

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

4 JULY, 1901, TO 7 AUGUST, 1902,

WITH

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XLIII.

BEING No. 3 OF THE TENTH VOLUME.

(FOURTH VOLUME OF THE NEW SERIES.)



Cambridge:

DEIGHTON, BELL & CO.; MACMILLAN & BOWES.

LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS.

1903

Price 5s.

Monday, 25 November 1901.

Mr GRAY, President, in the Chair.

A VISIT TO THE COPTIC MONASTERIES OF EGYPT.

By Mrs LEWIS.

The pictures which I am to shew you to-night are from photographs taken this year between February 18th and March 20th. They represent a visit made by my sister, Mrs Gibson, and myself, to six Coptic Monasteries in Egypt, into some of which no woman had ever previously set foot during the 1600 years of their existence. Leaving a new monastery on the eastern bank of the Nile, just opposite Benisouef, we spent five days in crossing the desert; for the most part over an upland plain, whose sand was thickly strewn with grey and black flints, specimens of which lie on the table before you. These often make the ground appear in the bright sunshine just as if a huge brush, dipped in wet Britannia black, had been passed over it. Professor Hughes can perhaps explain to us how those flints came there, but I for one have no doubt that they gave to the country its ancient name of Khemi, which in Coptic means black, the land of Ham, of which we read in the 105th Psalm. Please remember that the Arabic word Sudân means "the black people," not the black land. Travellers on a Nile boat do not see this, because the flinty country on both sides of the river is separated from it by low sandstone or limestone hills.

The first monastery at which we arrived was Deyr Mar Antonius, built in the 4th century by the followers of St Antony, one of the fathers of monasticism, the contemporary and friend of St Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Patriarch or Pope of the Egyptian Church; for we must remember that in the early centuries Alexandria contended with Constantinople and with Rome for the primacy of the Christian world.

Deyr Mar Antonius is built in precisely the same style as all the other Coptic monasteries. When we look at the splendid remains of monasteries in our own country, so graceful and ornate in their architecture, such as Fountain's Abbey, we feel that these could only have been reared in a land where the whole nation held one faith, and was inspired by one ideal. They seem to typify the strength and the beauty of the Christian religion.

When the monasteries were destroyed at the time of the Reformation, the cathedrals remained, and are with us to this day. But the Egyptian nation had no such happy history. The Christian portion of it has been so ground down by oppression that it has never had a chance of developing into anything worthy of the name it bears. Its monasteries have been shaped by the stern necessity for self-defence. From the days of persecution under Decius and Diocletian, from the era of Martyrs, A.D. 284, whence so many Coptic and Arabic MSS. are dated, till the time of Constantine, the soil of Egypt was drenched with Christian blood, and after that period her Church was distracted by quarrels, for she took the side of her own Athanasius against the Arians, and of her own Monophysite Dioscorus against the Orthodox. From the time of the Arab conquest, say about A.D. 640, till the accession of Mohammed Ali, A.D. 1802, the Egyptian Christians have been an easy prey to the spoiler. Insulting laws have been enforced against them; periodical riots and massacres have forced them to flee from the cities and villages of the Nile valley, and to take refuge in those dens and caves of the earth where no mob and no army could easily reach them. These circumstances have been eminently favourable to asceticism, which was indeed making a virtue of necessity, and they fully explain the construction of the Coptic monasteries.

We first notice the enclosing walls broken by no entrance gate, but having a semicircular recess roofed by stout beams, from which men and provisions may be raised or lowered by means of a rope and a windlass. No Egyptian monastery had any other mode of entrance until 50 years ago. The chief feature of the interior is a square tower, or Casr, surrounded by

an empty moat, and approached by a rough wooden drawbridge, easily lifted. This was designed as the last refuge of the inmates in the event of a siege, and its dark, dusty rooms, approached by a steep, winding stone stair, still serve as a depository for any valuables of the convent which are not in use; amongst these MSS. are included.

The monasteries of Deyr Mar Antonius and Deyr Anba Bolos are, in their present condition, only 400 years old. After an existence of more than 1100 years the original buildings were destroyed during a revolt of some Moslem slaves, whom the monks had imprudently bought, and had treated with rigour. The ruins lay uncared for during a period of eighty years, and were then rebuilt after the ancient pattern.

Deyr Anba Bolos is fifteen hours' march from Deyr Antonius. It is perched on the top of a bare sandstone crag. It has not yet been furnished with a door, and the only means of entrance is by the windlass and the rope. For Mrs Gibson and me a basket had to be improvised, made out of the rope-netting which protected our camel furniture. After we were safely hoisted a procession was formed, with crosses and banners, which marched into the little church and, after a two hours' service, the Hegoumenos delivered an Arabic oration, expressing the great delight which he and the monks experienced at our visit; their gratitude to Lord Cromer and the noble nation of the English for the deliverance of their "nation" from Ahmed Arabi Pasha, for the works of irrigation, the schools and other benefits; their grief at the death of Queen Victoria; and their belief in the ultimate triumph of the Cross.

After our return to Deyr Mar Antonius we had to listen to a similar address, drawn up in less poetic terms.

The MSS. in these two convents are almost all paper Arabic of late date. They are kept in cupboards amidst thick layers of dust.

The four convents which we visited in the Wady Natrûn or Nitrian Valley, to the N.-W. of Cairo, were all built in the 4th century. They are named respectively Deyr Abû Macarius, Deyr Suriani, Deyr Anba Bishoi, and Deyr Barramous. Only one of them, Deyr Suriani, has ever been entered by a woman,

when in 1838 Miss Platt accompanied her stepfather, Archdeacon Tattam, on that memorable expedition which resulted in the transfer of so many valuable Syriac MSS. to the British Museum, among them being the Curetonian Syriac Gospels.

Deyr Macarius has now an entrance gate in its massive wall, at the foot of the recess where travellers were once hoisted by a rope and a windlass. But the aperture is so low that you cannot enter without stooping, and two great granite millstones stand waiting to be rolled into it on the first threatening of danger. The convent has three churches, dedicated respectively to Abû Macâr, to the 40 Shiûkh or Elders, and to Abû Iskharûn. The leading feature in their architecture, as in that of all Coptic churches, is the dome; a style of construction which, we have little hesitation in saying, Europe learnt from Christian Egypt. There is some evidence that the dome was not unknown in ancient Babylonia; but the first great specimen of it appeared when the architect Anthemius constructed the church of St Sophia at Constantinople, and it is supposed that he got many of his ideas from Alexandria. In all three churches of this convent there is a huge shrine or bier of very old wood. That in the church of Abû Macâr is filled with the bones of three saints, all of whom were named Macarius, and all lived in the third century. The monks are not quite sure as to which of these founded this monastery, and they therefore pay equal reverence to all three. When a service is held once a year in the church of the Shiûkh, or in Abû Iskharûn, the bones are carried thither in solemn procession. This seems to be a survival of the ancient Egyptian idea of the *ka* or ghost, which was always supposed to hover near its own mummy.

We were greatly surprised to find that these devout people are in the habit of using the floors of their churches as store-houses. A heap of corn lay over the tomb of the Forty Elders, whilst olives, pomegranates, and other fruits of the earth were spread out to dry over the floors.

Deyr Abû Macarius possesses a hermit of peculiar sanctity, who, after living within its walls as an ordinary monk for 30 years, betook himself to a cave about two miles away, where he has dwelt for the last six years, subsisting on bread and

water, and coming to the church service only on Sundays, or whenever the Wakeel or steward happens to visit the monastery. He is an old man, with a finely shaped head, hollow cheeks, and red, watery eyes. He was quite sociable, and acted as our guide round the monastery.

The Coptic Church lays great stress upon fasting. For 170 days in the year, that is, 40 before Christmas, 45 before Easter, 40 before Pentecost, 30 in spring (the Fast of Nineveh), and 15 in August in honour of the Virgin Mary, no meat is partaken of, nor eggs, nor milk, nor butter, nor fish. In some families no food is tasted till three o'clock in the afternoon. This severe abstinence has weakened the stamina of the race; the Copt, though quick and intelligent, is physically inferior to his Moslem neighbours, and engages in no pursuit which would tax his muscles.

The manuscripts in Deyr Macarius are kept in a large room in the Casr, whose floor is thickly carpeted with a layer of dust. Loose leaves, and books which have lost something more than their bindings, are piled up on a large table, the fragments which fell from it on the dusty floor being trampled by every passing foot. I made an attempt to purchase these from the Wakeel, but, though he confessed that in five years' time little would remain of this pile, he was too much afraid of the curses which are written therein to entertain the idea of allowing any of them to be carried out of the monastery gate.

Deyr Suriani and Anba Bishoi are only some twelve miles distant from Deyr Macarius. In the former place we found that the monks were not in the least aware that their predecessors had ever possessed a Syriac manuscript. They gave us every facility for photographing, with a dark room in which to change our films. They too have a hermit, a man who lived for twelve years in a desert cave, subsisting on herbs and on the charity of the poor Bedawin. He moved his habitation from one place to another, and one night in his wanderings he suddenly came on the lofty bare wall of Suriani, of whose existence he did not know. But seeing a bell-rope, he pulled it, and was admitted. For nine years he has lived peacefully in a cell within the walls; but he never speaks, except to ask for

necessary things, and never attends the church services. We managed to secure a photograph of him with our kodak and the eager help of the monks.

At Anba Bishoi the oldest MSS. we saw were two Coptic Bibles, dated A.D. 1220 and 1256.

Deyr Barramûs is less dusty and altogether better kept than the other monasteries of the Wady Natrûn. It is the only one easily accessible to the modern tourist, for the little railway of the Egyptian Salt and Natrûn Company stops at Bîr Hôoker within two hours' ride of it. The few manuscripts and printed books which it contains are also well kept. But when we looked at its dull grey walls, and reflected that from them or from those of three other ancient monasteries—Deyr Abû Macarius, Deyr Mar Antonius, and Deyr Anba Bolos—all the Bishops of the Coptic Church, and therefore her Patriarch, must come; that from these monasteries the monks are not allowed to go out, even to take a walk in the desert, and that thence a few of them will be called to occupy positions where the utmost tact and the greatest knowledge of men will be required, we ceased to wonder that the reforming party amongst the laity periodically give up hope, and migrate in their hundreds to the Church of Rome, and in their thousands to the American Mission, thus getting rid of all the chains of ecclesiastical restrictions and oppressive ordinances which an unenlightened zeal has forged for them in the course of ages. But we who know this ancient community only in the period of its degeneracy, must not forget the tribute of admiration which we owe it for its constancy under trials to which no Christian Church has been subjected for quite so long a period.

THE SEPULCHRAL BRASS OF ST HENRY OF FINLAND.

By Dr M. R. JAMES.

The magnificent brass, or series of brasses, which I am bringing to your notice this evening, has, I believe, never before made its appearance in so full a form in England. At any rate, Mr Creeny, who has diligently investigated the

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