

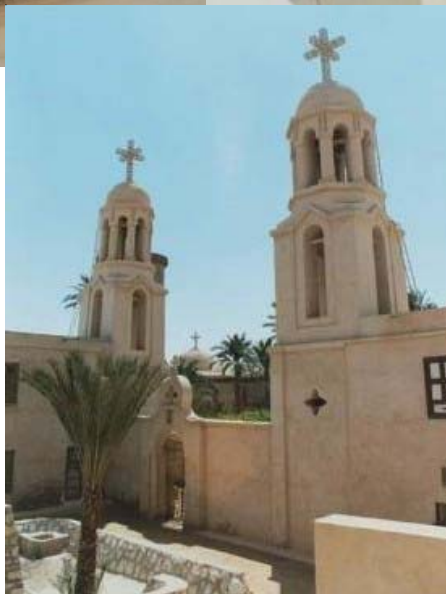


EL- BARAMUS

Monastery of the Virgin Mary

Dair El-Baramus in Wadi El Natrun

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*W*adi El Natrun (also known as *Scetis*) is located just west of the Nile Delta, about half-way between Cairo and Alexandria. The name refers to the natron salts that can be found here and which were used in Pharaonic times for the mummification of the dead.

*A*long the Eastern Desert, are the Monasteries of Saint Anthony and Saint Paul which are still active today. Wadi El Natrun was one of the places where early Christian monks retreated for meditation and contemplation. Currently, there are four active Coptic monasteries in Wadi El Natrun (St Macarius, St Bishoy, El Baramus

and El Soryan) but there used to be many more.

The word **"Baramus"** is a transliteration of the Coptic "Pa-Romeos" which means (of the Romans). The origin of this name is to be traced most probably to the famous Roman princes St. Maximus and Domitius, the sons of the Roman emperor Valentinian I (364-375 AD.), who retired to Wadi El-Natrun, embracing the ascetic life. Later St. Arsenius, also a Roman came to the Wadi El-Natrun about 394 A.D., took up his abode there and embraced the monastic life. This Arsenius had been tutor to Arcadius and Honorius, the sons of the Roman emperor Theodosius.



This monastery was dedicated to the Holy Virgin. It was the first monastic community in Wadi El-Natrun established by St. Macarius before 340 A.D.; at that time it was merely a group of cells and the church of St. Mary.

The Wall and the Old Gate



Vaulted Chamber overlooking the old gate

This monastery is quadrilateral, surrounded by high walls, which are 10 - 11 m height and 2 m in thickness. The original gate of the monastery is in the north wall. It opens on to a lofty vaulted passage, above which, is the gatehouse, so that the monks could give the desert Bedouins food without opening the gate of the monastery. Steps lead to an oblong barrel vaulted chamber from which a door opens on to the roof of the passage.

A new gate was opened in the east wall leading to the new farm outside the monastery. The main structures inside the walls of the monastery are the churches,

the refectory, the keep, and the cells, most of which are modern except for those in the south side of the vestigial church. These latter cells are ancient and roofed with vaults.

The Keep

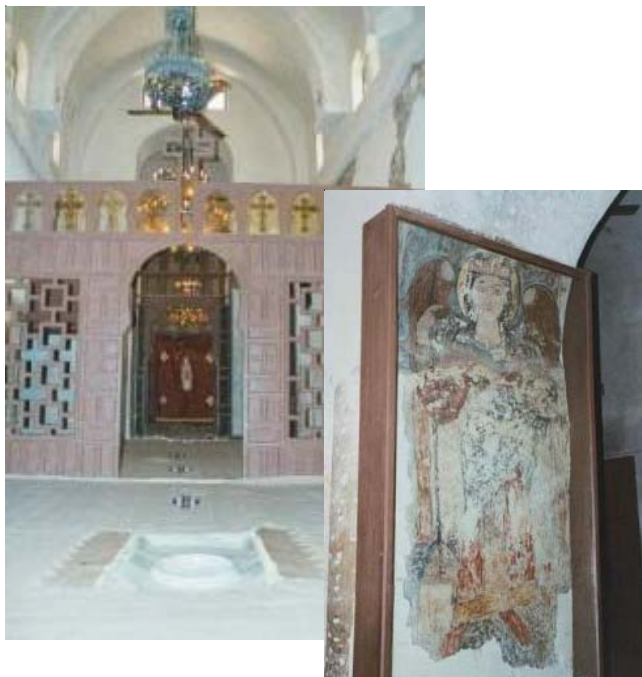


Steps leading to the well in the keep

As is customary, it contains a ground floor and a first and a second floor. It is entered at first floor level by a drawbridge. The ground and first floors are oblong in plan and are divided into two parts by a corridor with chambers on each side. On the second floor there is a church dedicated to the Archangel Michael as usual. Recently, in 1995, the monastery restored it under the supervision of the Egyptian Archaeological Department.



St Mary's Church



The Church of St. Mary

*T*his is the main church dedicated to the Virgin Mary and one of the oldest preserved churches in Wadi El Natrun. It is located in the eastern half of the monastery, south of the old tower. The ancient portions of the church belong to the seventh century. It has a small entrance covered with a vault in its north side, and another, larger quadrilateral entrance roofed with a dome in the south facade. The church is rectangular in the Coptic basilica style. It is divided into three sections: the sanctuaries, the khurus and the nave. The sanctuary of the chapel of St George - which is in the north west corner of the nave - occupies part of the west aisle. The nave is covered with a stone vault with upper

windows supported upon piers given the form of double columns. These piers are not in their original place because the nave was wider than the present one and covered with a wooden gabled roof.

*T*he chapel of St. Theodore lies against the north - west wall of the nave.

Against the north wall of the choir - which is at the head of the nave - there stands of feretory which contains the relics of St. Moses (The Black) and St. Isidore.

In the khurus, there is an entrance that leads up to the ambon which is in the nave. East of the choir, there are three sanctuaries open broadly to each other. In the middle of the nave, there is a large rectangular laqan.



*I*n 1986 by chance huge fragments of wall paintings (frescos) in the nave were discovered by the monks of the monastery. In 1988 a French - Netherlands Mission started work on these paintings. Three layers of paint have been discovered, the oldest of which is best preserved and seems furthermore of the best quality. They depict the Annunciation by Archangel



Gabriel to the Holy Virgin, the visitation between St. Mary and St. Elizabeth, fragments of both a Nativity scene and the wedding at Cana and a great composition of Christ's entry to Jerusalem. On the walls of the sanctuary, many wall paintings of the holy fathers have been found.



A door in the south well of St Mary's church leads to the old refectory of the monastery.

It contains a brick table and a lectern also built of brick. The kitchens and the store rooms adjoin

this refectory.

Church of St. John The Baptist



The Church of St. John the Baptist lies adjacent to the east gate.

It was constructed on the site of another older chapel of St. Apollo and St. Abeab the features of which have now been eliminated. The church includes three altars and the nave is divided into nine bays and covered with domes supported upon four quadrilateral piers. It was built by Ibrahim Al - Gohari, who died in 1795.



Church of St. Moses the Black:



This church is located outside the old monastery walls. It is built recently to host the liturgies for the monastery's visitors and the workers.

The New Wall and Gate

A new wall was built to include the



entire monastery's land. A need for this wall arose when the areas surrounding the monastery became part of a reclamation project funded by the Egyptian Government. Outside these new walls you can spot farms all around you.



The road leading to the old monastery

The Retreat House



The retreat house hosts the youth who seek to spend a couple of days in the monastery. They stay under the supervision of one of the monks and follow a daily schedule similar to the daily routine of a monk. They start with praises at 4 am, followed by a liturgy. After breakfast, they spend a couple of hours in an assigned

work. Lunch is followed by free time, agpeya prayers, retreat and meditation in the desert and a spiritual word from a monk. This house was the first step for many current monks in the monastery. It brought them nearer to the monastic life and increased its love in their hearts.

New Buildings in the Monastery

The monastery contains a library that has many manuscripts and modern books. It also comprises modern structures with the cells of the monks, distributed in a number of rows along the walls and the courtyards, a rest house, a guesthouse, and buildings of the farm annexes.

Monastery of St. Moses the Black



Just north of El-Baramus Monastery, the remains of another monastery, probably Monastery of St. Moses the Black, can



be seen under the sand. In the vicinity of the monastery, there is a vestigial mound on which Prince Omar Tousoun put a sign bearing the words "Monastery of Anba Mousa."

The Netherlands Institute of Archaeology started to excavate this hill in 1994.

References:

1- Bishop Samuel, Arch Badie Habib: Ancient Coptic Churches and Monasteries in Delta, Sinai and Cairo, Institute of Coptic Studies, 1996.

2- Dr. Edouard Lambert, Dr. Antoine Khater: Coptic Art, Lehnert & Landrock, 1989

Photos by: George Guirguis



There is nothing we can offer to God more precious than good will. But what is good will? To have good will is to experience concern for someone else's adversities as if they were our own, to give thanks for our neighbor's prosperity as for our own; to believe that another person's loss is our own, and also that another's gain is ours; to love a friend in God, and bear with an enemy out of love, to do to no one what we do not want to suffer ourselves, and to refuse to no one what we rightly want for ourselves; to choose to help a neighbor who is in need not only to the whole extent of our ability, but even beyond our means. What offering is richer, what offering is more substantial than this one? What we are offering to God on the altar of our hearts is the sacrifice of ourselves.

· St. Gregory the Great ·