



Countenance from the Journey of the Holy Family and the Cavern Church

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H.H. Pope Tawdrous II, 118th Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and the See of St. Mark

Introduction

Days and years pass, and history remains a witness to human life, preserving events and images. Generations pass and human die, but what remains is the history and events, and the nations are honorable and proud of their history and civilizations.

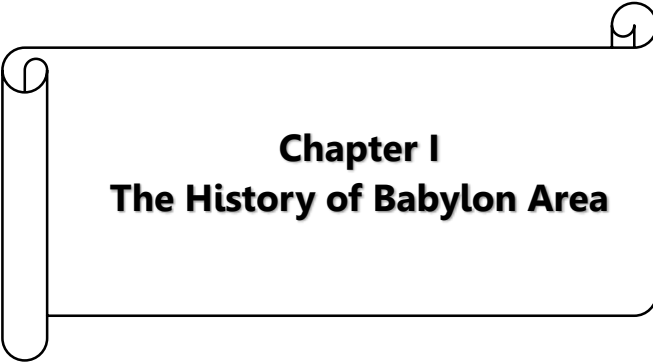
This history and that civilization are a reservation in the land and in the places where it occurs, so each generation is looking for the effects of the ancients to know, learn, and tell the whole world about civilization and the hidden secrets in earth.

What we will talk about in this book is the greatest days of Egypt and its history when the Holy Family lived for four years to add another profundity to the ancient Egyptian civilization, which will be later a beacon for the whole world.

Our focus here is on the cavern church known as Abu Serga, where the Holy Family lived, where St. Peter and St. Mark came. Here, saints gathered and chose Patriarchs of the Church. Here the Holy Mass was held for approximately two thousand years. Here is the traces of martyrs' blood. Here are the traces of fire and persecutions. Moreover, here are the traces of the return of glory and civilization.

In this book, the light is shining in between the stones of the cavern church and the martyrs St. Sergius and St. Bacchus' church, and a spiritual power is the profundity of life, which was born here. As the spiritual attributes can be inhaled as soon as you enter the church.

Father/ Angelos Guirguis Shenouda



Chapter I
The History of Babylon Area

Babylon is an Assyrian word meaning “*Home of Peace or Security*”. A true feeling that accompanies those visiting this unique place that has witnessed the history of the world’s civilizations. Here, was the Pharaonic civilization by the Nile bank, erecting a shrine for the solar boats and a foundation for a military fortress.

Here had dwelled the Babylonians after which this area was named. Then came Nebuchadnezzar emperor of Babylon who constructed additional sections to the original fortress. Here, a huge Jewish community settled in Babylon and built a Synagogue, which was highly recognized after the one in Jerusalem in the second Century B.C., that is why they have greatly signified this area. Jeramiah the Profit was also known to have lived there. Then came the Persians and the Romans, constructing monuments, and adding further enforcements to the Fortress.

During the journey of the Holy Family, they sailed the Nile reaching the Babylon area. At that time, the Nile used to flow beneath the western walls of the fortress. The Holy Family lived there in a cavern for over three months, and blessed this area and all the land of Egypt. The early Christian Jews have built the first church in that cavern, known as the “Cavern Church”.

Near the Babylon fortress, a Nilometer was also situated. Over the course of 1,800 years, the Nile has receded due to various changes, to finally flow in the course where it is nowadays.

Queen Helena issued a decree to build a Church named after St. Sergius and St. Bacchus to commemorate the presence of the Holy family at the Babylon area. Christians have then brought forth the construction of many other churches in this blessed spot.

At the Babylon Fortress, the Romans took defense, and from there, the Arabs set foot in Egypt, defeated the Romans, and declared the commencement of their reign. Since then, the history of Christianity was being traced on the walls of the Coptic churches and homes.

If history is a record of human events taking place in a certain geographic spot, and if these places were deemed holy, then the geography of that spot is considered holy as well. Therefore, the place or the geography is an important element in the course of history and events.

Finally, dear readers, let us to shed light on the spot that has played a significant role not only in the history of Christians, but in the history of Egypt as well. This spot which was known as “Babylon” and then as “Old Cairo”.

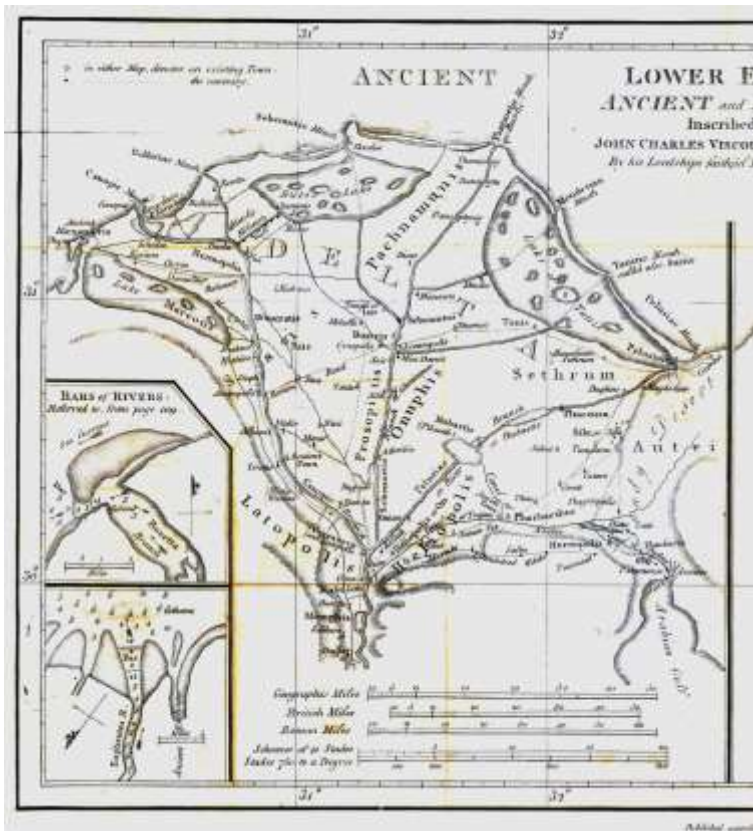


**The Cavern before
restoration**

Babylon over the History

1. The Babylon Fortress

This area has a strategic importance due to its location on the east bank of the Nile River, and is connected to the Nile branch known as “The Pelusiac” leading to the east gate and the Sinai Peninsula. According to the map below, the Nile flowed in seven (7) branches.



Historians have disagreed on the origin of Babylon; one could find several versions in their ancient references as follows:

As per *Casanova* (1861 AC - 1926 AC), Hieroglyphic documents stated that a fortress known as “Habnin”, was built in this area with a temple used by the god Apis as a resting spot during his journey to Heliopolis.

Theodore of Sicily, a Greek historian who visited Egypt in 59 B.C., states that, Ramses the Second, Pharaoh of Egypt, had captivated Babylonians who then settled in the area and established a city named Babylon.

In the Seventh Century, the historian *John the Jewish from Nicaea*, described the fortress and the Castles in the city saying:” Nebuchadnezzar – Emperor of Babylon – built a fortress replacing the old one after seizing Egypt in 606 BC. He brought the Jews as captives after demolishing Jerusalem. Jeremiah¹ was also brought to Egypt during the same era and was later stoned to death in Thebes by his own people, the Jews.

This incident is confirmed by the Holy Bible in the Old Testament, in “Kings Second book” (24:7). Jehoiakim, King of Judah, surrendered to Nakho, king of Egypt from the 26th Pharaonic dynasty. In the era of that Pharaoh, peace has prevailed leading to economic growth that brought many accomplishments such as, digging the canal connecting the Nile River to the Red sea in the year 600 BC, approximately. Hence, the Babylon area became an important port for trading, and for the mobility of the military fleet.

¹ Historians have disagreed in determining the residence of Jeremiah the prophet, among them mentioned in Babylon, others mentioned in the Mahalla al-Kubra, some of them said in the city of Thebes.

Nakho, then waged war against Nebuchadnezzar, but was defeated in the battle of Carchemish, and Nebuchadnezzar expanded his reign from the Nile river to the Euphrates.

In year 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar returned and besieged Jerusalem during the rule of Jehoiachin King of Judah, and brought him to Egypt as a captive, thus firming his grip over the land of Egypt. That was the habit of the triumphant kings in those times, to take the defeated kings as captives to their homeland and enslave them as an act of manifestation of power. Zedekiah became king of Judah replacing his nephew.

In 588 BC, Zedekiah king of Judah allied with the Pharaoh of Egypt, and took over Jerusalem. Later, the Pharaoh of Egypt confronted Zedekiah in Gaza but was defeated. In the meantime, a lot of Jews immigrated to Egypt together with Jeremiah the prophet and his disciple Baruch, and settled in Babylon. During the reign of Ahmes the Second, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt with a huge army, seized the coast of Egypt and reached Libya.

Nebuchadnezzar erected some citadels in Babylon, to secure his control over the roads leading to the land of Judah and Egypt, and utilizing the canal dug earlier by Nakho to connect the Nile with the Red sea and the Mediterranean.

The Jewish historian Josephus, stated that in the first century AC, a remarkable part of the Babylon Fortress was built by Cambyses after his invasion to Egypt in 525 BC. Cambyses is the king of Persia son of Cyrus, was presented with the Ancient Egyptian titles, such as the Son of Ra and Horus, as a sign of unifying the two lands. He demolished and burned the Heliopolis temples. As per Herodotus, Cambyses dared to unearth the Mummy of Ahmes II, kept beating it with a cane, and attempted to burn it as a punishment for rejecting him as a suitable suitor to his daughter. Cambyses' army

of Fifty thousand soldiers ended up completely buried under the sands of Siwa desert, after encountering violent storms. He had built fortresses in at that area and named himself “The King of the Two Lands” meaning the North and the South, and so he became.

Then came Trajan, the Roman Emperor in the year 98 AC, and continued building the Babylon fortress in the Roman Style, where fortified towers were constructed to enable them to monitor and control any revolutions against their rule in Egypt. The name of this Fortress was mentioned in the Roman history as “Babylon” or the Fortress of Egypt (Kimi). Trajan has also inaugurated the canal connecting the Nile to the Red Sea, previously dug during king Nakho’s era in 600 BC.

The fortress was further developed by Emperor Arcadius (395 AC - 408 AC). He also erected a wall surrounding the Citadel and the churches that were already built; this proves the existence of these churches before that date. *Historian Monroe Devillard states*: “The churches of the Old Cairo area date back to the Fourth and Fifth centuries together with the majority of the monasteries situated in the same area”.



St. Sergius and St. Bacchus Church, year 1925

The Babylon Fortress resembles the Roman castles in Europe and North Africa, where the doors and towers may reach a height of sixty feet (18m), built in the Roman style that was popular in the era of Hadrian (from the 2nd to the 4th century AC), and known as “Opus Mixtum” which is a mixture of red bricks and stones.



The three-story towers are built of three regular layers of fired bricks alternated with five limestone layers. This building technique, known as opus mixtum, has been used in most of the walls of the Fortress, including the curtain wall.

“Abu Serga Church” was built in the same style². During the recent restorations of the church in 2015, we have discovered a wall built in a similar method. We have then simultaneously adjusted the remaining walls of the church to follow the same style, reviving the original design, which dated back to the fourth century.

The fortress has round towers of 100 feet (31 m) in diameter, the thickness of the walls is around 8 feet (3m), the ground is below St. Georges’ street level by six (6 m), and it is at the same level with the Holy Family cavern that is present in the famous Cavern Church situated in “Abu Serga Church”, which proves that fortress’s grounds were all at the same level at that time.

The Citadel and the city cover an area of approximately 60 feddans. Two mosaic icons from the Byzantine era were discovered, one in Jordan, and the other in Palestine, both referring to the Babylon Fortress.

Crosses are also found on the columns’ crowns on the ground floor of the tower, and are believed to be sculpted during the expansions decreed by the Christian Emperor Arcadius who venerated Egypt’s churches and monasteries. During his era, many nobles and members of his family sought Egypt to join the monastic life, since the area was valued as the most significant hub for mystic Christianity in the world.

Butler, the historian has inaccurately stated that the Babylon fortress was built during the Christian period³ due to the presence of the crosses on its columns. He has disregarded all the findings of the

² During the restoration of the church, this was one of the most important discoveries that emerged. Moreover, I insisted to show it in its first form and made the rest of the walls of the church to be on the same style.

³ Unfortunately, till to date, and without accuracy, some archeologists and tour guides are promoting this information, referring to Butler.

other historians who have confirmed that the Fortress dates back to the Pharaohs times, as mentioned in the books and records of historians like *Theodore the Sicilian and the famous geographic Strabo*, who visited Egypt in the year 24 BC and reached the first waterfall in the company of the Roman ruler Aelius Gallus. Strabo has described the Fortress and referred its history to the Pharaonic time.

Also, the *historian Yormaster* in his book “A Guide to the Monumental Coptic Churches in Cairo” has documented important information concerning the Fortress, its history and the existing churches.

Moreover, in *Ptolemy’s Geographic book* (121 - 151AC), he has confirmed the presence of Babylon since the times of the Pharaohs, and mentioned the canal connecting the Nile to the Red sea. This information defeats Butler’s claims, his historical assumptions, and those who base their knowledge on his writings.



The Church after restoration 2015

2. Jewish Community in Babylon

Joseph's story in the Torah, in the Book of Genesis, explains that when Joseph encountered his brothers in Egypt, as the Pharaoh's minister, he personally served them food, privately (Gen 43:32): *"So they set him a place by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians"*.

For this reason, Jacob and the tribes dwelled in the land of Goshen (Al Sharkeya), isolated from Egyptians (Gen47:1). It was obvious that foreign communities were not welcome to mix with the Egyptians because of the diversity of religions, habits and cultures. This took place in the 17th century BC.

Since the Babylonians settled in this area, it became known as a place mostly for foreigners that might be the reason Jews chose to base their community there, when Nebuchadnezzar seized Egypt in the 6th century BC. As Babylon was a military zone, control over the Jews living in the area prevailed in case they attempted any revolutionary acts.

Historical resources confirmed that the Prophet Jeremiah and Baruch his disciple lived in this area for a while. In 160 BC, a Jewish Temple was modeled as the Temple of Jerusalem and named "Onias Temple" where Onias Son of Samaan – One of the High priests of Jews - fled to Alexandria from Antiochus the king of Syria during a war against the Jews.

Ptolemy received Onias cordially as he was an enemy of Antiochus. Onias lobbied with Ptolemy and offered to side with him against his opponent on condition that he supports the Jews, and grant them the liberty of worship in Egypt. Onias then promised him

that he would summon a great number of Jews for a battle against Antiochus, who had defiled the Temple of Jerusalem.

After demolishing the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AC, Onias Temple became more significant for the Jews. In the second century AC, the Jews started a revolution in Alexandria that almost spread all over Egypt. The Romans feared that other Jews from all over the world would join this revolution, so Caesar ordered to completely close the Onias Temple.

A while later, Laboss ruler of Alexandria after getting orders from Caesar, has seized some of the temple's donations and closed it down. Shortly, he passed away and Paulinus took over, threatened and intimidated the temple's priests in order to plunder and seize the temple's belongings and donations. Later on, Paulinus demolished the temple thus all traces of Jewish worshipping have completely vanished from this area. The temple lasted for 343 years since was first built till it was demolished. It has provided the Jews living in the Babylon area with a great religious influence then.

Onias expected that with no doubt after the demolition of Jerusalem temple by Antiochus in 170 BC, the Egyptian temple will be the only lawful temple, but as per Jewish tradition as mention in their book "The Mishnah" Onias temple was granted a semi lawful value only. In a matter of fact even for the Egyptian Jewish, this temple is not as significant as the Jerusalem temple.

Onias temple is currently called "Ben Ezra" which was originally a church named after Archangel Michael and was built in the early ages of Christianity, replacing the Jewish temple after the whole area converted to Christianity, but in the mid of the 9th century, Pope Michael the 3rd – Pope 56 – sold it to the Jews to pay the taxes imposed on Christians during the rule of Ahmed Ibn Tulun.

What *Al-Maqrizi* said about this temple:” History of this place is related to the arrival of Jesus Christ to Egypt, and it was built during the Era of Jeremiah the prophet, “he added:” Ancient or Old Egypt was built on the ruins of old Babylon after being consumed by fire, in the 12th Century. The only remaining part of this city is the Trajan wall, and the area that was inhabited by the Jews and the Christians, and is still surrounded by the old wall. On the front door, it is engraved in Hebrew a statement ‘Established year 336 for Alexander, which means 45 years before the demolition of Jerusalem for the second time by Titus or around 600 years before immigration. There is copy from The Torah in the Jewish temple, which the Jews confirmed that Ezra had written it.

Babylon became a powerful Jewish community area due to its religious significance for them. This Jewish congress resulted in creating a powerful presence for their community in Egypt. The Holy family therefore, chose to dwell in this area amongst their people upon the apparition of the Angel to St. Joseph guiding them to flee to Egypt. We can conclude that, Babylon has been all along the spot in Joseph’s mind to settle in, upon their arrival to the land of Egypt yet, Herod’s soldiers followed the Holy Family obliging them to keep fleeing from danger, and blessing our land in many destinations as we shall explain later in the course of the Journey of the Holy Family.



3. Babylon as A Significant Christian Hub in Egypt

Due to the presence of the Cavern where the Holy Family stayed, many Christians chose to live there together with all the Jews who converted to Christianity.

According to “Acts”, when Pentecost day came, the Jews from all the diaspora who believed in Christ, met together in Jerusalem, and among them there were Jews from Egypt (Acts 2:10).

Those came to be the early Christians who were back from Jerusalem and among them were those living in the Babylon area in Egypt, and chose to settle around the Cavern where the Holy Family had stayed and start the first church in the world. From there, did St. Peter send his first Epistle, (5:13), “*She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you and so does Mark my son.*”

The greetings sent by the Apostles in their epistles, were not sent particularly from streets or places, but from the appointed churches at the time. Therefore, St. Peter was sending his salutations from the appointed church in Babylon, and mentioning his presence together with St. Mark, confirming that they came to the Cavern Church and settled there for a while.

Mrs. Butcher, the historian, explains that the “Cavern Church is the smallest and oldest church that has ever existed”. In reference to her book, “The Story of the Church of Egypt“, by: Edith L. Butcher: “The Spot may fairly claim to be the oldest, and possibly the smallest, church in existence”.

That was the dawn for the rise of early Christianity, centralized in that area which was chosen later by St. Peter and St. Mark for starting their pastoral mission in Egypt. The church of Abu Serga, was build when Queen Helena decreed to construct churches in the places

where the Holy Family had lived, to commemorate their journey to Egypt.

At the time of the Emperor Arcadius, there were forty-two churches in this area. After the schism in Chalcedon year 451 AC, the Chalcedonian kings controlled a lot of churches in the Babylon area among them was, St. George's, and some other churches. Afterwards, and over the course of the years, many churches have been demolished.

This City was mentioned in many ancient Coptic manuscripts, and in the index listing Egypt's Episcopal areas, the episcopate of Egypt was launched on this area, there was once a mention of "The Bishop of Babylon".

At the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century, Babylon was an eparchy, and its Bishop was entitled to attend the Council of Ephesus held in 449 AC. *St. Jerome*, who visited Egypt and many of its churches and monasteries in the fourth century, mentioned that there were several docks for boats and ships in front of Babylon.

In addition to the Coptic texts mentioning Babylon city or fortress, there were other texts supporting the presence of a military camp, mentioned in the *biography of the two martyrs St. Abadeer and St. Iraie* who were persecuted at the end of the third century. They were both from Antioch, nephews of the Antiochian minister Basilides. St. Abadeer was a high rank officer in the Roman army (Esfelsar). Their mother has demanded the secrecy of their conversion to Christianity in fear of the wrath of the rulers yet; they went to Egypt and were martyred there.

In a manuscript, it was mentioned that a person was guiding their path in Egypt. Addressing Martyr Abadeer, he said, "in five days you will reach Tarnoti (Alexandria), cross the Nile towards the south and from there, you will reach the Babylon camp, then, enquire about Abakragon the monk".

Abakragon the monk was originally a thief who plotted with others to steal a monk living in Babylon. While they found him praying, they were obliged to wait for him all night, eventually, they were very touched by his prayers. They surrendered their weapons to the monk, repented and converted to Christianity. Abakaragon remained with his spiritual father for six years. Later on, he went to Alexandria and got martyred there. This happened during the Era of Maximinus at the end of the third century AC.

This manuscript, explains how Christianity had spread in this area to the extent that, a remarkable number of monks lived there considering it a safe haven for them and an ideal place for worship. This could not have taken place unless; there was a majority of Christians around the area. This tradition came before St. Anthony had established monasticism at the desert. The presence of Monks in Babylon supports the fact of the existence of a church confirming that the Cavern was an established church at that time.

In another document it was stated that Pope Benjamin the 38th, was living in Babylon together with Father Mina Bishop of Babylon camp area "απορωζ ΝΤΒΑΒΥΔΩΝ" this Coptic word "Ορωζ" means "lives in", i.e those who live in Babylon. Therefore, Babylon was their residence, which proves that the area held a proper number of churches, thus ranking it as an eparchy with an appointed Bishop.

We should clarify that, Babylon military camp and Babylon city are two different entities but, due to the fame of the Babylon Fortress, it was sometimes used as a name for both the city and the fortress without segregation.

In reference to the manuscripts of *Ibn Saleh the Arminian, and Al-Maqrizi*, it was mentioned that when the Arabs invaded Egypt, Fostat city was full of churches and monasteries but later, most of them were destroyed and demolished.

In one of the Coptic documents dating back to the year 1210 AC., it states that Salah Ad-Din Ayyoubi's rank was the "Ruler of Babylon Egypt, Phoenicia and Syria". Although Cairo was already built, but the fame of this area in Egypt was highly acknowledged by the whole world.

The Book "Observatories of Knowledge", for an author from the fourteenth century states that, Babylon is a name mostly given to Egypt and also to Fostat in the ancient Egyptian language. This place had a significant importance, geographically and military wise, which enabled it to be the destination for all the civilizations that ruled Egypt, since controlling this area, facilitated the grip over the Nile leading to the Delta and Upper Egypt. Moreover, it was a fast route to the Eastern desert through the Pelusiac Nile branch and a link to Rafah and El Arish, which became the course used by the Holy Family after crossing Egypt's eastern borders.

The Babylon fortress was overlooking the Nile with inner water canals to facilitate the ships' mobility within it. A harbor with several Ship docks was recently discovered under the walls of St. Georges' monastery, and also beneath the tower located in front of the entrance of the Coptic Museum.

It was discovered that the level of the original stones used in building the cavern where the Holy Family had lived in beneath the church of Abu Serga, is at a similar level with the harbor, and built with the same type of bricks used by the Pharaohs. This is evidence that the whole area was built at the same time of that of the Fortress and the city, approximately in the fifth century BC. Later on, with the Roman invasion in the second century BC., they built new towers at the Babylon Fortress.

During the restoration of St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, in 2015, we revealed the original floor⁴ to exhibit for the visitors, enabling them to receive the blessings of the place where Jesus had trodden with the Holy Family.



⁴ When I started the restoration, I tried to find the original stones, which blessed by the steps of Jesus and the Holy Family, and began to search until I found some of the original stones and revealed them and put a glass cover on them.

4. Babylon after the Arab's Invasion to Egypt

When Amr ibn Al- 'As invaded Egypt, the Babylon Fortress was the strongest defense point all over Egypt. A forceful Roman army held their grounds at the Fortress, regardless that Arabs' unsuccessful siege for over seven months. Finally, Egypt was offered to the Arabs after concluding a treaty with the Romans at the Babylon area.

Al Siouty, an Arab Historian mentioned, that this treaty was probably written in Abu Serga Church and was concluded in the presence of the people, this church was also the residence of the Bishop of Babylon.

At these times, Babylon was an extensive city, with borders reaching to the north until, the Azbakeya area where Egypt's armed borders were found. The Arabs entered through the south gate of the Fortress on April 9, 641 AC., to mark the start of a new era in the history of the area and of all Egypt. I will exhibit to my dear readers, what the historians have written concerning the history of that place.

When Amr ibn Al- 'As passed in to Babylon, he camped next to El Shamme Palace, and set his tent there. Since then, this area was called Al Fostat, which means tents. And the walls was used to connect Babylon.

In his Manuscript Al Maqrizi wrote that the Citadel was overlooking the Nile and that ships reached its western entrance through what was known as, the Iron Gate. Al Muqawqis, Egypt's Roman ruler, fled through that door reaching Rhoda Island, upon the entrance of Muslims to the Fortress.

Fostat is considered the first Islamic capital established by Amr ibn al-‘As in Egypt, in 641 AC - 20 Hijri. The first building in Fostat was a mosque known as Amr ibn al-‘As Mosque. The mosque had undergone significant expansions, changes and renovations during the course of time but it remained in its original place. Fostat, has also progressively expanded with many luxurious residences and buildings, sometimes reaching seven floors in height. There were markets for trading, public baths and a hospital.

Amr ibn al-‘As gave back to the Christians the lands seized from them earlier. Old Cairo area immediately became as it was before, a residence for the Christian community and the Arabs used to hire the local labor from there.

During the era of Umayyad Caliphate reign, Abd Al-Aziz ibn Marwan, built a Government house with a dome but, it was demolished.

During the era of Abbasid Caliphate, Saleh ibn Ali, established Al Askar city in (750 AC-132 H) the north east of Fostat, where he also built a government headquarters and a mosque in (786 AC-169 H), and both were ruined.

When Ahmed Ibn Tulun ruled Egypt, he resided at first in the government’s headquarters then, he built a palace north of Al Askar in (873 AC/259 H) and his key personnel built their palaces close to his, in new city known as Al-Qaṭā’i‘. Later, the area between Fostat, Al Askar and Al-Qaṭā’i‘ cities, was connected as a result of the extension of several residential compounds that reached the Nile banks and was sometimes called Egypt or Fostat.

Over the hill of Yashkhur, situated in the center of Al-Qaṭā'ī', Ibn Tulun built a mosque that still stands. Upon the fall of the Tulunian Dynasty, in 875 AC/292 H, Al-Qaṭā'ī' city was destroyed and only Ibn Tulun Mosque remained intact until present.

When the Fatimids took over in year (935 AC/323 H), Al-Mu'izz Li-Din Allah, the Fatimid, founded the city of Cairo. Fostat city, remained thriving with many residential buildings and existed next to Cairo until the end of the Fatimids Caliphate which deteriorated and weakened, giving way to the ministers to seize power. In the meantime, the Crusades attacked Egypt. A drastic conflict took place between two of the Fatimids chief ministers Shawar and Dirgham. Shawar consequently, burnt down Fostat. He sent twenty thousand bottles of petrol and ten thousand torchbearers to spread the fire all over the city. The great fire flames reached the sky causing such a dreadful scene. The fire kept devouring the houses and the city for fifty-four days, and thieves swarmed and robbed everything until nothing remained, nothing but a few ruins that still remain till today, bearing the traces of fire.

When Mamluks later ruled Egypt, Fostat was utilized as a waste dump for the city. This was the demise of Fostat City after its flourishing time that lasted for six centuries, after which Cairo became the cosmopolitan center of Egypt.

In the year 1671 AC, Louis the 14th, king of France, sent the scholar Father Vanslip to study the history of monasteries and churches in Egypt, and he said that he saw a sign at the Suspended Church written in Arabic that might be Amr ibn al-'As hand writing, recommending "Do not subject this church to abuse".



5. What Historians Wrote Regarding This Place

In the book “Coptic Cairo – History and Guide” by Jill Kamil, he states the following:

“Old Cairo, or Old Egypt (Misr), is located inside the old Roman Fortress "Babylon".

Old Cairo is not just a city surrounded by walls, but it is a protected city with narrow streets and alleys paved with cobbled stones.

The reason why this city was named Babylon after the famous city by the Euphrates, is not known. *The Coptic historian John of Nicaea*, who witnessed the era of The Arab invasion, claimed that it was built during the Persian occupation of Egypt (525 - 332 BC) and since then it was known as Babylon Fortress. The classic writer *Theodore the Sicilian*, – who visited Egypt long before this - confirmed that the name was connected with bringing war captives from great Babylon, by the Pharaoh Senosert (Sesostris)⁵, of the 12th dynasty, approximately in 2000 BC, to assist in the construction works. It is said that those Babylonians rebelled against the Egyptians and built garrisons for protection, which were eventually ruined. Upon the Persians’ invasion, the garrisons were rebuilt.

When the Roman *Geographic Strabo*, came to Egypt, at the beginning of the Christian era, he described Old Cairo as a well-fortified city, occupied by three Roman lesions. It was mentioned that, The Emperor Trajan (98-117 AC), has eliminated the canal passing through the city and incorporated some of the inhabited areas

⁵ The writer made a mistake in describing the construction of the city, which was at the time of Ramses II, the 19th Dynasty, 1200 BC, and between Sesostris (Senosert), who worked on the project of a canal linking the Red Sea and Mediterranean through the Nile. He is the one who established the river port in this place and may have built the beginning of the fort.

to the huge fortress. In addition, he removed the canal connecting the Nile with the Red Sea, which was dug by the Pharaohs of the 26th dynasty⁶, around 600 BC, and, this was according to what Egyptians revealed to him, during that time the area was known as the “Babylon fortress”.

Copts constructed many churches in Old Cairo, during the reign of the Christian Emperor Arcadius (359-408 AC). It was believed that, there were around forty-two churches over an area of sixty feddans approximately, expanding to the north and reaching what is now known as Azbakeya Gardens, near Opera square, in down town Cairo.

At the time of the Arab conquest in 641 AC, the walls were used to link Babylon – this part of the Fortress which represented a considerable community, including the huge towers and castles- to Fostat, the new Arabs’ Capital. At the beginning, those towers and garrisons were used as barracks for the legion.

Afterwards Amr ibn al-‘As – leader of the army during the Arabs’ invasion - returned back all the seized lands. Shortly, this place became a purely Christian community, and the Arabs hired them as workers and craftsmen.



The Cavern Church after restoration 2015

⁶ Strabo refers to Nakho (26th Dynasty) Pharaoh who wanted to re-dig a canal that was existed before..

• **In the book by Dr. Otto F.A. Meinardus, “Christian Egypt, Old and New” the following was written regarding, the Coptic Churches in Babylon or Al Shama’e Palace:**

“The majority of the old Coptic churches in Cairo are located at Old Cairo, specifically in the Babylon Fortress area also known as Al Shama’e Castle.

The Babylon Fortress – previously mentioned by Strabo in 24 BC – was expanded by the Roman Emperor Trajan (89 – 117 AC), then by Arcadius, (395-408 AC). After surrendering the Fortress to the Arabs Army Leader Amr Ibn Al-‘As in 641 AC, this area was inhabited mainly by the Christian community.

John of Nikiu, the historian, explains that, the city was one of the battlefields during the wars between the Greeks and the Arabs. He mentioned its name twice in his book’s index. He mentions how it was constructed: “Trajan headed to Egypt and built a city with an unbeatable stronghold, and an abundant water supply, and named it Babylon of Egypt. The original Foundations of the Fortress were originally established by Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Magi and the Persians, and named it the Babylon Fortress. He mentions Babylon in many sections but, with extreme vagueness which forced the translator to double his remarks.

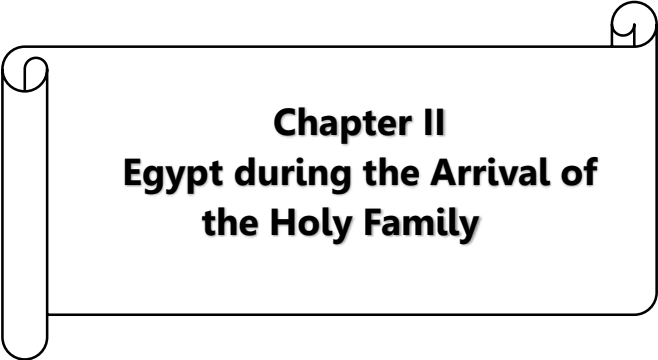
Historians have disagreed on the origin of Babylon, where *Historian Theodore of Sicily*, wrote in his Encyclopedia, "*Bibliotheca of History*", that the Babylonian captives who were brought in from Asia by the Egyptian King Ramses the 2nd, and were enslaved by the Egyptians, have revolted and seized Habnin Fortress under their control - (*The famous Professor Sabess, named this Fortress, Akriamo, kindly note that most Egyptian cities may bear two names*) – on the Nile river towards Memphis city north of Saba- they viciously attacked the neighboring cities and only ceased fighting

when King Ramses pardoned them, secured their presence, and allowed them to build their own settlement on the lands that they had previously occupied. They founded a city named Babylon after their homeland capital “Babel”- (*The Scholar Somt stated in his Dictionary about the geography of the Greek and Roman Empires, that Egyptian Babylon is situated north of Fostat and this is not a true statement.*)

This Old Fortress mentioned by *Strabo of Rome*, -in describing his trip to Egypt- is no doubt the one inaugurated by the Romans just before his arrival. North of this Fortress, a few cubits away, stands with its damaged walls, the remains of the Castle built by Emperor Trajan, between the years 100 AC and 117 AC.



The Cavern during the restoration 2015



Chapter II
Egypt during the Arrival of
the Holy Family

Egypt has lived profound civilized and spiritual ages before the arrival of Jesus Christ, but with the Ptolemies and the Roman occupations, this civilization faded and dulled. Then, Jesus Christ fled to Egypt from His homeland, and His presence dignified us as Egyptians, knowing that He had chosen our land specifically to become His sanctuary. Egypt, the land that always holds a high regard in God's plans.

Was it a mere coincidence that, Abraham and Jacob, fathers of the tribes and the beloved men of God, would come to Egypt? Has it been a coincidence, that Prophet Joseph reached Egypt to save the world from famine? Was it really, a coincidence that Moses was born in Egypt raised in the Pharaoh's palace and spoke to God on Mount Sinai?

God told his prophet Isaiah, eight centuries before Christ's birth "*Blessed is Egypt My people*". All Egyptologists know that Egyptians were regarded for their high spirituality among the nations, and were the first to conceive the One God.

Adolf Arman the scholar mentioned about the ancient Egyptian people: "The speech and perception of these people, are not far from the right belief".

Herodotus wrote: "The people of Thebes know the One who has no beginning, the Eternal Immortal God".

Broksh the German scholar mentioned in his researches: "Egyptians believed in the One and Only God, no God but Him, the Creator of everything. He is a spirit, The Spirit of Spirits, He is the Almighty Spirit of Egyptians. The Holy Spirit, He existed before existence. He is the origin of all creatures, He has no end. He is the truth, Creator, not Created, no one has seen Him, the Perpetual Who exists on His own and the Bestower of life."

That is why, Jesus Christ came to Egypt, where this spirituality, and the great belief in God prevailed to declare, that this land is the source of spiritual radiation to the whole world. This actually happened when Egypt became a spiritual power, and there, St. Mark has established the oldest Academy for Theology in the first century. The Theological Ideology and the Law of Faith, emerged from this Academy. In Egypt, was the dawn of Christian Monasticism and so, it became the cradle of spirituality throughout the different civilizations, Pharaonic, Christian and Islamic.

Jesus Christ came to make the whole world realize the land of Egypt as holy, and to provide Egyptians with a spiritual power in the times where Roman idolatrous paganism and temple worships have overwhelmed Egypt's spiritual intellect. Then came Christianity, to spread in Egypt, as we shall mention later on.



St. Sergius and St. Bacchus Church, year 1910

Religious Ideology at this Phase

Religious ideologies were extremely confusing, due to a religious and intellectual duality between the occupiers who wanted to impose idolatry, and the Egyptians who perceived the One God since the dawn of civilization. Egyptians have never worshiped idols, offered sacrifices, nor believed in figures or molded idols. From very early ages, they possessed a special spiritual enlightenment stemming from their civilized culture, and their advancement in all aspects of life, especially their knowledge of astronomy and the laws of the universe. This knowledge has guided them with great wisdom, and an elevated spiritual and intellectual force, towards God the Creator of the universe. They believed in the One God, Creator of life, and the One designing everything according to His will. He carefully devised the laws of the universe, and provided the power of life on earth to bring fruit. They believed that life is not limited to their presence on earth but, they believed in an afterlife in the presence of God.

In order to communicate these thoughts and believes on the layman's level, and to facilitate the means of worship for the people, they devised figures and drawings to express God's power and embody the theological intellect, so the public may observe God among them even as a symbol, but never worshiping the symbol, until the ignorance era, and the confusion of beliefs had overwhelmed them.

Ra, was God the Creator, Osiris was the God of afterlife, and Horus was the savior. This was not multiplicity of gods but qualities and images of God's power. The only God, is the creator, the life grantor, the savior, He who gives fruit to the land, and floods the Nile with His power, but these, were only considered different names for the One God.

Through their hymns and worshipping, they gave the name Amon to God, and it means, “The Concealed Almighty”, and concealed means unseen, so how can they be idols’ worshippers? An Idol is a tangible figure of God sculptured in stone or wood.

In their *song “Eden”*, they praise God, chanting:” Amon, who gave birth to himself at the beginning without revealing his secret, no God existed before him, no God but him, He has no mother and no father, who spoke I am, the powerful with the mysterious birth. The God who came to life on His Own, no one has seen His Face, for He is higher than the skies, deeper than limbo, His Figure cannot be observed in any book.”

By reflecting on their belief, “No one knows how He looks and cannot be illustrated in any book”. Would they be then considered as pagans with such faith?

In a *Hymn for God Ptah*:” I Am the Creator, the Living Spirit.... the Savior who saves all.”

The Book of the Dead includes this lovely text: "The Word came to existence, everything was mine as I was the Only One, I was Ra in all his manifestations, I was the Almighty who came to existence from Oneself”.

In the Book of *"The Dead"* scribed 4,000 BC, it described a man after his death, standing in front of God to be trialed for his deeds on Earth.

Egyptians were very religious people, known for their deep spirituality among the nations. In their *books of wisdom*, the following teachings were written by a wise man: The Eternal King dwells in your bodies; He is God, so take refuge in Him within your hearts. For He knows the secrets of your hearts. He illuminates the earth more than sun, He turns the Land of Egypt greener, and fills it

with power and life, for He is the Creator, so defend His name and protect His reign.

There came times when faith declined, except within the temples and libraries, and worship was limited to mere practices and traditions. This deterioration was due to the greediness of priests, and the consecutive wars. Akhenaten's religious revolution was meant to eliminate all degeneration that twisted the worship of God.

Akhenaton, has not invented the idea of the One God, but he endeavored to erase all forms of worships that conflicted with that faith. With his power of authority as a Pharaoh of Egypt, he enforced this ideology not through teaching, which led eventually to a violent resistance from the Amon priests. Akhenaton, refused to wage wars thus, giving the chance to his enemies to take over parts of the ancient Egyptian Kingdom.

Ptolemies, have not preserved the Old Egyptian faith as claimed in history books, but used the names and figures of the Egyptian religion in their Greek legends. They gave their Gods double names, a Greek name and an Egyptian one. For example, god Serapis is an Egyptian/Greek god but the form of worship was idolatrous, thus creating a distorted image.

In the Egyptian intellect, there was one great God that generates all power and all creation, this was embodied in small figures to express the tangible capability of godly deeds. Meanwhile, Ptolemies perceived this as a form of worship for many different gods.

This caused great confusion to Egyptians, where the name was for an Egyptian god but the form of worship, myths, and belief, were of paganistic Greek origins, but not Egyptian.

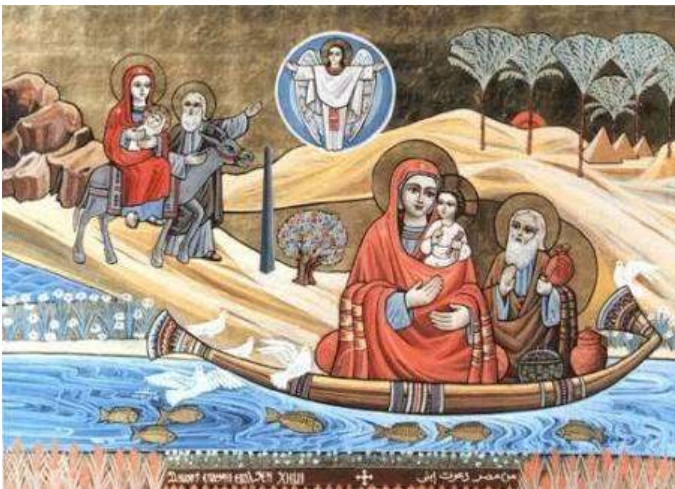
Ignorance, poor education, and detachment of the Egyptian priests from the public, have caused the deterioration and distortion of the Egyptian religious and theological concepts. Moreover, Egypt has suffered numerous consecutive wars and successive occupations since the 6th century BC. These Persian, Babylonians, Ptolemies and Roman invaders, have imposed their religious ideologies and gods on Egypt.

When Ptolemies declared the Greek language as the empire's official language, it contributed further to the weakening of the Egyptian religious intellect. Further on, when Alexandria turned into a big cultural capital, and a center for Hellenic philosophy, the Greek language became the language of intellect, causing the ancient Egyptian language to subside bit by bit, until both the Greek and Demotic languages "Old Egyptian language" interacted in the Coptic language.

All these reasons combined, poor education, priests pursuing their own interests, wars, and language degeneration, have led to superficiality in faith. Egyptians became more accepting to the figures and names of the Greek gods named after the ancient Egyptian gods.

Then came the Romans, with their great military weight and a powerful air of superiority, to dominate the entire world. The Romans lacked both the cultural identity and the religious intellect; their worship was idolatrous with a heritage from their ancient tribes' worships like Etruscan religion, coming from an area called Toscana where magic rituals were performed.

The Romans' worshipping was pure paganism with no substance, so they used the Greek legends and gods to provide an adequate intellectual and religious richness to their faith. Cicero, the great Roman Philosopher, described the Roman religion as a tool used to enforce social discipline. The Romans imposed their gods in every country they occupied. When they discovered the Pharaoh's statues, they devised the ritual of "Caesar's worship" with temples built and sacrifices offered throughout the Roman Empire.



Intellectual and cultural Status

When the Pharaohs were establishing their temples, they annexed to them several buildings among which was a school, a library, a hospital, a court and a municipal center. They were also supporting the temple priests with sacrifices and donations. Celebrations and feasts were arranged by the temples. They were also responsible for the education process in their neighborhood.

A Library was called “The Board House” or “The Stamp House” and was considered an administrative and an educational center.

When *Theodore of Sicily*, visited Egypt in 56 BC, and arrived Thebes, he saw a sign on the library in one of the temples reading, “medicine of soul”. Libraries and books were spread in all the lands of Egypt.

It was historically mentioned that, when Alexander the Great occupied Egypt, and founded Alexandria, he was dreaming to create a worldwide consensus among the nations in this city.

Alexandria, at the time of Ptolemies was a cosmopolitan city. Egyptians lived side by side with Macedonians, Greeks, Jews, Arabs, Phoenicians, and Persians who have all cooperated to build the most uniquely civilized city in the whole world.

When they found that libraries were annexed to the temples in Egypt, they built a huge temple for the God Serapis and annexed to it an enormous library known as the “Alexandria Library.” Ptolemies planned it to be the world’s greatest library, and so they assigned Manetho, an Egyptian priest, to translate all the content of the books in the Egyptian libraries to a Greek version. Since a big Jewish community had lived in Alexandria, Ptolemy brought seventy wise men from Israel, to translate the Torah, and the Old Testament, to the Greek language.

In favor of the Alexandria Library, all what was written concerning the Greek philosophies and cultures, was collected. Historians have agreed that the Hellenistic philosophy, which belonged to Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, had ended in Greece since the 4th century BC, but was revived again in Alexandria. Despite what many historians have explained that these philosophies, were influenced by the Egyptian intellect and were educated by Egyptian scholars.

When the Romans occupied Egypt, they chose Alexandria as their capital. The diversity, and wealth of intellect, and cultures thrived there, among which was, the Hellenistic Greek culture, which spread through the library of Alexandria, built next to the Serapeum Temple, the ancient Egyptian wisdom, and the Jewish active community, with its intellectual and religious heritage. The Jews, were constantly making demands and pressing for advantages which sometimes boiled up to bloody uproars with the Greeks, and the Egyptian Alexandrians. Massacres were in the streets, as the aggression had intensified in 38 BC. Another revolt happened at the final days of Emperor Caligula, as a cause of their rejection to worship him as a deity.

Another Jewish order that spread in Alexandria had built a settlement by Lake Mariout, and called themselves the “Theraputy”, which means physicians, in 20 BC. They led a very strict life of abandonment, relinquished their properties to their relatives, and lived a life of sharing. They didn’t eat before sun set and were spending their time working, praying, and meditating the Torah, and the holy books, yet, were allowed to marry.

If we leave Alexandria with its cultural bustle and ethnic conflicts, we will find that the Ptolemies have spread their temples throughout Egypt, yet they never abolished the ancient Egyptian belief, and continued to support the Egyptian temples and priests. However, during the era of Ptolemies, education and Theological ideologies deteriorated and were replaced by the Greek culture due to the domination of the Greek language, causing superficiality of the religious Intellect, and maximizing the impact of the Greek religion over the traditions of the ancient Egyptian worship.

With the beginning of the Romans' reign, Egypt's situation changed completely, Romans spread their Idolatry worships, and Emperor Augustus confiscated and seized all the Egyptian temples' properties to the State's ownership. They then eliminated all financial support to the temples' priests causing their total closure. That was the end of the ancient Egyptian holy scripts, and the chanting. The educating priests were destitute due to imposing very high taxes upon them. Offering sacrifices to the Romans gods, was dictated and imposed during their feasts, and celebrations, leading to further spreading of paganism.

The ancient Egyptian held to his cultural heritage of traditions, concepts, and celebrations that were kept by the Egyptian families, along with the traditions imposed by the Romans concerning their worships' rituals, and gods. Such practices, were considered foreign to the Egyptian society showing how the Romans despised the Egyptian belief, unlike what the Ptolemies had done.



Social and Economic Status

Egypt held a very special status for Rome, where all the Empire's regions were ruled by a governor except Egypt, which was ruled by a General Ruler of Alexandria & Egypt.

Alexandria was Ptolemies Capital, and so it was for Rome as well. It is a city with special characteristics, a Greek city on Egyptian soil, populated by Jews, Greeks, Egyptians, and other nations.

The Jews community enjoyed autonomy, established their own congress, and were most likely in touch with Herod, the ruler of Judea, at the time when Jesus was born. For this reason, the Holy Family avoided to pass by Alexandria during their journey in Egypt. Egyptians and Greeks hated the Jews living in Alexandria, to an extent that they were constantly in feud and massacres.

There were two Greek cities in Egypt, Ptolemy near Sohag, and Naucratis in Beheira and both had their Senate.

There were three Roman battalions in Egypt, one in Alexandria, the second in Babylon and the third in Aswan.

The People suffered the great toll of taxes, and the Egyptian wealth was mostly transferred to Rome. They imposed taxes on almost everything payable by citizens, between 14 and 60 years old.

More tax was imposed on the ownership of animals. Those who failed to pay were sent to jail with their families. This resulted in great poverty and intensified the feeling of oppression among the people.



The Holy Family in Egypt

During this period, the Holy family came to Egypt as per Prophet Isaiah's prophecy, 750 years before the birth of Jesus Christ where in verse 19 of the prophecy he wrote "*Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and will come into Egypt; The idols of Egypt will totter at His presence*"

We can understand from this verse that the Idols, which trembled, were those of the Roman and Greek temples of idols, and wherever Jesus was going, those idols were falling. That is why Jesus did not go to Alexandria where it was completely pagan.

The Prophecy said: "*In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt*", and this was the place where Jesus lived for the longest period during His visit to Egypt and is now known as El Muharraq Monastery.

It must be understood that in the Jewish old culture, God never allowed building a shrine outside Jerusalem, which points out that Egypt had had a very special place in God's heart, and this was one of the main reasons that had lead Jesus, specifically to Egypt.

The story of fleeing from Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus, could have been solved in a miraculous way, Jesus Christ, who was risen from the dead, and who performed miracles, could have saved his family from of the hardships of the journey, and prevented Herod's evil plan.

The Holy Family could have fled by crossing the Mediterranean, reaching any nearby European country, but Jesus came to Egypt intentionally, to confront Egypt's Idols as per the prophecy, and to step on our land declaring to the whole world the intensity of the spiritual intellect and faith that had radiated from Egypt. It has, and will remain, illuminated with an even greater power, a power which

will defeat all worldly endeavors to impose paganism, and will quell all attempts to suppress Egypt's faith and spirituality.

Jesus meant to come to Egypt to destroy its Idols, and build an altar on its land so it can remain the spot that bears the scent of spirituality, and the everlasting light.

This visit held a great significance and true meaning for our beloved country; it was the Divine choice to name Egypt as the sanctuary for the Holy Family, and to protect them from the brutality of an evil king, who sought to kill Jesus in his cradle.

The Angel appeared to St. Joseph the carpenter and told him: "Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, *"Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."* When he awoke, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt" (Mat 2:13)

We can notice that his escape during night meant that the Herod's evil plan was getting closer to eliminating Jesus Christ. Then the holy bible said again: *"Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead"*. Then he awoke, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel". (Mat 2:20)

The interval between those two verses, was the period of time spent by the Holy Family in our beloved country.

Some important questions arise in our minds; if the Holy Bible states the arrival time of Jesus to Egypt, how could we define the span of time the Holy Family had spent there, where they stayed, and the places they visited or Lived in?

We will answer this question in two ways:

- First, through the passed-on tradition.
- Second, through historical documents.

The moment the Holy Family stepped in Egypt, many phenomena and miracles took place. In every place they stayed, a water spring gushed, or an idol fell from the pagans' temples that were erected all through Egypt, during the eras of the Ptolemies and then the Romans who imposed and attempted to spread a new faith. The arrival of Jesus to Egypt was a declaration of the fall of these Idols, and a dawn for another spiritual dimension perceived by Egyptians as a consummation of their original radiant civilization, entrusted to them by their ancestors.

These miracles that were constantly happening, left a strong impact among the people and families living in those places, that they memorized the incidents clearly. It is only natural to remember the supernatural incidents that were witnessed, specially with their longing for the long-lost spirituality to the imposed idolism.

It took only thirty years for Christianity to spread, and the Holy bible states, that in the year 34 AC Egyptian Jews converted to Christianity, and Evangelism spread throughout Egypt.

The year 1995 AC, several pages from a manuscript of St. Matthew's Bible was discovered in Aswan, and was dated back to the year 60 AC, which means that Evangelism had already spread in Egypt.

When Evangelism started in Egypt some of the families who lived during the time of this journey were still alive, and heard about those miracles, there were those who still memorized the events and the places related to the Holy Family's path, like the Cavern of Abu Serga Church, St. Mary's tree in Matareya, the stone with Christ's

foot print in Sakha , the rock in Jabal Al Teir in Menia with Christ's hand embossed on it, the tree called "The Adorer" because it prostrated in front of Christ in Al Ashmunein in Mallawi and the cavern where they lived in in El Muharraq Monastery in El Quseyya, Assiut.

These places which held the objects for the miracles by Jesus Christ, also held the families living there as witnesses, when Christianity spread, those places were considered Holy, and Christians lived closely to enjoy the blessings. Many of these places were turned into churches during the early time of Christianity, like the cavern of Abu Serga Church.

During the period of the Christians' persecution by the Romans, the early Christians used to pray in caves, but after the pardon decree by Constantine, Emperor of Rome, in 313 AC, Queen Helena started to build churches in the same places where Christ had dwelled, in Jerusalem, in Galilee and in Nazareth, then ordered the construction of churches, at the places visited by the Holy Family in Egypt.

Romans and Egyptians started to build those churches in the 4th century AC, and Egyptians have kept all memories and miracles that took place there. A water well is always found in every church that stood in these places and was visited by the Holy Family, confirming an ongoing miracle in such areas.

Regarding the documents found: *Cologne University in Germany* has published an antique papyrus dated in the 4th century, describing the period during the stay of the Holy Family in Egypt. It states that their visit lasted for 3 years and 11 months, and portrayed Egypt as the greatest land in the world, and that Egypt's Nile will never be depleted. This papyrus was written in Coptic Fayoumya dialect and is of a length of 31 cm. and width of 8.4 cm.

The Historian Sozomen at the middle of the 5th century, confirmed the places where the Holy Family had stayed, through the held oral tradition he had heard from Coptic Christians.

John Maspero, stated that there were some murals dating back to the 6th century, picturing the whole story of the Holy Family's escape to Egypt, in the church of St. John, the short monk, (Yehness Al Qaseer) monastery, in Torah

In the 5th Century, *Pope Theophilus, the 23rd Pope* (385 – 412 AC), visited El Muharraq monastery which was a thriving one, and he expressed his wish to renovate the cavern where the Holy family had lived. Virgin Mary, appeared to him, and asked him not to carry out any changes, as this was the spot where Jesus Christ had stayed. She informed him of the other places that the Holy Family had visited, and they were all in accordance with times and events memorized by Egyptians and corresponding with the spots where the churches were built.

In the “*Jacobian Arabic Synaxarion*”, under the date of 24 Pashons, “and when they reached Egypt, they lived in the cavern which became today Abu Serga Church in Egypt”.

In the Manuscript no. 269/870 kept in the patriarchal library in Azbakeya (printed in 1790 AC) dated 8 Paoni: “the Holy Family lived in the Holy Cavern situated in Abu Serga Church in Egypt”.

In the “Feast guide” by Ibn Kibr (1324 AC): Commemoration of the consecration of Abu Serga Church, mentions that the construction of the church took place on the 23rd of Pashons without stating the year. Inauguration was in 10th of Epip.

In addition to the above-mentioned documents, there were manuscripts and icons that had spread through the world in the middle ages, and books copied from the original ones dating back to the early time of Christianity.

Back to the path of the journey, the Holy Family walked from Bethlehem to Rafah for approximately a 100 kms, and then sailed through the Pelusiac Nile branch.

St. Joseph had planned to travel to “Old Cairo” area where the largest community of Jews lived. It was only natural that he would desire to stay among his relatives in the Babylon area, as he lacked money, and had no knowledge of the Egyptian language. As we have previously explained, this place had a special attraction for the Jews; therefore, it was his first choice.

However, as soon as he reached Musturad, he realized that they were followed by soldiers, so he was forced to redirect their course to head north to the Delta rather than going south to Babylon. We can conclude that they were escaping, since he chose to alter their path again, travelling through the desert of Wadi El Natron after reaching the Delta.

We can also claim, that he originally wanted to settle in Babylon, since he returned later to live there.

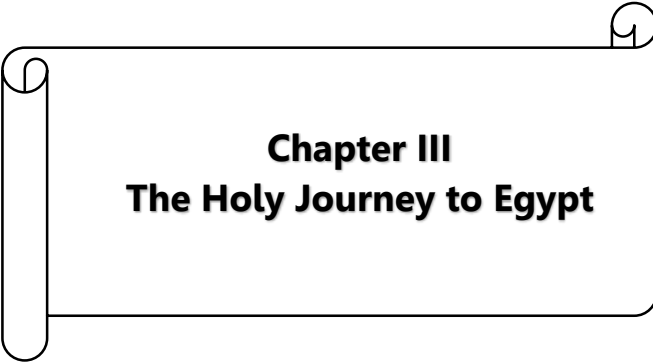
If he had not originally planned to stay in Babylon, he would have directly taken the road to Upper Egypt across the Nile, without passing by Babylon where he stayed for three months, and then moved to Upper Egypt. The Holy Family reached the area of El Muharraq monastery after a long journey, where they stayed for six months, and then they returned to their homeland after spending almost four years in Egypt.

During those years, Jesus blessed the land of Egypt and embraced it. He learned its language, and became one of the people, eating and drinking from its produce. Jesus, during those years became an Egyptian, to engrave on Egypt's walls, His name and the time of His presence among us, that marked our presence as well.

Now dear readers, behold the story of this holy journey to Egypt.



Pillar of the Cavern Church during the restoration



Chapter III
The Holy Journey to Egypt

This Holy period, which the Holy Family had spent in Egypt, lasted for almost 4 years, and has transformed into glorious footprints and a heritage that donned on Egypt. Every inch in Egypt turned holy, the land, the air, and the water. We greatly honor this interval, as a part of the world's history.

Points to be clarified concerning the visit of the Holy Family:

I. Babylon, "Old Cairo", was the original planned destination of the journey

We emphasize on the idea previously mentioned due to its importance. The Holy Family chose to land in Babylon, Old Cairo, to live with their own people, the Jews, who formed a community there, and next to the famous Jewish temple built in the second century BC. This area was believed to be the place where Jeremiah the prophet had stayed.

By observing the route map, and the places they moved to, we can realize that they reached Bubastis then Musturad, moving south towards Babylon. Their traveling course then changed to the north, to reach Belbeis.

Changing the course of the journey to the north, then to Wadi El Natron desert, proves that they were to mislead and escape from those who were following them.

Later, they reverted to the same point again, which means that they insisted on reaching Babylon as their preferred destination, due to the presence of the Jewish community, which was bound to support them due to their lack of resources, and their ignorance of the Egyptian language.

They probably sensed that Herod had sent his men to chase them, so they gathered some money and fled to Upper Egypt. There is a possibility, that their Jewish relatives had suggested Upper Egypt as a safer place for their stay.

They kept moving from one place to the other, until they settled in El Muharraq Monastery, where they stayed for six months, and it was considered the longest period spent in one place. They sailed to Babylon in the Nile, after the apparition of the Angel to St. Joseph advising him of Herod's death.

The Holy Family, were probably given enough provisions to survive their trip back home, sailing through the Pelusiac Nile branch which linked Babylon to Rafah, then travelled further to Nazareth via the desert using the same route of their journey to Egypt.



**The walls and Baptism
after restoration 2015**



II. Four years of Jesus' childhood were spent in Egypt

Besides His mother tongue, Jesus has learned the Coptic or ancient Egyptian language, which was the Demotic.

His first four years of childhood have carried memories of places, and people, were formed in Egypt and settled in His mind.

However, Jesus Christ cannot be considered just a visitor to Egypt, but a citizen, who lived his childhood here, and kept memories when passing across cities and villages, thus turning our land holy.

Jesus' first nourishment was from the produce and water of Egypt. His first taste of food was Egyptian. As per the studies, Jesus came to Egypt at the age of three months, and left it at the age of four during which He was living His normal life on this land.

III. The ancient Egyptian's belief and its spiritual intellect, were already abolished by the time the Holy Family came to Egypt.

This was due to the Ptolemies occupation, who imposed their Greek gods using the same image of the ancient Egyptian deities. In addition, spreading of the Greek language, and culture, has caused a great decline in the Egyptians' education and religious knowledge.

Then came the Romans, thirty years BC. Before Augustus Caesar, the Roman religion was not spread in the world, yet Caesar, enforced it and adapted it to the Greek legends, to create myths that revived the Roman idol gods among the people. He also declared that heavenly blessings would be granted to all Roman states worshipping the new deities.

When he came to Egypt, he refused to enter the temple of Apis, and praised his grandson when he refused to offer sacrifices to any gods other than the Romans'. He prohibited all celebrations for the Egyptian goddess Isis in all Roman lands, and imposed paganism through building idol temples all over Egypt. Finally, he forced the worship of the Emperor as a deity. In Alexandria the Greek temple of Serapis, was converted to an idol Roman temple as well.

Now dear reader, we have reached the part where we will explain the details of this hard journey across our lands, villages and cities, and how they managed to survive it for four years until they made it back to Nazareth.



The Road Map of the Holy Family Trip

- **Rafah:** The Holy Family walked around 100 km, from Bethlehem until Rafah.

They were riding a donkey, a well-known picture of the Holy Family,

St. Joseph the carpenter, Virgin Mary and Jesus together with Salome, Virgin Mary's cousin. Many assumed stories concerning their desert journey, but only some could be held true.

- **El Sheikh Zuweid:** A city 24 Km, southwest of Rafah. This city was considered a highly sophisticated place during the era of Ptolemies.
- **El Arish:** Ruins of old churches were found there
- **Zaranik protectorate:** It is 27 Km west of El Arish, was called "Phloosiat", and was a fortified city during the Byzantine Period. It had three churches.
- **Al Quals:** was previously known as "El Nassarah Fortress", where there used to be a monastery. It is 38 km west of Zaranik Protectorate.
- **Al Muhammadiyah:** Is 40 Km. from "Al Farma/ Pelusium", where it had an ancient monastery.
- **Al Farma/ Pelusium:** Is the final in land station in Egypt, before using the Nile branch the Pelusiac.

It is 25 km, east of Port Said. Al Farma/ Pelusium was one of Egypt's castles on the east borders, and was considered the most remarkable center for monasticism during the 4th century, with a big Eparchy of many churches.

The holy Family took the Pelusiac Nile branch after reaching Al Farma/ Pelusium. The Nile had seven branches then, and this one linked Babylon to Sinai, this explains why the fortresses were built in Babylon.

- **Bubastis:** A city with historical significance, it was where Prophet Joseph had lived, and holds many Pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Greek temples.

The Holy Family reached this city in 24 Pashons, and rested under a tree, Jesus Christ was performing miracles wherever they went, He would lay his hand, and fresh water would gush out for the family to drink.

In Pope Theophilus' Manuscript about the Holy Family's journey in El Muharraq Monastery, he explained, that the Holy Family had mentioned that they were heading to Babylon city in Old Cairo. This confirms what was previously stated, that their original destination was Babylon, but what happened later, forced them to change their direction.

- **Musturad:** A city situated 15 kms from Babylon, and was called "El Mahma" or "The Bath", it is said that Virgin Mary washed Jesus' clothes and bathed him in a water spring there. An old church was built in this area. As per tradition, it was known that drinking from this spring healed all ailments.

- **Belbeis:** They were supposed to head south to Babylon, but they were followed by Herod's soldiers, and were obliged to redirect their journey to the Delta cities. The first stop was Belbeis, a city where the Jewish community dwelled, at the time.

They rested under a tree, tradition holds that when the Babylonian soldiers tried to cut it down, the tree started bleeding, and they were startled, and immediately stopped their act. The location of this tree is 55 km. from Cairo.

- **Sebennytos and Daquados:** The Holy family moved north of these cities. Many churches in the name of Virgin Mary were built in the fourth Century by decree of Queen Helena, to commemorate all the places where the Holy family had stayed or passed by. Daquados is derived from the Coptic word “Theotokos”, meaning “Mother of God”.
- **Sebennytos (Samanud):** This city has witnessed the massacres and martyrdom of Copts. According to one of the manuscripts, in El Syrian Monastery, eight thousand people, mostly children were martyred in that place. There is also a church in the name of the Martyr, St. Abanoub.
- **Sakha:** They crossed the lake Burullus, to Sakha city, in Kafr El Sheikh. Tradition holds that Jesus’ feet was imprinted on a stone, and it holds the traces till today. *Al-Magrizi*, the Egyptian historian, wrote that this stone, has given the city fame and importance. There was also a monastery named “Al-Maghtas”, which was demolished in 1438 AC.
- **Wadi El Natron:** The Holy Family left Sakha, and travelled south towards the desert, till they reached Wadi El Natron, which confirms that they were escaping from those following them, to the desert. Wadi El Natron, eventually turned into the central hub for monks in Egypt. The number of monasteries in this area reached fifty; most of them were demolished, with only four remaining.

- **Matareya and Ein Shams:** After being assured that they were not followed anymore, they reverted to the initial plan, aiming towards Babylon, where the Jewish community was centered and where they felt safer.

They reached Matareya and Ein Shams, where Prophet Moses was raised, and where he learned the Egyptian wisdom. The area was also the center for science and wisdom in the ancient times, before most of its temples were demolished by Cambyses in the fifth century BC. The Holy Family rested under a tree in Matareya, which still exists to date and is considered a living miracle.

- **Zuwaita Ally:** While traveling from Matareya to Babylon, they passed by the downtown area where later a Church and a Monastery, were built and named after “Zeweila Ally”. There is also a small chapel for Virgin Mary, named “El Ezbaweya”.

- **Babylon, Old Cairo:** Finally, the Holy Family reached their ultimate destination where they lived with their relatives among the famous Jewish temple “Onias” and in the area where Jeremiah the prophet had lived, next to the famous Roman castle. Probably, this Jewish community was the destination for all estranged Jews. The Family stayed in a cavern prepared to host strangers, for a period of three months. There was a water well close by that supplied for the Family’s need.

We will discuss in another chapter, the history of this cavern, which was converted to a church, since the Apostles’ era. The Church of St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, was built on top of that cavern. Due to the threats from Herod’s soldiers, the Holy Family left Babylon after three months, and headed to Upper Egypt, which confirms that they needed a safer place away from the Delta and Babylon, so they sailed across the Nile from Maadi.

- **Maadi:** The Holy Family boarded a boat, sailing towards Upper Egypt from Maadi, which was on the southern borders for the Capital Memphis.

Most Likely, a Pharaonic temple stood there and some of the stories claim that it was where the Pharaoh's daughter found Moses. In the year 1976 AC, they found a bible floating over the Nile, and it settled by the bank of the Virgin Mary church. The bible was opened on the page from Isaiah 19, where the verse "Blessed is Egypt my people..." is mentioned.

- **Al Jarnus Monastery:** From Maadi and across the Nile, the Holy Family stopped at Al Jarnus Monastery or "Al-Bahnasa", which is now Sandafa village in Bani Mazar, Maghagha, Minya. It was called "Abay Issus", which means Jesus' House, and they stayed there for a few days.

El-Bahnasa: Was a big Coptic city as stated by *Father Palladius*, where thirty thousand monks had lived, and about three hundred churches stood there, before the Arabs invaded Egypt.

- **Jabal Al-Teir:** The Holy Family was on the move, looking for a safer place. They reached Samalut, crossing the Nile, towards the east, they settled in a cave for some days. This area is now Jabal Al-Teir.

Tradition holds that, while crossing the Nile, a big rock was about to fall over the boat, but Jesus stopped it and his hand was imprinted on it. Queen Helena, in the 4th century ordered to erect a church there, named "The Lady of Hand", or "Sayedat Al-Kaff".

Two Km south, there was a tree called Al Abed, it was a tree with all its branches leaning toward the ground, as if they were prostrating. In the chronicles, they mention that it prostrated when the Holy Family was passing by.

The realization of the prophecy of the fall of Caesar's Idols

- **Al-Ashmunin:** Known now as “Mallawi”. The Holy Family crossed the Nile to the west bank, to the city that witnessed the Pharaonic civilization when it used to be an important religious center.

One of its name is “Al-Ashmunin” derived from the Egyptian word “Khmenso” or eight, which explains the religious theory of the Pharaonic eight divinities. It was also the capital for the wisdom god, Thoth.

Then it became Hermopolis city, at the Ptolemies era, and the center for the Hellenistic intellect and the Greek gods, and was named after Hermes the Greek god, which confirms the conversion from its Pharaonic identity. It holds a temple built by Philip Arrhidaeus, the half-brother of Alexander the Great.

Then it turned into a Roman city, with the Roman style, with Roman baths, a center for pagan worship and a temple for Emperor Nero.

Tradition holds that, the fall of Idols in this city happened as a realization of the prophecy for the temples of the Ptolemies and the Romans, but not for the Egyptians’.

The pagan priests were furious after this incident and the Holy Family had to leave the city at once. That same city became a remarkable spot for Christians and witnessed the martyrdom of Copts in the name of Christ.

- **Dairut:** then they crossed to Dairut and stayed there for one night, and then they moved east to Abu-Hennes monastery.
- **Abu- Hennes Monastery:** Named after Saint John the Short. The family stayed there for few days. Later, it became a Christian center, and Queen Helena built a church there, it also had many monasteries, with more than five thousand monks. The monastery has the oldest mural for the Holy Family dated back to the 5th century.
- **Kom Maria:** It is said, that the Holy Family stayed there for few days.
- **Dairut El Sharif:** It is 20 Km south of Mallawi, the Holy Family stayed there for few days.
- **El-Quseyya:** They reached El-Quseyya at Quasqam Mountains; it is Lykopolis city and had Idols temples. In El-Quseyya, an idol with seven masks erected on top of a temple, fell down when Jesus arrived. The Holy Family was driven out of the city due to this incident.

Quasqam is a word formed of two syllables, Quas and Qam, meaning shrouding with Halva or bamboo, and the word Al Muharraq or “the burnt” stems from the place for burning residues of bamboo.

- **Meir:** A city after El Quseyya, they moved to Meir, 7 km away, and stayed there.

• **El Muharraq Monastery:** They travelled towards Quasqam Mountain, to reach El Muharraq monastery, which is considered the most important location in the Holy Family's Journey, because they stayed there for six months – the longest period of stay in one place – and from there, was the trip back home.

At the era of Pope Theophilus the 23rd pope, he had wished to have the blessings of the monastery, so he arrived three days before the memorial of Virgin Mary (21st of Tobi). He was dissatisfied with the modesty of the Altar, and he wanted to build a bigger and more remarkable one, that is fit for such a holy place. Virgin Mary, appeared to him that night, and warned him: *"Dismiss that wish, and do not inaugurate the altar, as it has been inaugurated by my beloved Son's sanctified hands"*.

He then requested the details for their journey into Egypt.

This is place holds a special blessing, as the Holy Family had stayed there for the longest period, and for the presence of the altar in the spot where Jesus was living. This is the altar referred to in Isaiah 19:19, *"In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the Land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border."*

In this place, the Angel appeared to St. Joseph and said: *"Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead"*. Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel". (Mat 2: 20-21)

This place became a monastery during the times of Saint Bakhomius, in the second half of the 4th century. Emperor Zeno, lived there in 481 AC, upon the wish of his daughter Elareia who became a nun in Egypt. All monasteries, including El Muharraq were fortified upon the orders of the Emperor.

Regarding the journey back home, the Holy Family had to head south to the boat docks; they might have passed by the Virgin Mary monastery at Durunka, then south to Al-Ganadlah, in Abu-Tig, because it was a port for big ships.

The Holy Family wanted to return home as fast as possible, without stops, so they sailed the Nile from Al Ganadlah to Memphis directly. Only sizable ships are able to sail this trip but not the regular sized boats.

They reached Memphis then Maadi, and back to Babylon, where they probably stayed for a few days in Abu Serga cavern, to arrange for the remaining part of the trip back, and get some funds for the trip from their Jewish kinsmen. Some historians believe that the Holy family stayed in the cavern upon their arrival to Egypt, others claim that they did on their way back home. The truth is that the Holy family stopped by the Abu Serga cavern on both their arrival, and departure trips.

They again sailed the Pelusiac Nile branch to Rafah, then they travelled home and settled in Nazareth.





Chapter IV
A Church where
Jesus Christ Lived

The Cavern Church

After the return of the Holy family to Nazareth, Jesus Christ had then accomplished his message, and was risen to heaven. Jesus has promised his disciples and apostles, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them to mark the start of the messianic age in the whole world. Acts Book Chapter Two, mentions that among those who believed in Christ, and listened to St. Peter's first Sermon, were Jews from Egypt (Acts 2:10).

When these pious Jews returned from Jerusalem to Egypt, they headed to Babylon area, the center of their community, and spread the news of what had happened there. Some of those who had witnessed the Holy Family, their miracles, and the water well they drank from, still lived then.

The first Christians have transformed this cavern into a church as it was sanctified for them, and believed that every bit of it, which was touched by Jesus, became a sacred witness for the holiness of the place through the ages.

After St. Stephan was martyred, a large Christian community fled from Judea to Egypt, (Acts 8:1-4), and mentions that most of them who were dispersed after leaving Judea, had spread everywhere preaching Christianity. Some have headed to Babylon, as Egypt has always been the destination preferred by the exiled Jews, since the 6th century BC.

A strong proof of the aforementioned, is the epistle written and sent by St. Peter, from Babylon City, Egypt, approximately by 61 AC, it is the same year when St. Mark, arrived to Egypt to meet him, the message stated: *"she who us in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son"*. (1Peter 5:13)

“Elected”, is a word used during the Apostles era means "the churches", therefore the cave church was the appointed one during this time when St. Peter, and St. Mark, where in Egypt. From this place, St. Peter wrote his epistles, lived together with St. Mark, and surely, they prayed in it.

In addition to the above, St. Apollos, who was with St. Paul, in Corinth, mentioned in a letter to Clement of Alexandria, that St. Mark, wrote his Gospel in Egypt. This idea was also mentioned by St John Chrysostom (Golden Mouth). Historians may debate the location where St. Mark wrote his Gospel, but it is a fact that he came to Babylon with St. Peter, as indicated by the famous historian *Mrs. Butcher*, about the Cavern: “It is the oldest and smallest church in the world”⁷.

On observing the churches during early era of Christianity, we will find them situated in caves and remote areas, away from the persecuting rulers⁸. While conducting the Geophysical studies on the cavern and the church we revealed two important facts:

1. The cavern had a crypt from the left and the right sides, used as entrance and/or exit, which confirms that the church’s entrance was meant to be concealed from persecutors during this era, especially that the cavern was located near the Roman Fortress.
2. The cavern is surrounded by a wall of two meters wide from each side, where an area of four meters on the west side was taken from the initial area of the cavern. Two meters, for the wall built in the 4th century, when the upper church was erected in the name of

⁷ "History of the Coptic Nation & Orthodox Church" (page 22) by Edith Louisa Butcher printed on 1900AC.

⁸ Before we start the restoration, I remained for a year studying the theoretical studies and sent to all the world academies and with my personal relations; I received some photos and studies in order to have a complete conception of the restoration before it actually began.

St. Sergius and St. Bacchus. One of the church's pillars was buried in this wall (Fig. 1)⁹.

Other pillars were discovered together with empty cellar cavities, in the area used to build the larger church, which mandated that as it was not possible to set the building on a cavity. Therefore, there was the modification to build walls around the cavern and use part of the area from the backside to support the new church, thus transforming the cavern to what it looks like now.

The Cavern is around four meters lower than the church's floor; it has a rectangular shape (6.20 x 5.30 m), and a height of 2.4 m. Despite its small area, it includes three arcades, the middle is the largest 2.3 m, the Northern side arcade is 1.4 m, and the southern one is 1.3 m, separated by four pillars from the north and four pillars from the south (Fig. 2), but there is a fifth pillar on this side, appearing from the wall built in the 4th century.

The pillars have crowns with various styles, hinting that they were gathered from different places and not made specifically for the church. (Fig. 3)

The middle arcade holds a cavity in the shape of a niche in the eastern wall, and was used as an altar, and on top, a marble piece with a cross engraved in it, as a sign of inaugurating this place to become an altar. This style was Roman, but the cross was Coptic (Fig. 4).

There is another cavity in the northern side that has a marble piece with an engraved cross (Fig. 5). On the southern side, there is a third cavity, with a granite piece but without an engraved cross (Fig. 6).

⁹ All pictures are attached at the end of the book.

Tradition holds that, those three niches were three altars, and the inauguration crosses confirm the same, because this tradition was popular in Rome during the 4th century, and it looks exactly as the Roman altars in St. Boudin in Rome, and St. Victor's church in Marseille, which are both built during the 5th century as mentioned by Butler, the historian.

It was strange that the third altar held a granite, not a marble piece, and with no cross engraved. On investigating this subject, we found that in many old books, it was mentioned that St. Mary used to bath Jesus and put Him to sleep on this granite piece, which was probably at that same spot on that height, providing the place with its perpetual sanctity. As per the Coptic tradition inherited since the Apostles era, the Altars were situated on the east side, therefore those three altars were set, and the cross was not engraved on the granite piece, because it became holy by Jesus Christ Himself.

A hollow bend was lately discovered in the east side, with black traces caused by the lamp flames that was found in the eastern wall.

At the end of the northern arcade, there is another baptism basin. In the latest restorations, we removed some construction, and uncovered the original stone, dating back to the Apostles times. It is a plane stone basin, used to serve the baptism sacrament in the early church. (Fig.7)

The Original cavern floor was also uncovered, and dates since the visit of the Holy Family. The floor level is the same as that of the wharf built by Sesostris in the 6th century BC, and used later on by Trajan to revive the canal flowing within the Babylon Fortress. The Cavern floor discovered was at the same level and of the same type of stones, which confirms that it is the original floor as indicated before. (Fig. 8)

The cavern has two entrances, the southern one, (Fig. 9), leads to the water well used by the holy family. That is why the well was kept in its place during the construction of the upper church and an altar was set in the name of Angel Gabriel, in a spot nearby. The well¹⁰ still exists and contains water at a depth of 3 meters from the surface. (Fig. 10)



The Cavern Church, year 1910

¹⁰ This well was covered with layers of sand and stones, and when I started my service in the church I looked for it because I knew it was there, until God guided me to its place. I showed it and put glass on it so that visitors could see it, where it contains water at a depth of 3 meters from the surface, and it is on the same level as the surface of the sacred cavern.

The Church of the Two Martyrs, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus

It the church built above the Cavern Church.

The Two Martyrs, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus

The two saints, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus were from the Roman nobility, and were top military leaders at the time of Emperor Maximinus, at the end of the third century. This emperor abhorred Christians, and sought to uncover the Christian converts among the Roman army, so he ordered all the military leaders and soldiers to offer sacrifices to the Idols. Maximinus, accompanied them to the Jupiter temple while offering their sacrifices, but both saints have totally rejected the act, causing the emperor to strip off their military titles and attire, and dressed them in women's clothes. They chained their necks in irons, and paraded them among their soldiers for display and mockery.

They faced their persecution fearlessly, and publicly declared their faith. The emperor ordered that they be sent to Antiochus the governor of Syria, to be tortured. This governor, had been an officer under the command of Sergius, so he savagely tortured them. He then put Sergius in jail and continued torturing Bacchus until he was martyred.

Shortly, he sent Sergius to Resafa city; there he was martyred six days after Bacchus' martyrdom. Bacchus appeared to Sergius revealing to him the glory of martyrs. (Fig. 11). Both martyrs became intercessors for the Christian Roman soldiers, and a church was built in Resafa in their names.

Many churches were built carrying their names. Justinian, had also built a church after their names in Constantinople, and they became the intercessors for the Ghassanid dynasty, with their image depicted on their state flag.

The church commemorates St. Sergius on the 10th of Paopi (Babah), and St. Bacchus on the fourth of Paopi (Babah).



St. Sergius and St. Bacchus Church during restoration 2015

The Construction of the Church

The cavern church, remained the main destination for the Copts who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, over the first three centuries, as we have previously mentioned in Chapter one, of this book. The monks' cells spread in the area together with the ordinary people's houses, due to the presence of the cavern where the Holy family had stayed, and which was considered a source of great blessings to them. The water well, which was next to the cavern, held a blessing for the people, and witnessed many who have been healed.

When persecutions were over, Rome converted to Christianity on Constantine, and Queen Helena ordered to build churches wherever Jesus Christ had stayed, in Jerusalem, and Galilee, to preserve the memory of the events that took place during the life of Jesus. She then ordered to build churches after St. Mary's, in every place visited by the Holy Family.

However, in Babylon, there was an original church, which was the cavern, where prayers were held. The Cavern Church, was situated inside the Roman fortress after Trajan's expansions in the 2nd Century AC. A larger church was constructed on top of the cavern in the name of the two martyrs, who were the intercessors for Roman Army, which settled in this Fortress at that time.

The Church was built in the same style of that of the Fortress, at about the end of the fourth and/or the beginning of the fifth century. The Romans brought a relic from the two martyrs' bodies, as per the tradition ordered by Queen Helena, which is to include a section of the martyrs' remains within the churches erected in their names.

During the Arabs' rule to Egypt, the church's name was changed, from "The Church of the Two Martyrs Sergius and Bacchus", to "Abu Serga", to facilitate pronunciation.

The Church was built using the Basilica style, like most of the churches during the Roman era, (Fig. 12).

The Origin of the Basilica Style

Was inspired from the Greek civilization, who used that style to construct their temples, castles, government houses, and military bases. The Greeks were inspired by the Pharaonic temples' structure during Sawy Dynasty, in the 26th family (663 - 525BC). During the rule of Psamtik, The First, they established an army and a fleet mainly from Greek mercenaries.

The Geographic historian, Strabo, mentioned that the Greek, had built a colony in the year 650 BC, under the name of Naucratis, in Beheira Governorate, town of Atay Al-Baroud. The Greeks, constructed temples for Hera, Apollo, and Aphrodite, using the same Pharaonic style. Naucratis, was an established Greek city with temples, markets and residences, hence, it was a Greek city, in a Pharaonic design.

Due to the strong Trading relations between Egypt and the Greek cities, the Pharaonic civilization and architecture were exported to the Greeks. The Greek basilica style must have been influenced by the Egyptian civilization, as clearly obvious in the two rows of columns, the three arcades, the entrance, and the Holy of the Holies. The roof of the middle gallery is higher than the other two galleries, and later on, the Romans, copied this construction model for erecting their temples, government headquarters, and courts as well.



General Outlook and Description of the Church:

Located approximately, in the middle area of the Roman Fortress. The Church's east and west walls are parallel, with two narrow lanes. In earlier days, the church was surrounded by Christians' houses. The Church, reflects the Basilica style of architecture, its dimensions are 27 m. in length, 17 m. in width, with a height of 15 m.

The Church has three entrances, from the west side, with a main gate in the middle, and two are located at the southern and the northern sides. It has an entrance, the nave, and two aisles. The entrance, and the nave are separated by two marble columns, and the middle arcade, is partitioned from the other two arcades by two rows of columns, five on each side. (Fig. 13).

Pillars:

The pillars are from marble, topped with a Corinthian crown, of 122 cm. to 135 cm, in diameter, (Fig. 14), except for one granite column, which is 190 cm. in diameter, extracted from a Ptolemy temple, which stood in the area since the second century. A cross is engraved on each pillar.

Total number of columns is twelve, representing the twelve disciples. This representation, took place in all churches constructed in the early centuries of Christianity, to emphasize that the church was founded on the ministry of the twelve disciples.

As these pillars represented Christ's disciples, there stands a pillar on the west side made from crude Granite, it was meant to look erroneous to represent Judah, his place was second among the disciples in terms of age, and the related column had no crown, to indicate his deprivation of his mission, and the loss of all dignity. (Fig. 15).

What confirms this idea, is the original wooden altar of the church, built during the fourth, or the fifth century – conserved in the Coptic Museum- and consists of twelve columns, made of Walnut wood, with one different back column without a crown or decorations, to prove that this idea prevailed during the time when the church was built.

Figures for Saints, and martyrs, were painted in full size on the Columns, during the 5th or 6th century, but unfortunately, only five of those paintings remained with faded features. We managed to decipher the written names of St. Cyril, Pope Athanasius, St. Sergius, and St. Bacchus, (Fig. 16, 17).

The features of those icons resembled the Frescos recently found during the latest restoration in 2015, on the north wall of the main altar, and were for St. Mark, and Pope Dioscorus.

We can explain the real story behind these paintings, where in the year 481 AC, after the Chalcedon schism occurred, the Roman Emperor, decided to impose this faith, which was rejected by the Coptic church, due to its deviation from original faith delivered by the disciples. He exiled Pope Dioscorus, and sent a leaflet to Egypt, trying to impose the Chalcedon faith by force, and he managed to take over some churches.

The dispute was great regarding the Babylon churches, due to their magnificent status, especially Abi Serga church, as it hosted the Cavern. Copts, then painted these icons on the pillars, (Fig. 18), and inaugurated Pope Dioscorus' Icon inside the altar, as a declaration of non-conformity of the church to this imposed faith, and that it is, and will remain a Coptic church.

Back to the pillars, we will find inside the northern altar, two marble columns connected with crowns at their base, with a carved cross in the middle of each one. These two columns support the upper wall that ends with the wall of the church nave. (Fig. 19).

There is another pillar at the end of the opening, between the main altar, and the side one on top of the cavern, and is made of rosy granite with a granite crown as well. The column is decorated in palm like sculptures, holding the roof of the altar named after Gabriel Arch Angel, and is situated in front of the water well of the Holy Family (Fig. 20).

Miracle of the Bleeding Pillars

In April 1967 AC, in the place where the church holds the Holy Week's prayers, at the second column from the west side, the priest of the church saw blood dripping from the cross in the center of the pillar. Pope Cyril the 6th. was notified, so he came and prayed. The pope then, dipped his finger in the blood asking Jesus to stop the flow. The blood stopped, but its traces and Pope Cyril's fingerprints are still on that column till today. This incident was witnessed by Father Raphael Ava Mina, who was Pope Cyril's disciple at that time. (Fig. 21, 22).

All the church's Pillars are bound by a wooden ledge, with the remains of marvelous drawings, which were distorted by the consecutive fires. The same woods were used for the restoration, where we made sure to conserve it, to resemble its original design. (Fig. 22).

On the outside of the columns, three ledges were hung with scripts written in Coptic, and Arabic reading: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who was born of the Virgin, have Mercy upon us
..."

“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who was crucified for us, have Mercy upon us ...”

“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who rose from the dead, have Mercy upon us ...”

Originally, they were placed on the top of the partitions separating the area of the repentant, from that of the believers, inside the church. The partitions were then removed and the ledges were placed on the walls, then during last restoration, they were placed on the wood over the columns.

The Walls of the church were built similar to those of the castle, i.e. five old style bricks with special specifications and one stone, this method of construction was popular for the Roman buildings. Several church walls were destroyed over time, and inaccurately rebuilt both technically and architecturally. In the latest restoration, we discovered the original wall of the north side in a good condition, after removing layers of plaster. The walls were restored in the same style, reverting the church to its original image and in the same Roman style.

Epiphany Tub

Located in front of the middle entrance of the church, and it is a rectangular basin of 2,60 x 3m that was used during Epiphany (Fig. 24).

Since ancient Egypt, the Nile, was considered sacred, and Egyptians held significant spiritual celebrations for it. People feasted, sang, ate and drank on that day. When Christianity spread in Egypt, the church kept the same social celebration, but with a spiritual perspective, so they were celebrating the Nile, during the Epiphany feast. Copts, used to celebrate Epiphany at the Nile banks

with prayers, and then by plunging into the water to resemble the baptism in River Jordan. Celebrations were held till the morning with songs, music, food, drinks, the happiness and joy during this event were great, as witnessed by historians.

In the year 1009 AC, The Fatimid Caliph, Al-Hakim Bi- Amr Allah, forbid Copts to observe the feast by the Nile, so they established this place as an alternative for celebrations. It was filled with water and they descended into it. Towards the end of his rule, he allowed Christians to celebrate their feasts publicly. Other rulers kept allowing and forbidding the Coptic celebrations, till the rule of El-Malik El-Salih Mohamed Ebn Qalawoon, in 1354 AC, who has totally banned all public religious celebrations for Christians. The tub, had then remained the alternative to the Coptic ritual of bathing in the Nile, during Epiphany celebrations. Nowadays, this ritual for celebration is not held anymore.

Laqqan

In front of the epiphany tub, one meter away, there is a basin, and El Laqqan, is a Greek word "**ΛΑΚΚΑΝΗ**", meaning the container filled with water. This water is sanctified through prayer at the Epiphany, Maundy Thursday and the Apostles' feast. It is made of marble, and engraved in the floor of the church. (Fig. 25).

Baptism

At the left side of the entrance, a baptism basin was discovered. It was buried under layers of bricks, and an outer layer of modern marble. During the latest restoration, we removed all these layers to uncover the original antique basin for baptism. It is a rare basin because of its conical shape, and the very delicately engraved crosses on its three sides. The crosses are fashioned in the same style as the

one engraved on the Cavern altar, dating back to the 4th century, as indicated before, which confirms that this is an authentic Baptism basin.

Amble or Amban (Pulpit)

It is a Greek word, meaning “the elevator”, has been distorted to “Al Amble”, or “Al Amban”, and was used as a preaching stand, and for reciting prayers on different occasions.

The original church’s amble, is made of Walnut wood, and decorated with ivory and ebony, it is preserved in the Coptic museum, since the beginning of the 20th century, and was replaced by another one assembled from other ones brought from an ancient area and is made of marble. (Fig. 27).

On April 24, 1990 AC, the pulpit fell but was not broken, and when restored, we found the remains of martyr Bashnouna close by at the depth of 2 m. The body was surrounded and topped with bricks and wasn’t affected by the underground water, and the bones were preserved without any decomposition. Even the traces of char caused by burning the martyr’s body were still obvious.

Martyr Bashnouna, (Fig. 28), was a monk, in St. Macarius monastery. He was arrested by authority of prince Dirgham, in the 12th century, during the rule of the Fatimids. The prince tried to persuade him to abandon his Christian faith, but the martyr persisted firmly. The prince ordered him tortured, then burnt alive. He was martyred on the 24th of Pashons 880 Martyrs - 164 AC. Copts buried him in St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, as mentioned in the Synaxarion, dated 24th of Pashons. He is placed in front of the main entrance on the opposite side from where the bodies of the two martyrs Sergius and Bacchus are placed.

The Iconostas (Al Hijab)

Iconostas, or as they call it in Greek “Iconostasis”, means holder of the icons, has developed throughout the history of churches’ construction. It is considered a witness on the history because it contributed to the evolution of the idea of the Iconostas in the Coptic Church in general, and in St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church in particular.

At the beginning, the Iconostas did not resemble those found nowadays, but they were a low wooden barrier that separates the church from the altar. The left and right sides of the Iconostas were not illustrated, but carried imbedded figures of crosses and carvings of the decease of Virgin Mary, the Last Supper, and the Nativity, on the left, while on the right there are carvings for St. George, martyr Demetrius, and St. Philopater Mercurius (Abu Seifin) (Fig. 29,30).

Icons are engraved on wood very elaborately, showing the hair, and the facial details clearly, mimicking the Greek art style. Similar to Fayoum Portraits, were fashioned during the same time of building the church in the fifth century, when the art of decoration and iconography had spread in the churches. It was not the Iconostas that completely separated the altar, but there were four bars on the altar, with four marble pillars, on which curtains are hung and closed during the Mass. The curtain holders, still stand below the dome, which is above the altar.

As for the Iconostas, its transformation and spreading were in the 8th century, due to the insolence of strangers who dared to abuse the church during Mass, as a result of the aggression accompanying the wave of sectarian strife.

According to manuscripts exhibited, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, was the first to build the wooden Iconostas. After the fires hit the church they were making Iconostas. The Iconostas, which was fashioned since the 8th century, is the one standing at Angel Gabriel's altar on the left side of the church. The Iconostas for Angel Michael's altar -on the right side- was made from wood that dates back to the 5th century.

The middle part of the Iconostas is made of ebony and decorated with Ivory (Fig. 32), fashioned after the Fatimid style which was popular at this period. Both the left and right sections, date from the 14th century but were not influenced by the Fatimid style. The Iconostas had no icons, as the tradition of placing icons on the Iconostas was only introduced in the 15th century. The two experts who specialized in the maintenance and restoration of the Iconostas were Haj Hussein el Sisy, and Haj Ayman el Sisy.

The wooden Altars

The middle altar is in the name of Virgin Mary, and it is very wide. The original altar is made of Walnut wood, and dated back to the 4th or 5th century, and it is kept at the Coptic museum. We have fashioned a model that is an exact replica of the original one, and turned all the church's altars to follow the same style. The altar is supported by twelve columns, and as we mentioned before, the back pillar is plane, without decorations, and without a crown, as per the initial vision of the artist who designed the church, to conclude, that the wooden altar was built during the same time of building the church. (Fig. 32)

Above the twelve columns, there is a wooden crown, and a wooden embellishment with a cross, and a shell engraved in the middle, which used to be an ancient religious Roman sign. This seashell, and the cross, are the first Christian symbols in Rome, to declare that the Roman religious logos have been transformed to Christian ones. The seashell is the symbol of life emerging from water, and was used as a sign, referring to baptism and resurrection. (Fig. 33).

At the side of the altar, a gravure of a bird eating from a bunch of grapes, and a seashell next to it. The bunch of grapes, is a Christian sign for salvation, and the Mass. The bird is a peacock, which represents eternity, or a Phoenix, which is a symbol of immortality in old legends, and the secret of immortality is symbolized by the bunch of grapes representing Christ's blood. (Fig. 34)

Above the altar, there is a dome mounted on four marble columns, and surrounded by four wooden ribbons, where verses from Psalm 98" The Lord Reigns" is written on each side. "The Lord reigns, Let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; Let the earth be moved! The Lord is great in Zion, and He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name— He is holy. The King's strength also loves justice; you have established equity; You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob". (Fig. 35).

Inside the dome, there is a painting for Jesus Christ on deer leather, from the 18th century. It was hard to restore the paintings on the wood at that time, so they painted this picture and fixed it on the inside (Fig. 36).

The dome is surrounded by paintings from the four outer sides; the oldest is the one facing the interior eastern part since the 11th century.

The dome's wooden material, dates from the 4th or the 5th century, and what confirms it, is the presence of the wooden curtain holders which were used before the 8th century.

On the north wall, an Icon dating back to the 5th or the 6th century, was recently discovered during the latest restorations. It pictures three persons, and we managed to find two names only, as the third name and its features had faded out. The middle figure is for St. Mark and the one at his right is Pope Dioscorus, the 25th. (Fig. 37).

The other side of the altar bears a cross, probably was placed as a sign of the agreement between the church and the Franciscan (Fig. 38).

On the east side, is the "Thronos", which is a Greek word meaning the Throne. It is a large semi-circle in the full length of the church with seven steps decorated with vertical marble ornaments, and very delicate pictures fashioned from marble, pearls and mother pearl.

Above stairs, there is a cavity in which a marble seat with a cross on top is set, to be used as the Pope's seat during the readings, and this was before the Iconostas were designed. At the back of the seat, there are traces of an icon, which was damaged during the icons war in the 8th century, its remaining colors were discovered during the last restoration and kept intact. (Fig. 39)

Side Altars

At the right side of the main altar, there is another altar named after Michael Archangel, where a fresco of Jesus Christ, dating to the thirteenth century was uncovered. It is the picture of Jesus Christ Pentocartor, sitting on the throne, surrounded in a blue halo, and by the wings of the four living creatures in an array of flames. On the right and left of Christ, stands Archangel Michael, and Archangel Gabriel, and the right hand of the Christ is raised in a blessing sign of while the left hand, (removed from the painting), of course was carrying a book. (Fig. 40)

The Iconostas's wooden material of this altar, which dates from the fifth century, bears traces of the fire that has occurred at the church.

At the left side of the Main Altar, there is another altar named after Gabriel Archangel, with a dome mounted on top of four columns, but its exact date is unknown, while the Iconostas dates from the 8th century.

The church has a wooden roof. The middle arcade which is the largest, has a ship roof with an opening for lighting and ventilation, built in the same style used during the early centuries, while the other two arcades have lower roofs. (Fig. 41)

Above the other two arcades, there is an upper level, which has two small churches. The Northern one is in the name of the two martyrs St. Sergius and St. Bacchus. The Southern Church is in the name of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which is the only altar in the world bearing such a name. The Iconostas of these two altars, date back to the 8th century.

The upper level of the church has a row of small columns in different styles, hinting that they were brought from different places, with a Corinthian crown on top, and a marble base with a wooden ornament below.



The Baptism in St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church during restoration 2015

The Coptic Museum conserves a number of collectibles from the church since the beginning of the 20th century as follows:

- The wooden altar, which is the oldest in the world, from the 4th or the 5th century. Marcus Semeika Pasha mentions it in the hall No. 24, at the Coptic museum: “item number 273- altar from the 4th century made of pine wood and decorated with gravures of birds, animals and crosses, supported by eight columns, and was originally situated in Abu Serga church. The only altar we found with dimensions (112 x 75 x 100 cm.) below its image is written: “273- Altar from the 4th century made of pine wood decorated with gravures in the shape of birds, animals and crosses influenced by the Greek Alexandrian art from the fourth century, originally from Abu Serga church ...”
- The wooden Amble (pulpit) we mentioned before.
- Three wooden panels from the podium of the old church, Marcus Semeika Pasha mentioned it at the hall 22, at the Coptic museum:”4995- Three wooden panels from the side of the podium, dating back to the 12th century, made of Walnut wood with gravures decorated with ivory and Cedar wood, originally from Abu Serga Church, (93 x98 cm each).
- Walnut wood door decorated with Ivory and cedar from the 12th century under the “no. 4996”.

Marcus Semeika Pasha mentions it at the hall number 22, at the Coptic museum:”4996- Door made of the same material (made of Walnut wood gravures decorated with pieces of ivory and cedar) originally from Abu Serga church (dimensions 184x75cm.).

- A segment from a marble window with embossed inscriptions and interspersed reliefs, with a cross from the 11th century, under “no. 3013”.

Marcus Semeika Pasha mentions it in the hall number 4, at the Coptic museum: “Inscriptions on the stones were either engraved on the surface or with a hollow pattern as seen in piece “no. 3013”, from Abi Serga church demonstrated in hall no. 4, item 3013- hollowed piece from a marble window interspersed with a cross from the 11th century- From Abu Serga Church.

- A veil of Purple silk covering the iconostas under no. 85, Marcus Semeika mentions it in the hall no.16, in the Coptic museum: “Closet no. 9-85- Purple silk curtain from Abu Serga church with a decorated cross, with a Coptic script: “Peace be upon God’s altar the Pentocartor”, On top of the large cross, a figure Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ with two angels on the sides, and between the four sides of the cross there is a Coptic script:

“Jesus Christ son of God “, also down at the left side is scribed: “come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; in fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple” (Psa 5:7), and on the right side: “Reward oh God those who labored, with heaven “a permanent grant, and a permanent gift on the account of Virgin Mary, and the two pure martyrs, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, 1451Coptic, (1735 AC)”.

- A Vest of Atlas textile with decorations, and with the names of the twelve disciples with a script on top: “A work by the Lady in Abu Serga, Reward oh God those who have labored, with heaven”.

- Gospel case of silver box no. 1527 (currently exhibited at the museum hall)
- Chest “S”: With a silver box in the middle, dated the year 1773AC.



The Archaeological Iconostas of the Church before restoration

Icons & Manuscripts

Icons at church represent an important spiritual and ritual role. They embody the incarnation, and indicative existence that bears a doctrinal truth of faith linking the earthly church to heaven.

Iconology, dates back to the ancient Egyptians, who illustrated figures on the walls of tombs, cemeteries, temples and sarcophaguses. This was an embodiment of immortality beliefs, where colors and engraved wood and stones became a substitute for the material loss of the deceased one, whose spirit will again return to his body and resume life.

However, the idea of icons at churches is different, as an icon is a symbolic picture of the Saint or martyr, or a scene from the bible explaining the reality of their existence, and an affirmation of their living spirits that are sharing our prayers. That is why; candles are lit in front of the icons as a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit, represented by the candle flame, which illuminates the saint brightly. The candle also represents the intercession of the saint before God.

In Fayoum Portraits, in the 2nd century, we can relate to this idea, where the portraits were painted on the tombs of the Copts or the martyrs. The art style of the icons is a combination of the Greek and ancient Egyptian art.

From the 2nd to the 4th century, the Coptic churches mostly used decorative symbolic art, such as fish, as a sign for Christianity, grapes, tree leaves, different designs for the cross, and ostrich eggs.

Icons then spread since the beginning of the 4th or 5th century, and became popular during the 6th century, which is considered the golden period of Coptic art all over Egypt. Between the 7th to the 10th century, the art of icons came to a decline, moreover, it was destroyed in most of the churches during a movement that swept the

world known as the “Icons War”, where most of the icons in the churches were ruined, including the ones in our church.

One of the factors that lead to the scarcity of the icons was the immigration of artists, or redirecting their work towards the decoration of palaces, especially during the Ayyoubi era. The Coptic artists were masters in illustrations, and sculpture work on ebony wood.

Starting the 17th century, there was a renaissance in iconography that lasted till the 19th century, especially during Mohamed Ali’s era. He was inspired by the European renaissance, which was reflected on the art generally, and on the icons specifically, which has led to their spreading again in churches.

Among the most famous artists and popular painters in most churches were, Ibrahim El Nasikh, Johan the Armenian, and Anastasi El Rumi, both of John the Armenian and Anastasi El Rumi studied in the professional art school of Jerusalem.

Most of the icons in our church were painted by those artists, except for some rare icons dating to the 11th, 13th, and 16th centuries.

Index of Icons at St. Sergius and St. Bacchus Church:

As we have previously mentioned, there are wooden carved icons from the 5th or 6th century on the icon holder for The Last Supper, Nativity, St. Demetrius, St. George, and St. Philopater (Abi Seifein).

1- The Virgin Mary carrying the crucifixion cross with the two Archangels Michael and Gabriel on top. It is considered a rare icon because it represents the prophecy of Simeon (The God Receiver), to Virgin Mary, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be

spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also). So, the Virgin carrying Jesus crucified as sign that salvation was the reason for incarnation. Icon dates back to the 19th century.

- 2- The two saints, Sergius and Bacchus - 18th century
- 3- Virgin Mary - 18th century
- 4- ST. John the Baptist - 18th century
- 5- St. Damiana and the Forty Virgins surrounding her, at the bottom it is written “Reward Oh God those who have labored with Heaven “, the year 1561 Coptic, by the humble, Astass El Kodosi El Rumi, (1561 Coptic - 1844, 45 AC).
- 6- The Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, Virgin Mary on a donkey holding Jesus, and at the back, St. Joseph and Salome - 18th Century.
- 7- The decease of Virgin Mary in the presence of Jesus Christ and the Apostles around - 18th century.
- 8- Virgin Mary carrying Jesus Christ with Archangel Michael on the left, and on the right the two saints Philopater (Abi Seifein) and Prince Tadros El Shatbi, from the 17th century.
- 9- Icon for the Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ surrounded by two angels, from renaissance era, 13th century.
- 10- St. Mathew (author of the Mathew book) – 18th century.
- 11- St. Philopater Marcorius (Abi Sefein) stabbing Julius the infidel king.
- 12- Jesus Christ surrounded by the twenty-four elders (priests).
- 13- St. Peter and St. Paul - 18th century.

- 14- St. Paula and St. Anthony - 18th century.
- 15- St. Stephan - 18th century.
- 16- St. John the Beloved - 18th century.
- 17- St. Paul - 18th century.
- 18- The Flight to Egypt, Virgin Mary on a donkey carrying Jesus, with St. Joseph behind. At the bottom it is written on two lines: “Reward Oh God all who labored with heaven - year 1565 Martyrs (?)”-“.....? teacher (...) Father of the late (?)....? painted by the humble Astass El Kodsi El Rumi, the illustrator.“ (Year 1565 Martyrs - 48/1949 AC).
- 19- St. George - 18th century
- 20- St. Peter - 18th century
- 21- Simeon (The God Receiver), carrying Jesus in the temple and blessing him with Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and Salome.
- 22- Nativity, with baby Jesus and Virgin Mary surrounded by the Magi and the Angel annunciation to the shepherds.
- 23- The Annunciation (the good news).
- 24- The Last Supper.
- 25- Jesus Enters Jerusalem, riding a donkey
- 26- Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead
- 27- The Transfiguration
- 28- The Wedding of Cana, written at its bottom “Please God remember your slave Youssef El Gohari and his son and his deceased daughter in heaven”.
- 29- Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in River Jordan.

- 30- The Resurrection of Christ from the dead and hell doors broken with the figures of three prophets, an angel and a female saint.
- 31- Decent from the Cross and Virgin Mary, the three Mary(s), Joseph of Arimathea and a skull underneath.
- 32- Crucifixion of Christ with the three Mary(s) standing below, beloved John, one of the soldiers and a drawing for a skull - 19th century.
- 33- The descent of the Holy Spirit
- 34- The Ascension.
- 35- Jesus and the Apostles around with St. Thomas touching Jesus' wounds with his finger.
- 36- Archangel Gabriel - 18th century
- 37- Jesus Christ - 18th century.
- 38- Resurrection, the three Mary(s) and the guards standing around the tomb.
- 39- Virgin Mary and two angels in front holding a napkin with the figure of Jesus Christ - 18th Century.
- 40- Jesus Christ on the cross with the two thieves, surrounded by the three Mary(s), Beloved John, guards and a Skull under the cross.
- 41- Archangel Michael, with the cross in his right hand and the balance in the left. A script on the left side:” Painted by Ibrahim El Nasikh” - (1403 Martyrs/1687AC)
- 42- Archangel Michael holding a sword with his right hand and stepping on the devil – 18th Century.
- 43- St. George.

- 44- Jesus on the cross with the two thieves, the three Mary(s) standing below with his beloved disciple John, the lower section of the icon illustrates the shrouding of Jesus Christ -19th century.



The Church's walls during restoration 2015

Manuscripts

The church has many manuscripts, because it possessed the original books, which were the source from which they copied the scripts for the church's rituals, the Bible with both the new and the old testaments, and a record for some miracles and mayamar.

The Church was set on fire and looted three times, what remained from the oldest manuscripts date as early as the 11th century, and up till the 19th. The Church also keeps the first books printed specifically in its name, in England's print house or France at the beginning of the 19th century, and they were ritual books and copies of the bible. (Fig. 42)

These manuscripts are mentioned in other libraries and/or museums as follows:

First: Manuscripts in the Library of the Coptic museum in Cairo

- 1- Manuscript no 11 Serial /103 Ritual: Books of Mathew, and Mark, scribed in Coptic language
- 2- Manuscript no 12 Serial /98 Holy: Books of Luke, and John, written in Coptic language
- 3- Manuscript no 212 Serial: Katamaras (Daily readings) for the Sunday(s) of the first six months of Tut to Amshir in Arabic – incomplete.

Second: Patriarch Library in Azbakeya

Manuscript no 1237 general/486 ritual.

Third: Manuscript at the library of Saint Mary's church in Babylon al Darag, Old Cairo

1- Manuscript no 12 general/10 ritual.

A) Explanation for Sunday, and feast chapters readings, at the beginning of the Month of Tut till Amshir, Arabic.

2- Manuscript no 16 general/14 ritual.



Eastern part of the Church during restoration, 2015

Church Property and Possessions:

In the old records, there are property documents in the name of Abu Serga Church as follows:

Year 1772 AC

It was included in the list of properties owned by Ibrahim El Gohari and his brother Girgis, and their children, and the documents of their property in Egypt and other countries. These documents are kept at El Bab El Aly, The Arab League and the Egyptian court. What is related to Abu Serga church is the following:

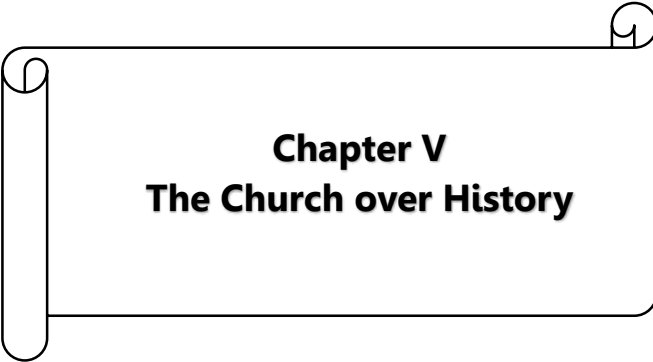
“A Donation in the name of Ibrahim, to Abu Serga Monastery, six Kirats in one place and a basement underneath, 17 Jamad El Awal year 1186 H (16 August 1772 AC), with an ownership document issued from Bab Saada”

Tawfik Eskaros, has mentioned in a speech about El Moallem (Master) Girgis El Gohari, “ I am proud to belong to this honorable house and respectable family, my Grandfather to my mother the late Girgis Mina Asaad El Sabbagh, from the elite of Fayoum, and a distinguished employee in the Sunni area, and the cousin of El Moallem Rizk El Sabbagh, grandson of Mokhtara, the daughter of El Moalam Girgis El Gohari, in Old Cairo. El Sabbagh’s home was donated to the poor of Abu Serga Church, and is known as “Bayt El Tarb”, situated behind the church. The house included many halls in ceramic, where one was prepared to host the Patriarch at that time, and that is why it was called the Patriarch’s Palace, different from the one situated in the area of Athar el Nabi.

Year 1844 AC:

- A- Twelve floors at the building in Azbakeya, Darb El Ebrahimi, property for El Malak monastery, property for The Lady's church at Quassreyat al Raihan ... property for St George church at Darb El Touqa... Property for Abu Serga church...property for El Malak Monastery...Property for St. George the conqueror, El Malha..(?) with a contract document, dated 27 n(?) year 1243 H, between (25/7/1827-13/7/1828 AC).
- B- A complete hall in Jews Street, property for the poor of Abu Serga church, in old Cairo, with a contract dated 18 Mouharam 1207 H, (5 September 1792 AC)
- C- Six floors at the building at Tyloon, ay El Kabsh Fortress, property for the poor of Abu Serga church, with a contract under the name of the afore mentioned church, dated first of Safar 1206 H (30 September 1791 AC).
- D- A complete hall in Zeweila Ally, towards Jews Street, for the poor of Abi Serga church in Old Cairo, with a contract dated 12 Mouharam 1207 H (30 September 1792 AC)
- E- A whole house, in El Kabsh Fortress, property for the poor of the above-mentioned church, contract dated 5 Mouharam 1206 H (4 September 1791 AC)





Chapter V
The Church over History

The historian Ibn Kibr, mentioned in chapter 22, of the Encyclopedia, “A Lamp in the Darkness for Clarifying the Service”, written in 1224 AC, that the feast of the inauguration of Abu Serga Church, in Old Cairo, is among those celebrated by the church.

This emphasizes the significance of this church over the history, and the existence of the cavern where the Holy Family lived, gave it a special status, and a blessing which established it as the most important Christian center, as we shall observe through the historical events. The church’s walls have witnessed important incidents, and its altars are a testimony of the Patriarchs prayers during persecutions, and the dire times that befell Copts, for a period of two hundred years after the Chalcedonian Creed, in 451 AC, and until the Arabs seized Egypt, in 641 AC.

A devastating struggle arose between the occupying Byzantine authorities, who adopted the Chalcedonian Creed, and Copts, who renounced it together with the Council’s decrees. When the Emperor of Rome sought to impose this faith by force, hundreds of thousands of Copts were martyred. As a result to the Copts resilient defense for their faith, several Coptic churches were seized by the Byzantines and were driven to follow the Monarchist/Royal churches, who tried to take over Abu Serga church as well, but Copts stood against it, and ordered the illustrations for the heroes of faith, to be painted on the church’s pillars, and an Icon in the main altar for Pope Dioscorus, as a sign of defiance to Monarchism, since the Emperor had exiled him during the Chalcedonian Council’s reunion.

After the Arabs had seized Egypt, they took Fostat as a capital situated north of Babylon Fortress. Romans, abandoned the Fortress after the treaty of surrender, and the Arab’s Army leader Amr ibn Al’ Ass met with Pope Benjamin, and told him:” all your followers

are under your control and you manage their related issues “. Then, he divided the churches between Copts, and Anarchists.

During the era of Abd Al-Aziz Ibn Marwan (685-705AC), his clerk Athanasius, asked his permission to build a church in El Shamaa Palace. Ibn Marwan, allowed him to build St. Georges’ church, and St. Abakir Church, which later became St. Barbara’s, after its restoration in the 8th century.

In the meantime, St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, needed renovation, so they used the remaining construction material to do it, which confused some historians to conclude that the construction of St. George and Abakir churches, and St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, were built during the same time, whereas, it was only a restoration for the latter, which was actually built by the end of the 4th century and beginning of the 5th.

Nomination of Pope Isaac, Patriarch of the Church - 7th Century

In 690 AC, Bishops were gathered at Abu Serga church, they chose Isaac, a monk from St. Makarios monastery. While Isaac stood praying at the altar, the oil lamp above his head broke, and he was covered all over. The Bishops rejoiced saying, “you are worthy”, and considering this as a sign of God’s will, they said:’ God has anointed you with the oil of Joy”, (Ps 45:7). This incident was mentioned in the Coptic manuscript, no. 62, at the Vatican Library.



Pope Khail, Patriarch No. 46, 8th century

In October 749 AC, Pope Khail was released from jail; he then went to pray in Abu Serga church.

Manuscript no. 258, Mimars, preserved in the Syrian monastery's library, mentioned that the Pope after being released, went to Abu Serga church, to hold the Mass and reunite with them, then he headed to the Papal chair residence, in Alexandria.

When the Umayyad Caliph, Marwan the Second, arrested the Pope, Hegumen Mina of Abu Serga church, accompanied him. The Hegumen at that time were called "Arch Ebaba "or the Hegumenos". They were both subject to awful torture, by the Umayyad Caliph, because the Copts had supported the Ikhshidid upon reaching Fostat, consequently, the Pope was arrested together with some Bishops, and priests to pressurize Copts.

The manuscript mentions that:” Father Moyesis was arrested with the Pope, and when we reached his tent, a fearful guard with a sword approached us, and they came with us upon the king’s order. He observed us, and asked which one was the Pope? We said, here he is, so he ordered to bring him forth.... The pious Father, Pope Michael, stood facing Marwan, and was looking towards Egypt, and his enemy, while the Khorasanians were watching him, and all Egyptians gathered at the seashore, cursing Marwan.

The remaining Christians in Egypt had told the Khorasanians, this is our father the Pope, is detained by the infidel Marwan, and we cannot know what his action can be.... /.... Hawthara the infidel, was telling Marwan that this Pope had said, be strong, and God shall seize the kingdom from Marwan, and give it to his enemies and similar contexts. Then Marwan ordered to pull out the Pope’s beard and throw it in the sea..../.... by 6 o’clock of that day the Pope stood

beardless and Father Moyesis took the punishment aforementioned, until the time mentioned, but the loving God of people, blessed his heart with a vision, where the two martyrs St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, surrounded by God's Grace, Dressed as two knights from the king's army, were crossing the sea on their horses, no one saw them but him till they stood in front of Marwan and told him, why are you here while your enemies have reached the west, and no one saw them but Marwan and father Moyesis"¹¹



Pope Shenouda the First, the 55th Pope, 9th century:

On December 27, 858 AC, Bishops and people were gathered in Abu Serga church in Egypt, on first of Tobi, and they choose Pope Shenouda as a successor for Pope Kozma. The Two Martyrs' Church of Ss. Sergius and Bacchus, was mentioned as "Cathalicae" which means cathedral.



¹¹ History of The Patriarchs of The Coptic church of Alexandria, III, P. 170 (424)-174 (428)

Pope Abram the Syrian, 62nd Pope, 11th century

In the Biography of Pope Abram Ibn Zaraa, the Syrian, Patriarch no.62, by Father Michael, Bishop of Tanis, (year 767 Martyrs/1051 AC), about the incident of selecting this Pope, on Christmas day, 29 Koiak, year 691 Martyrs/25 December 974 AC, at this church:

“After the death of Pope Mina, the Papal Chair remained empty. Bishops from rural and Upper Egypt, writers, and Alexandria’s clergymen, gathered to appoint a replacement. They spent several days without agreeing upon the right person to be nominated as the new Pope. There was this wealthy Syrian trader, named Abram Ibn Zaraa, he was charitable to the widows, the poor and the weak. He was an elderly man, with a beard that reached his chest like Our Father Abram the first. He had amiable relations with King Al Muizz, and his men, for his good merchandize and trading business relations with them, he was also appreciated and popular among the Arachna.

People were gathered at St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church – the cathedral- at Kasr El Shamaa, with the priests and Bishops for the feast celebrations, then Abram came to pray, and one of the priests pointed out to a bishop saying, here is the one you are seeking for the reform of the Patriarchy, the one who is worthy, and sent by God. Some heard what had been said, and approved of it but did not react, then one of the priest’s friend called him forth, and once he joined them they started cheering, this is God’s chosen one. They then detained him in iron chains. Abram cried, and wept declaring that he

was not worthy, and then he was taken to Alexandria where he was declared as the New Pope¹².

In Pope Abram the Syrian's, Pope 62, biography, about his selection as Patriarch: "After the death of Pope Mina, the Papal Chair remained empty. Bishops from rural and Upper Egypt, writers, and Alexandria's clergymen, gathered to appoint a replacement. They spent several days without finding the right person to be nominated as the new Pope. There was this wealthy Syrian trader named Abram Ibn Zaraa, he was charitable to the widows, the poor and the weak. He was an elderly man with a beard that reached his chest like Our Father Abram the first.

He had amiable relations with King Al Muizz, and his men. People were gathered at Abu Serga church – the cathedral-, with the priests and Bishops for the feast celebrations, then Abram came to pray and one of the priests pointed out to a bishop saying, appoint this man. One of Priests called him forth, claiming he needed his advice about an issue, and once he got there, they detained him in iron chains. Abram cried saying that he was not worthy, but he was taken to Alexandria and declared as the new Pope¹³.



¹² History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church known as the History of the Sacred Church by Sawiris ibn al-Mu'afia "Bishop of Ashmounin", Volume II, Part II, published by Yassa Abdel-Masih, Aziz Suriel Attia, and Asold Bramster, Cairo 1948, page 91.

¹³ Manuscript No. 258, Maymer in the Library of Al-Soryan Monastery, biography of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, by Bishop Yousab "Bishop of Fowa" paper 80 front.

Announcement of the Reconstruction of Abu Serga's Church, and St. Barbra's Church, before the year 761 Martyrs/1044 AC

The announcement of the reconstruction of Abu Serga Church, and St. Barbara's Church, came during the era of minister Abi el Sorour Yohana ibn Youssef Al Abah, (martyred Wednesday 25 Hator, 761 Martyrs/21 November 1044 AC), the secret keeper of Al-Mustansir Billah, the Fatimid Caliph, (1036-1094 AC), in several manuscripts. **We will mention some of them as follows:**

A) Manuscript no. 645, Serial/39 History, at the Cathedral in Azbakeya – Mimar (2): Explanation of the construction of St. Barbra, and Abu Serga Churches.

Date mentioned at the last page is Abib 9, 1434 Martyrs/1718 AC, illustrated by El Moalem Girgis, and copied by the deacon Bishara, page 16 back.¹⁴

B) Manuscript no. 12, History section, preserved at the Library of St. Anthony's monastery – Red Sea:

The announcement of the reconstruction of churches, of Abu Serga, and St. Barbra, came during the times of Minister Ibn el Abah, dated year (1485 Martyrs/1768/69 AC), illustrated and copied by Boutros Ghobrial, page 127, line 13, 16x 11cm.



¹⁴ Marcos Semeka Pasha, with the assistance of Yassa Abdel-Masih, Index of the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Coptic Museum, The Cathedral, the most important churches in Cairo and Alexandria, and Egyptian monasteries, Part II, Volume I, Cairo 1942, p. 293.

Pope Christodolos, the 66th Patriarch, 11th Century

In 763 Martyrs/year 1047 AC: St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, the Cathedral in Egypt:

In the biography of Pope Christodolos, the 66th Patriarch, after being appointed as Pope in Alexandria, in Kiahk 763 Martyrs, and after his arrival to Egypt in Toba 763 Martyrs/January 1047 AC), “After the anointment of Pope Christodolos, in St Macarius monastery, and after leaving Alexandria he came to Egypt. All previous Patriarchs held the tradition to be anointed as well, in St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, the Church in Kasr el Sahmee, as it was the cathedral in Egypt.

As the Pope reached Fostat, all clergymen were gathered at the Lady’s church – known as the “Suspended Church” – at Kasr el Shamee, they resented that the Pope would be anointed in Abu Serga - a Bishop’s church -, not at the Lady’s church. A conflict and a dispute ignited among the priests of the two churches, and finally the Pope’s anointment took place at the Lady’s Church, (Suspended Church), in the presence of twenty-four pious Bishops.

Father Filathaous, Bishop of Egypt joined the Mass prayers with the Pope. Meanwhile, in Abu Serga Church, the Archdeacon Abi el Farah al Tars, refrained from mentioning the Pope’s name during mass for a whole week, upon the latter’s attempt to change the anointment tradition and considered him not dedicated to his church, until finally the Pope came and prayed the Mass, clarified the misunderstanding and apologized explaining that he was obliged to choose the Lady’s Church (Suspended Church), to prevent any

escalation of further disputes among the clergymen of both churches¹⁵.

Also, in the biography of Pope Christodolos, 66th Patriarch, “Upon his anointment in Alexandria in Kiahk, year 763 Martyrs, and upon his arrival to Old Cairo in Toba, year 763 Martyrs/January 1047 AC.

“When Pope Christodolos left St. Macarius Monastery to Old Cairo to be anointed there, the tradition was to carry it out at Abu Serga church, as it was the Cathedral of Egypt. When he arrived, the priests of the Lady’s Church (Suspended Church), were gathered and accused him of leaving his people’s church to be anointed in a Bishop’s church. A dispute then occurred among the priests of both churches, and finally the Pope was anointed at the Lady’s Church, with twenty-four pious bishops present. The Archdeacon, of Abu Serga Church, refrained from mentioning the Pope’s name at the altar during Mass, as he saw that he had broken the tradition. Finally, the Pope came to the church to pray the Mass, and mended the situation”.



¹⁵ Manuscript No. 597 serial /12 history, in Cathedral Library at Azbakeya, Part III of Patriarchs' biography (66-72). history copy of 28 Pashons 991 m (23 May, 1275) at Abu-Makar monastery, in comparison with the printed "History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church" known as the History of the Sacred Church by Sawiris ibn al-Mu'afia, Volume II, Part III, 1959, by Mawhoub Ibn Mansour Ibn Mufraj Al-Iskandarani Deacon, paper 14, printed, page 168-169.

The Bishops' and Arachnas' Congress to appoint Pope Macarius the 2nd, 69th Patriarch - 12th Century

In the biography of Pope Macarius the 2nd, Patriarch no. 69, in **manuscript No. 258**, at The Syrian monastery, the following was mentioned:” Archbishops and Arachna were gathered in Abu Serga church, to choose the Pope, and agreed on the 1st of November, 1102 AC, to appoint Pope Macarius”.

In 12th of May 1117 AC, Father Sinhut, the Bishop of Egypt, was deceased and his funeral was held at Abu Serga church, then he was buried in Habashy monastery, at Babylon al Darag area.

In July of the same year, Pope Macarius, gathered with the people, and the priests of the church itself, to choose a new Bishop to follow Father Sinhut. They prayed and held a ballot, and according to God's will, Father John (Youannis) was chosen, and was seated at Abu Serga church on the 14th of October 1117AC.

In the same **Manuscript No.258, at the Syrian Monastery, page 131 back**, they mention that Pope Ghobrial Ibn Turaik the Patriarch no. 70, in 1131 AC, had focused on the churches' interiors, so he set wooden panels (Altar Iconostas), at Philopater Marcorius church, and the Suspended church, since there were no wooden panels at the altar of any church but only at Abu Sergas'.

Therefore, the wooden iconostas were present at Abu Serga church before that date, but became popular at the era of Pope Ghobrial Ibn Turaik.



Martyrdom of St. Bashnouna

Pashons 24 /1 June 1164 AC

In the manuscript no. 597 – section 3, At the Cathedral’s Library in Azbakeya, and **manuscript no. 258** – page no. 139 back, at the Syrian Monastery: “While the army of Minster Shawar besieged Cairo, Bashnouna, the monk, happened to be in the market selling the products of his brother monks, and buying the necessary needs for their living. The soldiers arrested him, and demanded that he forsook his Christian faith. Bashnouna refused, and consequently, was subject to torture, then was burnt alive.

While Pope Johan (Youannis) the Fifth, the 72nd Patriarch, was leading the celebration mass, for the Visit of the Holy Family to Egypt, in Abu Serga church, as was the tradition for all Patriarchs, there came the Copts, carrying the torched body of Martyr Bashnouna. The Pope ordered to bury him at the church, and his relics remained there until God revealed its place in 1991 AC, upon the collapse of the Amble (pulpit) at the church’s nave. While restoring the amble (pulpit), the martyr’s body was found underneath, and is now preserved in a big tube at the church”.



The Discovery of Saint Mark & Pope Discorus's Icon inside the altar during restoration 2015

Manuscript no. 302 Arabic, Volume Four, kept at the National Library in Paris, mentions: what happened during choosing Pope Cyril Ibn Laqlaq, Patriarch no. 75 (1243 AC), where Abu Serga church played an important role during those events, and has been the residence place for Bishops, who travelled from distant Eparchies. Father Al Soni Aboul Magd, the church priest, who took a vital role at the time, was also a monk who dwelled there.

“In 1243 AC, some people claimed that Father Al Soni Aboul Magd, who was influential in matters of the state and the church, had stolen their properties, in spite that these properties were already in the church’s ownership. He was arrested and jailed, and the church’s properties were abolished despite the efforts to stop this action. Churches, and altars, annexed behind the main church from the east were destroyed. During that time, the church had possessed several buildings and altars that were demolished, to leave the church as it stands today.”

It was mentioned that: “In Egypt, at Abu Serga church, a monk who was known by the name El Soni Aboul Magd, son of Abil Farag, the church priest from Ghalil family, had become a monk at St. Anthony’s monastery. Upon being summoned by El Sultan, who hired him at the controlling office of Egypt he left the monastery and returned. He remained as a monk in this state position for years, then he resigned, and moved to live at the same church where he was previously ordained as a deacon. Abul Magd was a well-recognized figure, appreciated by the Muslims, due to his good deeds towards them during his state’s responsibilities, his honesty, and piousness. He was deemed a patriarch in the eyes of people who sought his council, his orders were enforced on churches, monasteries, and monks, his judgment regarding property management was

undisputable, as he had endeavored to erect numerous church buildings, and invested fruitfully in their properties"¹⁶.

Manuscript 740 serial 260 ritual, at the cathedral's library in Azbakeya, it is mentioned that on the date of preparing the Mayrun sacred oil, by Pope Mathew the 2nd, 1461 AC, at the named church of the cavern, on Thursday 21 Barmudah, 1177 Martyrs/16 April, 1461 AC.

“On that blessed Thursday 21st of Barmudah, of that year, was the memory of our Mary, the pure tender Lady, the bishops have agreed on bottling the needed quantity of the Holy Myrun, so they went to The Lady's Church in Rum Ally .../ page 210 front), Bishop Isaac chief of bishops, has filled an old glass flask, with approximately ten pounds of oil, corked it well, and packed it in a new palm basket, that was lined inside and out, it was then sent in the custody of Priest Girgis to the cavern church, when he was heading towards Old Cairo.”



Church during restoration 2015



¹⁶ Adel Y. Sidarus, Ibn ar-Rahibs, leben und werk, Ein Koptisch- arabischer, Enzyklopädist des 7/13 jahrhunderts, Klaus Schwarz Verlag.frieburg, 1975. Dokument 10: Die Koptische Patriarchengeschichte über den Vater des Ibn ar-Rāhib.

Western Voyagers Visits to the Church:

Trip of St. Francois the Voyager: Saint Francois the Monk, came to this holy Cavern, in 1330 AC, and repaired a sacred lamp that was placed in this holy spot, and was lit during the masses.

The lamp was a property of the Coptic Church till 1698 AC. The Venetian traders from Venice paid a good sum of money to those in charge of the church and acquired this sacred lamp.

Many travelers came to the church, specially the western pilgrims who visited Jerusalem, then came to visit the church afterwards. During the Crusade's wars, relationships between Egypt and the West was disrupted, and it became difficult to visit the church as most of Egypt's churches were closed down, until the French Chancellor Willplmi Bonemayn , intervened with the Sultan Al-Malik Al-nasir, to reopen the churches, in 1323 AC.

From the voyagers' reports: During the 17th and 18th centuries, it shows that the Franciscan - Owners of many nearby hospitals for years- were granted for a long period, the right to hold their Mass at the cavern, and obviously, they even had control over it for a while, (Primond 1744, Wenslabin 1672, Morison 1697, Lorenzo Cozza 171)

It seems that reason behind allowing the Franciscan to pray the mass at St. Sergius and St. Bacchus church, was a bargain made to allow Copts to build a small church in return, inside the Resurrection church in Jerusalem. By mid-18th century, the Catholic church had an altar there, never the less, they later had to pay the price for having the privilege to just enter the cavern “.

Vansilip mentions during his visit in 1672 AC, to the church:” Visit on Saturday 17 June, 1672 AC: The original text in French “I went and saw the church of St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, as per the report of Saeid Ibn Tarabik- Coptic secretary, narrated to the Caliph of Egypt, Abd El -Aziz ibn Marwan. I saw under this church as per the Coptic tradition, that it is constructed over a small cavern where the Holy Family had lived for a while, as mentioned by the Coptic translations.

This is a stone cavern, which contains some small columns on both sides, and it is comprised of three sections. The first section, has an old Baptism basin in the middle, the second section, contains a stone altar amidst the cavern, which is imbedded in the wall. Clergymen held masses there every now and then. It is believed, that this altar was inaugurated by the presence of Jesus Christ. The third section is a stone formation, also sanctified by the presence of Jesus Christ’s traces everywhere.

We have no accurate information regarding the era of the cavern’s formation, as mentioned in Apocrypha, it is from hundreds of years, and these stones were not decorated, as they are considered holy and can be an inspiration for voyagers, and Egyptian travelers.

These are some highlights, on one of the holy places in our beloved Egypt; God could give us life, not only to leave impressions on walls and stone, but on souls and spirits.

God may grant us sight, understanding, and life...

May His glory be for evermore



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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



□ Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

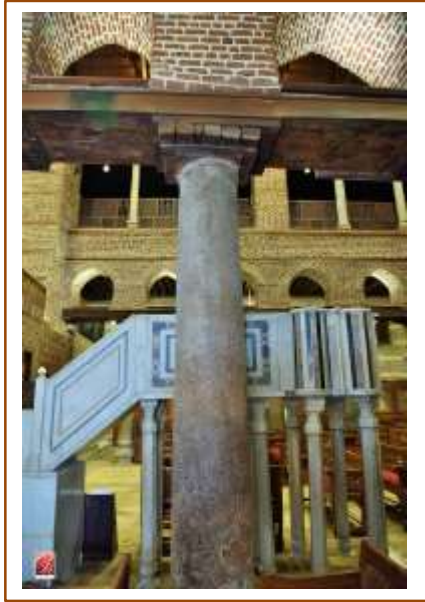


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

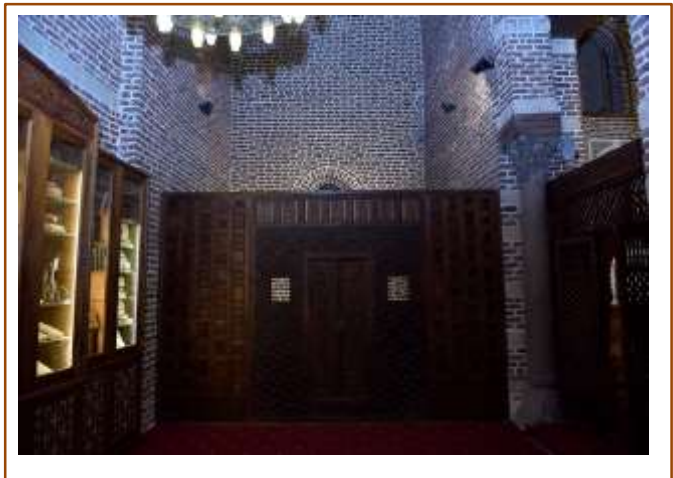


Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41

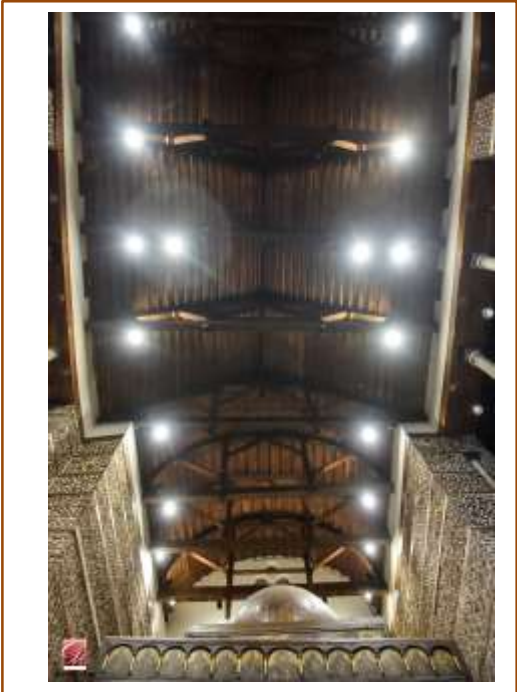


Figure 42

