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NOTES ON THE COPTIC DAYRS OF THE WADY NATRÛN AND ON DAYR ANTONIOS IN THE EASTERN DESERT.

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THE researches for ancient MSS. by Canon Cureton and Archdeacon Tattam, and the amusing pages of the "Monasteries of the Levant," by the Hon. Robert Curzon, afterwards Lord Zouche, have thrown considerable interest around the Coptic *Dayrs* of the Wady Natrûn, but, so far as I know, no detailed account exists of those ancient Christian establishments, much less of the still remoter Convent of S. Antony, in the Eastern Desert, near the Red Sea. This last place indeed seems not to have been visited by more than one or two Europeans within the recollection of the present generation of monks.

As an appropriate sequel to my Notes on the Coptic Churches of Mus'r el Ateykah, published in a late number of this Journal,¹ I propose to give such a brief description of these ancient Dayrs as I was enabled to draw up during a brief visit in January in the present year (1873).

1. The Convents of the Wady Natrûn, or Valley of the Natron Lakes, are four in number, and are respectively named *Dayr Macarius*, after the celebrated anchorite of that name; *Dayr Syriani*, founded perhaps originally for Syrians; *Dayr Amba Bishôi*, and *Dayr Baramoos*. All these establishments, unlike those of Mus'r el Ateykah, are still strictly conventual, women not even being permitted to enter their precincts. Numerous other Dayrs existed in ancient times in the same neighbourhood, but these last have long since fallen into ruin, and of some scarcely even a vestige now remains.

¹ Vol. xxix. p. 120.

Teráneh, the ancient Tenenuthis, on the Nile, is the best point from which to cross that portion of the Libyan Desert which lies between the "*Bahr*" or River and the Wady, as the Khedivè's worthy Overseer of the natron and salt found therein is himself a Copt, and in the habit of sending occasional supplies to the Convents.

After a long day's journey across the Desert, surmounting at length an elevation of shining black pebbles, I saw in the red glow of the rapidly approaching sunset—a sight welcome to the eyes in those remote solitudes—the long white line of the walls of Dayr Mari Macarius growing out of the yellow sand on the opposite side of a depression, sparsely tufted with tumps of reedy grass, and white in places with efflorescent salts. Around, like stranded boats around the hull of a ship, lay the ruins of three more Convents and numerous smaller cells.

The walls of Mari Macarius, as well as of the other Dayrs, are windowless, and were whitened some twenty years ago, a period insufficient in that incomparable climate to cause the slightest stain. Access in this, as in the other instances, is gained by a single door, so low that one is compelled to bend double in order to enter, and near it is placed one or more massive mill-stones of the red granite of Assouan—sections, apparently, of ancient columns—which in time of danger are rolled into the doorway, the monks who effect the process being afterwards drawn up by a rope into a kind of gate-tower above. The Gommos or Abbot of Mari Macarius was unfortunately absent at the time of my visit, and a French ruffian named Fortune Amè, of Cairo, having abused the hospitality of the monks by breaking into one of the churches and the library by night and stealing therefrom silver plate and all the valuable MSS., which he threw over the wall to Arabs in his employ who were stationed outside, I was not permitted to enter the Kas'r or Tower. Sir Gardner Wilkinson² speaks of it as containing three churches and extols the beauty of the upper one, but I was told that it only contained a single chapel, one probably dedicated, as in the Kas'rs of the other Dayrs, to the Archangel Michael. Be that, however, as it may, the other churches are four in number: A. Abou Es' Haroun; B. Sheough (the Elders);

² Murray's Egypt, 1873, p. 261.

C. Abou Macarius, with the appended Church of Hanna ; and D. another church not of ancient date.

A. *Abou Es' Haroun*.—The vestibule or porch of this church has a vaulted roof of red brick and is supported upon four arches. The interior is divided into three principal compartments, in the first of which are rude frescoes of Mari Girgis (S. George), the patron of the Copts, and Abou Sefhîn.³ The pulpit is of wood. The Heykel or chancel is now disused, and, as is usual in the Wady Natrûn, in contradistinction to the examples at Mus'r el Ateykal and elsewhere in Egypt, it ends square and not with an apse.

B. *Sheough*.—This is a large church in three compartments. The chief objects of interest are the relics of S. Macarius, which are placed on an "Ambooba," a sort of wooden bed.

C. *Abou Macarius*.—This church also is built in three compartments. The third or Easternmost is unusually large and contains some old paintings and two stone candlesticks. A side compartment, which has an ancient screen, is really the separate Church of Hanna (John). Here are two more stone candlesticks. The dome displays fine Cufic inscriptions in red. At the time of my visit this Church was used for drying raisins, which almost covered the floors, a species of desecration far too common in the Dayrs of the Wady Natrûn.

The Refectory is a long, low, narrow building, supported by a single wooden pillar with a marble capital. It has a barrel roof of stone, and a stone table, now, as usual, disused, runs along its full length. Ten monks only occupy this Convent, the buildings of which appear to be in extremely bad repair.⁴

Three hours from Mari Macarius stand, near together, Dayr Syriani and Dayr Amba Bishoi, and at no great distance are the ruins of Abou Honnes and two others. Dayr Syriani is the most beautiful Convent of the Natron

³ The attachment of the peaceful and servile Copts to such warlike saints as S. Girgis, S. Teodrus, and Abou Sefhîn, is curious and worthy of note.

⁴ A few hundred yards out in the desert west of S. Macarius, an Arab from Beni-Salameh showed me a curious place very difficult to describe. It is a shallow

excavation cut in the natural rock with perfectly smooth floor and sides, and about seven yards across either way. Upon each side are two or three rectangular recesses. This singular exoavation, of which it is hard to conjecture the use, is nearly filled up with sand.

Valley. Its lofty walls enclose a large space of ground, and include a beautiful garden of palms, nebkas, and other trees. Over the small door of entrance is a circlet of white marble sculptured with a sixfold cross within a wreath. The existing Churches are three in number, Adra Miriam, Abou Honnes and Baramooti Syriani, and Adra Bis Syriani; three others are in ruins.

A. *Abou Miriam*.—Over the door of this Church, which possesses nothing of particular interest, is a large cross sculptured in yellow stone, above which is a square window with stone tracery running all over the aperture in the form of quatrefoils. This, probably, is a unique feature.

B. *Abou Honnes* and *Baramooti Syriani*.—The interior of this Church exhibits four compartments, of which the first, that, namely, with the tank for the water blessed on the eve of the Epiphany, is very small and separated from the rest by a low stone screen. The Baptistery, now disused, is altogether cut off from the rest of the Church. In the second compartment are the relics of the patron saints, and a pulpit with very ancient paintings. Hanging high up is an ancient Arabic lamp of glass. Over the altar,⁵ as usual, is a large wooden baldachino. The curtains of the door of the iconostasis are of rich material, and their edges display inscriptions in Arabic letters of early form, but not, I was assured, of ancient date.

C. *Adra Bis Syriani*.—This is a Church with four compartments and three aisles. The roof is unusually lofty, and there are several windows of stained glass. The screen door between the second and third divisions is of great magnificence, richly carved and inlaid with wood and ivory. The iconostasis, like the last named screen, is also inlaid with ivory; figures of saints and Syriac inscriptions being introduced with excellent effect. Over the door of the iconostasis is a cross of iron, and on either side the arch are plaster pilasters curiously moulded. Within, the surface of the entire walls of the sacrarium are richly ornamented with plaster orna-

⁵ Sir Gardner Wilkinson, the original writer of Murray's Guide to Egypt, has made an extraordinary mistake, which has remained uncorrected in the revised edition of 1873, p. 361. He says, speaking of some subterranean chapels near Antinoë, "These had no stone altar. The Copts, indeed, have always had a table."

The very reverse of this is the truth. In every Coptic church, ancient or modern, which I have either seen or heard of, the altar is an unmistakable altar, and always built of stone. Many Coptic clergymen have assured me they never even heard of a wooden table, and were sure that none such existed.

ments of ancient design. In the niche is a picture suspended from a bronze cross. To the left of the high altar is a broken piece of marble built into the wall and sculptured with the lower part of a cross painted red, around which is written or painted on the stone a very ancient Syriac inscription. This may have been a consecration cross, if indeed they were in use in Oriental Churches. It should be noted that the screens in this interesting Church are solid, that is to say, imperforate and very lofty. Upon the altar of the Chapel of the Martyrs is a board carved with four crosses and with a Syriac inscription on the back. Here, too, is a very ancient double picture upon panel. Upon one side are represented SS. Sergius and Ouagius, and on the other the diademed head of a woman, which may be conjectured to represent that of the Empress Helena.

The refectory is evidently of great antiquity; it has the usual long stone table and stone seat on either side, and is adorned with much-faded frescoes. The Kas'r, or tower, which, as in the other Convents, serves as a sort of treasury, is approached through another building, from which, at a great height from the ground, a plank is thrown across to a small iron-plated door, its only entrance. The library contains a small collection of old, but not ancient, books and MSS. All the treasures have long since disappeared. In the topmost story of the Kas'r is a chapel dedicated to S. Michael,—a position which reminds one of the Churches dedicated to the same Archangel on Glastonbury Tor, S. Michael's Mount, and other places in Western Christendom.

Dayr Amba Bishöi.—This large Dayr, as already stated, stands at a short distance from Dayr Syriani, and the view from the top of the latter of its lofty and massive walls rising out of the silent sands of the desert is most peculiar and most striking. It contains three Churches,—Amba Bishöi, with that of El Adra attached, and a small one in the Kas'r.

A. *Amba Bishöi.*—The Church of Amba or Father Bishöi is approached by a porch, with a beautifully executed circular roof of red brick, and is divided inside into five compartments divided by screens of wood, of which two are solid, and two are perforated. In the second division is a stone pulpit, and between the third and fourth an ancient fresco and several small circular windows of stained

glass. To the right is the domed chapel of Abba Es' Haroun El Kalini, *i. e.*, of El Kalin, which contains a large bronze corona. The sacrarium ends square, and has a fine range of steps,—six in number,—and remains of very handsome mosaic.

B. The Kineseh or Church of *El Adra* on the left contains a large reliquary, which incloses the entire body of Amba Bishoi. Outside is a small but picturesque belfry. In the Kas'r is a lofty chamber divided by a row of piers, with lofty pointed arched roofs of dark-red brick. This room is strewn with *leaves* of Coptic and Arabic MSS. upon Charta Bombycina, amongst which appeared a few atoms of vellum. The ancient MSS. have all been sold.

Dayr Baramoos.—This large convent (for which its occupants claim an antiquity of 1599 years) is situated about two hours' distance from the two last described. It contains four Churches, those, *viz.*, of Adra Baramoos, Mari Hounes el Ma' Medaneh,⁶ the small Church of Abela-wa-Abib, and that of the Melak Michael in the Kas'r.

A. *Adra Baramoos.*—The interior of this building has three compartments and three aisles, as well as the rare feature for a Coptic Church of a kind of transept. The nave has a lofty stone-ribbed roof, and is supported upon massive piers. Here is the reliquary of the Adra Baramoos, and a fine screen. To the west is the Chapel of S. George, with a pointed doorway of Arab architecture.

The other Churches contain nothing worthy of particular notice. The refectory has a three-domed roof, a stone table with a range of stone seats on either side, and a massive lectern of stone sculptured with a floriated cross. The library in the Kas'r contains a considerable collection of MSS. on cotton paper in excellent preservation, but of no great antiquity, and an adjoining room is full of fragments and loose leaves. The belfry contains an ancient bell, apparently of Western manufacture, inscribed with the names of the four Evangelists. Near Dayr Baramoos are the ruins of Dayr Amba Musa. None of the suspended volumes described by Mr. Curzon now exist in any of these monasteries, and I only saw a single Abyssinian monk in Dayr

⁶ I cannot be answerable for the correct spelling of the names of these Coptic Saints, though I have striven after accu-

racy by submitting them to the revision of Mr. Girgis Melad, an accomplished Coptic friend at Cairo.

Baramoos. Of the four existing convents of the Wady Natrún, Dayr Syriáni possesses the most property; it is followed in this respect by Dayrs Baramoos and Macarius, Dayr Amba Bishoi being the poorest of all. The inmates consist of the Gommos or Abbot, a certain number of Abúnas or Priests, and the Rahibs or lay brethren. The monks are extremely friendly, and hospitable to the utmost extent of their limited means.

2. I proceed now to give a brief description of my visit to Dayr Antonios in the Eastern desert, a place which, from the fine scenery by which it is surrounded, and its remote and extraordinary position, is of even greater interest than any of the convents of the Wady Natrún. In the first instance I proceeded to the beautifully situated town of Boosh near Benisoo, upon the western bank of the Nile, in order to procure the proper letters of recommendation from the Reis or Gommos of S. Antony, who commonly resides in the subsidiary Convent at Boosh, near which place the Dayr possesses considerable landed property.

Dayr Bolos (S. Paul), the other existing Convent of the Eastern desert, has likewise its subsidiary though smaller establishment at Boosh; and the two great Churches, with their numerous white domes surmounted by crosses, give an unexpectedly Christian aspect to the scene. I was received in the kindest manner by the Gommos, who, his handsome new Church being completed, was engaged in superintending the erection of new conventual buildings around a large court, which was thronged with monks and with Christian and Mohammedan workmen, and with numerous asses, buffaloes, sheep, and other domestic animals. Next morning I crossed the Nile, with one of the Abúnas, to a point opposite the village of Maydoon, where stands another branch Dayr dependent upon Mari Antonios; a third, that of Adra Miriam, existing at Byad, opposite Benisoo. The Convent of S. Antony, opposite Maydoon, is reputed to have been the first spot to which S. Antony retired, and it was only when the saint found too much distraction from the concourse of people who passed up and down the Nile that he retired to the desert and the lonely mountains of Gelalla. This ancient establishment has now lost the character of a true Dayr, and has become a mere village of Christian people surrounding the ancient Churches, but still enclosed within

the ancient walls, and entered by the usual small postern. The Church, or, more properly, the two connected Churches of Mari Antonios and Abou Sephîn are built of very hard dark red bricks. Mari Antonios has a central dome, flanked by four half-domes, supported by four pillars, of which three have fine ancient capitals taken from some still older building. Four smaller domes of very ingenious construction rise at the angles. The Church is apsidal, and contains an ancient chalice, and several of those curious balls of white porcelain or imitative eggs covered with coloured crosses, arabesques, and figures of Archangels, which are also found at Mar Saba, the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and in many other oriental churches. In the southern apse is the Baptistery. The floor of the entire church is formed by the natural rock which here rises to the surface. Abou Sephîn, which appears to be of equal antiquity, boasts likewise of a dome supported upon four pillars. The Arab historian, Makrisi (A.H. 740), calls this convent *Dayr el Gemaseh*, i. e., of the Sycamore, and within the walls to the present day stands a half-blasted, but still venerable, sycamore fig-tree. The same Muslim author says of S. Antony, that he wished to become a martyr, but Diocletian dying, he became a monk and fasted forty days.

The convent of Adra Miriam at Byad, having become too dilapidated for habitation, is now in progress of restoration,—an indication of that progress and revival which is everywhere manifest amongst the Copts in Egypt. Adra Miriam contains nothing of interest, except an ancient hand-cross of bronze.

Having obtained a letter of commendation from the Reis or Abbot,—a letter, by the way, so worded as almost to remind one of Apostolic days,—and an escort of the noble and faithful Maâzee Bedoueen, I crossed from Benisoof to Byad, and next morning commenced my dromedary journey across the desert. At the end of the third day's march we reached the top of a rising ground strewn with boulders, and suddenly came in sight of the vast windowless and doorless walls of the great Convent, standing at the foot of the vast dry precipices of that portion of the Gelalla⁷ mountains called *Gelzum*, and in full view of the Red Sea and of the red summits of the mountains of the Sinaitic range beyond

⁷ Spelt by Sir G. Wilkinson "Lelalla."

it. At the same moment the sound of a deep bell boomed out over the silent expanses of those vast solitudes. Arriving at the foot of a sort of tower, a trap-door was opened, and, after a short parley, a *Rahib*, or monk, was let down by a rope, which being fastened around me, I was hauled up by main force into the Convent. My servant, Hassan, although a Mohammedan, was likewise permitted to enter, but the Bedouen were compelled to remain below outside.

The Dayr of S. Antony is the largest in Egypt, and its lofty walls enclose a large space of ground partly occupied by the irregular masses of the conventual buildings and partly by large and beautiful gardens, abounding in vegetables and in date palms, olives, carobs and other trees. These are watered by rills conducted from a magnificent spring, which, bursting out of a cleft in the rock behind, falls into a round artificial basin hewn in the natural stone, and afterwards into a large covered reservoir. It was of course the existence of this delicious and copious *Ain* which, in the first instance, determined the position of the Convent. An Arab tradition mentioned by Makrisi relates that the Prophetess Miriam, the sister of Moses, bathed in it at the time of the Exodus. The charm of these beautiful and well-watered gardens in that "barren and dry land" will be readily imagined.

With the exception of the very ancient and striking church of S. Antony, all the Churches, and most of the conventual buildings, have either been entirely or partially rebuilt. Some 380 years ago the monks of S. Antony had become rich and waxed luxurious. Each monk bought a Muslim slave, and these, at least nominally, converted to Christianity, they kept to work in the garden and to do all the menial work of the Dayr. But an unlooked-for Nemesis was at hand. When a certain bell rang in the night it was the duty of each slave to call his own master to rise to prayer in the Church. On a certain night the slaves both of Dayr Antonios and Dayr Bolos, who had secretly conspired together, rose against their masters, and each, as he awoke the monk to whose particular service he was attached, fell upon him and cut off his head. According to another account some few lives were spared; some of the older and more infirm monks being imprisoned at Dayr Bolos, and some of the younger and more lusty being set to grind the

mills and work in the gardens of Dayr Antonios. After this tragedy the slaves seem gradually to have dropped off from the two Convents, until the latter were left entirely empty and open for the ingress and egress of the wandering Bedouen, who, during some seventy or eighty years, made them their temporary abode, breaking down the carved woodwork for fuel, using the MSS., amongst which were probably inestimable treasures, to kindle their fires, and destroying the buildings as they listed. At length, 300 years ago, the two Dayrs were again taken possession of and reoccupied by monks.

The Kas'r or Keep of Dayr Antonios has apparently its original basement story of stone, but the upper part, built of crude brick, was reconstructed at the time of the reoccupation. It contains a chapel dedicated to S. Michael. Two small rooms contain a large number of books in Coptic and Arabic in fine preservation and kept in boxes. In this tower may likewise be seen a curious Abyssinian shield made of hippopotamus' hide, a fine bronze lamp of at least as great antiquity as the foundation of the convent itself, a great silver processional cross, and a gorgeous silver-mounted umbrella which is held over the Evangelion on the occasion of the annual procession to the cave of S. Antony.

A. The most interesting building, however, in the Dayr is the very ancient and striking Church of *Mari Antonios*. Its interior has four compartments separated by low stone screens, and there is a considerable rise towards the altar. The two first and the fourth divisions are crowned by domes, the third having a vaulted roof. The first arch is round, the others pointed, and around each is a Coptic inscription in dark red characters. To the left of the first compartment is a chapel with a small dark apsidal sacarium ornamented with very old frescoes representing Christ in glory attended by angels. In the eastern niche is painted the Cross with two saints. The whole walls indeed of this church are covered with ancient frescoes of very curious design, and the figures present a strange appearance, glaring forth from under the black smoke-stains of the fires of the intruding Bedouen. In the central apse I found the half of a small but very carefully painted picture executed on a gold ground. It is much damaged, but I could easily distinguish the figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of S. John Baptist, and

of a crowned king, apparently a portrait. In this church also are two old glass lamps, and an elegant sexagonal brass stand for the chalice, ornamented with Arabic inscriptions, and belonging perhaps to the fourteenth century.

B. The Church of *Talamees* (Disciples?) *Petros and Bolos*, anchorites, not Apostles, is said to be only 100 years old. It is built in three compartments and is crowned by twelve domes. Preserved in the sacrarium is an ancient picture of Christ in glory with angels, with an Arabic inscription executed on a gold ground. In the third compartment are two old Arabic glass lamps, one of which has inscriptions in relief. In the sacristy is a large coved tomb.

C. In the garden stands the large twelve-domed church of *Amba Marcos*, also said to have been erected 100 years ago. It contains the tomb of Amba Marcos. In all respects this church follows the ancient Coptic models, but upon the side of the sacrarium is painted in a beautiful Italian hand the inscription, "*Hec ædes Fr'is Bernardi Ferulensis Siculi Ordinis Minorum.*" The same name in the same hand is painted on the side of the cave of S. Antony. Who this Bernardus was I could not learn, and the Rahibs seemed indignant at the idea that he was the architect of their Church.

D. The small upstairs Church of *Adra Miriam* is of little interest in itself, but it contains two very curious old pictures of the hermit-saints Antony and Paul. In one corner of the conventual inclosure is another small Church with twelve domes, built only a few years ago.

Having expressed a wish to see the *Maghara*, or cave of S. Antony, the three monks who were to accompany me rushed into a Church and brought thence cymbals and small bells struck with an iron rod, with which, after being swung out of the Convent, we went clashing and clanging up the mountain side to the great amazement and amusement of myself and two Bedouen lads whom I took with us. The cave of S. Antony is a small natural fissure in the almost perpendicular side of the mountain immediately above the Dayr. The ledge in front of the cell commands a magnificent and impressive view of the intervening desert, torn by *fumaras* and strewn with boulders, the long ridge of the opposite mountain range of Gebel Oreida, the blue waters of the Red Sea, and the mountains of the Sinaitic range

beyond. Near S. Antony's cave can be traced the remains of the cells of other anchorites.

I did not visit Dayr Mari Bolos, which is two days' journey beyond Mari Antonios, although a shorter route, inaccessible to camels, exists across the mountains, as I was assured that not a single fragment of any ancient MS. had escaped the wreck of the eighty years of abandonment. Its position, as far as I could learn, is even more striking than that of S. Antony. The sites of one or two more Dayrs are known to exist in the neighbouring desert. One of these, called by the Maâzee '*Dayr Behayt*,' has a well of good water.⁸

⁸ I append a few points in illustration of my former paper (See vol. xxix. p. 120). The "Moaallaka" and S. Berbarra in Old Cairo were formerly nunneries. The "Dayr el Benat," of Makrisi, now called *Dayr Teodrus*, in Cairo, is still a nunnery. Here on Wednesdays, in the chapel containing the Shrine of S. Teodrus, is performed the ceremony of casting devils out of women. Patients and operators alike appear to be Mohammedans!

Makrisi states that the synagogue called *Damouk* is the oldest in Dayr esh Shemma. "They all say it was the place where Moses prayed to God." It was said to have been built immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, and pilgrimages were made to it instead of to the Temple. He also relates the following curious tradition about this site. The Prophet Moses struck his staff into the ground there, and it budded and became the most beautiful of trees. When the Sultan el Ashraf Shebân ebn Hoseyn (A.D. 1363), who was building a school, heard of the beauty of this tree he desired it, and sent messengers to carry it away. The tree, however, had miraculously become ugly, so the messengers did not think it worth cutting down, and accordingly left it. After this a Jew and Jewess cohabiting together under this tree, it dried up and died! According to Makrisi there was in the Dayr esh Shemma a synagogue called *Ish-Shammain*, which had an inscription in Hebrew upon the door stating that it was built 336 years after Alexander. Here was kept a copy of the Holy Scriptures alleged to be in the handwriting of Ezra the Scribe! Makrisi speaks of a "Treasury" as existing under the Dayr of "Babilion" (Babûn), and of another under the Kineseh in the Hart el Zoualeh in Cairo. This last, he says, was through a well, and in his time was hidden, the well having, according to the assertion of the occupants, been filled up by a pillar which fell from heaven.

Shenouda, to whom a church is dedicated in Mus' el Ateykah, is said to be the author of many works, whether extant or not I could not learn.

The Hon. Sir Arthur Gordon informs me that he has discovered in Dayr Abou Sephîn another Church besides those mentioned in my former paper. Sir Arthur writes, "It is, as you know, very difficult to make out the true dedication of a Coptic Church, but as far as I could ascertain that which I found in addition was the Church of S. Theodore. It was (like the Moaallaka) entirely upstairs, and consisted of a number of little chapels with nothing of very great interest in them, unless it be some old pictures."

While fully appreciating as an invaluable witness to ancient Christian usages the Churches and Ritual of the Copts, it should never be forgotten that these Euty-chian Jacobites obtained their property by siding with the Mahomedans at the time of the Arab invasion against the orthodox Christians of the Church of Egypt. Many of the Churches are themselves those of the Orthodox or Melkite Christians. The pages of Makrisi abound with instances of the spoliation or demolition of Churches during various outbreaks of Mohammedan fanaticism and cruelty.