

MOSES OF NISIBIS AND HIS WORKS IN THE SYRIANS MONASTERY

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ABSTRACT

During its long history, the monastery of the Syrians in Wadi Natrun was usually one of the most important Coptic monastic establishments dedicated to the Theotokos in Egypt. In fact, its importance is due to its precious and rare manuscripts, its wall paintings, its different and ancient architectural buildings and because of the big number of this mixing of the Coptic and foreigner monks who lived together within it. Moses of Nisibis was among those who lived in this monastery which became prosperous during his time. Who was this person? When his name was mentioned for the first time? What are the different elements that he added in the monastery? What are the most important events that took place during his mission? The purpose for which the present paper is prepared is to focus on Moses of Nisibis who was one of the most important persons who visited the Syrians Monastery during the fourth century AH./tenth century AD. I will begin my discussion by providing an overview of this person and then by describing its most interesting works and additions which are still visible until now in some of the buildings of the monastery specially the two wooden doors richly decorated and which lead to the old khurus and the main chapel of the archeological church of the Holy Virgin Mary in addition to the uncommon stucco decoration which is executed in the same church as well as the small church of the forty martyrs. Moreover, I will try to deal with the most important events of Moses of Nisibis' career. I hope that scholars who are specialized in this field and those in other areas may find something of interest in this paper.

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During its long history, the monastery of the Syrians in Wadi Natrun was usually one of the most important Coptic monastic establishments dedicated to the Theotokos in Egypt (Pls. I/a, II) as it offers several opportunities to well study, understand and follow the evolution of the Coptic history and art through the different eras. It was visited by several kings and travelers and it was also mentioned by many historians like TAQIYY AL-DIN AL-MAQRIZI¹ († 845 AH./1441 AD.). The Syrians monastery has several names and it was usually inhabited by monks even during the Black Death that took place in Egypt in 749-750 AH./1348-1349 AD. In fact, its importance is due to its precious and rare manuscripts, its wall paintings, its different and ancient architectural buildings and the big number of this mixing of the Coptic and foreigner monks who lived together inside it. Moses of Nisibis (295-332 AH./907-943 AD.) was among one of the most important abbots who lived in this monastery² which became prosperous during his time. But who was this saint? When his name was mentioned for the first time? What are the different elements that he added in the monastery? What are the most important events that took place during his mission? The purpose for which the present paper is written is to focus on the personality of Moses of Nisibis who was one of the most important persons who visited in the Syrians Monastery during the fourth century AH./ tenth century AD. I will begin my discussion by providing a brief overview of this person and then by describing his most interesting works and additions which are still visible until now in the buildings of the monastery specially the two wooden doors preceding the *khurus* and the main chapel of the archeological church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in addition to the

¹ المقریزی، کتاب المواعظ والاعتبار بذكر الخطط والآثار، ج.1-2، طبعة بولاق، القاهرة، 1835 هـ، 509؛

O. H. E. BURMESTER, *A Guide to the Monasteries of the Wadi'n-Natrun*, Cairo, 1954; OMAR TOUSSOUN, *Sur le Wadi Natroun, ses moines et ses couvents*, Alexandrie, 1931.

²G. GABRA, *Coptic Monasteries. Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*, with a Historical Overview by T. VIVIAN, Cairo-New York, 2002, 48.

stucco decoration which is executed in the same church as well as the small church of the forty martyrs³ in the same monastery (Pls. I/b, III). Moreover, I will deal with the most important events of his career.

Moses of Nisibis was born in the second half of the third century AH./the ninth century AD. in Nisibis⁴ in Syria⁵. For the first time, his name was mentioned in a manuscript dating back to 295 AH./907 AD. and he was one of the superiors of the monastery. According to L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, the presence of Moses of Nisibis is mentioned for the first time in 294-295 AH./906-907 AD. and perhaps in this time, he wasn't yet an archimandrite⁶; a function that he trained for long years until his death in the middle of the fourth century AH./the tenth century AD. The name of Moses of Nisibis is also written in another manuscript dating back to 332 AH./943 AD. where he received the following title: "Our glory and the ornament of all the church"⁷. After this year, we didn't receive any information about this person.

Furthermore, Moses of Nisibis was a well known hegoumenos who came to live in this monastery during the first half of the fourth century AH./the tenth century AD. which is considered to be the golden age of the Syrians presence. His period was the best one in the history of the monastery and it is well documented. In fact, during his time, the Syrians Monastery flourished a lot.

³Venerated on the 13th of Barmahat/22nd of March, they were originated from Sebastis and they were living during the rule of king Afyanus named Licinius (Litiki) who was one of the officers of Constantine. R. BASSET, "Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte), IV. Les mois de barmahat, barmoudah et bachons. Texte arabe publié, traduit et annoté par R. BASSET, PO, XVI/2, Turnhout-Belgique (1922), 222-223; F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt Faith and Life*, Cairo, 1970, 191.

⁴ J. LEROY, "Moïse de Nisibe" in: *Symposium Syriacum 1972*, coll. OCA 197, Rome (1974), 463-464.

⁵ G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, 197.

⁶ L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, "La présence des syriens dans le Wadi al-Natrun", *ParOr.*, XXIII, Paris (1998), 180-181.

⁷ J. LEROY, *Moïse*, 463-464.

Before his arrival to the Syrians Monastery, the role of the Tagritains was going on and the relations with Mesopotamia continued. Like the Tagritains before him, Moses of Nisibis was usually busy by the construction and the laying-out of the church and all the buildings within the monastery.

He undertook the construction of the church of the forty martyrs of Sebastis. In fact, this church is distinguished by its stucco decoration which is inspired from the earlier iraqien artistic style introduced in Egypt by Ahmad ibn Tulun⁸ and which is finding now inside his mosque in Cairo. This decoration is also still visible in the three eastern chapels of the church of the forty martyrs of Sebastis⁹. The decoration of the northern chapel is depicting Saint Mark the evangelist in the center of the apse. In the middle of the central chapel, the Holy Virgin Mary enthroned is holding Jesus Christ the Infant in her lap. The southern chapel is decorated by the figure of Athanasius I¹⁰ (295-372 AD.) the Coptic saint and the 20th

⁸ S. FLURY, "Samarra und die Ornamentik der Moschee des Ibn Tulun", *Der Islam*, IV, Strassburg (1913), 421-432, Abbs. 6-7; S. FLURY, "Die Gipsornamente des Der es-Surjani", *Der Islam*, VI, Strassburg (1916), 71-87, Tafeln I-II, Abbs. 1-7; U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Les églises du monastère des syriens au Wadi Natrun*, Milan, 1928, 29, pls. 16-28, figs. 15-18; فريد شافعي، "زخارف وطرز سامرا"، *مجلة كلية الآداب/ جامعة القاهرة*، مج. 13، ج. 2، القاهرة (1951)، 1-39؛ فريد شافعي، "مميزات الأخشاب في الطرازين العباسي والفاطمي في مصر"، *مجلة كلية الآداب/ جامعة القاهرة*، مج. 16، ج. 1، القاهرة (1954)، 94-57؛

A. FATTAL, *Ibn Tulun's Mosque in Cairo*, Beyrouth, 1960, 31-33, pls. 44, 46, 48-49; زكي محمد حسن، *الفن الإسلامي في مصر من الفتح العربي إلى نهاية العصر الطولوني*، القاهرة، 1994، ص. 121.

⁹Franz pascha, *Die Baukunst des Islam*, Darmstadt, 1887, 2 Aufl. 10 ; M. Van Berchem, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*, Le Caire, 1949, I 28 f. (265 AH./879 AD.); J. STRZYGOWSKI, "Der Schmuck der älteren el-Hadra-Kirche im syrischen Kloster", *OrChr.*, I, Roma (1901), 357.

¹⁰ He was the writer of the biography of Saint Anthony the Great and he is commemorated annually on the 7th of the Coptic month Bashons. ATHANASIUS, *the Life of Antony and the Letter of Marcellinus*, Translation and Introduction by R. C. GREGG, Preface by W. A. CLEBSCH, New York-Toronto, 1980; ATHANASIUS bishop of Alexandria, *Life of Saint Antony*, Red Sea, 1992; C. CANNUYER, *Les Coptes. Fils d'Abraham*, Paris, 1996, 85-87; A. MARTIN, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'église d'Égypte au IV^e siècle (328-373)*, coll. de l'école française de Rome 216, Rome, 1996; ATHANASIUS of Alexandria. *The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, Translated by T. Vivian and Apostolos N. ATHANASSAKIS, Michigan, 2003; G. GABRA,

patriarch of Alexandria (326-372 AD.) who is setting in frontal attitude. The same artistic decoration is also repeated in the three eastern chapels of the archeological church of Saint Anthony the Great in his monastery in the Red Sea but with some differences¹¹. Moreover, the same stucco ornament is flanking the entrance of the central chapel of the main church of the Holy Virgin Mary (Pl. IV/ a-b). It covers also the interior walls of the same chapel¹².

In addition to the remarkable Samarra stucco decoration surrounding the entrance of the central chapel of this church, Moses of Nisibis added also the two wooden doors in the main church of the Blessed Virgin Mary during the time of the patriarchs Mar Gabriel of Alexandria (284-309 AH./897-921 AD.) and Mar John of Antioch (298- 311 AH./910-923 AD.), the year 1125 of the Greeks in the month of May which is equal to the year 301-302 AH./913-914 AD¹³.

The first wooden door leading to the *khurus* of the church, which is the oldest one of its kind in Egypt, is inlaid with ivory and ebony¹⁴. The door consists of six rows of rectangular panels richly decorated with human figures, geometric patterns and Syrian inscriptions. The upper level is showing, from left to right, the figures of Saint Peter, the Holy Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and Saint Mark standing all in frontal attitudes. What's more, one can read

Historical Dictionary of the Coptic Church, with Contributions by B. A. PEARSON, M. N. SWANSON and YOUHANNA NESSIM YOUSSEF, Cairo, 2008.

¹¹ For more information of such an artistic composition, see J. LEROY, 'Le programme décoratif de l'église de St. Antoine du désert de la mer rouge', *BIFAO*, LXXVI, Le Caire (1976), 347-379; R. G. COQUIN et P. H. LAFERRIERE, "Les inscriptions pariétales de l'ancienne église du monastère de saint Antoine, dans le désert oriental", *BIFAO*, LXXVIII, Le Caire (1978), 267-321; P. VAN MOORSEL, *Les peintures murales du monastère de saint Antoine près de la mer rouge*, I-II, avec des contributions de P. GROSSMANN, K. INNEMEE et P.-H. LAFERRIERE et la collaboration de PH. AKERMANN, ABDEL-FATAH NOSSEIR, B. PSIROUKIS, K. CRENA DE IONGH et J. RUNIERSE, (Le Caire, 1995); E. S. BOLMAN and P. GODEAU (ED.), *Monastic Visions. Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, Cairo, 2002.

¹² U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Églises*, 29, figs. 15-18.

¹³ J. LEROY, *Moïse*, 467.

¹⁴ U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Églises*, 29, pls. 29-36, figs. 33-36.

some Coptic names confirming the Coptic origin of the work and the iconography as follow:

Pi agios markos (Saint Mark)

Ti agia maria (Saint Mary)

Pi agios petros (Saint Peter)

All these names are preceded by the Coptic definite article Pi or Ti. The translation of its syriac inscription published by J. STRZYGOWSKI¹⁵ is read from the right as follow (**Fig. 1**):

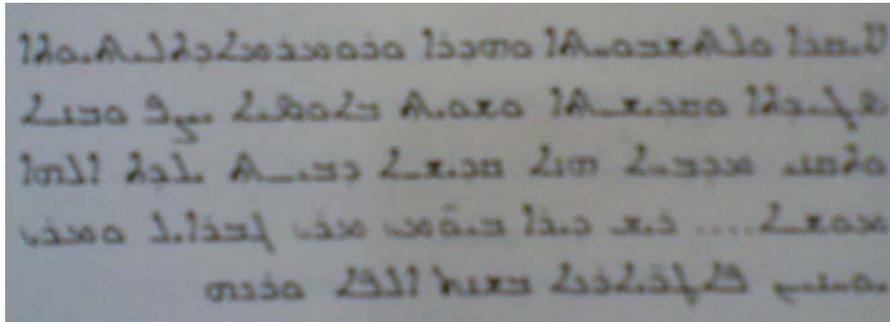


Fig. 1. According to J. STRZYGOWSKI, *Schmuck*, 365.

“The 15th May God by the name of whom (it was done) reward him as well as the faithful servants who participated (in the edification) of this altar and of this saint convent, for the conservation of their life, the pardon of sins of their defuncts and the absolution of their proper errors”. H. G. WHITE confirmed that according to the syriac inscription of this door, in 302 AH./ 914 AD., Moses of Nisibis was already the abbot and the benefactor of the Syrians monastery¹⁶.

The second wooden door preceding the central chapel contains seven rows of rectangular panels also inlaid with ivory (**Pl. V**). The upper row is depicting, from left to right, the figures of

¹⁵ J. STRZYGOWSKI, *Schmuck*, 365.

¹⁶ H. G. E. WHITE, *the Monasteries of the Wadi'N Natrun*, II. Edited by W. HAUSER, New York, 1932, 337.

Saint Dioscorus¹⁷ the 25th patriarch of Alexandria (446-454 AD.), the Holy Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, Saint Mark, Saint Ignatius and Saint Severus of Antioch¹⁸. Saint Dioscorus and Severus of Antioch are the two founders of the orthodox churches of Coptic and Syrian languages.

One can read in Coptic:

- o agios dioskoros (Saint Dioscous)
- h agia maria (Saint Mary)
- emmanouhl (Emmanuel)
- o agios markos (Saint Mark)
- o agios ignatios (Saint Ignatus)
- o agios seueros (Saint Severus)

J. STRYGOWSKI translated the second Syrian inscription in German and he published it with the English translation of Baumstark. It can be read as follow: “In the praise, glory and exaltation of the venerable, Sainte and substantial trinity”¹⁹. This inscription includes the date 1225 and 1238 of the Greeks meaning 314-315 AH./926-927 AD²⁰ (Fig. 2). It contains also the names of other patriarchs like Kosmas III of Alexandria (308-320 AH./920-932 AD.) and Basile of Antioch (926-927 AH./923-

¹⁷The Coptic version of the History of the Patriarchs is the best reference about his life. Opponent of the Nestorian doctrines, Saint Dioscorus was one of the disciples of Cyril of Alexandria. His feast is usually celebrated by the Church on the 7th of Tut/17th of September. OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Faith*, 160; G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, 93-94.

¹⁸ Venerated on the 14th of Amshir/8st of February, his relics were translated from Sakha to the Emmaton Monastery in the west of Alexandria. Some of these relics were transferred in the fourth century AH./the tenth century AD. to the Syrians Monastery where they are preserved in a bolster together with relics of other saints. R. BASSET, *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte)*, III. Les mois de Toubeh et d'Amchir. Texte arabe publié, traduit et annoté par R. BASSET, *PO*, XI/5, Turnhout-Belgique (1915), 343, 823; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, “The Museum of the Dair as-Surian, etc.”, *BSAC*, XVII, Le Caire (1964), 230; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Faith*, 189.

¹⁹ J. STRYGOWSKI, *Schmuck*, 367, 395; U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Églises*, 29-30, figs. 29-32; H. G. E. WHITE, *Monasteries*, II, 337, note 8; J. LEROY, *Moïse*, 467.

²⁰ H. G. E. WHITE, *Monasteries*, II, 337.

935 AD.)²¹. This second syriac inscription and the German translation of J. STRZYGOWSKI include also the name of Moses from the city of Nisibis as follow: “*Moses aus der Stadt Nisibis*” and the date of the year 283²²:

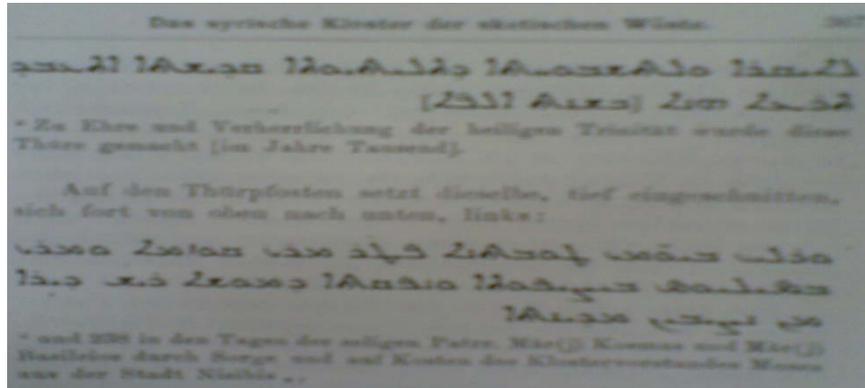


Fig. 2. According to J. STRZYGOWSKI, *Schmuck*, 367.

According to the monks of the Syrians Monastery, this is the door of the Prophecies. From their point of view, the various geometric decoration of each row of this door has a special symbolic meaning by order from up to down as follow: The period of the persecutions, the extension of the Christian faith, the Arab conquest, the heresy Period, the deterioration and the weakness period in addition to the second arrival of Jesus Christ.

These doors are made not only by the Syrian artists but also by the Coptic famous ones. Most probably Moses of Nisibis brought his workers with him from Iraq. May be Moses of Nisibis and the Moslem workers used to accomplish such stucco decoration as a proof of the collusion developed under the Fatimids especially in the arts. According also to J. LEROY, it is evident that the artists were not only Christians but also Moslems. Later the Christians added some Christian symbols of their faith like crosses and grapes

²¹U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Églises*, 30-31; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, IVth ed., Cairo-New York, 2002, 124.

²²J. STRZYGOWSKI, *Schmuck*, 366-367.

on the eastern and the northern walls of the main chapel of the main church²³ that's why, the Christian aspect is still visible in the decoration of the doors especially the crosses and the saints' figures.

According to the two important Syrian inscriptions executed in the frames of these two wooden monumental doors, Moses of Nisibis the archimandrite constructed the altar by his care and his money²⁴. The first inscription of the main chapel engraved in reliefs and this one of the *khurus* is incised on wood. As it was mentioned before, the two doors which are inlaid from the base to the top by ivory date from 301-302 AH./913-914 and 314-315 AH./926-927 AD. It is also evident that the wood of these doors has resisted for a long time.

In 314-315 AH./926-927 AD. and after finishing the two wooden doors with its syriac references, Moses of Nisibis left to Baghdad as representative of the desert monasteries in order to speak in favor of the bishops, the monks and invalids Christians²⁵. Moses of Nisibis went to ask the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir Billah (295-320 AH./907-932 AD.) to exempt the Christians from taxations. According to H. G. WHITE, this event took place after the arrival of the vizier Ali ibn Isa ibn al-Garrah in Egypt when he imposed taxes to bishops and monks as well as the cripples²⁶. As result, Moses of Nisibis received the title of "Ornament of all the church". These speeches are perfectly in harmony with the information found in certain manuscripts' colophons.

In this way, the position of Moses of Nisibis became so important in the Christian community in Egypt after the caliphate decision although his Syrian origin. Most probably, he spent five years in the Syrians monastery and five other years visiting the

²³ J. LEROY, *Les peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natroun*, publiées avec la collaboration de B. LENTHERIC, P. H. LAFERRIERE, H. STUDER, E. RAVALT, B. PSIROUKIS et J. F. GOUT, Le Caire, 1982, 63.

²⁴ L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, *Présence*, 180-181.

²⁵ L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, *Présence*, 181.

²⁶ H. G. E. WHITE, *Monasteries*, II, 337.

different monasteries in Mesopotamia and North of Syria where he collected Syrian manuscripts. After coming back to Wadi Natrun in 319- 320 AH./931-932 AD., Moses of Nisibis greatly enriched the library of the monastery with a huge quantity of precious manuscripts²⁷ (about 250 volumes²⁸; the majority is complete) as one colophon confirmed. Certain of them were offered to him by the Christian community of Mesopotamia like abbots and bishops and he also bought others. A list of about sixty complete and fragmented volumes is identified by colophons is now conserved in several European libraries especially in the Vatican library and the British Museum. Two others are in the Berlin and Leningrad Libraries. These manuscripts are rare because of their materials, contents, texts and age. They help also to well know and to understand the Syrian literature²⁹. These valuable manuscripts were discovered in Mesopotamia especially Tagrit, Reshaina and Harran. Syrian cities like Damascus, Aleppo and Hims are not mentioned at all in the colophons of these manuscripts³⁰. Moses of Nisibis and his collaborators cancelled most probably many colophons and they wrote new notices to record the rights of the proprietors of the monastery. The monks of the Syrians Monastery copied and wrote also manuscripts. According to certain colophons, some persons from Mesopotamia visited the Syrians monastery³¹. What's more, some manuscripts were translated inside the monastery from Coptic to Syrian.

The last mention of the name of Moses of Nisibis appeared in a donor's note dating back to 332 AH./943 AD. In this note, it is

²⁷H. G. E. WHITE, *Monasteries*, II, 337; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt. Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, 1965, 160-161; M. BLANCHARD, "Moses of Nisibis and the Library of Deir Suriani", in: L. S. B. MACCOULL (ed.), *Studies in the Christian East in Memory of Mirrit Boutros Ghali*, Washington, D. C. (1995), 13-24; G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, 197.

²⁸L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, *Présence*, 180-181.

²⁹J. LEROY, *Moïse*, 465.

³⁰L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, *Présence*, 187.

³¹L. VAN ROMPAY and K. INNEMEE, *Présence*, 187-188.

written “*Mar Moses our glory and the ornament of all the church, the head of this monastery*”³².

Moreover, many hagiographical texts were translated from the Egyptian language to the Syrian by the abbot John who was the successor of Moses of Nisibis. This confirms the cultural exchange that took place between the Egyptian and the Syrian monks. It means also that the monks who lived in the Syrians monastery were speaking several languages.

In conclusion, in this paper, I tried to make sense of what i heard and what i saw during my several visits to the Syrians monastery before. I particularly wanted to mention the valuable additions of Moses of Nisibis in the Syrians Monastery throughout this study especially these ornaments which are the reminiscent of the Islamic art of Samarra and i tried also to deal with all the possible details concerning his life in Egypt and his travels in Mesopotamia. Finally, it is certain that the arrival of the foreigner monks in the Syrians Monastery provided them together with the Copts a reciprocal exchange in several domains.

List of Periodicals and abbreviations

BIFAO: *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*. (Le Caire).

BSAC: *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*. (Le Caire).

Der Islam: *Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*. (Strassburg).

ParOr.: *Parole de l'Orient* (Paris). Continue **Melo** et **OrSyr.**

PO: *Patrologia Orientalis*. (Turhout-Belgium).

OCA: *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*. Inst. Pontif. Orient. (Rome).

OrChr.: *Oriens Christianus. Römische Halbjahrhefte für die Kunde des christlichen Orients*. (Roma). Cf. **OC**.

³² H. G. E. WHITE, *Monasteries*, II, 337.

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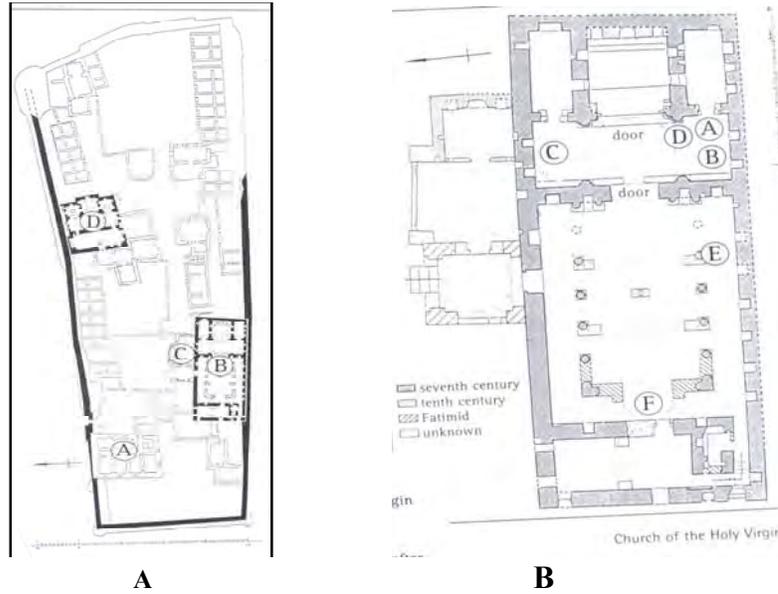
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Plates

Pl. I

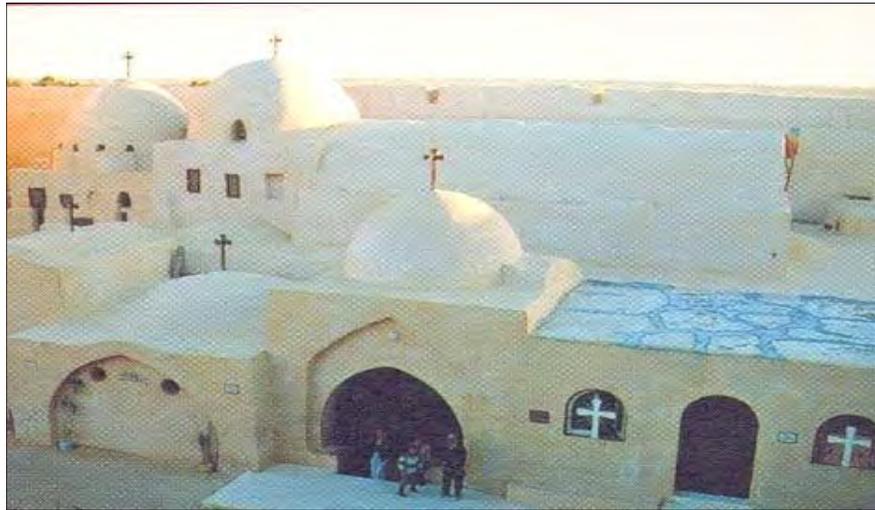


The general plan of the Syrians monastery to the left. The Plan of the main church of the monastery to the right. According to G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, 47, 49.

Pl. II



General view of the Syrians Monastery in Wadi Natrun



The entrance of the main archeological church and the church of the forty martyrs in the Syrians Monastery

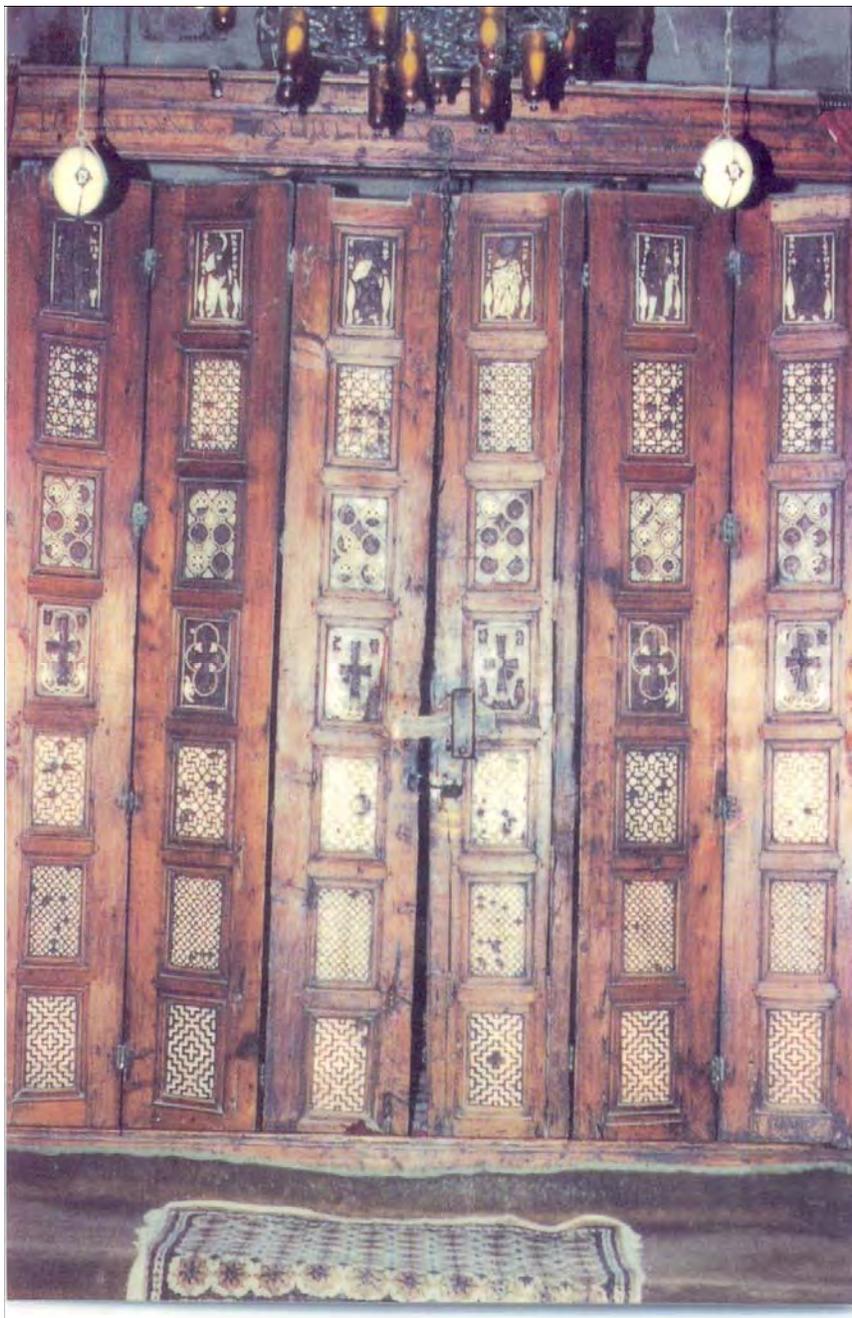


A



B

The stucco decoration flanking the entrance of the central chapel of the church of the Holy Virgin Mary in the Syrians Monastery



The wooden door leading to the central chapel of the main archeological church of the Syrians monastery