dominant that Patriarch Gabriel II admonished priests to explain the Lord's Prayer in vernacular Arabic. Liturgical books increasingly carried Arabic translations alongside the Coptic, but not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – six centuries after the Arab conquest – was the bulk of the population Arabic-speaking.

Planned immigration was encouraged in the eighth and ninth centuries when large numbers of Arab tribesmen from north-eastern Arabia settled in Egyptian towns and the countryside. At first the new settlers had privileged status; they did not pay taxes levied on non-Muslims and there were several uprisings. In Samanud and Sakha in the eastern Delta, for example, the governor's tax collectors were driven away by irate rural populations between 725 and 773. However, as Muslim settlers intermarried with Egyptians, they were gradually absorbed into the age-old way of life in the Nile valley. Distinctions between Egyptianised Arabs and Arabised Egyptians slowly ceased to be significant. Arabs bearing such names as 'Ali' and 'Muhammed' wrote in Coptic, and evidence that the conquerors learned the language of the subjugated can be seen in the letters in Coptic from Muslim officials to their Christian subjects.

Some change came about when the Abbasid family seized control of the caliphate and transferred the capital from Damascus to Baghdad in 750. Successive military governors appointed to Egypt – eighty in just over a century – whose task was to ensure that the agricultural wealth of the country continued to be channelled into the coffers of the now more distant central treasury, displayed different levels of tolerance towards the local population. Some asserted their independence and exercised harsh rule over Egyptian and Arab settlers alike; others were well disposed towards the local population. Musa ibn Issa, for instance, allowed the restoration of churches, and there were building activities in el-Fustat, provincial towns and desert monasteries, as attested in Coptic records during the patriarchates of Bishop (Anba) Yaqub (Jacob) between 819 and 830, and Anba Yusef (Joseph) between 830 and 849. However, a series of new regulations by Caliph el-Mutawakil in the time of the latter vexed urban and rural Copts alike. They were ordered to wear yellow turbans, distinguishing patches on their belts, forbidden to place

Christian symbols on their doorways, and from carrying processional lights in the streets. While it would be misleading to attach to these edicts the importance that later generations of Copts wove into their history of persecution, it would be equally deceptive to underestimate them. The fact that several *manshoubiya* (monks' cells) sprang up around monastic communities indicates that the spirit of asceticism was still very much alive in Egypt and there were many who chose a life of penance and prayer to one of confrontation and discrimination.

Coptic papyri found in abundance all over Egypt – and still being unearthed during excavations – nevertheless provide evidence of collaboration with the government, both as regards taxes levied on individuals and on the agricultural land owned by monasteries. Those discovered during restoration of the sixteenth-century church at the Monastery of Saint Tomas, north of Akhmim (see Figure 8.5), for example, included records of taxes paid by the monks which bear the names of bishops in the eighth century, Apollos, Pachomius and George among them. A large storage jar unearthed near the Church of the Archangel Gabriel at Naqlun was found packed with documents on papyrus and parchment. Over fifty of them in Arabic concerned the sale of property, land and houses, as well as money loans that cover a short period from the end of the tenth to the early eleventh century. These records were produced at a notary's office at the nearby city of Lahun at the mouth of the Fayoum depression (*University of Warsaw Newsletter* No. 4 of June 1998).

A new phase in the history of Egypt started in 868 with the rule of Ahmed Ibn Tulun, a Turkish mercenary soldier. A man of strong character who fostered trade, encouraged agriculture, and looked after the needs of the rural population to a greater extent than many Muslim leaders before him, he defied Baghdad by refusing to pay tribute. Backed by his own army of mercenary troops he succeeded in making himself an independent ruler. As a symbol of autonomy, he founded a royal suburb named el-Qatai to the north of el-Fustat. Ibn Tulun was a patron of the arts and his leadership was marked by great building activities. The mosque in Cairo that bears his name is regarded as one of the most beautiful and distinctive examples of Islamic architecture. Palaces, government buildings and *wekalas* (market places) were built and – for the first time since Ptolemaic rule over ten centuries earlier – Egypt became the seat of its own military and political power. This meant that the country was no longer drained of its wealth to support the luxury of



*Figure 9.9* Early medieval stone water containers, in the garden of the Coptic Museum, are little different from Islamic, apart from the cross as part of the decoration. Photo Robert Scott.

the Baghdad court. As a result, under Ibn Tulun's government, Egypt became rapidly prosperous. Local architects, craftsmen and traders became wealthy. Christian buildings in urban and desert communities were restored and enlarged.

The historian Mas'udi visited Egypt in the time of Ibn Tulun and gave an account of the system of irrigation. He described the cutting of the canal dams on 14 September, and their closure (in the Delta) in January:

The Night of the Bath (*Leylat el-Ghatas*) [a ritual celebration in commemoration of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan] is one of the great ceremonies, and the people all go to it on foot on the 10th of January. I was present in 350 (942 AD) when the Ikhshid Mohammed b. Turgh . . . ordered the bank of the island and the [opposite] bank of el-Fustat to be illuminated each with a thousand torches, besides private illuminations. Muslims and Christians, by hundreds of thousands, crowded



*Figure 9.10* The Church of the Holy Virgin, widely known as the el-Moallaqa, or 'Hanging Church' of Old Cairo, has a wide central nave and narrow side aisles marked off by eight columns originally adorned with icons. Behind the sanctuary screen is the main altar covered by a canopy resting on four pillars. The nucleus of this church may originally have been a Roman temple, transformed into a church in the fourth century, and taken over by the Copts after the Arab conquest. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.



*Figure 9.11* Part from a fifth-/sixth-century carved wooden panel, 274 cm in length, and among the finest to be found. It formed a lintel in the Hanging Church in Old Cairo and is now in the Coptic Museum. It combines a lengthy Greek inscription with two pictorial scenes from the life of Christ: His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the Ascension. These well-proportioned figures are carved with sharp contours. Photo Robert Scott.

the Nile on boats, or in kiosks overlooking the river, or [standing] on the banks, all eager for pleasure, and vying in equipage, dress, gold and silver cups, and jewellery. The sound of music was heard all about, with singing and dancing. It was a splendid night, the best in all Misr for beauty and gaiety; the doors of the separate quarters were left open, and most people bathed in the Nile, knowing well that [on that night] it is a sure preservative and cure for all disease.

(Lane-Poole, 1901: 85–86)

Unfortunately, Ibn Tulun's descendants were weak rulers, and coupled with a devastating earthquake in 954, seriously affected the economy. A powerful new caliphate had meanwhile been established in Tunisia; its fourth caliph el-Mo'izz sent a huge army into Egypt in 969.

The Fatimids of North Africa claimed direct descent from the Prophet Muhammed through his daughter Fatima, and thus regarded themselves as rightful heirs to the Muslim world. Egypt, exhausted by plague, famine and civic unrest after the earthquake, fell easy prey. El-Fustat and el-Askar were captured and the new dynasty, the Fatimid, ushered in a period of prosperity that lasted for two centuries. The leaders set to work and laid out a new royal quarter which they called el-Qahira (from which 'Cairo' is derived), and the university mosque of el-Azhar, founded in 970, became the centre of Islamic learning. Cairo became famous for its production of glass, ceramics and ivory. Great wealth flowed through Alexandria, which was revitalised as a commercial outlet between East and West. A prosperous middle class emerged. Travellers to Egypt wrote of five- or six-storey houses surrounded by gardens and orchards. Public order was such that it was possible for shops, jewellers and moneylenders to leave their doors open. A large number of the officials handling the caliphate's affairs were bilingual Copts in cities, towns and villages. The court of the caliphate was gilded and enamelled; courtiers robed in silk and brocade. Some of the wealthier merchants were Copts and many rose to positions of prominence. The convivial relations between Muslims and Copts under the Fatimids is exemplified by the words of Patriarch Kirollos in 1086 who admonished lay Copts to lead virtuous lives and obey the laws and practices of the country. The spirit of the age is expressed, among other things, in the employment of Copts in the government and Muslim participation in Christian feasts.



*Figure 9.12* *Mashrabiya* and geometric woodwork is usually associated with Islam; in fact carved woodwork was part of domestic architecture that pre-dates the Arab conquest. Today it can be seen in religious and secular buildings, on ceilings, decorated screens, doors and windows. Crosses alone attest to a Christian-owned building – a church. Photo Michael Stock.

The Hanging Church in Old Cairo (el-Moallaqa) was restored under the Fatimids, during the patriarchate of Abraham Ben Zara, and later acquired distinction under the Coptic reformer Christodoupolis (Anba Akhristudulus) when the Coptic patriarchate was moved from Wadi Natrun to Cairo between 1049 and 1078. The entrance gateway, which leads to a stairway that gives onto a passage and a covered courtyard with glazed tiles in geometrical designs, dates to this time, as does the straight-sided marble pulpit resting on fifteen delicate columns arranged in seven pairs with a leader; each pair are identical, but no two pairs are alike. The inlaid woodwork of this church is among the finest to be found. Cedarwood and ivory were used for the sanctuary screen, the latter carved into segments of exquisite design and set in the woodwork to form the cross. This elegant building became the place for the election, consecration or enthronement of the patriarchs and a centre for theologians, lawyers and astronomers. Regular synods were held there. A second storey was added to accommodate pilgrims.

Art and architecture flourished. The making of *mashrabiya* screens and windows out of small, finely carved segments of wood fitting together without the use of nails or glue, usually associated with Islamic architecture, was in fact part of domestic architecture from at least as early as the end of the fourth century. Metalwork ranged from mediocre bronze objects produced in small towns, to the finest work in gold, silver, bronze, copper and iron. Examples can be seen in the Coptic and Islamic Museums where several rooms are devoted to their display: elaborately adorned patriarchal staffs, an excellent collection of crosses, bolts and keys that once belonged to monastery doors, and various utilitarian objects including musical instruments and bells. Three metal lamps are worthy of mention: two have the cross-and-crescent as decorative motifs (Nos. 5185, 9123) and the third is adorned with a cross inside the loop of the Pharaonic *ankh*.

Weavers were in great demand and factories for linen, wool, and silk production flourished in Damietta, the Fayoum, Bahnsa, Ashmunein, Asyut, Ihnasia el-Medina and Akhmim, one of the most important centres for the textile industry from ancient through Graeco-Roman times. Craftsmen wove textiles for Coptic patriarch and Muslim patron alike. As Arabic came into more general use, the Kufic script was introduced into their designs. Recent studies of papyri in the Bodleian Library at Oxford reveal that much of what was earlier regarded as

*Figure 9.1.3* Thanks to the dry desert climate textiles have been preserved in great numbers in Egypt. Spinning and weaving, among the oldest crafts, was a sophisticated industry even as early as 5000 BC – graves provide evidence in the form of spindle whorls, bone tattering needles, and loom weights. The weaving technique used in the early Christian period was inherited from the ancient Egyptians: the width of the loom, and the 'Egyptian-knot' used in the tapestry-weave. The main feature of the textile on the left is a pagan centaur, while that on the right is a holy rider with crosses. Photo by courtesy of the Coptic Museum.



'alchemy' was, in fact, 'simple craft technology – trade secrets'. In other words, the occult-sounding words in many ancient texts were recipes for various metallurgical and dyeing operations (MacCoull, 1993: XV, 101).

Fatimid rule was marred only by the notorious el-Hakim in 1008, an extremist in today's jargon, regarded as insane by medieval Arab historians. He had a consuming hatred for Christians and Jews. He commanded the former to carry a heavy iron cross, the latter an image of the golden calf. He was a misogynist who forbade women from wearing shoes in order to keep them at home, from using public baths to prevent them from gossiping, and from eating certain foods. He dismissed Copts from public service, and a reputed 3,000 churches were destroyed on his orders, among them the Church of Saint Shenuda (the White Monastery) which was converted into a mosque; it did not revert to a monastery until the fourteenth century. Copts, in fear of their lives, took refuge in caves, dispersed among the rural communities, or escaped to monastic settlements. El-Hakim mysteriously disappeared one night while riding alone in the Moqattam Hills. His successor el-Zahir's renewed tolerance to non-Muslims in Egypt resulted in the repair of damaged churches.

Myths and legends explain political or social realities, and the miracle of the Moqattam fits well within the framework of the benevolent attitude of the Fatimid period and their spirit of tolerance. The biography of Saint Samaan (Simeon) survives in an ancient manuscript in Saint Antony's monastery near the Red Sea. It describes the miracle of the caliph el-Mo'izz, as a great enthusiast of intellectual discourse, especially on the subject of religion. He frequently gathered together Christian and Jewish religious leaders in open discussion. At one such debate in 979 he asked the patriarch Ephraim whether what was written in the Gospel was true: that if a man had faith he could by his word move a mountain. When the patriarch said that indeed it was so, the caliph gave him four alternatives: to fulfil the commandment and move the mountain, to abandon his faith and espouse Islam, to emigrate, or to be smitten by the sword. A difficult choice indeed. A solemn assembly of clergy and monks was held in the Hanging Church, and prayers and fasting continued without ceasing for three days. On the evening of the third day, the fatigued patriarch fell asleep and dreamed that the Holy Virgin told him to be of good cheer and to go into the street where he would find a one-eyed male water-

carrier. The patriarch did as advised and, indeed, did meet such a man, a pious individual called Samaan carrying a goat-skin filled with water slung over his shoulder. He said that he was born with two eyes but that, following the scripture, he plucked one out in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven rather than have two eyes and go to hell! He told the patriarch that he woke early each day to distribute water to the elderly and ailing, that he worked in a dye factory (another version of the myth has him in a tannery), partook of little food, and that at the end of his day's labour he drew water for the poor before he turned to prayer – indeed, he said, he stood the whole night praying. When the patriarch – no doubt with little confidence in the outcome of the situation – told the shabbily clothed man of his vision, Samaan replied that he should not fear but lead a procession of deacons and archdeacons bearing crosses, gospels, long candles and censors and go to the mountain (i.e. the Moqattam Hills). He advised him to invite the caliph and his retinue to accompany him and that one group should stand to one side of the mountain and the other on the side opposite. 'As for me,' he said, 'I will stand among the people . . . no one will recognise me.' And so it came to pass. Before the multitude – for large numbers of curious spectators, Christian and Muslim, had followed – the patriarch drew the sign of the cross. And suddenly a powerful earthquake rocked the city and the Moqattam Hills rose up so that the sun could be seen shining beneath. Then it reverted to its place. It was indeed a miracle and hysteria ensued. El-Mo'izz acknowledged the faith of the patriarch promising to grant whatever he desired. Ephraim asked for permission to build a church to Saint Mercurius. When the patriarch looked around, searching for Samaan, the saint was nowhere to be seen'. (Booklet entitled *The Biography of Saint Samaan the Shoemaker "The Tanner"*, (1994) published by the church of Saint Samaan, Cairo).

The church of Saint Mercurius (Abu Seifein or "He of Two Swords") was in fact rebuilt under Patriarch Abraham Ben Zaraa (975-978). This Roman legionary in the time of Decius, who was martyred and buried in Palestine, was at first honoured in Egypt by those loyal to the church of Constantinople. After the restoration the large and beautifully-adorned edifice, Copts came to regard the saint as a powerful protector against persecution. In the evolving legend, Mercurius was given a second, luminous sword with which to fight against paganism. He is traditionally depicted in icon painting brandishing a weapon in each hand over his

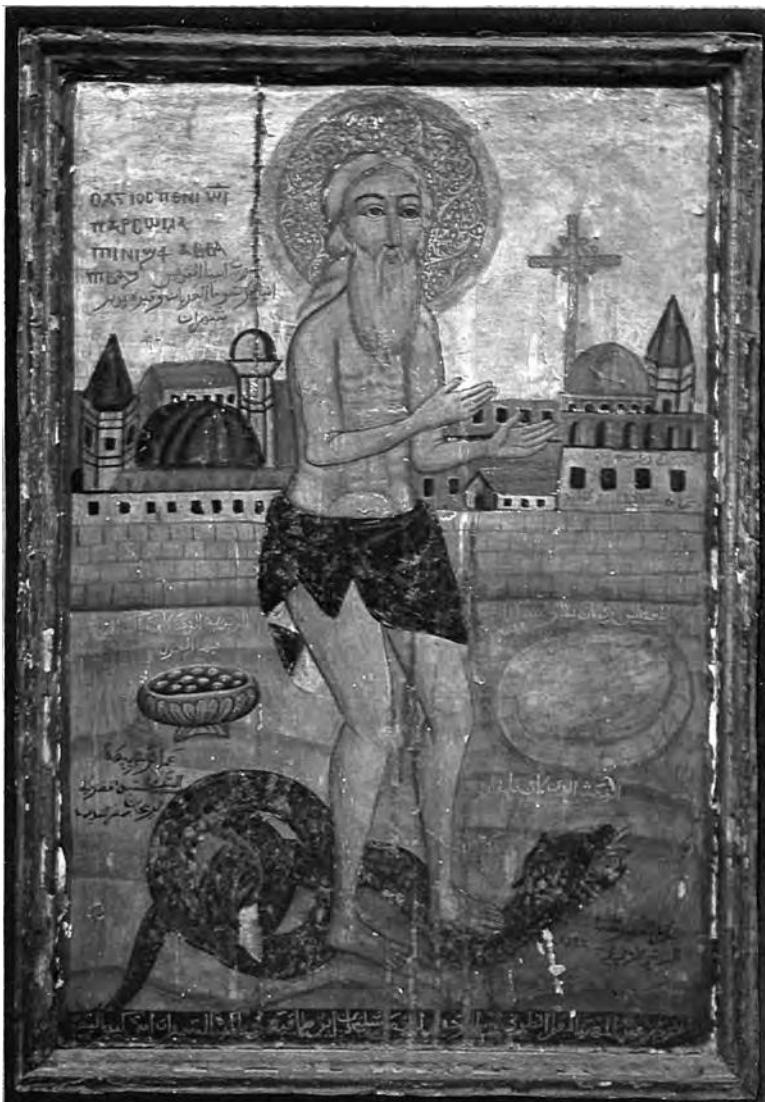


Figure 9.14 Eighteenth-century icon of Saint Barsum (Barsum the Naked) who died in 1317 having spent twenty years of his life in strict isolation in a tiny dark crypt with a low vaulted roof in the Church of Saint Mercurius (Abu Seifein). The church became famous in medieval times for its association with this holy man. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.



*Figure 9.15* A Coptic manuscript from the Monastery of Saint Mercurius (now in the Patriarchate Library) is illustrated with a brightly coloured miniature of the Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

fallen foe. The church gained prestige when, in 1080, forty-seven bishops assembled there at the order of the governor Badr el-Din el-Gamaly to discuss ecclesiastical matters. In the fourteenth century it became famous for its association with Barsum the Naked, a holy man who spent twenty years of his life in strict seclusion in a tiny dark crypt entered via a flight of stairs near the north aisle of the church; he died in 1317.

Despite its prosperity, the strength of the Fatimid dynasty had rested on its troops who were mercenaries of many nations: Berbers, Sudanese and Turks. There was rivalry between them, intrigues, and even murder among viziers who bribed the troops to further their own ambitions. This led to frequent wars, which continued until Salah el-Din, a Kurdish warrior who founded the Ayyubid dynasty (1171–1250), popularly known as Saladin and famed for his successful stand against the Crusaders, put an end to the Fatimid caliphate; it was the last Arab dynasty to rule Egypt. Salah el-Din took measures that had a lasting affect on the future of Egypt. Under his rule, Egypt became both the real centre of Muslim military power and leader of Islamic culture. To secure Cairo from Crusader attack he built the Citadel, landmark of Cairo, and developed commercial activity on an enormous scale. He treated all religious sects without discrimination, and Copts respected him because, under his guardianship, they were employed in various offices of the state and were free to re-build churches. There was a revival of Coptic identity when dictionaries were produced, literary works assembled and various encyclopaediae compiled. The *Coptic Synaxarion*, or ‘History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria’, a composite work by various scribes, was translated into Arabic for the Arabic-speaking Coptic population, along with earlier biographies written in Coptic or Greek. Abu el-Mufaddal ibn el-‘Assal, ‘the father of Coptic writers’ and a linguist, was spiritual leader of a scholarly group of writers in Beni Suef who called themselves Awlad el-‘Assal (‘Children of the Honey-maker’). This group detailed the laws, traditions and cultural norms of the Copts. Among them was El-Safi ibn el-‘Assal, who compiled canon law which became the basis of ecclesiastical law for the Coptic Church. Coptic scholarship continued unabated. Abu Shakir ibn el-Rahib, an eminent and bilingual scribe who became a deacon at the Hanging Church in 1260, produced a Coptic vocabulary and grammar, wrote on the Holy Trinity, and produced his *Book of Histories*. Abu el-Makaram, a Coptic priest, visited remote sites and made a survey of the relics venerated by his people.

Salah el-Din employed mercenaries in his army, installing them in the impregnable Citadel, and granting huge fiefs to their leaders. He also started the practice of importing slaves to act as bodyguards for the caliphs and sultans. They were the forerunners of the Mamelukes (the Arabic word signifies ‘to own’ or ‘possess’) who developed into a privileged, but not hereditary, foreign ruling caste that eventually took over leadership and ruled as caliphs in Egypt from 1250. They were landowners who were also fighting mercenaries, and they retained power in Egypt for centuries, until finally defeated and massacred by Muhammed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt in the nineteenth century. The Mamelukes built extravagantly. Their mosques and houses are among the most remarkable and best-preserved monuments in Cairo. Wages for craftsmen, weavers, porters and servants reached an all-time high and Copts did benefit, to some extent, from the commercial activity that flourished. But the Mamelukes had little or no understanding or sympathy for Christians and made frequent attempts to dismiss them from their government posts. In fact Salah el-Din’s foreign military dictatorship was the occasion of much oppression, bloodshed and civil strife. As a result of misgovernment after the death of caliph el-Nasir in 1341, there was a slow and steady breakdown of public order and security. Irrigation was neglected; canals silted up.

And then disaster struck from an unexpected source. The great plague, the Black Death, entered Egypt via el-Farma (Pelusiam) in 1349 and rapidly spread through the Delta to Upper Egypt. In his *The Black Death in the Middle East* (1977), Michael Dols, quoting Arabic sources, described the Delta city of Bilbeis (an important caravan station between Cairo and Palestine), covered with corpses ‘thrown against the walls of the great mosque, where dogs devoured them’ – the gardens and irrigation system at Damietta abandoned because of the loss of agricultural workers, and royal properties in the suburbs of Cairo empty and falling to ruin. In Upper Egypt the sharp decline in the population resulted in the neglect of the irrigation system, which caused a shrinking of water resources and severe famine. The caliph’s starving soldiers revolted and sacked palaces and churches. Animals were affected and, bearing in mind the rural dependence on the ox and donkey, this caused further hardship. The epidemic caused losses of up to 600 in a single village in Upper Egypt. In the region of Asyut, where the land tax was customarily gathered from about six thousand people, it was collected from a mere

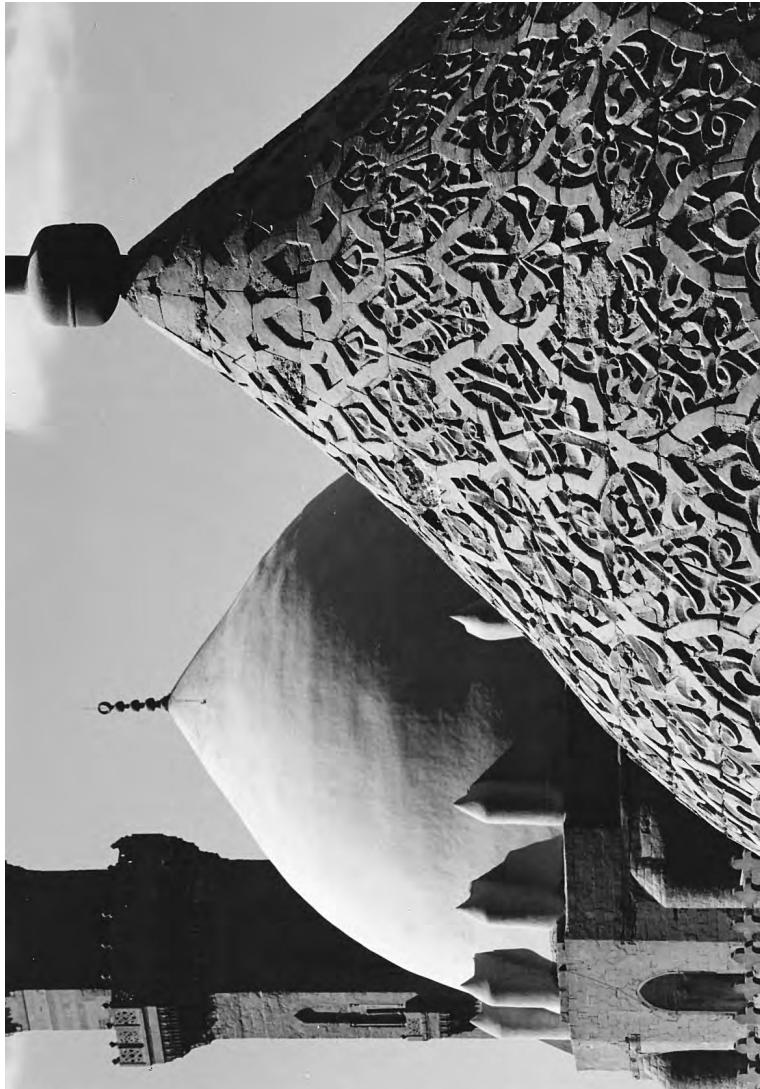


Figure 9.16 Domes of the *madrasa* (school) of Sultan Hassan (left), one of the masterpieces of Mameluke architecture (1356–63), and (right) the mosque and tomb of Sheikh Ali el-Rifa'i (1869–1912). Sherif Sonbol © Al-Ahram Weekly.

116. Out of an earlier estimate of 24,000 *feddans* of productive land in Luxor, a paltry 1,000 was recorded in the year 1389. The area between Qena and Nag Hammadi lost 15,000 inhabitants. The agricultural foundation of the economy was destroyed. Landlord and labourer, craftsmen and merchant alike, Muslim and Christian struggled. Towns, villages, hamlets were in a state of crisis. Monasteries located in or near agricultural land were seriously affected. The White Monastery was abandoned and fell into an advanced state of decay. The monks in the monasteries of Wadi Natrun cried poverty.

Once the devastating plague had run its course, landlords set about redeveloping agriculture, taking over neglected land, turning empty churches into schools and mosques, and creating water fountains. Copts, for their part, resettled their communities as best they could but according to el-Maqrizi there was increased taxation and the seizing of Church property. The once-large Monastery of Saint George at Akhmim was torn down and replaced by houses for artisans and workers. Relations between Copts and Muslims were further strained when restrictions were imposed on repairing their churches. Building new ones was not permitted. Coptic fast disappeared as a spoken language. Contributions to *The History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church* ended.

The Western world withdrew from the eastern Mediterranean when Vasco da Gama reached India by sailing round the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and opened up new trade routes to the east. At one stroke Egypt lost its position at the crossroads of the world. The picture gained from a study of the monastic sites may in some measure reflect the general conditions of the Coptic Church in late medieval times. There were periods during which the monasteries were plundered and destroyed by marauding bedouins, but some were rebuilt. The monasteries of Wadi Natrun, which were hardest hit of all by the plague in the fourteenth century, now suffered devastation from bedouins on at least three occasions. El-Maqrizi recorded that in the fifteenth century seven monasteries survived in the area where over a hundred once stood. Today there are only four.

Under the Ottoman Turks (1517–1808), Egyptian communities were further depleted by renewed outbreaks of plague, in 1619 and in 1643. Whole villages were wiped out. ‘Copts were under such great pressure from the authorities that, in order to continue earning a respectable livelihood, many, especially those with scribal skills, converted to Islam’ (Atiya, 1991: 6, 1856–7).

When one considers the Arab invasion of Egypt, one is apt to think in terms of a new ideology being imposed by the conquerors on the indigenous population. Seldom do we take heed of the influence of local tradition on invaders; yet perhaps it is appropriate to do so. After all, when the Persians controlled Egypt from 525 to 332 BC they adopted Egyptian burial practices, as is evidenced from numerous tombs excavated at Abu Sir, and the Ptolemaic kings who ruled successfully for three centuries did likewise. Even the Romans, who mercilessly exploited their Egyptian colony, mummified their dead and interred them in elaborate coffins with Egyptian mortuary texts. Ancient symbolism and ritual practices survived even the war launched on paganism by the imperial government of Constantinople (see Chapter 6). Therefore we should not be surprised that Islam, as practised in Egypt, should take on a distinctive local flavour.

The first Muslims were buried in the desert in accordance with their own tradition, but soon enough the ancient Egyptian practice of tomb-building and grave-visiting was adopted by the conquerors. The first Islamic religious figure of pilgrimage in Egypt was the jurist el-Shafi (767–820), who settled in Fustat and was buried at the foot of the Moqattam Hills. Today there are five thousand-odd Muslim *mulids* every year and many have become national events. Some last for a few days, others are week-long celebrations. Although Islam had no tradition to encourage the remembrance of holy men, almost every village in Egypt today has come to have its revered sheikh buried beneath a white dome or a tree. Ancient burial rituals are carried out by Muslim and Christian alike: the deceased is borne in a bier followed by mourning women (sometimes professional mourners); special services are conducted in the house of the deceased on the third day after the death of the individual when prayers are held; mourning lasts for forty days as in ancient and early Christian times. Annual pilgrimage is made to the graves of the departed when flowers and, in some rural areas, food and drink are placed on the tomb. Both men and women pay regular visits to the tombs of their relatives, often sleeping in the mausoleums overnight, sacrificing a sheep and giving some of its flesh, along with bread, to local poor. Who would question that such a ceremony stems from ancient expiatory sacrifice, which is today regarded as alms-giving? Or that decorative graphic pictures of the holy pilgrimage to Mecca (by ship or air) on the outer walls of houses in villages and towns all over Egypt are not a

reflection of scenes in ancient Egyptian tombs of the pilgrimage (by boat) to the holy city of Abydos? Ancient Egyptian traditions have broken through the time barrier. New-born babies in rural areas are still placed in a sieve in village ceremonies to cleanse them of evil spirits and call blessing on them.

Among Egyptians, Muslims and Christians alike, a sense of the supernatural remains strong. They believe in the efficacy of sacred charms for protection, especially against the Evil Eye (the casting of a covetous look to cause grievous harm), and they believe in evil spirits. Faith in the power of patron saints is extremely strong. Egyptians frequently entreat holy men, priests or sheikhs to exorcise these spirits on their behalf. If, among the poor, prayers to Allah (God) are to no avail, both Christians and Muslims may ask a scribe to write a letter to a personal saint with pleas as varied as curing the sick to solving personal problems. These letters are not signed because, as in ancient times when letters addressed to the dead or to local deities were written by scribes, it is taken for granted that the saint or sheikh knows who has written them.

Whether in honour of their sheikhs or saints, Muslims and Christians make pilgrimage to holy sites that resemble one another in preparation and ritual: tents are put around the church or tomb and the area is decorated with flags, banners and lights. The night before the *mulid* markets are held and toys, sweets, trinkets, paper hats, clothing and books are sold. There are swings for children and puppet shows. The highlight is the great *zaffa*, a procession through the streets carrying a picture of the Muslim sheikh or Christian saint. Votive offerings or pieces of cloth are torn from the clothing of the pilgrims and placed on the tomb near the relics, or on trees, and the celebration is accompanied by games, music, dancing and horse-racing in which landowners in the district take part.

The Muslim *mulid* that is celebrated in Luxor during the month of Shaaban closely resembles the ancient Egyptian Opet festival depicted in the colonnade of the Luxor temple; sheikhs emerge from the mosque, which stands in the court of Ramses II, bearing sailing boats that they place on carriages; these traverse a city bedecked with flags and filled with rejoicing people. Near the village of Damirah where Saint Dimiana was born there is a mound called Qafr (castle) Damirah el-Qadim ('Damirah the ancient'). The community is predominantly Muslim today, although many of the mosques have columns and other architectural

elements which attest to earlier Christian settlement. The *mulid* that takes place is not in honour of the adolescent Christian virgins martyred in the time of Diocletian (see pp. 118–19), but is held for the forty Muslim soldiers killed during the conquest of Egypt. The *mulid* of Saint George, which is celebrated by both Copts and Muslims near Mansoura, closely resembles the Festival of Bastet described by Herodotus as a joyous boat-festival with dancing and fanfare.

Egypt's colourful and popular national festival known as Shem el-Nessim ('smell the breeze'), a day-long celebration heralding the first day of spring on the Monday following Orthodox Easter Sunday, undoubtedly had its origins in the country's ancient past, since it is not observed in any other part of the world. The people awake at dawn and picnic outdoors on fava beans, salted fish, hard-boiled eggs and spring onions. The decoration and eating of boiled eggs subsequently became incorporated as part of the celebration of Easter Sunday, which falls a day before Shem el-Nessim. Both celebrations relate to rebirth: the rebirth of the land and the rebirth (i.e. resurrection) of Christ. Since there is no way that Islam, based on a lunar calendar, would have adopted a Christian festival based on a solar calendar, it is clear that Egyptians are celebrating a more ancient festival.

## RESTORATION AND REVIVAL

Following the October 1992 earthquake that caused considerable damage to historical monuments in Cairo, a programme of restoration was launched. Storerooms in the Coptic Museum and elsewhere were opened up, boxes of long-neglected manuscripts and textiles were taken from dust-ridden shelves, and conservation initiated. Monasteries followed suit. Ancient corn mills, olive presses, millstones, lecterns, carved wooden boxes and ecclesiastical vestments came to light, as well as manuscripts bound in leather and a mass of utilitarian objects. Long-abandoned refectories were turned into museums (figures 3.10, 8.2). Churches all over the country have been restored anew.

These projects have been financed in various ways: by government funding through the Ministry of Culture; money raised by local Coptic communities or by individual donors; in joint development projects with foreign embassies and organisations; and some religious institutions have been able to fund their own projects from their dependencies (landholdings in rural areas, often remote from the monasteries, that have been used for centuries to supply their needs). Some efforts have been modest. Others have been carried out on a grand scale. In the little-known church of the martyr Abu Qastur, in the village of Bardanuha, south of Beni Mazar, for example, no expense was spared. Kamel Awad, dean of Cairo University's Faculty of Fine Arts, launched the project; all costs were borne by Gaber Moussa, mayor of the village of Bardanuha. Foreign expertise was sought to aid in architectural consolidation, icon restoration and the conservation of wall paintings. The ancient sanctuary screen was restored, using as much of the original wood as possible. The stained glass for the windows was imported from Belgium, marble from



*Figure 10.1* The Coptic Museum which lies within the old Fortress of Babylon (Old Cairo) has the largest collection of Coptic antiquities in the world. This photograph was taken in 1976. Today, contractors of The Greater Cairo Waste Water project have been allowed to centre their activities in what was once its beautiful garden with fountains and gazebos. Photo Robert Scott.

Italy, and the Czechoslovak artist Jaro Hilbert was commissioned to paint icons to refurbish the church. During clearance, a wooden Bible-stand and a brass bell were found, as well as an ancient stairway leading downward from the mound on which the church stands – perhaps to the original shrine built in honour of the fourth-century saint. Today a paved road leads to the walled complex in which stands a new single-storey church with two domes.

Portable icons, until recently the most neglected of Egypt's enormous Christian heritage, have been found in large number. Damaged by the hands of adoring pilgrims, blackened by smoke from candles, chipped and discoloured, their subjects hardly visible, they were stacked in the corridors of various churches, behind screens, or even in wood piles. Two hundred and fifty are housed in the Church of Saint Mercurius in Old Cairo alone. The first step in scientific restoration of icons was carried out between 1989 and 1996 by the joint Egypt-Netherlands 'Conservation of Coptic Icons Project'. It was based in the Coptic Museum in Cairo under the direction of conservator and art historian Zuzana Skalova in



Figure 10.2 During restoration of the Monastery of Saint George at Sidment el-Gebel, south of the Fayoum, architectural elements of earlier (Graeco-Roman) structures were found. In the thirteenth century, Butrus el-Sidmant, a Coptic theologian of distinction, served as monk in the monastery. Photo Samir Naoum © *Al-Abram Weekly*.

cooperation with the Coptic Church and SCA. Her study revealed that surviving portable icons in Egypt date to three main periods: early icons from the fourth to the eighth century; medieval, which she ascribes to the thirteenth century; and a variety of icons of the Ottoman period. From initial work, Skalova observed salient differences in carpentry between the icons made for Melkite patrons on the one hand, and for Copts on the other, suggesting that there were Melkite and Coptic workshops in Cairo where local traditions, techniques and materials were maintained but styles were updated. ‘Some workshops, as well as the scriptoria, might have been attached to both patriarchates,’ she said (Skalova, 1998: 104). Coptic icons from the Ottoman era are often signed. The painters tended to depict full figures, concentrating on the essentials of the subject and give less attention to such detail as proportion. They appear not to have been constrained by a rigid code such as that known



*Figure 10.3* One of the entrances to the grand new Monastery of the Holy Virgin some 10 kilometres south of Asyut. The area was heavily populated by early Christians and the monastery is built on an old quarry. Its structure, both inside and out, reveals that it was of considerable size, though badly damaged by hermits who sought refuge there. Black encrustation and smudges on the walls were caused from fuel used for cooking. Paintings were destroyed and walls demolished. The cave-church has now been restored and the church, which was built in 1955, has been considerably expanded. Photo Samir Naoum © Al-Ahram Weekly.

from post-Byzantine painting, but felt free to experiment with their themes. Consequently, there are a variety of interpretations in the treatment of a single subject. Copts, who love bright, clear colours, were remarkably practical in mixing the limited scale of available dyes, pigments and clays to achieve lively pictures. When large-scale production of a workshop survived, it can be deduced that the labour was divided and more than one artist was involved in the production of a single icon, with the face inevitably painted by the master.

Conservation of icons includes the removal of dirt and discoloured original varnish (or that from earlier ‘refreshments’), stabilising the peeling paint and preparation layer on the wooden board on which most were painted, repairing these supports, and filling in those areas in the image where the original material was missing. In the past, icons were sometimes ‘revitalised’ or repainted, to make them again function as

sacred pictures, and probably to give the worn icon fresh spiritual power. Only seldom was the subject matter itself changed by overpainting to meet new spiritual requirements. Two such icons professionally cleaned by Skalova and her Egyptian trainees in the 1990s, are worth mentioning. One is that of Saint Mercurius which was re-restored in the project workshop in the church of the patron saint in Old Cairo. It was 'refreshed' in the eighteenth century with the aim of transforming the Roman saint who suffered a martyr's death (depicted with one sword), into the Coptic Abu Seifein or 'He of two swords' (Skalova et al. 1999: 380–81). An equally fascinating case is the adaptation of the icon of 'Saint Mark with the Severed Head' (Coptic Museum). It is a full figure of the Evangelist, bearded and middle-aged, depicted with the severed head, which has his ascetic features, at his side. He wears a blue episcopal garment, which Skalova noted is an over-painting of a later date to emphasise the saint's role as the first Coptic patriarch. 'Observation under the microscope confirmed that . . . St. Mark was . . . first painted as an apostle wearing a red tunic and a mantle . . . (the) red tunic is preserved under the over-painting and is visible where the upper blue layer is damaged' (Skalova 1995b: 721–32). Father Maximous el-Antony, Skalova's first trainee, established the first workshop for icon conservation in a monastery in 1988. Together they restored most of the icons in the Monastery of Saint Antony.

Meanwhile, a Dutch team of Leiden University (ENCAP) carried out an ambitious project initiated by Gawdat Gabra to catalogue the icon collection of the Coptic Museum in Cairo. The project director, Van Moorsel, edited the first volume, published in 1994 under the title *Catalogue Général du Musée Copte: The Icons*. That same year, ENCAP provided scholarships to three monks from the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun to study Christian, Coptic and Byzantine art in the Netherlands.

The restoration of wall paintings presented a different challenge. Churches have been restored time and again, their walls replastered and successively repainted. Where parts of the stucco have fallen, earlier

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*Figure 10.4 (opposite)* Saint Mercurius was a Roman legionary who died a martyr's death in Palestine. Copts hold that he was given a second, luminous sword to fight against paganism and, under the name Abu Seifein, or 'he of two swords', he is regarded as a powerful protector against persecution. This 140 × 104 cm icon in the church in his



name in Old Cairo, showing the saint surrounded by scenes of his martyrdom, was completely blackened, restored in a workshop of the church in 1989, and subsequently professionally re-restored by Zuzana Skalova and her trainees. Photo by courtesy of the Church of Saint Mercurius.

paintings are sometimes revealed; or suspected paintings are confirmed when ‘windows’ are made in the plaster by restorers – either accidentally, when outer layers are dislodged, or carefully but intentionally chipped in background areas during cleaning and restoration. Restorers are then faced with the problem of how to deal with the ethics of conservation, especially when as many as five layers have been revealed. Some conservationists consider it a duty to preserve the present condition of the paintings without delving into earlier layers. Researchers would like to remove successive layers of painting in order to get down to the earliest work. And, needless to say, the problem is further complicated by monks who are naturally anxious to have a beautiful, theologically correct, end product as quickly as possible.

Three monasteries in widely separated areas – Fayoum’s Naqlun, Wadi Natrun and the Red Sea – have each presented unique challenges in wall-painting restoration.

The original Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel at Deir el-Naqlun, of unknown date, was reconstructed in the ninth century or early in the tenth, destroyed and/or fell to ruin in medieval times, and then totally rebuilt at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time the walls were replastered and whatever remained of the earlier paintings totally obscured. In 1991, a team of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and the National Museum in Warsaw visited the monastery and found it in a terrible condition, guarded by a single monk. Patches of paint were scaling from the disintegrating brick walls and the roof was damaged and causing further injury to the remaining wall paintings. Structural reinforcement was necessary before the layers of secondary plaster could be removed to reveal the earlier work. I watched Ewa Paradowska of the National Museum in Warsaw cleaning and consolidating parts of the revealed paintings, which included the Holy Virgin between angels, saints on horseback, and the Archangel Gabriel. An inscription in the apse, traditionally decorated with apostles and locally venerated ecclesiastics, dates the wall paintings to between 1025 and 1030 (Godlewski and Paradowska, 2000: 99).

The case of the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun was completely different. A fire broke out in the Church of the Holy Virgin in 1988, partly destroying the thirteenth-century painting of the Ascension in the western apse, one of the most beautiful in the church. A team of restorers from the French Institute for Archaeology (IFAO) carried out restoration



Figure 10.5 A Polish conservation team carried out restoration and conservation of the church in the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel (Deir el-Naqlun) in 1991. These wall paintings in the apse, which were revealed after careful removal of layers of plaster, can be dated to between 1025 and 1033; certainly they were in existence in 1183 when Bishop Isaac of Aphroditopolis left a commemorative inscription in Coptic which follows the contours of the painting in the apse. An inscription of a deacon Ioannes from Heracleopolis Magna suggests that he was the artist. Photo Sami Boushra © Al-Ahram Weekly.

and were able to confirm what had long been suspected: the existence of earlier wall paintings beneath the layers of stucco on which the above work was painted. The monks were anxious to see the original, before Syrian monks inhabited the monastery. But this would have meant removing layers of paint-work and, however professional the conservationists, running the risk of damaging even further the fire-damaged painting. In 1991, another large part of the apse threatened to collapse and caused a predicament. It was too large to consolidate. It had to be removed. Thanks to modern techniques and a team of Dutch and French conservationists, it proved possible to dislodge the outer paint layer completely, stabilise the painting, mount it on a support, clean and restore it, and place it for exhibition. Meanwhile, the earlier work revealed *in situ* was almost perfectly preserved. It shows the Holy Virgin seated on a throne



*Figure 10.6* This striking representation of the Virgin and Child flanked by prophets of the Old Testament (Isaiah and Moses to her right and the Archangel Gabriel, Ezekiel and Daniel to her left, with their prophesies written in Coptic on their unfurled scrolls), came to light in 1995 when a team of Dutch and Polish restorers were consolidating a thirteenth-century outer painting in the western apse of the church in the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun. Scholars at a symposium organised to discuss the discovery dated it between the seventh and the twelfth centuries. Photo Nabil Selim Atalla © Lehnert & Landrock.

with Isaiah and Moses (with the burning bush above his head) on one side, and the archangel Gabriel, Ezekiel and Daniel on the other. Each prophet holds a scroll in which a verse from his prophecy of the incarnation of Jesus Christ from a virgin (Isaiah 7: 14 and Ezekiel 44: 2) is written in Coptic. The position of the Virgin's hands indicates her submission to the message she is receiving from the archangel Gabriel, who is standing in front of her. The painting retains the original bright red, green, blue and white colours that are characteristic of early art. It has been described by experts as one of the most remarkable wall paintings in the world, painted by a talented anonymous artist some time between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

Further work in the Monastery of the Syrians has been carried out by a joint Polish/Netherlands Institute mission. Layers of paintings lie one on top of the other over most of the church's walls. This was revealed

when, in 1995, fifty-two ‘windows’ were made at different places on the interior walls of the church. When one of these was enlarged, a  $3 \times 4$  metre area revealed, on the bottom layer, a unique eighth-century painting depicting three Old Testament prophets, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, on whose robes small, naked figures are painted, possibly symbols of innocence. Two adjacent columns to the right of the church’s main sanctuary also yielded exquisite paintings: full front-view portraits executed in encaustic (coloured wax manipulated with a hot spatula). One shows the Holy Virgin nursing the Christ child, the other an anonymous martyr in military uniform holding a sword in one hand and a cross in the other. The paintings and inscriptions in the church make it possible to date some of the work with accuracy. The earliest layers, Coptic in technique and subject matter, were overlaid by paintings by Syrian monks who lived in the monastery through to the thirteenth century. Father Yuhanas, who accompanied me around the church, pointed to a Syriac text found under several layers of plaster, which mentioned restoration completed in the year 992. ‘Some inscriptions’, he said, ‘were covered by travellers’ graffiti dating as early as the tenth century.’

‘Our approach to restoration in the Monastery of Saint Antony was completely different,’ said Father Maximous el-Antony. ‘According to our oral tradition, this ancient monastery was founded soon after the saint’s death but the medieval decoration of its oldest church was completely blackened by smoke when the site was deserted and used by Bedouin in the fifteenth century as a kitchen. Now, following restoration and cleaning, the thirteenth-century paintings – earlier only vaguely discernible through the grime – have been revealed in their glory.’ He was referring to restoration carried out between 1995 and 1999 in an Egyptian/Italian/USA partnership. The major part of the walls of the church can be attributed, thanks to an inscription that is dated and signed, to a Coptic painter Theodore; the donors are also named. Theodore and his team decorated the church between 1232 and 1233 when a succession of caliphs, the heirs of Salah el-Din, ruled Egypt. Theodore’s programme consisted of a number of well-known Coptic themes painted in the sanctuary and in the nave. In the former, Christ is shown enthroned in glory in the apse, carried by the four creatures of the Apocalypse. The Old Testament prophets Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah and David appear in medallions on the width of the arches between the domes of the principle apse of the church with its altar. The archangels

Michael and Gabriel in liturgical robes are prominently placed on the arch dividing the transept from the nave. And in the nave, the visual genealogy of Coptic monks is imposing; they are present in a great number, standing one next to the other, starting with the patron saint of the monastery, the ‘father of monasticism’, Saint Antony the Great. He is placed prominently on the right (eastern side) of the nave. Opposite, is an image of the enthroned Virgin and Child and, on this west wall, seven large warrior saints on horseback loom large. The result of professional cleaning, conservation and restoration is breathtaking. All appear as though painted yesterday. ‘In places where small parts of the original paint layer were missing they were not retouched in colour but covered with clouded water to neutralise the garish appearance of the blank wall,’ explained Father Maximous. Where large parts were missing, the section was in-painted using a skilful technique of small vertical strokes (*trateggio*) so that the area of restoration is integrated, yet can be clearly identified.

Of course, in deciding to conserve these wonderful thirteenth-century wall paintings by a master artist (the most complete medieval decorative wall paintings in Egypt), only limited areas of the church could be professionally scrutinised for evidence of paintings of earlier periods. This was possible only in places where the medieval layer did not survive (or was left unfinished). There, restorers could ‘look through’ the later plaster layers, discerning older artwork beneath. Not surprisingly they also depict monks. According to the newly published *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, edited by Elizabeth Bolman, these figures date to between 550 and 700, or even earlier. Such evidence is important for two reasons: first because this oldest church of the monastery of Saint Antony is clearly much older than hitherto claimed by scholars, and second because it attests to the power of oral tradition. Through the millennia, monks of the monastery have claimed, and passed on to novices, that the Old Church dates to the time of Saint Antony himself, that is to say to the third century.

An ongoing conservation project by the same team, focusing on the most ancient core of the nearby Monastery of Saint Paul – who was Saint Anthony’s teacher/companion/fellow monk on the Red Sea coast – might well cast more light on the origin of both holy sites. It is possible, indeed probable, they were constructed simultaneously. Judging from a study by the late Paul van Moorsel entitled ‘The Medieval Iconography of the

Monastery of St Paul as compared with the Iconography of St Anthony's Monastery', restorers and conservationists can be expected to discover more about early Coptic art hidden beneath numerous layers of paint work that refreshed the earlier darkened images (Van Moorsel, *Called to Egypt*: 41–62).

In a different location I watched a monk, who prefers not to be named, organising workers covering an ancient, decorated apse in the original church of an important monastery with plaster. 'The paint was scaling and not pleasing to the eye', he explained. 'I wish for a new painting which will delight the worshippers', he added. I asked him whether he had any idea of the artistic and historic value of the work that he was covering. He smiled knowingly and responded in excellent English: 'Of course', he responded. 'That is the reason we are covering them up. If their presence were known and their value realised, experts would arrive and restorers, and curious visitors, and soon enough our quiet and sacred place would turn into a tourist attraction. That is not what we want.'

In conclusion, I have chosen two monasteries that separately illustrate the themes of restoration and revival. The first is the Monastery of Abu Fanah (Saint Epiphanius) in the desert west of Mallawi, which provides an example of almost uninterrupted Christian occupation from pre-Christian to modern times, from the rock-hewn cells of early ascetics, through its formation into a semi-cenobitic community under the spiritual leadership of Epiphanius, to its growth and development as attested by medieval travellers and modern archaeologists, and its excavation and restoration today. The second is the Monastery of Saint Samaan on the Moqattam Hills east of Cairo, which immortalises the memory of the medieval miracle described in Chapter 9. With the aid of foreign investment, a squalid slum of Greater Cairo has been converted into a religious, educational and social centre.

Abu Fanah (Saint Epiphanius), a saintly man who pursued a life of devotion and piety, was born in Memphis to a Christian family in the time of Theodosius towards the end of the fourth century. He lived in a cave, was well versed in the gospels, memorised the Psalms, and developed a talent for palm-leaf plaiting and basket-work to provide for his basic needs. His name in Bohairic, Avavini, means 'palm tree', and his life was likened to a tall palm, noble and fruitful. He had a special concern for the sick and the needy and gained a reputation for prophesying,

exorcising, reading minds and working miracles, one of which was to raise a young man from the dead. His reputation grew and the church built in his honour developed into a huge monastic centre, as attested by pottery, potsherds and bricks over a wide area. It was one of the monasteries visited by the Empress Helena, who was so impressed with the religious community that she authorised the construction of a grand ‘Church of the Cross’. Grey granite blocks in large quantity are indicative of its beautiful construction. It became a pilgrimage site on a par with that of Saint Minas at Maryut. After the withdrawal of the Byzantine patriarch from Egypt in the middle of seventh century, along with clergy loyal to the Chalcedonian creed, the monastery was temporarily abandoned and subsequently taken over by Coptic monks. It suffered the vicissitudes of other monasteries, including Berber attacks, and was restored in the thirteenth century under el-Rashid Abu el-Fadl. The great plague, and subsequent neglect of the irrigation system, had an adverse effect on the monastery and when el-Maqrizi visited it in 1441 he found few monks in residence. He nevertheless described ‘an edifice of stone, with fine architecture, located in the precincts of Minya at the edge of the wilderness’. Nothing more is heard of the monastery until the eighteenth century when, among its visitors, were Abbé Sicard (1716) and Father Julian (1883) both of whom mentioned that ‘a priest of Hur’ maintained the monastery and still performed prayers in its church. Sicard wrote that the church was decorated with twenty-one marble pillars of Gothic style, eleven in the church nave and ten surrounding the altar. He mentioned also that the walls were painted from top to bottom by crosses of all shapes and colours, ‘a sight most pleasing to the eye’, and he discerned an inscription in Coptic which read ‘wood of life’ (meaning the wooden cross).

When the scholars accompanying Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt (1798–1801) went in search of what was still well known as the Monastery of the Cross, they found it largely buried beneath debris and sand. On a small hill, not far from what appeared to be the entrance to the monastery, they found the ruins of a square building – doubtless the keep. It was left to archaeologist Gaston Maspero, who visited the site in 1883, to re-describe the church. He confirmed that it was shaped like a cross and adorned throughout with crosses decorating the walls. Only in 1987, however, did the Higher Institute for Coptic Studies in Cairo, under Father (now Bishop) Samuel el-Suryani, undertake a study of the

site. The survey proved so rewarding that a joint Austrian–Egyptian mission was set up to reconstruct the church and restore its wall paintings. During the first season the mission was delighted to discover the foundation of the ancient church, built of sun-dried brick, doubtless the original shrine built over the tomb of the saint. Further excavations revealed that the whole area under survey was littered with cells for hermits, some isolated and others located nearer the church, which evidences a semi-cenobitic way of life. The mission came across coins that date between 250 and 425, probably the height of the pilgrimage period.

It is early 1999 and I am in a vast semi-natural amphitheatre, a massive assembly hall in a monastery built in honour of Saint Samaan around a series of caves in the Moqattam cliffs that rise on Cairo's eastern rim not far from the Citadel of Saladin. I am moved by the sight of some 12,000 people, and the sound of their voices resounding from the living limestone rock that rises dramatically above them. This is the first building in honour of the miracle worker described on pp. 242–3 and constructed in the heart of the garbage collectors' community, the *zabalin* area in Mansheet Nasser. Twenty-four thousand people, mostly Copts, live in this unofficial and unsupported squatters' quarter and daily collect household garbage from the heavily populated capital city of 18 million people. The *zabalin* earn a living from recycling sorted-out garbage constituents and raising sheep and pigs. Their area was a veritable slum and eyesore until 1974 when a regular Sunday School developed into a general meeting. Recycling is good business and money was not short. The community decided to invest in a new church. Over the next fifteen months the pathetic tin shack in which they prayed was transformed into a brick and canvas structure which was subsequently enlarged to accommodate an ever-increasing number of the faithful. International attention was drawn to the condition of the inhabitants of Mansheet Nasser and the adjacent *zabalin* areas of Ezbet Bekheet and Duweaka, and when Pope Shenuda visited the new church in 1976 he formally accepted a grant from Finland to construct an education centre for 500 boys and girls. By 1993 there was a kindergarten, a school for deaf and dumb, an anti-illiteracy course and vocational training centres: tailoring, sewing and knitting for girls; carpentry, blacksmithing, electrical training and the techniques of leather production for boys. In 1994, the Saint

Samaan/Patmos–Moqattam Hospital was opened, with a specialised team of doctors and modern equipment.

Meanwhile, a monastery was established against the cliff face rising above the community. Natural caves were utilised as chapels and separate residential and administrative buildings were progressively added. The amphitheatre, the high-point of the concept, is now being enlarged. Superlatives are not out of place when describing this awe-inspiring assembly hall with its semi-circular auditorium descending into the heart of the mountain. ‘This is not a church, it is a meeting place for spiritual gatherings and conferences’, said Father Samaan, senior priest at the monastery. ‘It is necessary to excavate such a place because our rock churches of Saint Samaan and the Holy Virgin, Saint Paul, and Bishop Abraham are too small to accommodate the vast numbers of pilgrims.’ An enormous bas relief of the Virgin Mary carrying Christ is carved on the rock ceiling in front of the large altar. Dominating the cavern is a huge rock relief that towers high above the congregation; it depicts a scene from the Sermon on the Mount. Two large neo-Coptic icons depict the miracle of Moqattam (see pp. 243–4). One shows the rays of the sun filling the space beneath the hills when they rose in the miracle; the other shows Samaan as a middle-aged, bald, one-eyed man carrying a large jar on his back.

During construction almost a million tons of limestone had to be removed before it took its present form. ‘We used to creep inside the cave on our knees to see the relief of the Holy Virgin’, Father Samaan said. ‘Today is the end of the three-day fast, which the church keeps in remembrance of the time when Saint Samaan performed his miracle and moved the mountain. These most holy of days have been added to the Christmas fast of forty days, making the sum total of forty-three days – from November 25 to January 6.’ Some relics of Saint Samaan, and a broken jar (one he is said to have carried), now have pride of place in his cathedral. They were placed there in 1991 after their discovery in Saint Mary’s church in Babylon el-Darag in Old Cairo.

## EPILOGUE

In June 2000 an exhibition entitled '2,000 Years of Christianity in Egypt' was opened in the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and 350 unique artefacts (dating from between the third and nineteenth centuries) were put on display. Chosen from collections of Coptic antiquities around the world, including the Coptic and Islamic Museums in Cairo, the Louvre in Paris, the Textile Museum in Lyon, Italy's Turin Museum, the British Museum, the Egyptological Institute of Heidelberg, the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, Russia's Hermitage in St Petersburg, and the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, the exhibition has done much to help promote an understanding of the distinctive art of Coptic Egypt and its place in the world of Christendom.

At the Sixth International Congress of Coptic Studies in Leiden in September 2000, representatives attended from as far afield as Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, the Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Switzerland and the USA. There were also Coptic clergy from Australia, Canada, Egypt, Europe and the USA. Papers were presented on a wide spectrum of Coptic studies; surprisingly, though, there remains confusion in the very word 'Coptic'. Philologists use it to refer to the last phase of the Egyptian language; theologians to Egyptian faith; and art historians, until recently, to anything dating to the Roman and 'Late Antique' (i.e. Byzantine) periods that did not fit into other well-defined parameters, which is to say work that is 'anti-Hellenic' or 'primitive' in execution.

The perennial debate among scholars who are accused of 'coptomania' and 'graecomania' continues. I submit that the former (evidence of the roots of Egyptian Christianity within the Pharaonic inheritance) does

not negate the latter (Hellenistic and Byzantine influence in Coptic Egypt). The two stand as separate and divided. Separate because the evidence of Greek, Persian, Syrian and Byzantine influences in Egypt can as easily be demonstrated as the continuity of a successful religious tradition more than three thousand years old. Divided because, like the two churches on each side of the gateway leading to the Coptic Museum in the old Roman fortress of Babylon – the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George (better known as Mar Girgis) to the north, and the Coptic Church of the Holy Virgin (better known as el-Moallaqa) to the south – they stem from a common tradition in Saint Mark's evangelical role in Alexandria, yet architecturally bear no resemblance one to the other.

Egypt's influence on the New Testament since the discovery and study of the Nag Hammadi codices, described in Chapter 4, and so upon early Christianity, shows that Egypt exerted an appreciable sway upon the entire Hellenistic world in which Christianity took shape. This is apparent in the acclamation 'God is One', a Pharaonic theological form of Egyptian gods used by the earlier Christian communities; in the notion of the 'crown of righteousness and glory', of which there are references during the late period of Pharaonic history; in the religious concept of three gods combined in one form; and in the Logos (the creative force of the spoken and written word), which can be traced to a period prior to Philo, the Jewish philosopher-politician of Alexandria to whom it is usually attributed. In fact, a search for such a trend of thought throughout the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia will be fruitless except in Egypt.

Ancient Egyptian theology, despite its apparent diversity and growing complexity with the passage of time, remained remarkably uniform throughout the 3,000 years of ancient history. It was closely connected with the Egyptian's conception of his world – the universe was essentially static; the social order was part of the cosmic order; and the central figure was the king, whose acts were those of a god not a human being. In other words, every aspect of life is eternal and unchanging. Thousands of years before Christianity, the Egyptians believed in judgement of the dead based on ethical values that included a person's right conduct towards others, towards the gods and towards society. *Maat* was the measure of judgement and, through the king ('lord of *maat*' and personification of the cosmic god), arose the notion of a tribunal in the beyond operating in continuation of an earthly court. In other words, the idea of final

judgement under divine supervision. Akhenaten, the humanitarian Pharaoh of Egypt in the fourteenth century BC, first recognised the universality of God. In his famous *Hymn to the Aten* (which shows similarity in thought and sequence to Psalm 104 of the Hebrews), Akhenaten saw the Aten as ‘the father and the mother of all that he had made’ and he based the universal sway of God upon his fatherly care of all people alike, Syrian, Nubian and Egyptian.

Egypt provided a succession of great theologians, starting with the Pharaonic sages who developed and refined creation myths, to Christian Gnostics like Valentinus and Basilides, followed by Clement and Origen of the catechetical school of Alexandria who regarded all learning, whatever its source, as sacred, leading to the great pillars of the Coptic Church – Athanasius, Pachomius and Clement. All the above entitle us to the opinion that Egypt played a major role in the developing Christian movement. The autonomous Coptic Church, as already pointed out, has been exonerated of the fifth-century charge of heresy. Is it not timely for its recognition as a key contributor to Christian Orthodoxy?

The complex issues that have been raised in this book are coloured to a large extent by my long exposure to Egyptian society. Given the provocative nature of many of my arguments, it is bound to be controversial. However, hopefully I have succeeded in arousing curiosity as to the truth of my assertions or fired some interest in further research along the lines I have presented.

## APPENDIX

### Notes on saints and martyrs

The *Coptic Synaxarium* is a compilation of the lives of 381 saints, martyrs and religious heroes used in the Coptic Church. It was started in the fourth and fifth centuries and evolved from a local martyrology in which nearly half the number suffered martyrdom under Diocletian (284–305), towards a more general calendar in which Greek, Syrian, Armenian, Roman and Ethiopian bishops, saints and martyrs were added. Coptic martyrologies provided the material for the twelfth/thirteenth-century Arabic version of the *Synaxarium*. De Lacy O’Leary’s *The Saints of Egypt in the Coptic Calendar* lists the names of known martyrs enumerated in the *Coptic-Arabic Synaxarium*, as well as saints derived from other papyrological fragments. Recognising the evolutionary and contradictory nature of many of the legends, the following combines some of these descriptions with contemporary oral tradition.

**Abnub (or Apa Nub)** Abnub was twelve years old when he was tortured to death by the Romans in the once heavily populated Delta city of Samanud, the scene of many massacres in the time of Diocletian (see pp. 116–17). There was a large prison in the city in which Christians were imprisoned before being killed. According to local tradition, during the annual festival in honour of Abnub he appears and plays with children.

**Abscaron (Ishkiron)** This young recruit into the Roman army refused to burn incense at the altars of pagan gods, was declared a Christian and martyred in the time of Diocletian (see pp. 114–15). Today’s restored church of Saint Abscaron in Samalut is built on an older foundation and some elements of the earlier building are incorporated into its structure.

**Amun (Amonius) of Nitrea** Amun was among the earliest of the hermits who, like Saint Macarius of Wadi Natrun, was inspired by the teachings of Saint Antony. He was from a wealthy family, but he left his wife (with her

consent) to take to a life of asceticism in the desert region at the north-western edge of the Delta (see p. 46).

**Antony the Great** Saint Antony, regarded as the ‘Father of Monks’, is one of the founders of the Coptic Church, not only because he introduced a semi-cenobitic phase of monasticism (see pp. 78–80) but also because he helped Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, to expound his creed (see p. 177). His monastery, one of the most famous in Egypt and situated near the Red Sea coast, was founded some years after his death. During and after the Crusades his relics were taken, among other places, to Constantinople, Bruges, Antwerp and Cologne.

**Apollo** A Pachomian monk of the late fourth century, Apollo became spiritual leader of a community in Bawit in the Western Desert, which eventually grew into a great monastic centre in his name with over five hundred monks. Apollo spent forty years in the desert, ate sparingly – three spoonfuls of soup a day and no more than a morsel of bread. Pilgrims would travel long distances to see him and hearken to his wisdom.

**Athanasius of Alexandria** Church Father, theologian and patriarch of the see of Alexandria, Athanasius played a vitally important part in the doctrinal disputes that eventually split the Egyptian Church from the Church of Constantinople (see pp. 171–77). Some of his relics were transferred from Rome to Cairo in 1973 and lie in the churches in his name in the Abbasiya district of Cairo and in Damanhur in the Delta.

**Barbara** A young virgin of western Asia who converted to Christianity, was tortured for her faith and eventually martyred together with her attendant Juliana. Her relics were brought to Cairo in the sixth century and temporarily housed in the Church of the Holy Virgin (the Hanging Church known as el-Moallaqa) within the old Roman fortress of Babylon, before being transferred to a nearby basilica in her name built specially to house her relics.

**Barsum the Naked (Barsum el-Arian)** This venerated Egyptian saint died in 1317 after having spent twenty years in a tiny, dark, swampy crypt in the Church of Saint Mercurius in Old Cairo where he overcame a serpent of which the congregation was afraid. Although of a rich family, he gave up his worldly goods and chose to live in seclusion; his food and drink was no more than beans and brine. He excelled in his devotion, and had patience, modesty and compassion. Many miracles are recorded of him, some in the time of Caliph el-Nasir (1294–1341). His relics lie in the church that bears his name in the village of Ma’sara, between Maadi and Helwan.

**Bishoy (Pshoi)** One of the most pious and visionary monks of Wadi Natrun, Bishoy came from a large family. In response to a vision he went into the desert to become a disciple of John the Short. During the doctrinal disputes between the Melkites and Egyptian monks in the fifth century he, together with John, abandoned his hermitage in Wadi Natrun when the hermitages came under siege by imperial forces of Constantinople. He died in the Fayoum and his relics were transferred to the Monastery of Saint Bishoy in Wadi Natrun in the ninth century. He is depicted in iconography washing the feet of Jesus.

**Catherine of Alexandria** Known for her monastery in Sinai – and understood to have died a virgin martyr’s death in the time of Maximianus at the beginning of the fourth century. She was the daughter of an aristocratic family in Alexandria and was well-versed in poetry, philosophy, mathematics and languages. She was a devout Christian and successful proselyte (see pp. 121–2 for her legend and association with Sinai).

**Cyril of Alexandria**, the nephew of Theophilus the Bishop of Alexandria, joined the monastic order at Wadi Natrun, and eventually succeeded him to the see as the twenty-fourth bishop of Alexandria. He is honoured for his defence, against Nestorius, of the Orthodox Creed (see pp. 182–5); for his definition of faith see p. 200. Cyril was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1882 for defending the faith and also for the liturgy in his name which is said to have been passed down orally from Saint Mark the Evangelist.

**Cyrus and John (Abu Kir and Yuhanna)** Cyrus came from a wealthy family in the city of Damanhur and he and his brother agreed with two priests, one called John, to confess to having embraced Christianity. For that they suffered martyrdom (see p. 114). A church was said to have been built over the body of Cyrus, but when Cyril, having destroyed the cults of Serapis and Isis at Canopis, sent for the relics of Cyrus to install in the newly constructed Church of Saint Mark in Alexandria, they were so intermingled with those of John that they had to be buried together. Centuries later the two saints apparently disentangled themselves and began to work miracles. The relics of the saints lie in the Church of Saint Barbara in Old Cairo.

**Dimiana** Egypt’s most revered female martyr. The only child of a Christian governor near the Delta town of Mansoura, she was a girl of great beauty who became a Christian at the age of fifteen. She built a monastery with the aid of her father and lived in seclusion with forty women who also chose to abandon a life of materialism. Dimiana and her companions were tortured and killed in the time of Diocletian because of the danger she represented as an inducement to apostasy (see pp. 118–19). Her relics lie in several churches in Cairo. Her *mulid* is one of the most popular in Egypt.

**Ebonkh** was among the earliest spiritual leaders in the vicinity of Nag Hammadi, an area heavily populated with early hermits who lived in caves, ancient tombs and abandoned quarries.

**Elias** A monk at the end of the fourth century, Elias lived in the ‘inner desert’ near Antinoe (Fayoum city) and was regarded as having ‘gained perfection’ in his devotion to God.

**Ephraim the Syrian** had his early training in Wadi Natrun under Saint Bishoi, but was weak and used to lean on a staff. When he realised that some of the monks thought he carried the staff to assume distinction, he planted it in the ground a few metres from Saint Bishoy’s hermitage, where it budded, and grew into the famous tamarind tree in the Monastery of the Syrians. Later, the saint returned to his homeland. His abundant poetry was translated into Greek during his lifetime and his influence spread to the East.

**Epiphanius (Apa Fanah or Aba Bana)** A fourth-century saint born in Memphis to a devout Christian family in the time of Theodosius, Epiphanius was raised to be god-fearing and devout. He joined a monastic order, gained a reputation for healing, exorcising and performing miracles, and is believed to have been among the first to establish monastic orders in Middle Egypt (see pp. 265–66). He chose to live in a darkened cell for eighteen years and is said to have suffered terribly from arthritis in his feet.

**Eugene** A native of Suez (Clysma) and a pearl-fisherman by trade, Eugene was a disciple of Saint Antony who, along with seven Coptic monks, reputedly made their way eastward to Mesopotamia where they introduced semi-cenobitic monasticism.

**Falasi** A man of great inner strength, Father Falasi took to a life of meditation and prayer in the Naqlun desert, a narrow strip of land between the Nile valley and the Fayoum depression where countless anchorites escaped from Roman persecution.

**George (Mar Girgis)** Saint George, often depicted as a knight in shining armour on a horse that rears over a snake-like beast, is one of the most popular of the military saints in Egypt and throughout the Christian world. Different saints and martyrs bearing the name appear to have become confused. One of the most widespread legends is that he was of noble birth, born in Cappadocia in the year 280. He was fourteen years old when his brother died and he became a captain in the army. He embraced Christianity, defied Diocletian, and on seeing a proclamation against the Christian religion tore it down in anger. He

distributed his wealth, freed his slaves, and went to court where he made a public declaration of faith. He refused to worship idols and was brutally tortured until he died. The legend of another George, the martyr of Alexandria, son of a merchant, relates that his father went to the Church of Saint George on the day of his feast, prayed for him to intercede before the Lord that he might bestow on him a son, and was granted his wish; he called his son George and he was martyred for proselytising. A curious history of the worship of Saint George developed from the sixth century when George of Cappadocia (see pp. 178–9) assumed the role of a martyr and Christian saint. As to Saint George of Melitene, the Martyr of Cappadocia, he is popular among Greek Egyptians and his fame and popularity spread in Europe, especially England, under the Crusaders. The concept of overpowering ‘evil’ in the form of a dangerous animal, whether hippopotamus, snake, crocodile (in a Christian context, a dragon) is of Egyptian origin (see pp. 149–51).

**Hor** According to Coptic tradition, Apa Hor was a young man who lived towards the end of the third century. He went to Pelusiam where he made a public confession of faith, managed to convert the governor and his family to Christianity, and later went to Antinoe (Medinet el-Fayoum) where he was tortured and suffered martyrdom (p. 123). Not to be confused with Hor, the aged hermit who had a ‘radiant face’ and a ‘brilliant white beard down to his chest’.

**Isaac (Ishaq)** A disciple of Saint Antony, Isaac helped spread semi-cenobitic monasticism in the Fayoum, the Western Desert and Alexandria. The monastery in his name, more popularly known as El-Hammam after the village where it is located north-west of Lahun, was originally dedicated to the Holy Virgin. It has recently been restored and has become a popular place of pilgrimage (see p. 193).

**John the Baptist** The relics of Saint John the Baptist and Elisha the Prophet are believed to be those that were discovered during restoration of the Monastery of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrun in 1976 (see p. 50).

**John of Lycopolis (Asyut)** A fourth-century hermit, John chose as his abode an ancient rock tomb on the west bank of the Nile. He attained great celebrity for his miracles and power of prophesy. Sometimes he would lock himself in his cell for days on end and visitors from all corners of the Christian world had to wait patiently to see him. On several occasions he was consulted by Emperor Theodosius who sent envoys to him. Many of his prophecies, it is said, came true.

**John the Short** (Colobos or John the Little) was a disciple of Amun of Nitrea. He sought to serve God from his youth and when Amun became incapacitated in his later life, John cared devotedly for him for twelve years. John the Short then led a solitary life in a ‘pit’ and only left the region due to raids when he is believed to have taken refuge in the Monastery of Saint Antony near the Red Sea, where he died. His relics were transported to Wadi Natrun and today lie in the Monastery of Saint Macarius and the Monastery of the Syrians. On his death-bed Amun praised his disciple: ‘He is an angel, not a man.’

**John Kame** A young man from the Delta town of Sais who was forced into an early marriage, John Kame was moved by a heavenly vision to take to a life of asceticism and prayer. He inhabited a cell in Wadi Natrun where news of his piety spread. Hermits joined him and a keep was constructed as a refuge during attack.

**Three Macarii** The three Macarii are Macarius the Great (below), Macarius of Alexandria, and Macarius the Bishop of Tkaw (near Asyut). The three saints are distinguished in iconography: Macarius the Great holds a staff, symbol of struggle and sacrifice; Macarius of Alexandria holds a ladder, symbol of the gradual attainment of virtue; Macarius the Bishop carries a lamp in his arms and wears white, symbol of the shepherd and martyr.

**Macarius the Great (Abu Makar)**, one of the most important Desert Fathers, was the son of a village priest who drove camels laden with natron from Wadi Natrun, to the Nile valley for shipment abroad. As a result of a divine revelation he adopted a life of contemplation and prayer around the year 330 and lived in a cave close to the Monastery of Romans. Many followers were attracted to his grace and wisdom, and during the twenty years he lived there he drew towards him many ascetics who had hitherto lived in isolated caves (see p. 44). He twice visited Saint Antony, whose teachings inspired him, and on his return to Wadi Natrun he built the first church there. About the year 360, at the age of sixty, Macarius retired from the north of the depression, which was then crowded with anchorites, to a more secluded area to the south. There he hollowed out a cave on top of a rocky surface, with a tunnel leading to another more secluded cave to which he retired. And yet his followers increased. When he died he was buried in the cave where he had lived for more than thirty years.

**Mark the Evangelist** One of the four evangelists who came to Alexandria in the time of the Emperor Claudius, Mark preached the gospel, miraculously cured a cobbler, and became the first bishop of that city (see p. 60). He was arrested on Easter day while celebrating mass and died by being dragged through the streets with a rope tied round his neck. It was said that a hailstorm

broke out, causing his assailants to flee; his fellow Christians were then able to remove his body for burial. The body of the saint reposed in the Church of Saint Mark in Alexandria until the ninth century. When it was removed by two merchants to Venice, Copts hold that the head of the evangelist remained in Egypt.

**Mary the Egyptian** Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute of Alexandria in the middle of the fourth century who, having joined a group of pilgrims to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in order to find customers, was suddenly filled with remorse for her sinful life, prayed and begged forgiveness. She chose to live a pious life in isolation in repentance in a lonely place beyond the river Jordan. There she lived for many years, died and was buried. A feast in her honour is celebrated by the Eastern Churches on 1 April and by the Western on 2 April.

**Maurice** was the captain of the Theban Christian legion loyal to Constantinople. Under Maximianus the legion put down an uprising of Gauls but on their return to Saint Moritz in Switzerland the emperor gave orders that the army should sacrifice to Roman gods in thanksgiving. The Theban legion refused to comply and Maximianus ordered them to be 'decimated' (every tenth man killed). Saint Maurice encouraged them to hold fast to their faith and they died with fortitude. The whole Theban legion was eventually killed. Some of his relics were transferred to Cairo in 1989, and they lie in the pontifical chapel in Abbasiya.

**Matthew the Poor** A pious hermit honoured in Upper Egypt, the relics of Matthew are said to lie in the Church of Saint Michael in the Monastery of Asnah near Luxor.

**Maximus and Domitius** Saints Maximus and Domitius were the sons of the Emperor Valentinian I who served in the Roman army in Syria and decided to make a pilgrimage to the holy sites in Egypt. When they came to Wadi Natrun they met, and were inspired by, Saint Macarius and eagerly took to a life of asceticism. But the harsh desert conditions took their toll and the brothers died a few days apart. Saint Macarius consecrated the cell they had used, calling it the 'cell of the Romans'. Their relics are buried beneath the main altar of the church.

**Menas (Abu Mina)** One of the best-known martyrs throughout the Christian world, there are contradictory legends about this saint. Churches dedicated to him were constructed at many sites in Egypt, but none so important as the Monastery of Saint Menas at Maryut (Mareotis), which became a popular pilgrimage site (see pp.119–21).

**Mercurius (Abu Seifein or ‘He of Two Swords’)** According to Coptic tradition Mercurius was a Roman legionary born of pagan parents in Asia Minor, who had a vision in which a luminous sword was given to him by an angel of the Lord to fight paganism. He is believed to be buried in Cesaria, but his body was found and his relics were transferred to Egypt. Another legend holds that both Mercurius’ father and grandfather were hunters of wild beasts who, on a certain day, met two dog-faced men who slew the grandfather, and were about to slay the younger man when an angel of the lord appeared and said: ‘Touch him not for from him shall come good fruit.’ Then the angel surrounded the dog-faced men with a fence of fire and they became as lambs and entered the city.

There are contradictory legends about this saint. According to one tradition he defied Emperor Decius, refused to worship idols, cast his garments and girdle at Decius and said: ‘I will not deny my Lord Jesus.’ He was subsequently subjected to terrible torture that included tearing his skin with sharp nails and lighting fires on each side of his body. But he suffered with fortitude and eventually suffered a martyr’s death at the age of twenty-six.

**Michael the Archangel** This merciful angel is extremely popular in Egypt. As the one who comforts and strengthens the saints, makes them long-suffering, and makes intercession with the Lord for the rise of the Nile and the fruits of the land, he also bestows justice. ‘I am Michael, the angel, who delivers you from all your troubles and offers charities before the Lord’, he said to those he guided.

**Mina al-Agaibi (the miraculous)** Devoted to God and choosing the monastic tradition, Mina lived in a cave in what has become known as Deir el-Moallaq (the ‘suspended’ or ‘hanging monastery’ east of Asyut) (see pp. 215–16).

**Misail** Misail of Qalamun was honoured by the monks of the Monastery of Saint Samuel in the ninth century for helping them overcome their Arab aggressors who accused them of hoarding grain. The church in his honour is in the keep of the monastery.

**Moses the Black (Abu Mussa el-Aswad)** Moses the Black is honoured as a martyr of the first Berber attack on the monasteries of Wadi Natrun in the fourth century. The monastery built in his name was discovered in 1994 (see p. 53). His relics lie in the Monastery of the Syrians at Wadi Natrun and in the Church of Abnub in Samanud.

**Onoprius (Apa Nofer)** One of the well-known hermits of the ‘inner desert’, Onoporus derives his name from the Egyptian Onufri (the wolf-headed Wepwawat associated with the funerary cortège). He is usually depicted in

iconography as a white-haired, long-bearded man walking barefoot and usually without clothes because he refused to wear any when his old ones were worn out (Figure 8.8). Tradition has it that he was a prince of Thebes who felt a vocation for a solitary life and spent sixty years without seeing another soul or speaking a word. During his last hour, Pachomius arrived to comfort him. His *Life* was written by Paphnutius. His relics lie in the Monastery of Theodore (convent) in Harat el-Rum in Cairo.

**Pachomius (Anba Bakhum)** Pachomius, born of pagan parents in the time of Diocletian, is one of the solid pillars of the Coptic Church (see pp. 123–32). He founded cenobitic monasticism, a way of life for communities of monks working together to accomplish more good for themselves and for society, by formulating a rule which became the basis for almost every monastic order that followed (see pp. 123–30).

**Palomen (Anba Balamun)** Palomen was a saintly man who took to a desert in the semi-circle of land between Nag Hammadi and Qena. He was a man of spiritual excellence who served as a model for Saint Pachomius, founder of Pachomian monasticism. Palomen died from excessive fasting.

**Paphnutius** Known for religious revelations, Paphnutius travelled in search of holy men and discovered many living in isolated places in the Western Desert. On one occasion he found a hermit, seated, silent and appearing in meditation; he was, in fact, dead and it was Onophrios! He wrote many of their biographies.

**Paul, ‘Father Paul the Poor’** Coptic sources describe Saint Paul as born of a rich family in Alexandria. His father died leaving his two sons a large inheritance, which they disputed. They had to resort to legal measures and on the way to see a lawyer they passed a funeral procession. Paul was so moved by the sight of the mourners that it changed his life. Not yet sixteen years of age, he withdrew from the city and spent three days in a deserted tomb where he beseeched God to show him the way he was to follow. An angel guided him to the Eastern Desert where, in an isolated spot in the South Qalala range of mountains near the Red Sea coast (known as Mount Clysma in Roman times), he lived for eighty years. Palm leaves provided his only clothing. Saint Paul’s reputation grew as a healer and helper of the bedouin tribes that roamed through the mountains with their sheep and goats. His food, according to the legend, was brought by a crow who dropped him half a loaf of bread each day. A full loaf was brought on the occasion of the single visit of Saint Antony.

**Pigol (Yagul)** This venerable saint was the founder of the White Monastery at Sohag; he adopted the rules of Pachomian monasticism in a modified form (see p. 186).

**Qastur (Abu Qastur)** An early convert to Christianity, Qastur was a martyr in the reign of Diocletian for refusing to consecrate idols. When pressed to do so, he responded with a recitation of Christian doctrine. He was subjected to great torture and exiled by the ruler of the provincial city of Al-Qays in an effort to alienate him from his Christian faith. His relics are in the Church of the Martyr Abu-Qastur in the village of Bardanuha.

**Samaan** A humble cobbler and a man of great piety, humility and faith, Samaan lived in the tenth century. His name is associated with the miracle of the Moqattam hills east of Cairo (see pp. 241–3). According to a manuscript in the Monastery of Saint Antony on the Red Sea, the hills were hit by violent movement and divided into three parts, ‘moqattam’ meaning ‘cut up’ in Arabic. Some of the saint’s relics, along with a broken jar (the one he is said to have carried), were discovered in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Babylon el-Darag in Old Cairo in 1991. They now have pride of place in his rock cathedral in Moqattam.

**Samuel (Anba Samwil)** Saint Samuel entered a semi-cenobitic community in the Qalamun Desert in the sixth century at the age of eighteen and was for some time abbot of the monastery that took his name. He was a patriot who publicly opposed the theological doctrine pronounced at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, was captured, imprisoned and tortured by the imperial authorities (see p. 194). Legends of Saint Samuel have accumulated over a long period of time and become confused with tales of monks of an earlier period who were subjected to Berber raids. In one version, for example, Samuel was abducted and left by the roadside to die, recaptured by his enemies, tortured and humiliated, and lost an eye. In another he spent three years with the Berbers, at one time tied to a young girl with whom he was left to guard the camels – but he was not tempted to sin and later, in return for the miraculous healing of his captor’s wife, he was set free.

**Serapion** An Egyptian monk of the late fourth century and a disciple of Saint Antony, Serapion was himself both hermit and pilgrim who once boarded a ship bound for Greece and Rome where he went in search of holy men and women.

**Sergius and Bacchus** Sergius and Bacchus were two Roman officers who were martyred in Syria at the fort of Rusafa in 303. The cult of Sergius radiated outward as far afield as Armenia and Egypt where, in the fifth century, some of his relics were placed in a basilica built in his name in the old Roman fortress of Babylon (see p. 122).

**Shenuda (Anba Shenuda)** Shenuda, the abbot of the White Monastery, was a great religious reformer, strict disciplinarian, and prolific writer of Coptic literature in the fourth century. Born of devout Christian parents, he fought against paganism and Hellenism and was a strong influence on the monastic movement in Middle Egypt (see pp. 185–9). He accompanied Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, to the Council of Ephesus in 431 and his religious guidance and charitable institution were so inspiring that after his death tens of thousands of pilgrims paid homage to him, with the White Monastery in Sohag becoming one of the best known in Egypt.

**Theodore (Tadrus)** Theodore was the son of a pagan called Yuan from the village of Shutbi in Upper Egypt. He served in the Roman army and was taken as a prisoner to Antioch where he married into a family of idol worshippers. Later, he studied science, learned wisdom, saw the light of God, and was led to a bishop who baptised him. Later Tadrus returned to Upper Egypt to search for his father, with whom he remained until the old man died. He returned to Antioch, where he was reported as being a Christian, and was subjected to all kinds of torture, which he endured. Eventually he suffered a martyr's death by being beheaded and thrown into a fire.

**Theon** A fourth-century hermit, Theon lived in a small cell at an unidentified location. He read Coptic, Greek and Latin, ate only raw vegetables and observed silence for thirty years. He was hospitable to pilgrims, receiving them with a joyful face ‘abounding with grace’.

**Tomas (Bishop al-Sa'ih)** Born of Christian parents, Tomas was deeply religious, took to a secluded life near Akhmim, was joined by other monks for prayer and a communal meal but once a week, and spent day and night in prayer. He had a pleasant voice, which he raised in hymns glorifying God. He gained a reputation among the bedouin as a healer of the sick and for many miracles.

**Victor** Saint Victor (Mar Boqtor) son of Governor Romanus, was a soldier in the time of Diocletian who served in the fortress of Shu near Asyut. He refused to obey the edict ordering soldiers to join in sacrifices, was tortured, suffered no harm, and was subsequently cast into the furnace used for heating baths until he died. The Coptic version of the story includes an episode in which he throws his golden chain in the face of the emperor.

**The Virgin Mary** Saint Mary (*Theotokos*) occupies a special place in the hearts of Copts. After the death of the Virgin, the Apostles were grieved at her loss but the Lord promised them that he would show her to them in the flesh. And so it came to pass. On a certain day they saw her sitting on the right hand

## APPENDIX

of God and she was in glory. She stretched forth her hand and blessed the disciples, and surrounding her was a great company of angels and saints. Apparitions of the Holy Virgin have been sighted many times by pious Christians in recent years. In the Zeitun district of Cairo in 1968; in Shentena el-Hagar, an obscure village in Menufiya governorate north of Cairo in 1977; and in Shubra suburb of Cairo in 1986.

**Yuhanna el-Asyuti (John of Asyut)** A saintly man who lived in a two-roomed cell on the eastern bank of the Nile, Yuhanna was believed to have power over the Nile and the crop. He was one of many of hundreds of hermits in a large community near Asyut, the ruins of which can still be seen today (see p. 216).

# GLOSSARY

Words in italics are of Egyptian (Pharaonic) origin

<b>abuna</b>	(Arabic) father, the name by which to address a priest or monk.
<b>adze</b>	Tool for shaping wood; used in ancient Egyptian mortuary ritual.
<b>aisle</b>	Longitudinal division within a building, whether the hypostyle hall in an Egyptian temple or the nave in a church.
<i>akb (akbs)</i>	Immortal spirit(s).
<b>akhmimic</b>	Coptic dialect of Middle Egypt.
<b>anba</b>	(Arabic) saint, bishop, archbishop or pope.
<b>anchorite</b>	(Greek) One who escapes from labour; one who withdraws from the world to live a solitary life devoted to God.
<i>ankb</i>	Hieroglyphic sign for ‘life’ resembling a looped cross, taken over by the Copts for the sign of the cross.
<b>apocrypha</b>	Books of the Bible of which the authenticity is in question and which are not accepted as canonical by the Church.
<b>apocryphal</b>	Any gospel or similar work of doubtful authenticity.
<b>apse</b>	A vaulted semi-circular recess at the east end of a Coptic church.
<b>ascetic</b>	One who practises austere self-discipline; a reclusive hermit.
<i>ba</i>	A bird representing a powerful divine being; the personality of an individual; that aspect that allowed one person to be different from another; the soul.
<b>baba</b>	Colloquial Arabic for ‘father’; title used for pope or patriarch.
<b>caliph</b>	(Arabic) title of lawful heir of the Prophet Mohammed; the religious and civil ruler of the Islamic Empire. ‘Caliphate’ is the area under his control

## GLOSSARY

<b>canon</b>	A corpus of Coptic or other ecclesiastical law.
<b>canopic jars</b>	Vessels in which the embalmed entrails of the deceased were placed.
<b>cartouche</b>	Elliptical sign containing, particularly, the name of a Pharaoh.
<b>cenobite(ic)</b>	(Greek) ‘common’ and ‘life’. Member of a monastic religious community.
<b>codices</b>	Ancient texts written on papyrus paper scrolls, cut into sheets and bound in leather; a book.
<b>coffin</b>	A box or case for the (mummified) body contained within the outer sarcophagus.
<b>Coptic</b>	A vernacular form of the Egyptian language, no longer written in hieroglyphics or demotic (the last stage of the ancient language) but by means of the Greek alphabet supplemented by certain signs meant to represent sounds for which there was no Greek equivalent. The culture, Church and people of Christian Egypt. The distinctive art and architecture that developed as an early expression of their faith.
<b>cross-church</b>	A church with a transept which gives it the form of a cross.
<b>deir</b>	(Arabic) A walled compound enclosing Coptic churches and monastic buildings; a monastery. Colloquial name for Egyptian temples partly or wholly converted into church or monastery.
<b>demotic</b>	A late development of the Egyptian language developed from the cursive hieratic script which was itself developed from hieroglyphics.
<b>djed</b>	A pillar-shaped fetish with cross bars.
<b>doura</b>	(Arabic) grand procession on the last day of a <i>mulid</i> .
<b>encaustic</b>	Wax-based painting technique with the colour applied by spatula.
<b>Ennead</b>	Group of nine cosmic and nature gods in the Heliopolitan doctrine of the Creation. Group or groups of primordial divinities engendered by an original Creator God.
<b>epiphany tank</b>	Deep basin sunk in the floor of a Coptic church, now boarded over, formerly used for a service of blessing with water on the feast of the epiphany.
<b>feddan</b>	(Arabic) measure of area, approximately equal to one acre.
<b>gizya</b>	(Arabic) poll tax.
<b>Gnostic(s)</b>	(Greek) ‘knowledge’; group of intellectuals with a claim to special insight into human nature, destiny, life, birth and death.

## GLOSSARY

<b>haikal</b>	(Arabic) central and principle apse of a Coptic church with its altar; the word signifies ‘temple’.
<b>hegira</b>	(Arabic) The flight of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in AD 622, marked as the beginning of the Muslim era.
<b>hejaz (or hajj)</b>	(Arabic) The principal annual pilgrimage to Mecca.
<i>bu</i>	Spoken authority.
<b>iconostasis</b>	The screen wall or woodwork decorated with icons which separates nave from sanctuary in a church.
<b>iwan</b>	(Arabic) Portico around the central court of a mosque.
<i>ka</i>	An immortal aspect or life force of a person. A <i>ka</i> -statue was a ‘likeness’ of an individual erected in his tomb.
<b>kom</b>	(Arabic) A word, peculiar to Egypt, derived from the Greek <i>kome</i> or village which applies to mounds formed by accumulated debris of houses and refuse dumps.
<b>laura</b>	(Greek) A group of detached cells or caves used by hermits which have a separate but common centre with church and refectory.
<i>Logos</i>	(Greek) The ‘word’. In a Christian context, the Second Person of the Trinity.
<i>maat</i>	Cosmic order or harmony. ‘Truth’, ‘Right’, ‘Correct rule’. When the creator-god made the world, it was ‘right’, in harmony or order. Maat, the goddess representing this concept, is depicted with a feather of truth on her head.
<b>mammisi</b>	The term borrowed from Egyptian Coptic meaning ‘birth house’ where rituals related to the royal birth legend were performed in the Late Period of Pharaonic history.
<b>manshopi</b> (pl. <i>manshoubiya</i> )	(Arabic) Dwelling house for hermits, whether individual or collective.
<b>mar(i)</b>	(Arabic)圣ly.
<b>martyrium</b>	Place where the relics of a saint or martyr are kept, or the chapel built above the tomb of a saint or martyr.
<b>martyrologies</b>	A particular type of hagiographical literature commemorating saints, mostly martyrs.
<b>mashrabiya</b>	(Arabic) Woodwork of screens and windows made out of small carved pieces fixed together without the use of nails or glue.
<b>Melkite</b>	(Syrian) ‘Royal’ or ‘Emperor’s Man’; the term applied to Byzantine Church and its followers.
<b>mihrab</b>	(Arabic) Recess in the wall of a mosque marking the direction in which Muslims pray to face Mecca.
<b>Misr</b>	(Arabic) Ancient word for the country of Egypt and used colloquially for the capital (el-Qahira/Cairo).

## GLOSSARY

<b>muezzin</b>	(Arabic) He who makes the call to prayer from the minaret of a mosque.
<b>mulid(s)</b>	(Arabic) Pilgrimage festival; annual ‘holy day’ or celebration in honour of a Christian saint or Muslim sheikh; synonymous with Western Christian ‘feast’.
<b>myron</b>	Holy oil.
<b>narthex</b>	A transverse vestibule preceding the main body of a Coptic church.
<b>nimbus</b>	Bright disc or aureole round or over the head of a holy person.
<b>nomarch</b>	(Greek) Ruler of a province.
<b>nome</b>	(Greek) Province of Egypt.
<b>ogdoad</b>	A group of eight primordial gods of the creation story of Hermopolis.
<b>omdah</b>	(Arabic) Respected village elder or appointed head man.
<b>ostraca</b>	Limestone flakes or sherds of pottery used for inscriptions of various kinds in Pharaonic times. Pottery ostraca were used for the same purpose in Graeco-Roman times.
<b>Pantocrator</b>	God Almighty, one of Christ’s iconographic types.
<b>papyri</b>	Texts written on material made out of the fibres of the stem of the papyrus plant.
<b>Patriarch</b>	A title (dating from the fifth century) for the bishops of the main sees of Christendom: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem.
<b>Pyramid Texts</b>	The earliest Egyptian funerary texts written on the walls of the corridors and burial chambers of nine pyramids of the Old Kingdom (2375–2181 BC).
<b>qasr</b>	(Arabic) Tower or keep, for the defence of a monastery.
<b>sahidic</b>	Coptic dialect of Upper Egypt.
<b>scarab</b>	Commemorative object in the shape of a beetle, usually inscribed on the base. An amulet in the shape of a beetle.
<b>sebakh</b>	(Arabic) Earth that is rich in accumulated debris of (ancient) houses and refuse heaps deposited around dwelling areas. Sebakhin are peasant farmers who collect this soil to fertilise their fields.
<b>shawabi</b>	A small mummiform figure or figures placed in a tomb to work for the deceased in the afterlife.
<b>sheikh</b>	Islamic religious leader or ‘holy man’.
<b>sheikh el-balad</b>	Islamic local official (lit. ‘of the town’).
<b>Shem el-Nessim</b>	(Arabic) National festival marking the beginning of spring.
<b>sia</b>	(Egyptian) Abstract concept describing perception.
<b>stela (pl. stelae)</b>	Greek word for upright stone slabs, usually rounded at the top, with figures and inscriptions referring to a wide range

## GLOSSARY

sura	of subjects: historical records, biographical statements, tombstones, or votive pleas which were placed in temples.
Synaxarion	(Arabic) Chapter (of the Holy Quran).
	A compilation, the result of various endeavours, of the lives of saints, martyrs and religious heroes used in the Coptic Church, the author(s) of which drew their inspiration from various sources.
tell	The archaeological term for a mound or hill formed over ancient settlement sites.
Theotokos	(Greek) Mother of God, title of the Holy Virgin.
transept	Ante-chamber in front of the altar of a Coptic church.
triad	Group of three gods worshipped in an ancient Egyptian temple, comprising chief god as father, consort as mother, and child.
<i>uraeus</i>	Sacred symbol of the cobra depicted on the royal crown.
wadi	(Arabic) Dried-out river bed.
zabalin	(Arabic) Refuse collectors of Cairo who recycle the city's rubbish and raw materials.
zaffa	(Arabic) Procession through the streets during <i>mulid</i> celebrations.
zir	(Arabic) Pottery jar.

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