

FIG. 2.—DER EL ABIAD, NAVE LOOKING EAST.

THE WHITE MONASTERY NEAR SOHAG, UPPER EGYPT.

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In view of the historical importance of Egypt as a centre of Christianity in early times, it might be expected that there would remain to us, with the help of a climate unusually favourable to their preservation, some unequivocal evidences of the splendour of the Christian buildings of the age of Constantine the Great and his immediate successors. But though, as elsewhere, traditions connecting certain sites with St. Helena are not uncommon in Egypt, it is impossible to point to a single instance where the existing remains can with any degree of confidence be assigned to so early a date. The history of the church in Egypt has at no time been a peaceful one, either before or after the Arab conquest, and the Christian communities were not often in so flourishing a condition that they were likely without absolute necessity to rebuild or enlarge existing churches, after the manner of their more fortunate brethren in the West. And the Moslems, who on the whole interfered very little with the Christian building, were not inclined to tolerate any considerable additions to them, and in several instances destroyed new work which seemed to them to be on a larger scale than necessary. So that it happens that the churches of Cairo, though much altered and built up at various times, retain for the most part plans which look earlier than the existing structures. Of all the Christian buildings of Egypt, the two monasteries near Sohag,¹ Dêr Anba Shanûda, or el Abiad (The White Monastery), and Dêr Anba Bishoi, or el Ahmar (the Red Monastery), would seem to have the best claim, both in plan and in architectural detail, to a date which, if not as early as St. Helena, is probably not far removed from her time.

They are built on the edge of the western desert, some

¹ About 310 miles south of Cairo.

three miles from the river, not far from the mounds which mark the site of the ancient city of Athribis, whose buildings served as a quarry for the neighbourhood, and may have had some influence in determining the monastic sites. But apart from this the sites are well chosen, except as regards their distance from the river, being on gently rising ground, with a good rock foundation, at the foot of the limestone hills which overlook the wide stretch of fertile land in which the town of Sohag stands. The White Monastery is about a mile to the south of the Red; the remains of its buildings are similar to those of its neighbour, but on a larger scale, and there is so close a likeness between the general plans and details of the two monasteries, that it cannot be doubted that both belong to the same age, and very possibly are due to the same builders. One point of difference, to which they owe their alternative names (already existent in the thirteenth century as regards the White Monastery and by inference also as regards the Red), is that the former is built of blocks of limestone, and the latter of red brick.

The foundation of the White Monastery is ascribed to the great Coptic saint Shanûda, or Sinuthius, who was born probably towards the end of the fourth century, and died in 451. He was the son of a peasant, and was born at Shenalolet, which has been identified with Shandawil, to the north-east of Ekhnim. He served in boyhood as a shepherd, and then came under the tuition of his uncle Apâ Pjöl, who trained him to the monastic life. He is said to have been present with St. Cyril of Alexandria at the Council held to condemn Nestorius.¹

For the early history of this monastery the chief materials are to be found in a history of St. Shanûda written by his pupil and successor Besa or Visa. He tells us that at the first the monastery and church were small (it is not quite clear whether St. Shanûda's foundation was an altogether new work, or whether it absorbed an older site), but that when the number of monks increased,² St. Shanûda was commanded by a vision to

¹ From a note by A. J. Butler, p. 194 of Evett's ed. of Abu Salih's *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*, etc., Oxford, 1895.

² At St. Shanûda's death the numbers are said to have been 2,200 monks, and 1,800 nuns, beside novices.

enlarge the church and build other monastic buildings. The work was begun and finished, under the charge of Visa, in six months. When all was complete, the chief mason spent the whole of his earnings on the making of a beautiful *corona*, which was hung up in the cupola of the altar, and his brother made a cross ornamented with gold and silver, also hung up in the church in the middle of the gabled roof.¹

The church was held to be one of the largest in the world, and St. Shanûda gave it the name of Jerusalem, ordaining that those who could not make the pilgrimage to the Holy Land might come here instead. Within the monastery there were, beside the church and the monks' cells, a courtyard, a well, eleven ovens for baking bread, and store-rooms below the ground level. The parts of the church mentioned in Visa's history are the altar, the sanctuary, the middle aisle of the nave, and the desk for reading and singing. St. Shanûda seems not to have been buried here, but in a monastery on the hills near by. His shrine or coffin was pierced with holes, through which the body of the saint, wrapped in a part of the seamless vesture of Christ, might be seen.

Abu Sâlih, the Armenian, who wrote his description of the churches and monasteries of Egypt not later than the first decade of the thirteenth century, says of the White Monastery²:

In this monastery there is a very large church, spacious enough to contain thousands of people, and within it are the bodies of the two pure disciples Bartholomew and Simon the Canaanite, two of the Twelve Apostles. The body of the great saint Sinuthius, the Archimandrite, a word which means "superior of the superiors," is in a monastery at the top of the mountain called Atribah; it was contained in a chest, until the invasion of Egypt by Shirkuh and the Ghuzz who accompanied him, and who broke open the chest, and the body was taken out of it and concealed in the ground in an unconsecrated chamber near the altar. In this monastery there is a keep, and there is around the keep and monastery also a wall of enclosure, within which there is a garden full of all sorts of trees.

Al Makrizi (*ob.* 1441), in his *History of the Copts*, has nothing to say of the Dêr el Abiad except that in his time it was ruined, and only the church remained.

¹ This probably means "from the middle of one of the tie-beams."

² *op. cit.*, fo. 32b., ed. Evett, Oxford, 1895.

Later writers have given notices of the monastery, of more or less value, such as Vansleb¹ (1673), Pococke² (1737), Denon³ (who saw both the Red and White Monasteries on December 29, 1798, the day after they had been attacked and burnt by a band of Mamelukes), Wilkinson (c. 1830), and Curzon (1838). The best modern description is by W. de Bock, in his *Matériaux pour servir à l'archéologie de l'Égypte Chrétienne*, St. Petersburg, 1901.

At the present day the monastery, as seen from the south, the usual point of approach from Sohag, consists of a massive rectangular block of limestone masonry, standing among mounds of ruined burnt or crude brick buildings, the whole having been surrounded by a crude brick wall, of which hardly anything remains. This is no doubt the wall of enclosure mentioned by Abu Salih, within which was "a garden full of all sorts of trees." The trees have long vanished, and only the heaps of rubbish and broken pottery distinguish the precinct from the surrounding desert. The 4,000 monks and nuns, "beside novices," of St. Shanûda's time, are represented by an illiterate priest and some ten or twelve Coptic families, whose squalid and filthy houses crowd within the massive limestone building, defacing and hiding its fine proportions and many of the traces of its ancient splendour.

Until these people can be evicted a complete plan of the building will be impossible to obtain, and many difficult questions in its history must remain unanswered.

For the plan given in this paper I am indebted to Mr. Somers Clarke, who has visited the place many times and done what he can to call the attention of the Egyptian government to its condition. That nothing has yet been done can hardly be made a case of reproach, for the maintenance of the many ancient monuments in Egypt is a heavy burden already on the limited finances of the country, and without help from outside it is

¹ *The present state of Egypt, or a new relation of a late voyage into that kingdom, performed in the years 1672 and 1673.* Englished by M. D. London, 1678.

² *A description of the East, and some other countries.* London, 1743.

³ *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte.* Paris, 1802.

impossible that ever the most important monuments can receive the care they so greatly need.

As has been already said, a complete description of the monastery is for the present impossible, but what can be seen is of such great interest, and so markedly superior in all ways to the general run of Christian buildings in Egypt, that even an imperfect account may not be without interest.

The rectangular building, which now generally goes by the name of the Dér el Abiad or White Monastery, is in fact only the church of the monastery, with certain rooms grouped round it; the buildings which accommodated the monastic body being represented by the surrounding mounds of ruins.

The external measurements are, in round numbers, N. to S. 120 feet, E. to W. 242 feet, mean height (the ground has a considerable fall to the E.) 44 feet. Thickness of walls at base about 6 feet. The internal wall faces are vertical, the external batter considerably in the height. The elevations are very simple, but interesting from their retention of several characteristic features of the ancient native style, having, besides the batter just mentioned, a "gorge" cornice, which only differs from the well-known Egyptian "gorge" by the absence of the torus at base. The masonry of the walls is also distinctly Egyptian, and shows little or no trace of outside influence. It is composed of blocks of limestone averaging 2 feet 6 inches long by 1 foot 6 inches deep; probably taken from the ruins of Athribis, but if so, redressed for use: all stones are laid as stretchers, that is, with their major axis parallel to the direction of the wall, which is therefore built up of several thicknesses of masonry not bonded to each other in any degree.¹ This retention of ancient Egyptian features is a matter of considerable interest, and may have an important bearing on the question of the date of the work. It is of course well known that temples continued to be built in the native style far into Roman times, the latest emperor whose cartouche is known to occur on the

¹ This is one of the great faults of ancient Egyptian building, a more frequent cause of ruin than any other, as if by any means a wall is thrown out of

the perpendicular, there is nothing but their own weight to prevent the overhanging stones from falling outwards in blocks or separately.

temples being Decius, 249-251 A.D., but this is only evidence for the continuance, and not the discontinuance of the style, and how long the ancient style survived the abolition of the ancient religion is a matter of doubt. The wall surfaces are unbroken except by two ranges of shallow rectangular window-like recesses, of which a few have served as windows, but the large majority are and have always been blind (a very small provision for light is sufficient in this sunny climate, and in any case these monasteries had to consider means of protection from attack before comfort or convenience)¹; they are 4 feet high by 2 feet wide, and have shallow stone lintels which are continued as bands all round the walls, and have been painted red, in contrast with the rest of the surface, which shows traces of having been originally covered with a thin coat of white plaster on which false jointing was marked in red. The S.W. angle of the building has at some time been destroyed, and rebuilt with a facing of smaller stones on a brick core, with no recesses or windows.

At the angles of the building a few long slabs of red granite are built in to tie the masonry together. The walls generally are in fairly good condition, except that the eastern end of the north wall has bulged outwards to a most dangerous extent at about half height. A heavy mass of brickwork has been built against it to support it, but would be of no use if any of the bulged stones were to fall, as nothing could then prevent the top of the wall from falling on to the brick half dome of the northern apse of the church. The strength and height of the walls points to the idea of protection against attack, and in this connection it is interesting to note that in Abu Sâlih's descriptions of the Egyptian monasteries a keep is often mentioned, evidently of considerable height, one (f. 92 *b*) being of five stories. At the White Monastery the keep mentioned may be the enclosure of the church, though some strong building may have existed beside it, which has now disappeared. The feature is an interesting one in view of the parallels

¹ There are two ranges of twenty-six recesses each on the N. face, and two of nine each on the E.; the S. and W.

faces had the same numbers, but are not now complete, owing to the re-building of the S.W. angle.

in western monastic houses, where a tower for protection against attack was not an unknown feature. Gundulf's tower at Rochester Cathedral may be an example,

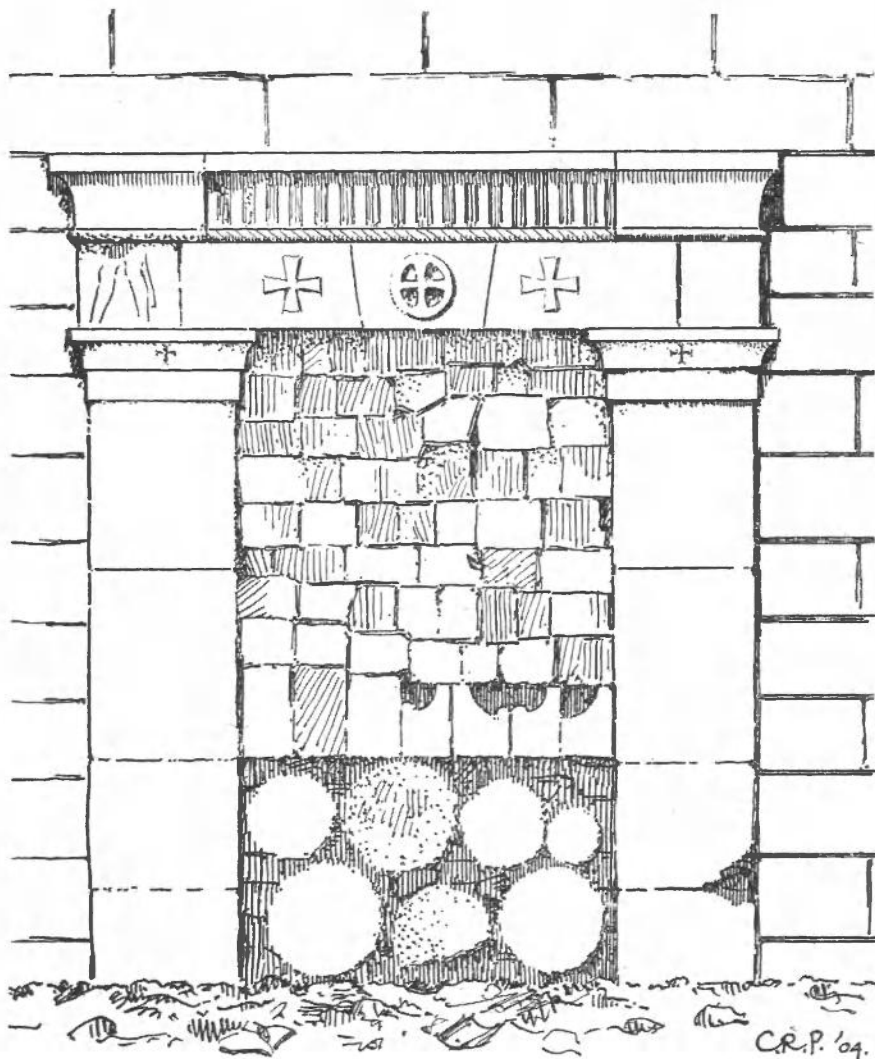


FIG. 1.—NORTH DOORWAY OF CHURCH, SHOWING BLOCKING.

possibly also St. Leonard's tower at Malling, and it is one of the many explanations suggested for the Irish round towers. The massive stone water-spouts which

project from the walls above the upper range of recesses are worth noticing as being another feature taken from the ancient native architecture. There are ten in all, two in the E. wall, three in the N., and five in the S. Two of the last are curiously placed, between the two ranges of recesses, and far below the level of the original roof. Their level is nearly that of the floor of the rooms over the long hall to the south of the church, and they may well have served for pouring away dirty water or the like.

There are three doorways,¹ one each approximately in the middle of the N., S. and W. walls. The western doorway is hidden, except for part of its S. jamb, by a mass of brickwork built against it; the northern doorway is built up in masonry, and the southern alone remains open, though reduced in width and height by later additions. All doorways are about 6 feet wide, their height varying on account of the accumulations of rubbish round them. They are of very simple style, with red granite jambs and lintels doubtless plundered from the temples of Athribis. Only the north doorway (Fig. 1) is completely visible on the outside; on the lintel are three crosses² in relief, and above is a cornice of Egyptian style in three stones, of which that in the middle has the characteristic fluting, and is probably an old stone re-used without alteration. On one end of the lintel the legs of a standing figure are to be seen. The jambs are plain and flush with the wall surface; they have plain hollow chamfered *abaci* with crosses on the chamfers. It is clear that the original builders, though often content to use the old granite slabs without alteration, were quite capable of reworking them if they wished. From what can be seen of the southern doorway, it is like that on the north in all details, but over it, just above the level of the heads of the lower range of recesses (see above), is a long chase in the wall now filled with brickwork. The position suggests that

¹ Vansleb says (*op. cit.*, 224): "There be six great gates of a red stone which are now walled up, one only excepted, which now hath an open place as high as a man." This is a mistake, as to the number of "gates," which, with the usual ill-luck of compilers of descriptions

at second hand, has been perpetuated in several later accounts, including the current Murray's *Handbook for Egypt*.

² See note, p. 140, for a similar detail seen by Vansleb on the west doorway, now hidden by masonry.

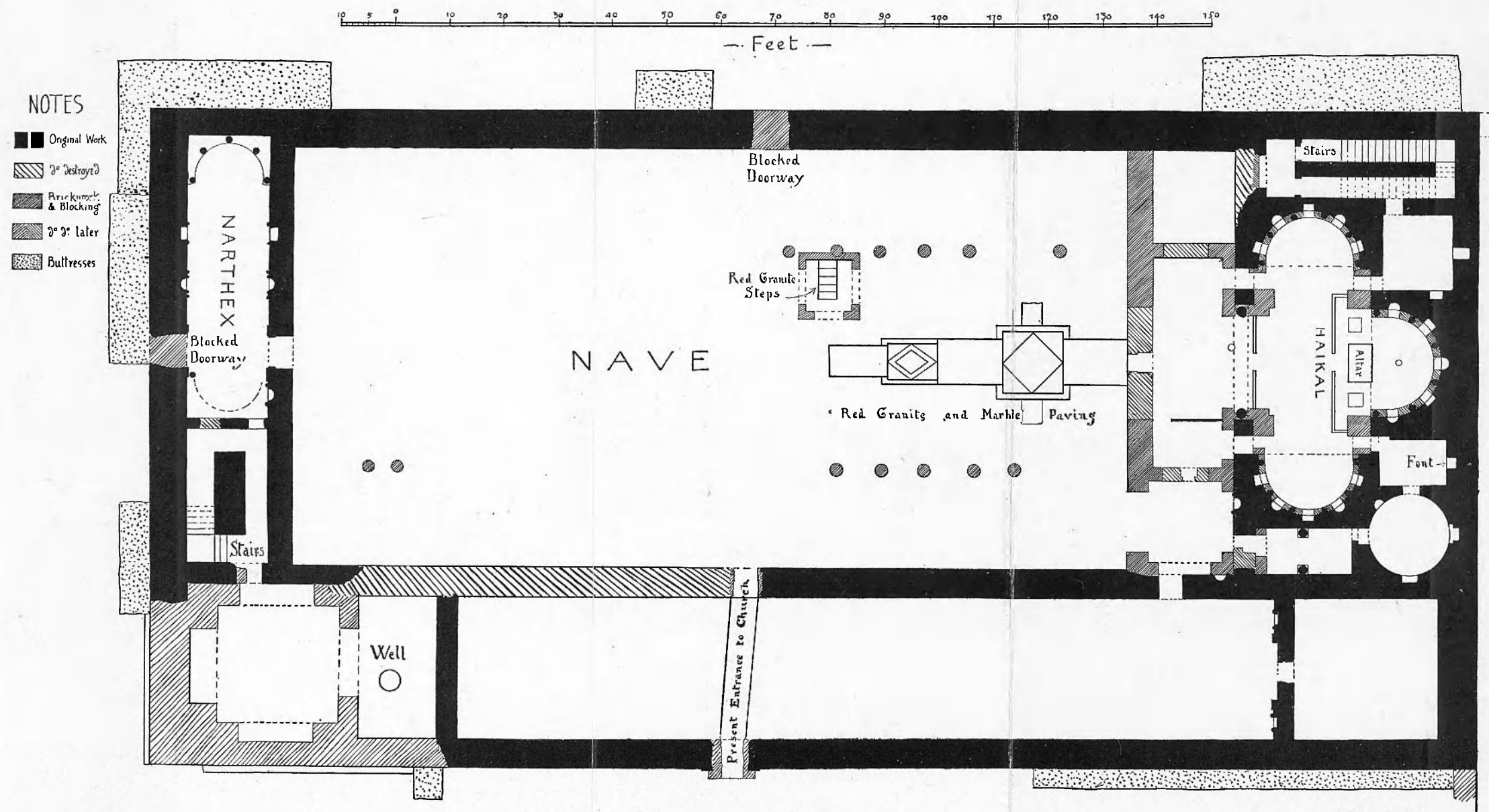


FIG. 3.—DER EL ABIAD, SOHAG. GROUND PLAN.

there has been a band of ornament, but there is no definite evidence.¹ The western doorway formed the entrance to the narthex, and so to the west end of the nave of the church, and has a lintel with triglyphs and *guttae*, part of a Roman building, and carved foliated capitals to the jambs. This was the chief or public entrance to the church, and is accordingly marked by a little more elaboration of detail. It is the door referred to in the story, given by Abu Sâlih,² of the visit of the "unenlightened and wicked Al Kasim, wali of Egypt," to the monastery, in the time of Michael I., forty-sixth Patriarch (743-767). It was Al Kasim's custom to make journeys up and down the Nile as far as Aswan, in boats "like royal palaces," accompanied by his harem, his bodyguard, and troops. He came to the monastery "accompanied by one of his odalisques, whom he greatly loved, and both of them were riding upon horses . . . So the monks went forth to meet Al Kasim, and brought him into the monastery, together with the odalisque who was with him, and they passed through the first door, and through the second which leads into the enclosure of the church, and they went as far as the door which forms the entrance into the church, still riding upon their horses." The monks not unnaturally objected to his going any further on horseback, especially in such company, "for never from the beginning has any woman entered into this church." But the unenlightened and wicked man would not be persuaded, "and entered on horseback together with his odalisque and the soldiers who were with him." The sequel was of course disastrous to the odalisque, but the interest of the story lies in the mention of the three doorways, that in the outer wall leading into the main enclosure, that into the "enclosure of the church," *i.e.* the building now under discussion, and that into the church itself. As will be seen from the plan, the south doorway also leads to an entrance to the church, but it is clear that the west doorway, leading through the narthex into the church, is the one referred to.³

¹ Over the north doorway there is a smaller patch of brickwork in somewhat the same position.

² *op. cit.*, f. 82 .

³ Vansleb, *op. cit.*, 224: "The chief gate that is walled up is now called

The present entrance, as has been said, is by the south doorway, through a low archway of rough stone and brick barely 5 feet high. Within is a doorway 2 feet 8 inches wide, with granite jambs and limestone head, built within the lines of the original entrance, and giving access to a narrow passage vaulted in brick, opening at its north end by a brick arch into a courtyard bounded on the east by what is now the church, and on the other three sides by mean brick buildings (Fig. 2). Looking back at the doorway of entrance, a red granite lintel of Roman date, with triglyphs and *guttae* like that over the west doorway, is to be seen over it; this formed the head of the south doorway of the church. The courtyard is in fact the eastern half of the nave of the great church, some remains of whose southern colonnade may be seen built into the houses on the left hand. Encumbered as it is with modern brickwork, it is at first difficult to realize its splendid and stately proportions. Its extreme internal length is 210 feet exclusive of the narthex, and its width across the aisles 76 feet.

The triapsal arrangement of the east end is exceedingly effective, even in its present mutilated and altered condition, and the richness and variety of the architectural ornament is equal to anything in Egypt, and far superior to the ordinary run of Coptic work. The plan of the original building (Fig. 3) comprises a rectangular sanctuary, from which open apses to N. E. and S., entered from the west by a wide arch carried on (marble?) columns with foliated capitals. To the west of this is an oblong compartment of the full width of the nave and aisles, formerly separated from the nave by a screen of four columns with a wide central intercolumniation, the outer pair being in the line of the nave colonnades. The Red Monastery, as may be seen

Bab il bagl, or the Mule's gate, in remembrance to what happened to a daughter of an heathen king, who offered to go into the church in contempt, riding upon a mule, and was swallowed up alive in a pit that opened, to punish her insolency; which miracle happen'd by the prayers of S. Sennodius,

who begg'd this punishment from God. This gate is ten foot high and six broad; every one of the supporters is made up with four great marble stones, as well as the lintil, upon which is graven three crosses, one great in the middle, and two little ones on the sides."

from the plan of its eastern end here given (Fig. 4) shows this arrangement of columns *in situ*. From the width of the central opening, it is clear that it must have been spanned by an arch, and the side openings may have been similarly treated. This part of the building, though no wider than the body of the church, must have given the effect of transepts. The nave was 152 feet long,¹ with lofty N. and S. colonnades; as the

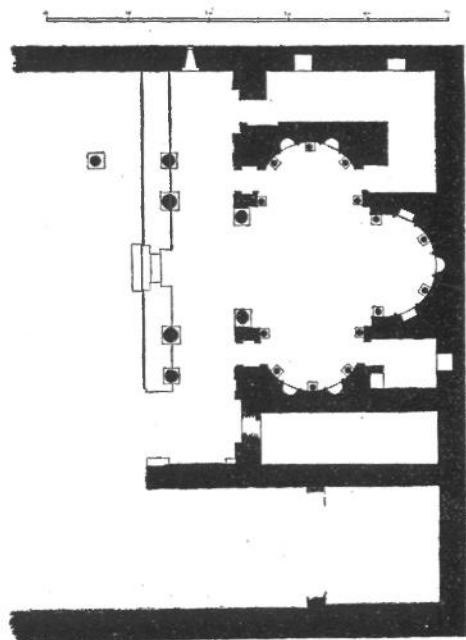


FIG. 4.—PLAN OF EAST END OF CHURCH, DER EL AHMAR.

present columns are irregularly spaced and probably in some measure reconstructions, their original number is uncertain. The aisles were of two stories, and there was probably a clearstory. At the west end was the narthex, also of two stories, having to the south a staircase which must have given access to the upper stories of the aisles.

It is worthy of note that while the outside of this

¹ It is worth noting that the nave is in plan exactly two squares, being 152 feet long by 76 wide. And the height to the top of the aisle walls, which is

probably the level of the bottom of the clearstory, is almost exactly half the width of the church.

block of building shows many affinities with the Egyptian style, the interior features are purely of Greek or Roman origin.

The three apses at the east end of the church are elaborately ornamented, though most of the detail is hidden by a plastered brick facing, on which many tracings of paintings and inscriptions remain. Each apse has two ranges of six columns with foliated capitals carrying richly carved architraves,¹ and between each pair of columns are niches alternately square and semicircular in plan, with semicircular heads. Most of the details of these are now buried beneath the plastered facing, which is flush with the fronts of the architraves,² but from what remains it is probable that they are richly ornamented. The apses are finished with brick semi-domes plastered and painted; the subject of that on the north is difficult to see, the east apse has a majesty, and the south a cross, both in *vesicae*, and flanked, the one by the four evangelists and their symbols, the other by two angels, with the Virgin and St. John the Divine (?). An inscription in the field of the east semi-dome gives the date of the painting as the year 840 of the Martyrs, *i.e.* 1124 A.D.

This part of the church, which I have called the sanctuary, is now covered in with brick domes carried on arches whose piers block up and hide much of the older work. From above it can be seen that the walls of the

¹ In the centre of the architrave of the lower range of columns in the east apse is a carved figure of the Holy Dove; worthy of mention if only on account of the extreme rarity of sculptured figures in Coptic churches.

² Mr. Somers Clarke points out that the probable object of the blocking of these columns by a mass of brickwork is to support the architraves, which here as elsewhere in Egypt, did not rest directly on the capitals of the columns, but on wooden beams laid along from capital to capital. This is a clumsy arrangement, but it has at any rate the result that the architraves can be built of small stones instead of long slabs running from column to column. When the wood decays, these stones, having vertical joints, are liable to fall out, and the remedy here adopted was to build up the void beneath them in

brickwork. The wood was probably destroyed by natural causes, *i.e.* time and decay, as there is no trace of fire to be seen on the stonework.

The principle of carrying the wall above a colonnade on wooden beams instead of masonry arches was generally adopted in the Coptic churches (being of course merely an application of the native Egyptian lintel construction to an unsuitable material), and the attempts to throw the weight from the centre of the bearing to the ends carried by the columns, by building small relieving arches in the middle of the span, lead eventually to arcades of normal character with arches of sufficient width to throw all the weight on to the columns or piers. The wood lintels then become an unsightly superfluity, and are either removed, or retained for a new use, as tie-rods for the springing of the arches.

sanctuary were carried up considerably beyond the springing of the present domes, and probably finished by a low-pitched gable with a timber gabled roof with heavy tie beams.

These timber roofs seem to have been the usual form of covering for the Egyptian churches, and many references to them occur. They were of course very liable to destruction by fire or otherwise. The following extract from Abu Salih, referring to the church of St. Menas at Cairo, might almost have been written of the White Monastery, as we see it to-day : (*f.* 31a.)

"In the month of Jumada the first, in the year 559 (*i.e.* 1164), when the Kurds and the Ghuzz came with Salah ad Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, (the Saladin of our histories), and the King of the Franks (Amaury King of Jerusalem 1162-1173) was appealed to for help against them, then this monastery, and this church was burnt to the ground, except the apse and the northern and southern sides of the sanctuary, which were preserved intact. These were restored and domes and arches were built and piers instead of the marble columns, in the Caliphate of Al Adid, and in the vizierate of Shawar."

Other instances of the destruction of timber roofs occur, as at *f.* 28a, of the Melkite churches in Fustat (Old Cairo) :

"The Ghuzz and the Kurds took possession of four of the churches, robbed them of their timber, and threw down their walls."

The church of St. Mercurius (Abu's Sifain) in Old Cairo was pillaged and burnt in 1168 : (*f.* 37a.)

"So that nothing remained except the walls . . . until the Christians decided to restore the great church aforesaid. So they restored it and completed the sanctuary, and substituted for the roof of timber cupolas and arches of baked brick."

This was in 1175-6. Another enemy to timber which has to be reckoned with in Egypt is the white ant (*Termes arda*). At the monastery of Nahya near Gizeh : (*f.* 63b.)

"The worms destroyed the timbers of this monastery and the church, and so they were pulled down at the expense of that *Sayyid* (Ibn Katamah), who constructed instead of the roof (of timber) a vaulted roof, and enclosed the columns within piers of masonry."

On the plan the added brick masonry is shown by diagonal hatching ; as to its date the evidence is slight, but it is clearly later than the paintings in the semi-

domes, which are dated to 1124, and as it is on a large scale and must have cost a considerable sum of money it was probably built during a time of comparative prosperity. A chronicle of the monastery, if such were obtainable, might help to settle this point. (See note, p. 153.)

The north transept is blocked by houses and inaccessible from the church; the south transept has an added brick dome on piers, but part of the older limestone masonry is to be seen, with a niche and part of a large blank arch in the east wall, and another niche in the

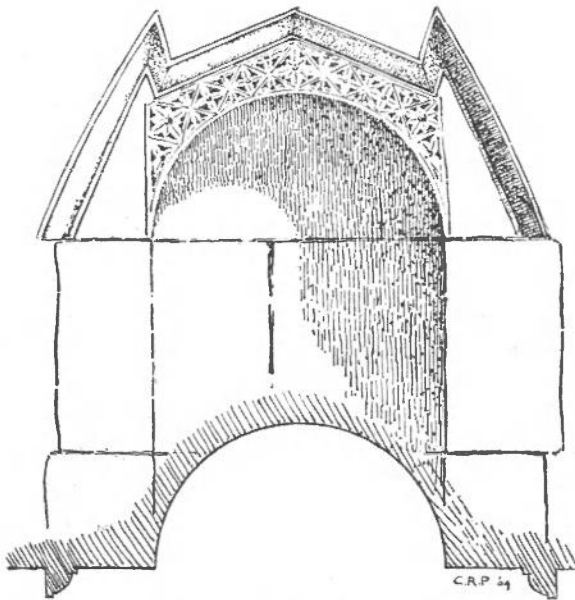


FIG. 5.—HEAD AND PLAN OF NICHE.

south wall. These niches, which occur in several places to be mentioned later, are semicircular in plan, with semicircular shell heads flanked by shafts which carry a peculiar form of pediment characteristic of Coptic work of apparently early date. It is a clumsy and awkward form, better to be understood from a diagram than from any description. (Fig. 5.)

On the line of the former screen of columns separating this part of the church from the nave is a massive brick wall, which is now the west wall of the church. It has

in the middle a wide and lofty pointed arch in brick, now blocked by a later brick wall pierced with three windows and a small door, into which several pieces of carved stone ornament are built. It is clear that when the wide arch was built,—and it is probably of the same date as the rest of the brick arches, piers and domes in the sanctuary,—part at any rate of the nave was still in use, and it may have been at the same time that the nave colonnades were rebuilt as they now exist.¹

Another wide brick arch, also blocked, opens from the south transept into the south aisle, its springing being about on the level of the former floor above the aisle. Whether a similar arch exists in the north transept cannot now be seen. Above these arches, at what must have been the level of the original clearstory, are a range of eleven windows with arched brick heads, belonging to the period of the construction of the domes (see Fig. 2).

Of the nave colonnades little can be said: parts of thirteen columns can still be seen, and doubtless more might be found embedded in the houses. Some are of brick plastered, some of granite; of these latter all seem to be old material, Egyptian or Roman, re-used, and made out to the necessary height with pieces of two or more shafts.² The few capitals which remain in position make no pretence of fitting the columns on which they stand. The inter-columniations are, as before noticed, very unequal, and probably due to some reconstruction. The outer walls of the north and south aisles remain to their full height, and show several interesting features, bearing on the original arrangement of the nave. They stand about 38 feet high from the level of the nave floor, having at the top and also at about 24 feet from the floor rows of stone sockets for timbers of large scantling, which carried the roof and floor respectively of the room or

¹ In 1673 the conditions were nearly the same as now. Vansleb (*op. cit.*, 224), says: "The inside of this monastery is demolished, the Heikal excepted, where Mass is said, and the middle. The body of the Church, called by the Copties Giamelun, was heretofore supported with two ranks of pillars, each having fourteen, which are yet standing,

but in the open air, for the vault is fallen down."

² Vansleb (*op. cit.*, 225: "All the pillars are not of the same stone, nor workmanship, nor bigness, nor height; for some are reasonably big, others are slenderer. And to such as are small, they have clapt some plaister, to make them as big as the others."

rooms over the aisles. Towards the church the effect would have been like the triforium of a Gothic church, and the level of the lower range of timbers makes it, apart from other evidence, almost certain that the walls over the colonnades were carried on lintels (whether wooden or otherwise) and not on arches.

The north aisle wall is also the wall of the enclosure, and a good number of the recesses described above have been pierced—whether from the first or no is not clear,—as windows to light both the aisles of the church below and the rooms (or triforium) above. On the south the case is different. Between the church and the enclosure wall is a space 25 feet wide, occupied, except as to its east and west ends, by a long room formerly divided into two stories, and lighted very sparingly from windows in the recesses of the south enclosure wall. The levels of its floor and roof timbers, as shown by sockets like those in the aisle walls, are the same as those of the aisles, and consequently the south aisle could only have been lighted by borrowed light through these rooms.

That this was the case is shown by openings in the aisle wall,¹ but the amount of light so obtained would have been infinitesimal. The nave clearstories must have been the chief source of light for the church, and indeed would probably have helped to modify the darkness of the range to the south.

The west end of the nave is so encumbered with houses that very little can be said about it; the west doorway is choked with rubbish to within a foot of the lintel, which is of red granite, like the rest, and has failed under the weight of the masonry above it. Through it the narthex was reached (the present entrance is through a hole in the north wall of the adjacent staircase). It is a long narrow room with its major axis north and south, occupying the space between the west wall of the church and that of the enclosure, but only extending for about two-thirds of its width, the remaining space being taken up by a staircase.

It has been divided into two stories, the upper being on

¹ There are several round-headed openings of considerable size at the lower level in the aisle wall, but they

are too much blocked by the houses to be thoroughly examined; they are about 6 feet wide.



FIG. 6.—DÊR EL ABIAD. NORTH END OF NARTHEX.

a level with the room over the aisles of the church, with a floor resting on large beams. The lower story or narthex proper, though now in a deplorable condition, as being the common laystall of the inhabitants, has considerable remains of its original decoration (Fig. 6). At the north end are five columns with foliated capitals, set in a semi-circle, and carrying an architrave from which springs a semidome in red brick laid in herringbone patterns. The facing arch of the semidome is of brick plastered, with a stone chamfered label. The whole chamber has been ceiled with a brick and plaster waggon vault, but this was not the original arrangement. It has now fallen, and its ruins help to swell the mass of unsavoury rubbish on the floor. The south end of the narthex has been like the north end, but nothing now remains except one column with its capital. In the east and west walls are niches with shafts and pediments of the same description as those mentioned above, p. 144.¹

The same detail with regard to the architraves may be noted here, which was mentioned in the account of those in the eastern apses, namely, that they do not bear directly on the capitals of the columns. The crude bricks which now fill the gap between the capitals and the architraves no doubt take the place of wooden lintels which have decayed and fallen. Rough walls have probably been built, as at the east end, to carry the architraves, which here as elsewhere are in short lengths, but these no longer exist, and the stones hang loosely, and may fall at any moment.

The staircase to the south of the narthex is of massive construction with steps of granite slabs, many having on their undersides the undefaced ancient Egyptian sculptures which show the source whence they were taken. The steps are much broken, and can only be ascended with difficulty, and the staircase is destroyed in its upper portions, so that nothing can be said of its original use, except that it must have communicated with the upper floors over the aisles and narthex.²

¹ Curzon, in his *Monasteries of the Levant*, p. 131, gives a most enthusiastic description of this narthex, which he calls a chapel or baptistery. It has doubtless lost some of its ornament

since his visit, but can never have been as gorgeous as he supposes.

² Vansleb seems to be speaking of these stairs when he says (p. 225):
“ . . . in the great and beautiful

In view of the condition of the church, it is not surprising that remains of ritual arrangements are few. The high altar stands on the chord of the central apse, flanked by two small cubical blocks which look like small altars.¹ To the east of the high altar, on the centre line of the apse, is the stump of a marble shaft, about 4 feet 6 inches high, set with its larger diameter uppermost, much after the fashion of one form of Roman milestone. Another good instance of this is to be seen in the ruined church at Philae. A wooden screen of no great antiquity encloses the altar and the eastern apse, and another cuts off the southern apse from the rest of the sanctuary.² A third screen stands on the line of the western arch of the sanctuary, and another, of quite recent date, across the south transept. A little to the west of the third screen, on the north side, is a second marble shaft.

In the north transept is a crazy wooden platform which does duty as an *ambo*. The font is a plain round basin in a recess, closed by doors, in the east wall of the small room opening out of the southern apse at its north-east corner. The pavements of the eastern part of the church are a mere jumble of broken fragments of marble and granite, among which, in the north apse, may be seen a white marble altar slab with a horse-shoe shaped sinking, of the type illustrated in Butler's *Ancient Coptic Churches in Egypt*, II, 8. The pavement west of the line of the sanctuary arch is of red granite slabs, laid with some approach to regularity, but probably of no great antiquity in its present position; its level is about 8 inches above the courtyard, which represents the floor of the nave of the church. Part of the courtyard is paved with limestone squares, very regularly set in long lines, but on the axis of the nave is a series of slabs of red granite and marble of considerable interest; they are

pair of stairs that lead up to the sleeping place of the monks, are certain great stones full of Cyphers and hieroglyphic figures placed not right; by which we may understand that those who put them there had no knowledge of this mysterious tongue."

¹ The original position of the altar in this church is not clear. The lateral apses do not seem well adapted for

altars (though there is a mass of rough stonework at the south-east of the north apse, which has somewhat the form of an altar), and possibly at first the high altar stood in the centre of the sanctuary, and two other altars in the two transepts.

² The southern apse is now the women's part of the church.

shown on the plan, and their arrangement suggests that they were connected with *cancelli*. Several of the granite slabs are covered with hieroglyphs, and it is clear that no trouble was taken to deface them before using the slabs as part of the decoration of the church. There seems to have been no prejudice against these relics of paganism, and there is a curious passage¹ in the description of the church of St. Onuphrius in the Hamra (a district between New and Old Cairo) which (if not corrupt) suggests that they were even credited with certain powers;

At the entrance of the sanctuary in this church there was a threshold of black granite, upon which were figures carved and painted in the style of those in the ancient temples, and it was placed there to prevent the little birds from going into the sanctuary or into the tank; and it is said that a man from Upper Egypt who visited this church passed the night here, and imagined that he could decipher certain letters upon the stone. In this way the tank was freed from the little birds which went into it.

On the north side of the nave is a square building of plastered brick, surmounted by a dome springing from an octagon with concave sides. It is built over a massive flight of steps cut out of three blocks of red granite, which is generally considered to be part of an *ambo*, and in Denon's time seems to have been perfect, as he says (*op. cit.*, description of pl. 32) "*la chaire pour l'épître et l'escalier qui y monte sont faits de deux morceaux de granit énormes.*" The steps are undoubtedly ancient, and may once have done duty in a temple, or as an approach to an altar platform, though their rise is much quicker than that usual in ancient Egyptian work.

From the east angle of the north apse a doorway gives access to a small room,² which has beneath it a crypt, and opens to the north on a passage leading to the staircase which occupies the north-east angle of the enclosure, and leads to the roof. The steps are solid slabs of stone, many having on them the five-pointed stars which show that they have done duty as ceiling-slabs in some ancient Egyptian building. The staircase is all built in stone, and has an easy rise, and is part of the original work.

¹ Abu Salih, *op. cit.*, f. 33a.

² Mr. W. E. Crum tells me that this room is shown by the evidence of

inscriptions on its walls to have been the library. See *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1904, 553.

There was probably an entrance from the north transept to the lobby at its foot, but the actual start of the stairs can now only be reached by climbing through a very inconvenient hole in a wall, which seems designed to hide the existence of the stairs from the chance intruder. Further examination might show traces of a more convenient approach, as it seems unlikely that the staircase would have been so large if it was intended to be a secret staircase only. It gives access to several small rooms on the upper floors, and has a good carved cornice to the ceiling of its top flight, which would hardly have been the case if its *raison d'être* was concealment.

From the south apse a small room is reached which now serves as the baptistery, see above p. 148. In its south wall is a blocked doorway, which formerly led to a circular domed room, having on the west a narrow vestibule with an arched roof and two columns midway in its length. From the west end of the vestibule a door leads to the south transept. The use of these rooms is uncertain, the domed room may have been the former baptistery; but this part of the building is jealously guarded by its present occupiers, and access is difficult. There are rooms on the first floor over all these, of which the same may be said.

On the south of the church the remaining space within the enclosure is taken up by (1) a square domed room at the east end; it may have contained the remains of the library, according to M. de Bock (*op. cit.*, p. 60); (2) a long hall with rooms over it, now blocked up by various houses, and the passage from the south entrance to the south door of the church; (3) a square domed room in the rebuilt south-west angle of the enclosure.

The long hall, though choked with rubbish and mean brick houses, shows many traces of fine architectural detail. In the centre of its east wall is a lofty blank arch, of the round-headed elliptic form often seen in Coptic work, especially in the brick vaults with obliquely laid rings which were built without centering. The arch has fine foliated capitals to the jambs, much damaged, and the blank wall within it is pierced above by a small elliptic arch, and on the ground level by a square-headed doorway with granite jambs (ancient work re-used)

leading to the domed room already mentioned. On either side of the large arch are two niches, one above the other, circular in plan, with flanking shafts and the peculiar pediments before noticed. The heads of the niches are richly and elaborately carved; the detail being exceedingly good, though now much obscured by the pupa-cells of a large wasp which is well known throughout Egypt for its diligence in defacing ancient monuments. Above the upper niches is a cornice of simple profile, but excellent and refined detail¹ (Fig. 7); the course below the cornice is set out 1 inch from the wall-face below, and has

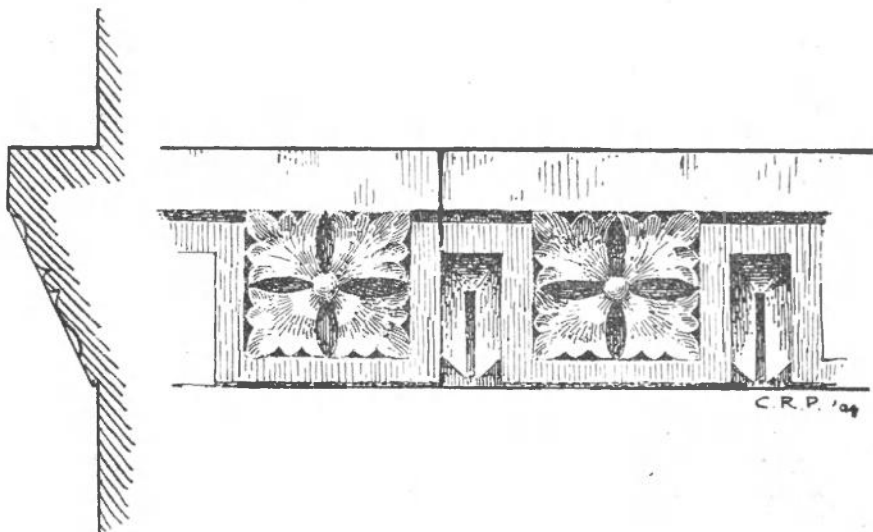


FIG. 7.—DETAIL OF CORNICE.

been coloured a deep red. The setting out was to act as a stop to the plastering with which all the walls were covered. Above the cornice are the sockets for the floor beams of the upper story, and at the top of the walls others for the roof beams, as already noted in the description of the south aisle of the church. Some of these sockets are monuments of unnecessary labour, being carefully hollowed out of a single stone only a few inches wider than themselves.

The domed room in the south-west angle calls for no

¹ A similar cornice is to be seen at the west end of the church, at the level

of the ceiling of the aisles, and doubtless ran all round as far as the transepts.

further description; built into its brick dome are four small stone carvings of early Christian style, whose subjects I could not make out from below. In Denon's time this room contained a "*superbe citerne*." In its north side is a doorway to the staircase south of the narthex.

To the east of this room is the well still used by the inhabitants; it shows no traces of ancient masonry.¹

From the foregoing account, unfortunately in many ways a very imperfect one, it may be seen that we have here to do with a building of very great interest, both in itself and in its relation to the history of Christian architecture. Its comparative inaccessibility has made it little known, and of the hundreds of visitors to Egypt who make a point of going to see the Coptic churches in the Kasr esh Shema at Cairo, very few indeed get as far as the White Monastery, which from an architectural point of view is infinitely superior to them or any other Christian building in the country. It is doubtless for some such reason that the guide book account of it is inaccurate even beyond the common degree. The plans hitherto published are chiefly distinguished by the same quality: that in Fergusson's *History of Ancient and Mediaeval Architecture* (3rd ed., 1893, I, 511) is perhaps a little less incorrect than the others. Butler in his *Coptic Churches* confesses that he never visited the place, and takes his plan from Denon or Pococke; it is quite worthless. Pococke adds to his plan a drawing of the nave colonnade, which is a work of fiction and a poor one. M. de Bock's work, already mentioned, is the only reliable account so far.

In giving a date to the building a comparison of similar plans, especially as regards the triapsal sanctuary, would be very valuable. I have not been fortunate enough to come on anything much like it; the church at Bethlehem, which is generally supposed to be of the time of St. Helena, has a certain resemblance to it, but

¹ Vansleb says of it (p. 225): "In one of the apartments of the monastery, towards the west, at the left hand as one goes in, there is a large and deep well. The monks told me that the water was forty cubits deep, and that it

had been sanctified or bless'd by our Saviour. It is very sweet and wholesome, and rises and falls with Nilus, though it hath no communication with this river."

is quite a special building, enclosing as it does the Holy Manger.

But both by tradition and the evidence of its architectural details, a date in the fifth century A.D. seems not unlikely, and to such a date I would, in the lack of more definite knowledge, assign it.

I cannot end this paper without putting on record how much I owe to Mr. Somers Clarke in the matter of its preparation, not only as regards the plans and much of the information, but also for the fact that it has been written at all. A two months' voyage on his dahabieh last winter gave me the opportunity of seeing, among many other things which otherwise I should never have seen, this fine but little known building, and it is to him rather than to me that the Institute owes this account.

NOTE.

Some Coptic inscriptions from the White Monastery published by Mr. W. E. Crum in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1904, 552-569, make it possible to assign a date in the thirteenth century to the brick piers and domes in the sanctuary and second bay of the church. They seem to be a rebuilding, after an earthquake, of domes built in the early days of the Ayyubid dynasty, c. 1175, perhaps to replace a wooden roof destroyed in the general attack on the Christian churches which took place at that time.