

An Introduction to the Red Monastery Church

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The Red Monastery Church is an extraordinary monument, a beautiful materialization of asceticism and authority. A community of Christian men made the decision a millennium and a half ago to build a large church, thus asserting the social centrality of their ascetic establishment at the Red Monastery. A significant part of that original monument and some of its major renovations still survive in astonishingly good condition, although the church has until very recently not received the renown that is its due. It was designed as a triconch basilica: a building with a rectangular nave, divided into three aisles by two rows of columns, leading to a three-lobed sanctuary. The nave, where the congregation attended religious services, is separated from the sanctuary, which was reserved for priests, by a raised platform with a screen and an interior façade wall. The basic model for the Red Monastery Church was a larger church built a few decades earlier at the nearby White Monastery. Though the trefoil design was popular in the late Roman world, no other example survives in such an excellent state of preservation. Additionally, the early Byzantine decoration of the sanctuary is almost intact and includes rich architectural sculpture, imposing figural compositions, and extensive ornamental paintings.

A fortuitous conjunction of factors accounts for the superb state of the Red Monastery Church. The arid climate of Egypt certainly played a role in its preservation, but probably equally important was a decision made by its monastic owners at some unknown point in the medieval period. Presumably anxious about structural instability in the triconch, they built enormous mud-brick bulwarks within the curves of each apse, up to and supporting the semidomes. These additions covered the sanctuary walls and engulfed the columns and capitals almost entirely, thus protecting their fragile painted surfaces for about half a millennium, before being removed in the early twentieth century.

It seems at first surprising that this dynamic building should be missing even from most specialized, scholarly literature. One reason for this absence dates back to the early Byzantine period and involves the history of Christian monasticism, a mode of existence that began in the eastern Mediterranean around 300 C.E. One of its earliest practitioners was Antony of Egypt (d. 356), whose fame spread throughout the Roman Empire thanks to an account written by Athanasios, patriarch of Alexandria (d. 373). The popularity of the *Vita Antonii* focused the attention of Christians throughout the empire on the monks of Egypt and their emerging monastic institutions. Narratives about these spiritual heroes, circulating in both Greek and Latin,

inspired numerous travelers to search out holy ascetics in person and sometimes even to live among them. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Sayings of the Desert Fathers), *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (History of the Monks of Egypt), and *Historia Lausiaca* (Lausiac History), all originally written in Greek, were instrumental in immortalizing the names of well over a hundred influential monks active in the fourth and fifth centuries. Some of the most famous of their desert settlements, including Scetis (Wadi al-Natrun), Nitria, and Kellia, were not far from Alexandria and comparatively easy to reach. In contrast, the founders and leaders of an enormous and powerful monastic association in Upper Egypt remained very little known outside of the province. This federation was centered at the White Monastery, and included the nearby Red Monastery. The principal reason for the lack of knowledge about this large community was that narratives of the men who created and shaped these institutions, Pcol (fourth century), Pshoi (fourth century), and Shenoute (d. 465), were not written in Greek or Latin, but in Coptic, the last phase of the Egyptian language. Thus, in the absence of a textual record comprehensible to the majority of the empire, people from outside of Egypt were largely unaware of their existence.

The White Monastery Federation is best known for its charismatic and domineering third leader, Shenoute, although Pcol (Shenoute's uncle) actually founded the central establishment. About three kilometers (two miles) farther north, a man named Pshoi instituted the community that later became the Red Monastery. A women's monastery was also part of this association. Its location can now be confidently placed within the nearby Ptolemaic temple at Atripe (Athribis), thanks to the discovery on site of an early Byzantine, low-relief, painted sculpture showing eight men and one woman, most of whom are dressed in the uniform of the White Monastery Federation. In addition to the three monastic settlements, a few senior ascetics also lived as hermits in the vicinity. The popular names for the two men's communities, the White and Red Monasteries (Dayr al-Abyad and Dayr al-Ahmar), are first attested in the medieval period. Presumably they derive from the building materials used to construct the exterior walls of the two monumental churches at the heart of each settlement, white limestone and red brick.

A few observations about Egyptian monasticism in general will help place the Red Monastery in its proper historical context. The ideal as crafted by literary sources and artistic representations cast these early Egyptian ascetics as angels who made the arid desert to which they fled a verdant garden. They were heroes, radiant with light, who voluntarily died to the world and its pleasures by embracing death in advance of their physical demise. This transformative way of life was intentional and creative. Monastics very deliberately aimed to reorder existence, even to overturn nature. These men and women attempted to overcome desire for such basic needs as food, sex, and sleep. They strove to perfect themselves as much as possible to obtain everlasting life in heaven.

Egyptian monastic models varied tremendously. The methods of Antony and Pachomios (d. 346) have come to represent the two extremes. Antony lived much of his life in solitude as a hermit, retreating farther and farther into the desert, away from the Nile and its inhabitants. In contrast, his contemporary Pachomios organized his followers into a tightly knit group that lived, worked, prayed, and ate together in accordance with written monastic rules. So successful was his *cenobitic* (life in common) approach that, by the time of his death, Pachomios led nine men's and two women's communities. The Pachomian rule, as translated into Latin by Jerome (d. 420), later served as the basis for that used by the Benedictines, which in turn became the foundation for Western medieval monasticism. It was also instrumental in shaping the ascetic community of the White Monastery Federation. Yet the divisions between the eremitic and cenobitic forms of monasticism were rarely as clear-cut as the two standard models suggest. Followers of men like Antony might form large communities in which members lived alone in cells arranged in close proximity to each other. Conversely, hermits could live in solitude apart from the cenobitic establishments to which they belonged, as happened at Shenoute's federation.

The Red Monastery Church: Orientation

The Red Monastery Church as it now exists represents two major phases of construction. The dramatic triconch sanctuary, including its facade wall, and the adjoining side rooms were all built in the early Byzantine period, though there are some vital medieval and early twentieth-century structural interventions. Our dating of the church to the late fifth century rests largely on a close analysis of the architectural sculpture in the church by the architectural historian Dale Kinney. The tall exterior walls of the church, which surround both the sanctuary and the area of the nave, were rebuilt sometime between the tenth century and 1301, although they include two monumental sculpted portals reused from the earlier structure. The fortified tower on the southern side of the building is approximately contemporary with the medieval walls. The galleries and roof of the medieval nave no longer survive. It is possible that they were severely damaged during an earthquake. At some point after the collapse of the roof and galleries, the sanctuary was completely enclosed, and it functioned as a self-contained church, with an altar in the eastern lobe, behind a screen. In the early twentieth century, the late medieval wall enclosing the sanctuary was removed and replaced by a new wall that incorporated the late medieval portal.

The triconch design of the sanctuary includes three apses rather than the typical single one, which creates a more complex space and provides a far broader field for large-scale images than exists in most church sanctuaries. The early Byzantine paintings date from between the late fifth and the sixth or early seventh centuries. They are located in the triconch, the facade wall, and in the side rooms of the sanctuary. There were three principal phases of early Byzantine paintings, as well as a much less comprehensive fourth phase. Despite the often-repeated, but incorrect characterization of Christian wall paintings in Egypt as frescoes, they are in fact made with tempera or encaustic (wax-based) paint applied to dry plaster. The stratigraphic ordering of the phases depends on the plaster layer (rendering). For the most part, there is a close correlation

between the plaster and paint layers of the Byzantine phases, although the paintings of the first phase may have been applied on the earliest rendering in different stages. All three of the major early Byzantine periods of work included substantial areas of ornamental paintings, especially the second phase. The smoke of lamps, and of incense used in the liturgy, darkens surfaces quickly. During the course of conservation, little or no buildup of soot and dust was discovered between the Byzantine paint layers. This observation makes it possible to assert with confidence that there were minimal lapses in time between the four Byzantine programs; all were probably done within about a hundred years or even less. Additional paintings from the medieval period probably range from the tenth to the late thirteenth centuries, and comprise at least four phases of work. These later paintings are found primarily on the nave walls, but some are also located on the façade of the sanctuary.

A Diachronic Overview: The Red Monastery Church in Context, Fifth to Early Twenty-First Century

The region around the Red Monastery is now lush with fields and palm trees owing to year-round irrigation made possible by the Aswan High Dam. In the early Byzantine period, it was desert; near the Nile and a major, cosmopolitan city, Panopolis, but nevertheless removed from the traditional world of the living. Today, Panopolis is called Akhmim, and its urban fabric, on the east bank, is complemented by the large modern city of Sohag, on the west bank. The Red Monastery sits farther west, at the foot of a limestone escarpment, a sedimentary layer dating to the Eocene period that is the residue of prehistoric seas.

The history of the Red Monastery church is inextricably connected to that of the White Monastery Federation as a whole. Life in all three of the monasteries that together constituted the federation was regimented and supervised to an extreme degree. Male and female monastics had little contact with each other, for the most part. Entrants abandoned their lives and social ties in favor of a new monastic community and reality. The completeness of this transition is perhaps best conveyed by the requirement that they surrender their clothes at the gatehouse in exchange for a monastic uniform. Within two or three months, they signed a document giving all personal possessions to the federation. Their daily routine followed a stricter version of the Pachomian model. The *Canons* of Shenoute contain approximately five hundred rules that ordered every aspect of life. The community was divided into groups that lived in, and were identified with, residential buildings called “houses” within the three compounds. The monastics slept in communal cells. They rose before dawn and went to church. Here they performed rounds of prayers while weaving reed mats and baskets. The monks then returned to their houses for additional prayer and handiwork. This activity lasted until about midday, when they moved to the refectory for their major meal of the day. Among the foods mentioned in the *Canons* are gruel, a small loaf, a few beans, and cucumbers; cooked food was offered one day each week, except during periods of fasting, such as Lent, when it was available only to the sick. After eating, some time was apparently devoted to individual projects, but in the afternoon the monks

returned to their houses for more prayer and handiwork. This was followed by another large assembly in the church with more of the same. Each stage of this daily regimen was announced by the loud knocking of a mallet on a wooden post or board. The number of rounds of prayer at each meeting was precisely determined, and the number of items woven by each individual was carefully recorded. Twice a week the community celebrated the liturgy in the church. Four weeks of each year were spent on “scrutiny” of the monastics’ lives, involving the reading aloud of all of the rules. Whether the “angelic life” of the average monastic was as radiant as the literary sources suggest is an open question. Certainly not everyone could live up to the ideal, and in the White Monastery Federation, those who failed were sometimes punished. As is indicated by this overview, the central church featured significantly in daily life. In each of the two male monasteries, it was by far the largest, most elaborate, and most expensive building.

Most members of the federation stayed within their walled compounds, but the residents of these monasteries nevertheless interacted with the world around them. When the Red Monastery Church was constructed, Egypt was part of the early Byzantine empire, and Panopolis was far more involved in Mediterranean culture than Sohag and Akhmim are today. Owing to the greater speed of sailing, compared to overland travel, the Mediterranean and Nile made Upper Egypt more accessible from Constantinople than many other places physically far closer to the capital. The Byzantine aristocracy, some with large estates in Egypt, traveled frequently, as did many other people in the empire for reasons of work, trade, and pilgrimage. Like other regions, Egypt had a distinct local character. For example, many residents spoke Coptic. By the fifth century, however, Egypt was thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the empire. Panopolis, renowned as a center of literary culture and textile manufacture, was also the home of people who became famous and powerful in the capital and far beyond it. We should therefore think of the residents of Egypt, at least the one-third of the population that lived in urban centers, as being as much Byzantines as Egyptians.

With the Arab conquest in 641, the political status of Egypt as part of the Byzantine Empire came to an abrupt end. Many aspects of life remained essentially the same, at least at first. The country and its people, however, changed in the following centuries. Arabic rather than Greek became the language of government and trade; Fustat (Old Cairo) replaced Alexandria as the capital; taxes were no longer sent to Constantinople but to Damascus and later Baghdad; and Islam replaced Christianity as the official religion of the country. Some Christians converted, but the adoption of Islam was a relatively slow process in Egypt. In contrast, the Arabic language spread more rapidly. By about the ninth or tenth century, many Christian Egyptians had begun speaking Arabic as their first language. As they participated more and more in the Muslim-dominated society of the Nile Valley, they increasingly adopted the language, manners, and customs of their rulers. These changes in lifestyle, in combination with the maintenance of traditional beliefs and practices, created the Arabized Christian culture known as Coptic.

In the medieval period, the fortunes of the Copts rose and fell. The White Monastery Federation survived at least into the 1340s. The fourteenth century proved to be a particularly difficult time for Christians in Egypt. By its end their numbers and resources had been greatly reduced. At some point before the federation's demise, the roofs of the Red and White Monastery churches both collapsed, and the eastern ends of the buildings were enclosed and remodeled to function as complete churches, occupying considerably smaller footprints. The outlying monastic structures were eventually abandoned and fell into ruin. Some time later, the open-air naves of the two monasteries were opportunistically adapted into villages, housing local priests and their families.

Very few Westerners visited the Red and White Monastery churches in the late medieval and early modern periods. By the early twentieth century, a few foreigners with an interest in historical architecture and its documentation had recognized the importance of these monuments, as well as the fact that they were in a perilous state of neglect. As a result, the two churches were brought to the attention of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe (hereafter referred to as the Comité), Egypt's first official organization concerned with the preservation of historic monuments. The Comité undertook an extensive restoration of the two buildings between 1909 and 1912. Without the Comité's efforts, both monuments would today be little more than ruins.

The next major transformative phase began in the late twentieth century with the reappropriation for monastic use of the ancient sites of the White and Red Monasteries, including their historic churches. The speed of change in this area, as in all Egypt, rapidly increased in this period, and the trend shows no sign of diminishing. It is driven by many factors, not least of which is massive, escalating population growth.

I first conceived of conserving the Red Monastery Church in 1999. When I walked into the church for the first time, the walls were blackened with smoke and dust. Pews, chandeliers, fluorescent lights, fans, curtains, rugs, an early modern sanctuary screen, and recent icons crowded the triconch. The majesty of the architecture and the dynamic space it shaped were nevertheless breathtaking. It was also apparent that most of the interior was covered with early Byzantine paintings. In those initial moments looking around the sanctuary, I recognized the importance of the monument and the urgent need for the conservation of its wall paintings. Having had the great privilege to work with two master conservators, Adriano Luzi and Luigi De Cesaris, at the Red Sea monasteries dedicated to Saint Antony and Saint Paul, I knew that the obscured paintings could be cleaned and brought back to life.

I submitted my first formal application for funding to the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) in 2000. That year, at the International Association of Coptic Studies Congress in Leiden, I also convened a group of scholars to plan interdisciplinary work involving the Red and White Monasteries. In 2001 the Byzantine Studies Program of Dumbarton Oaks showed great

foresight by providing crucial initial funding for preliminary documentation and project development before any spectacular results were visible. Following these initial steps, the founder of the St. Mark Foundation for Coptic History Studies, Fawzy G. Estafanous and I successfully nominated the two churches for inclusion on the World Monuments Watch **2002 List of 100 Most Endangered Sites**, raising awareness of their importance for world heritage, as well as publicizing their threatened states. In 2003 ARCE agreed to conserve the enclosed eastern end of the Red Monastery church. With the support of the American people, USAID paid for all of the conservation in the monument, its aim to increase tourism in the region and stimulate the local economy. ARCE administered the USAID grants for the entirety of the conservation project, devoting a massive amount of time, expertise, and effort to the work for well over a decade.

Luzi and De Cesaris completed the first test cleanings in the Red Monastery church in 2002. These two extraordinarily talented directors of conservation sadly passed away during the course of the project, Luzi in 2003 and De Cesaris in 2011. After Luzi's death, De Cesaris and Alberto Sucato, later joined by Emiliano Ricchi, directed the conservation. Sucato, Ricchi, and their team persevered with tremendous fortitude in the wake of De Cesaris's death, completing ten years of fine art conservation in 2012. Site work comprised extended campaigns involving as many as thirteen conservators at any one time, living for almost half of each year away from their homes and families. The project took over 5,700 individual days of skilled conservation, entailing consolidation, cleaning, and aesthetic reintegration. Substantial additional work was subsequently carried out by Nicholas Warner, including building conservation and preparation for ecclesiastical use. In 2015 Pietro Gaspari, with Warner's assistance, laser scanned the Red Monastery Church, creating an exceptionally high-quality three-dimensional record of the building.

For more on the White Monastery Federation see:

Elizabeth S. Bolman, ed. ***The Red Monastery Church: Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt***. Yale University Press and the American Research Center in Egypt, 2016.

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Ariel G. López. *Shenoute of Atripe and the Uses of Poverty: Rural Patronage, Religious Conflict and Monasticism in Late Antique Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

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