

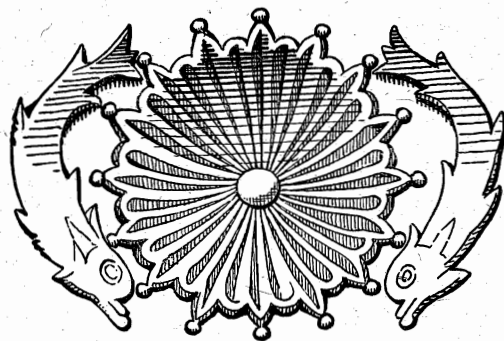
**THE MEDIAEVAL WALL-PAINTINGS  
IN THE COPTIC CHURCHES OF OLD CAIRO**

BY

**OTTO MEINARDUS**

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# THE MEDIAEVAL WALL-PAINTINGS IN THE COPTIC CHURCHES OF OLD CAIRO

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From the XIVth century onwards, pilgrims and tourists have been attracted by the ancient Coptic Churches of Old Cairo, yet it was not until the latter part of the XIXth and the first part of the XXth century, that these churches were systematically studied and described<sup>(1)</sup>. At the same time, many of the mediaeval wall-paintings have either escaped the notice of the students or they were only recently uncovered. It is the purpose of this study, therefore, to list and to describe the wall- and pillar-paintings of the following four Coptic churches in Old Cairo : The Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah), the Church of St. Shenute and the Church of St. Mercurius. In each case, a brief historical note precedes the description of the paintings.

## 1. THE CHURCH OF SS. SERGIUS AND BACCHUS.

### *Historical Note.*

The Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus<sup>(2)</sup>, commonly known as Abû Sârgah, is probably the most ancient church in Old Cairo. At one

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<sup>(1)</sup> BUTLER, Alfred, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*. Oxford, 1884, 2 vols. MONNERET DE VILLARD, Ugo, *La chiesa di Sta. Barbara di Vecchio Cairo*. Milano, 1922. MARCUS SIMAIKA Pasha, *A Brief Guide to the Coptic Museum and to the Principal Ancient Coptic Churches of Cairo*. Cairo, 1938. BURMESTER, O.H.E. KHS-, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Cairo*. Cairo, 1955.

<sup>(2)</sup> SS. Sergius and Bacchus, two Syrian saints, who suffered martyrdom under Maximian, are commemorated in the Coptic Church on the 4th of Bâbah (14th of October) and on the 10th of Bâbah (20th of October) respectively.

time also known as «the Church of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Flesh»<sup>(1)</sup> and the «Church of the Blessed Virgin»<sup>(2)</sup>, the church was built over the traditional site commemorating the stay of the Holy Family in Babylon on their flight to Egypt. According to tradition, the church dates from the end of the IVth or the beginning of the Vth century<sup>(3)</sup>, although already A. Butler pointed out that «the present building dates unaltered in its main features from at least the VIIIth century»<sup>(4)</sup>.

The church is well attested from the middle of the VIIIth century onwards. In 744 A.D., the archdeacon of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus participated in the deliberations for a successor of Theodore, the 45th Patriarch of Alexandria<sup>(5)</sup>, and ten years later, Menas, the archpriest of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, accompanied Michael I, the 46th Patriarch of Alexandria, in crossing the Nile, when Cairo was set on fire<sup>(6)</sup>. We do not know, whether this church was included among those churches in Old Cairo, which in the latter part of the VIIIth century were destroyed. At any rate, during the patriarchate of Mark II (799-819 A.D.) the Coptic churches of Old Cairo were rebuilt<sup>(7)</sup>. In 859 A.D., Shenute I, the 55th Patriarch of Alexandria, was elected in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus<sup>(8)</sup>, and approximately one hundred and twenty years later, «the people assembled (again) in the Church of the two Martyrs Sergius and Bacchus at Miṣr in Kaṣr aš-Šamʿ, which is the catholic one» to elect Ephraim, the

<sup>(1)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and some neighbouring countries attributed to Abū Šālih the Armenian*. Oxford, 1895, pp. 94-95.

<sup>(2)</sup> FABRI, Felix, *Fratrī Felicis Fabri Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae Arabiae et Egypti Peregrinationem*. Stuttgart, 1843-1849, vol. III, pp. 49-51.

<sup>(3)</sup> MARCUS SIMAIKA Pasha, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>(4)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 181.

<sup>(5)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., «The History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church», *Patr. Orient.*, V, p. 109.

<sup>(6)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>(7)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt, etc.*, pp. 84-86.

<sup>(8)</sup> YASSA ʿABD AL-MASIH, O.H.E. KHS-BURMESTER, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, (*HPEC*, II, 1), Cairo, 1943, II, 1, p. 19.

62nd Patriarch of Alexandria <sup>(1)</sup>. In the beginning of the patriarchate of Christodoulus (1047-1077), the contest for patriarchal privileges between the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus and the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah) broke into the open, «for it was the usual custom of the patriarchs, who preceded Christodoulus, that they were consecrated in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, because it was the catholic church in Cairo». When Christodoulus arrived in Fustât Miṣr, the priests of the Church of the Mistress in Cairo in the Kaṣr aš-Šam<sup>c</sup>, known as al-Mu'allaqah, assembled and said : ' How is it that thou dost forsake thy church and dost go to the Church of St. Sergius which belongs to the bishop <sup>(2)</sup> to be consecrated in it? ' A dispute and a quarrel occurred between the priests of these two churches, until they went with the patriarch to the Church of the Mistress al-Mu'allaqah and consecrated him in it. There were with him on that day twenty-four bishops, saintly and distinguished elders, and Abba Philotheus, bishop of Cairo, celebrated the Liturgy with him on that day. And there was in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus an archdeacon, known as Abi'l-Farag at-Tirs, and when the patriarch forsook his church in which it was the custom to consecrate the patriarchs, he cut out the patriarch's name, and he did not mention it in his sanctuary for the space of a week, until the patriarch came to the church after a week and celebrated the Liturgy in it, and removed the trouble, and excused himself, saying that he had only gone to the Church al-Mu'allaqah to stop the quarrel which had occurred between the priests of the two churches on his account, lest the matter should become serious between them <sup>(3)</sup>. In 1088, during the patriarchate of Cyril II, Sanhût, the deacon of the Monastery of St. Bishoi, was proclaimed bishop of Cairo in the Church of SS. Sergius and Baccus <sup>(4)</sup>. Then,

<sup>(1)</sup> 'AZIZ SURYAL ATIYA, YASSA 'ABD AL-MASIH, O.H.E. KHS-BURMESTER, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, (HPEC, II, II). Cairo, 1948, II, II, p. 136.

<sup>(2)</sup> *i.e.* the bishop of Cairo.

<sup>(3)</sup> 'AZIZ SURYAL ATIYA, YASSA 'ABD AL-MASIH, O.H.E. KHS-BURMESTER, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, (HPEC, II, III). Cairo, 1959, II, III, pp. 255-256.

<sup>(4)</sup> HPEC, II, III, p. 347.

in the tenth year of the patriarchate of Michael IV (1092-1102), the patriarch called a council to excommunicate the aforesaid Bishop Sanhût of Cairo, because he had celebrated on one day two liturgies, one in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah) and the other in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. The bishop, however, fled to the Monastery of St. Severus in the mountain of Asyût so that the patriarch had no power over him. Thereupon, Michael IV was on the point of attaching the cathedral-church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus to the patriarch, thereby abolishing the bishopric of Cairo, when he suddenly caught the plague and died <sup>(1)</sup>. In 1117, Sanhût, the bishop of Cairo, died and he was borne to the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus where Gregory, the Patriarch of the Armenians, performed the funeral service and prayed over him <sup>(2)</sup>. Then the priests and the people assembled in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus for the purpose of electing a successor to Sanhût <sup>(3)</sup> and when they had reached agreement, they conducted him in a solemn procession to the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, where he celebrated the liturgy, and his deed of investiture was read by three bishops and he was consecrated in the church <sup>(4)</sup>. During the patriarchate of Mark III (1166-1189) the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus was largely destroyed. «The Ghuzz and the people of Cairo pillaged it, and broke the pillars of the Apostles, and part of the roof was burnt. In consequence of this, the restoration of the church was undertaken by the Shaikh ath-Thikah Gabriel in the caliphate of al-'Adid (1160-1171), and it was consecrated afresh» <sup>(5)</sup>.

*The Wall-Paintings in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus.*

We may assume that at the time of the XIIth century restoration of the cathedral, the walls of the central apse and the nave including

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<sup>(1)</sup> HPEC, II, III, pp. 395-397.

<sup>(2)</sup> ANTOINE KHATER, O.H.E. KHS-BURMESTER, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, (HPEC III, 1), pp. 11-12.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>(4)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>(5)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt, etc.*, pp. 94-95.

the former apsidal chapel were adorned with elaborate paintings, of which only two fragments have survived to his day. The mediaeval pilgrims to the Holy Land, who visited this church, spoke of altars, *paintings* and pictures with representations of the Passion of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin <sup>(1)</sup>.

Alfred Butler, who studied this church in the latter part of the XIXth century, still saw traces of a wall-painting of Christ standing with his right hand upraised in benediction and holding in his left hand a scroll bearing an inscription in Coptic letters signifying : ' Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world '. The figure wears a glory, but no mitre, an amice covering the head and falling on the shoulders ; a fine cope embroidered with a diaper pattern and fastened by a triple-lobed morse ; an alb, girdle and perhaps sleeve. The still more prominent figure at the other end of the curve was more fully bearded and vested in an early chasuble and nimbed, carrying in each hand a cross. Of the figures between, which once filled the apse, only very faint tokens remained <sup>(2)</sup>. Needless to say, none of these wall-paintings can be seen to-day.

In the central apse, there are two fragments of paintings. On the northern side of the curve there is a fragment of a sadly damaged painting of a saint with a nimbus (92 cm. wide  $\times$  119 cm. high). On the southern side of the curve there is a fragment of a painting of two saints. The painting of the saint on the right is in fairly good condition. The letters O AΓΙOC are written vertically, the letters . . . ΦAN . . . are written horizontally. The saint is probably St. Epiphanius, the Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, who is commemorated in the Coptic Church on the 17th of Bashons or the 25th of May. One can clearly identify two layers of wall-paintings, both of which were damaged. The heads of the saints appear on the upper layer, whereas the colourful vestments in red, green, gray, light gray and black belong to the lower layer. The paintings show many signs of intentional damage (Pl. I).

<sup>(1)</sup> FABRI, F., *loc. cit.*

<sup>(2)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, pp. 186-187.

We suggest that the first layer of these apse-paintings belongs to the XIth and XIIth century, the period when the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus enjoyed episcopal and even patriarchal privileges. The second layer of the paintings, *i.e.* the restoration of the faces of the saints, should be assigned to the period of the general restoration of the church in the second half of the XIIth century.

On the upper southern wall of the haikal, there is a relief of the Terra Santa Cross, indicating the relationship which this church used to have with the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land <sup>(1)</sup>.

*The Pillar-Paintings in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus.*

The twelve monolithic columns with the exception of one column which is of granite are of white marble. The circumference of the marble columns varies from 122 cm. to 135 cm., the granite column having a circumference of 190 cm. The capitals are of a debased Corinthian style. Five columns separate the nave on each side from the northern and southern aisles. Two columns separate the nave from the vestibule in the west. Each of the eleven marble columns was adorned with a painting of an apostle or a saint varying from 131 cm. to 146 cm. in height and 51 cm. to 54 cm. in width, facing the nave. Traces of these paintings on the five southern and two eastern columns are still visible, though it is impossible to determine the identity of the persons portrayed. The paintings on the easternmost and the two westernmost columns of the southern row as well as those on the two western columns are best preserved. The pillar-paintings should be assigned to the VIIIth century. They were severely damaged in the XIIth century, when the church was pillaged by the Ghuzz (Pl. II, A, B, C).

Below the painting on the southernmost column of the western row facing the nave, on the middle column of the northern row facing the north and on the easternmost column of the northern row facing the nave, there are three Coptic inscriptions, which, however, ought to be assigned to a much later date.

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<sup>(1)</sup> FEDDEN, R., «Two Notes on Christian Cairo», *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, X, pp. 33 f.



## 2. THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY VIRGIN

KNOWN AS «THE SUSPENDED» (*al-Mu'allaqah*).

### *Historical Note.*

Whereas several traditions assert that this church existed already prior to the Arab Conquest<sup>(1)</sup>, the Vth century wooden door lintel depicting the Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem and belonging to this church substantiates this claim<sup>(2)</sup>. Burmester maintains that a likely date for the construction of the present church on the bastions would be soon after the first persecutions of the Christians, which occurred in the reign of the Patriarch Isaac (690-692 A.D.)<sup>(3)</sup>. The earliest historical reference to this church seems to be a statement in the biography of Joseph, the 52nd Patriarch of Alexandria (831-849 A.D.), that the Armenian Governor of Egypt ordered the demolition of the churches of Fustât Mişr «and first of all he began, and he came to the church which is in the Fortress of aş-Şam<sup>c</sup>, called the Suspended, and they demolished its upper part until they reached the columns»<sup>(4)</sup>. In this context, it is important to remember that in the Kaşr aş-Şam<sup>c</sup> there were two churches under the name of the Lady, the Mu'allaqah and the other was in the Lane of Abû Huşain. Whereas the Church of al-Mu'allaqah remained in the hands of the Copts, the Church of the Holy Virgin in the Lane of Abû Huşain was acquired by the Melkites<sup>(5)</sup>.

Undoubtedly, however, in the Xth century, the church was still in a very poor condition, for Ephraem, the 62nd Patriarch of Alexandria (975-978 A.D.), received permission from al-Mu'izz the caliph to

<sup>(1)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, pp. 228-232.

<sup>(2)</sup> This object is now preserved in the Coptic Museum, room XXI, No. 1885, cf. SHENUDAH HANNA, *Who are the Copts?* Cairo, 1963, p. 120. MARCUS SIMAIKA Pasha, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 and 55.

<sup>(3)</sup> BURMESTER, O.H.E. KHS-, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>(4)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., «History of the Patriarchs», *Patr. Orient.*, X, p. 634.

<sup>(5)</sup> HPEC, II, II, pp. 108, 112, 171.

rebuild the Mu'allaqah in Miṣr in Kaṣr aš-Šam', «since a great part of its walls had fallen down and part of them was in a state of decay»<sup>(1)</sup>. In the XIth century the church became the patriarchal residence, when Christodoulus, the 66th Patriarch of Alexandria, transferred the seat of the patriarchate from Alexandria to Cairo. At the occasion of his consecration in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah) twenty-four bishops were present<sup>(2)</sup>. During the patriarchate of Christodoulus, the Church of the Mistress al-Mu'allaqah was among those churches, which were taken from the See of Cairo and attached to the patriarchate<sup>(3)</sup>. However, the church was not only patriarchal in the sense of being under the direct jurisdiction of the patriarch, the church also remained the patriarchal seat until the XIVth century, when the see was transferred to the Church of St. Mercurius in Old Cairo. Cyril II, the 67th Patriarch<sup>(4)</sup>, Michael IV, the 68th Patriarch<sup>(5)</sup>, Macarius II, the 69th Patriarch<sup>(6)</sup>, and Gabriel II, the 70th Patriarch<sup>(7)</sup>, were all consecrated in this church. With regard to Michael V, the 71st Patriarch, and John V, the 72nd Patriarch, they were both ordained to the rank of hegoumenos in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah)<sup>(8)</sup>.

Mark III, the 73rd Patriarch, still resided in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah) from where he intervened in the famous XIIth century theological controversy involving Mark ibn Kaṅbar. Towards the end of the XIIth century, John VI, the 74th Patriarch, presided over a synod which was held at the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah) to judge Khâil, the Abûnâ of Ethiopia, and in 1239, a synod assembled in this church to judge Cyril III, the 75th Patriarch of Alexandria, who had engaged in simony. The Holy Chrism was

<sup>(1)</sup> *HPEC*, II, n, pp. 144-145.

<sup>(2)</sup> *HPEC*, II, n, pp. 255-256.

<sup>(3)</sup> *HPEC*, II, m, pp. 383-384.

<sup>(4)</sup> *HPEC*, II, m, pp. 326, 365.

<sup>(5)</sup> *HPEC*, II, m, p. 385.

<sup>(6)</sup> *HPEC*, III, i, pp. 6-7.

<sup>(7)</sup> *HPEC*, III, i, p. 42.

<sup>(8)</sup> *HPEC*, III, i, pp. 62, 66.

consecrated three times in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah), by Cyril II, Gabriel II, and John VIII <sup>(1)</sup>.

*The Wall-Paintings in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah).*

On the east wall of the Sanctuary of St. Takla Haymanot there is a damaged wall-painting representing the Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse. The Elders are portrayed standing in one row and clothed in priestly vestments, namely, the sticharion, the epitachelion and the phelonion, and their heads are surrounded with halos. Above the heads of the seven Elders in the centre, there is a Coptic text, which reads : «I rejoiced with those who said to me : ' We shall go to the House of the Lord. Our feet have stood in the courts of Jerusalem ' » <sup>(2)</sup>. The identification of this apse-painting with the Twenty-four Elders has been much disputed. Butler stated that «the eastern wall has been adorned with a very fine painting in distemper, of which faint traces are left, indicating a central figure <sup>(3)</sup> and a group of figures at each side. The priest could only say that they stood for the Twelve Apostles, but I counted twenty figures, and there may have been a few more originally, possibly as many as twenty-five. The painting is at some height from the ground, in a wide arched recess, the dimensions are nearly 14 ft. by 3 in <sup>(4)</sup>». Fifty years later, Marcus Simaika Pasha referred briefly to the apse painting, which he described as «a damaged fresco with pictures of saints dating from the Vth century, *i.e.* the period of the construction of the original church» <sup>(5)</sup>. From our historical survey we have seen that it is impossible to assign this painting to the Vth century, and the earliest possible date for this painting would be the second part of the Xth century, the period of the restoration of the church by the Patriarch Ephraem. Or, would it be conceivable that

<sup>(1)</sup> MARCUS SIMAIKA Pasha, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Psalm CXXI* : 1-2.

<sup>(3)</sup> This central figure would be Christ surrounded by the Twenty-four Elders.

<sup>(4)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 225.

<sup>(5)</sup> MARCUS SIMAIKA Pasha, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

the painting was a donation in commemoration of the consecration of the Patriarch Christodoulos in 1047, at which occasion twenty-four bishops were present?

H.G. Evelyn White is the first one to identify the wall-painting in what he called «the Sanctuary of St. John the Baptist» in the Church of as-Saydah al-Mu'allaqah in Old Cairo with the Twenty-four Elders <sup>(1)</sup>. The local tradition upheld by the Coptic parish priests of the church, however, still maintains that the apse-painting represents «Christ among some of His disciples» <sup>(2)</sup>. Upon closer inspection, there is no doubt that this Xth century wall-painting portrays the Twenty-four Elders, although they are not identified either by the Greek letters of the alphabet or by their names (Pl. III, A) <sup>(3)</sup>.

Above the Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse the dome of the sanctuary is adorned with a heavily damaged wall-painting of the Holy Virgin and Child standing on a pedestal. The upper part of the painting has completely disappeared. This painting which is truly Byzantine in style must have been very similar to the IXth century mosaic which formerly occupied the apse of the Church of the Koimisis of the Holy Virgin in Nicaea <sup>(4)</sup>. The destructions of this painting were

<sup>(1)</sup> EVELYN WHITE, H.G., *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n-Naṭrūn*. New York, 1933; vol. III, p. 95.

<sup>(2)</sup> Shenudah HANNA, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>(3)</sup> This is one of the oldest iconographical representations of the Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse. Other wall-paintings of this particular theme in Egypt are found in the apse of the church in the Monastery of St. Simeon in Aswān, the Sanctuary of Benjamin in the Church of St. Macarius in the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Wādi 'n-Naṭrūn, the Sanctuary of the Twenty-four Elders in the subterranean Church of St. Paul in the Red Sea Monastery of St. Paul the Theban, the apse of the central sanctuary of the Church of St. Antony in the Red Sea Monastery of St. Antony, the apse of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin in the Church of the Holy Virgin in the Ḥārat ar-Rūm, Cairo, and the new Upper Church of the Holy Virgin at Rod al-Farag, Cairo. Cf. MEINARDUS, O., «The Twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse in the Iconography of the Coptic Church», *Studia Orientalia Christiana : Collectanea*, XIII.

<sup>(4)</sup> The Church of the Koimisis and its decorations were destroyed in 1922. Cf. Rice, David TALBOT, *Art of the Byzantine Era*. London, 1963, p. 92.

intentional as seen by the large number of holes in the plaster (Pl. III, B).

*The Pillar-Painting in the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Mu'allaqah).*

Whereas at one time many, if not all, of the columns of this church were adorned with paintings, to-day, only the picture on one column can be seen. According to A. Butler, the paintings vanished under the scrubbing and polishing, which the pillars received during the restoration. Butler identified the person with an early patriarch, whose design on the pall closely resembles on a smaller scale a design upon the sides of the mimbar in the Mosque of Sultan Hassan, built in 1356, though the painting is some centuries earlier<sup>(1)</sup>.

The fifth column from the east in the southern row is adorned with a painting of a beardless person with a nimbus wearing a coronet. This person is a female saint, possibly a queen or a princess. In her right hand she holds a scroll. She is clothed in a phelonion (?), very similar to the vestment worn by the Empress Eudoxia on the XIth century ivory in the Cabinet des Médailles at Paris<sup>(2)</sup>. At the bottom of the painting, there used to be a Coptic text, of which, however, only two letters can be read. The colours of the painting are red, ochre, yellow, brown, gray, light-blue and black. The painting, which faces the east, has a length of 120 cm. and a width of 37 cm. at the bottom and 30 cm. at the top (Pl. IV, A).

### 3. THE CHURCH OF ST. SHENUTE.

*Historical Note.*

This church, which constitutes part of the Dair Abû's-Saifain, is dedicated to the Vth century Upper Egyptian monk and theologian St. Shenute<sup>(3)</sup>. The first historical reference to the Church of

<sup>(1)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 216.

<sup>(2)</sup> RICE, D.T., *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>(3)</sup> St. Shenute is commemorated in the Coptic Church on the 7th of Abib or the 14th of July.

St. Shenute is a statement in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, according to which an ecclesiastical council assembled in this church in 743 A.D. for the election of a successor to Theodore, the 45th Patriarch of Alexandria <sup>(1)</sup>. In the time of al-Ḥākim (996-1021), the Muslim call to prayer was made from this church <sup>(2)</sup>, which, as Butler stated, may mean that the caliph spared it, or, as seems more consistent with the context, that he turned it into a mosque <sup>(3)</sup>. Throughout its history, the church has undergone several restorations, one of which is recorded in an inscription in the church and pertains to the restoration effected by Benjamin II, the 82nd Patriarch of Alexandria (1327-1339) <sup>(4)</sup>. Around 1940, a thorough restoration was undertaken by the Committee for the Preservation of Monuments of Arab Art.

For many centuries the Church of St. Shenute has existed in the shadow of the more prominent Church of St. Mercurius, a factor which undoubtedly accounts for the paucity of information concerning this church.

#### *The Wall-Paintings in the Church of St. Shenute.*

As in the case of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus and the Church of St. Mercurius, we may assume that the walls of the upper and lower Church of St. Shenute were fully or partially adorned with wall-paintings <sup>(5)</sup>. The only wall-painting, however, which has survived the vicissitudes of the ages is that representing the Holy Virgin and Child and two attending figures (angels?) in the niche of the Upper Church of St. George above the southern aisle. The painting, which shows signs

<sup>(1)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., «History of the Patriarchs», *Patr. Orient.*, V, p. 103.

<sup>(2)</sup> MALAN, S.C., *A Short History of the Copts and their Church*. London, 1873, p. 90.

<sup>(3)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 148.

<sup>(4)</sup> BURMESTER, O.H.E. KHS-, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>(5)</sup> Butler still saw inside the baptistry nine extremely rude and ancient monochrome frescoes of saints with glories. The enormous size of the head in proportion to the body, the large and staring eyeballs, and quaint pouting lips, are enough to prove the antiquity of these figures. BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 144.

of intentional damage, extends over the full niche, and has a height of 165 cm. and a width of 77 cm. The Holy Virgin with a halo is portrayed standing. Her head is erect and not inclined towards the Child. In her left arm she holds the Child, Who presses his head onto her left shoulder. The artist copied the traditional Byzantine presentation of the Holy Virgin of the XIIth-XIIIth century, though the painting lacks beauty, elegance and proportions. This is especially true with regard to the facial expressions of the Holy Virgin and the Child. The right hand of the Holy Virgin is raised in the orans position<sup>(1)</sup>. On either side of the Holy Virgin there is a figure with a nimbus. This painting should be assigned to the XIVth century, the time of the restoration of the church by Benjamin II (Pl. IV, B).

In the Church of St. Shenute there are two columns, which are adorned with paintings. The second column from the east of the southern row of columns has a painting of a warrior-saint or a king (?) facing the nave. The round head without a beard is surrounded by a nimbus, and around his neck he wears a gorget or protective collar. Generally speaking, the armour corresponds to that of a Xth-XIth century warrior of the early Crusades. His left hand rests on the hilt of a double-edged sword. Above his left arm one can see the contour of a helmet (?). In his right hand he holds a sceptre surmounted by a cross (?). The lower portion of the short skirt, which reaches to the knees, is decorated with six horizontal stripes, three of which are white, the others are black. There are no details in the painting, which would determine the identity of the figure. It is possible that the artist portrayed a Christian emperor (Pl. V, A).

In the southern section of the church there is a single column, which stands between the southern aisle and the western part of the baptistery with the Epiphany tank. The column is adorned with a painting of a bishop in episcopal vestments, who holds in his left hand a staff surmounted by a cross. His head is surrounded by a halo and his face is that of an elderly person with a long beard. E. Loukianoff suggested

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<sup>(1)</sup> Cp. the early XIVth century mosaic in the apse of the church on the island of Murano, RICE, D.T., *op. cit.*, p. 182.

that the painting represented St. Mark<sup>(1)</sup>. The two lines of Coptic text below the painting are badly damaged (Pl. V, B).

..... ΠΕΚΒΩΚ . . ΔΙΝΕΩ      . . . . thy servant . . . . .  
 ΚΧ ΜΑ ΠΙΡΕΜΠΩΕΗΚΕΡ ΟΥΛ.      . . . . . ? the man . . . . .

#### 4. THE CHURCH OF ST. MERCURIUS.

##### *Historical Note.*

The earliest reference to the Church of St. Mercurius is a statement in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* about the demolition of the church and its subsequent use as a storage-house for sugar-cane<sup>(2)</sup>. We do not know when the first Church of St. Mercurius was built, Abû'l-Makarim merely informs us that «in ancient times» there had been a church dedicated to St. Mercurius on the bank of the river<sup>(3)</sup>. During the caliphate of al-Mu'izz<sup>(4)</sup>, Ephraem, the 62nd Patriarch of Alexandria (975-978 A.D.), received permission to rebuild the church<sup>(5)</sup>, and at the time of Philotheus, the 63rd Patriarch of Alexandria (979-1003), the Church of St. Mercurius played a significant role in the story of the confessor al-Wâdiḥ ibn Raḡâ, thus confirming that the church had been restored<sup>(6)</sup>.

During the patriarchate of Christodoulos, the 66th Patriarch of Alexandria (1047-1077), the Church of St. Mercurius was among those churches in Old Cairo, which were taken from the See of Cairo and were attached to the patriarchate<sup>(7)</sup>. At this time, we also hear

<sup>(1)</sup> LOUKIANOFF, E., «L'Église Copte», *Les Cahiers Coptes*, III, 1953, p. 30.

<sup>(2)</sup> HPEC, II, II, p. 144.

<sup>(3)</sup> EVETTS, B.T.A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt, etc.*, p. 116.

<sup>(4)</sup> According to Abû'l-Makarim, the church was restored by the Patriarch Ephraem in the caliphate of al-'Azîz (972-975 A.D.). EVETTS, B.T.A., *loc. cit.*

<sup>(5)</sup> HPEC, II, II, p. 144.

<sup>(6)</sup> HPEC, II, II, pp. 155, 159.

<sup>(7)</sup> HPEC, II, III, p. 383.



of some trouble between the Patriarch Christodoulus and the Syrian people while he was in the Church of St. Mercurius on account of the oil and the salt, which they use in their oblation <sup>(1)</sup>.

In 1168, in the fire of Miṣr during the caliphate of al-ʿAdīd, the Church of St. Mercurius was burnt down. «A large multitude assembled and gave way to their fury and set fire to the church, so that nothing remained except the walls, and a small chapel within it, which was not burnt. This chapel was dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Moreover, in the upper story of this church was the Chapel of St. George with a lofty cupola. The cupola and the sanctuary, *i.e.* the altar and the walls of this chapel remained whole and untouched at the time of the fire». In 1176, however, the church was rebuilt <sup>(2)</sup>, and subsequently became one of the more important churches in Old Cairo, next to the Church of the Holy Virgin (al-Muʿallaqah) and the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. Cyril II, the 67th Patriarch of Alexandria (1078-1092), together with those bishops who were with him paid a visit to the newly rebuilt church <sup>(3)</sup>, and in 1174, after his consecration in Alexandria, John V, the 72nd Patriarch, returned to Cairo, «and the Christians at Cairo received him with a fine reception and walked before him to the Church of St. Mercurius, which was the place of his dwelling» <sup>(4)</sup>. Over the years, the Church of St. Mercurius increased in ecclesiastical importance, so that by the middle of the XIIth century, Cyril III, the 75th Patriarch of Alexandria (1235-1243), celebrated with great pomp in this church on the feast of its patron-saint <sup>(5)</sup>. From the XIVth to the middle of the XVIIth century, the Church of St. Mercurius served as the patriarchal seat for the patriarchs of Alexandria, and most of the wall-paintings of the Church of St. Mercurius ought to be assigned to this period.

In 1909, during the patriarchate of Cyril V, the 112th Patriarch

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<sup>(1)</sup> *HPEC*, II, III, p. 256.

<sup>(2)</sup> *EVETTS*, B.T.A., *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>(3)</sup> *HPEC*, II, III, p. 338.

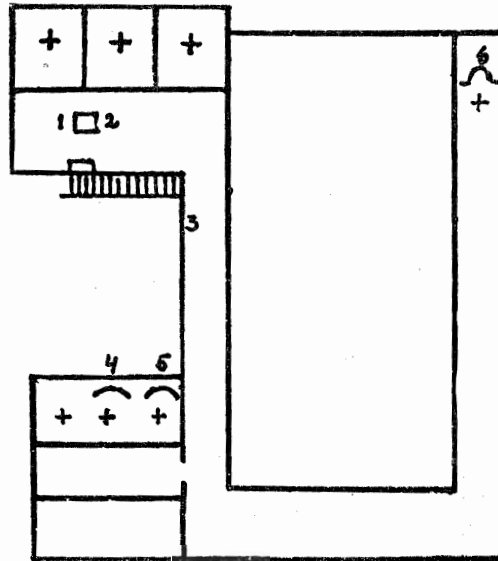
<sup>(4)</sup> *HPEC*, III, I.

<sup>(5)</sup> *BUTLER*, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 128.

of Alexandria, the Committee for the Conversation of Monuments of Arab Art engaged in the restoration of this church <sup>(1)</sup>.

*The Wall-Paintings in the Church of St. Mercurius.*

There is good reason to assume that during the Middle Ages the walls of the Upper Church of St. Mercurius with its numerous chapels were



The Upper Church of St. Mercurius.

either fully or partially adorned with wall-paintings. The remains of six separate paintings can still be seen.

1. On the northern pier in the nave of the north-eastern chapels <sup>(2)</sup> and facing the north, there is a Coptic inscription, 30 cm. in width and 30 cm. in height with the following text :

Π̄Θ̄Σ̄ ΣΜΟῩ ΕΤΕΚΒΩΚῙ ΣΕΘ̄ ----- ΤΕ̄ ΤΩΗΡῙ ΕῩ ΧΕ̄ .Θ̄.  
 ΛΣϢΙΦ̄ΡΩΟῩΨ̄ ΕΤΑΙΖΩΚΡΑΦΙᾹ ✕̄ Ο̄Ζ̄ ΧΙΝ̄ ΠΧΣ̄ ΥΣ̄ ΤΟῩ Θ̄.

<sup>(1)</sup> According to the marble-plaque in the Church of St. Mercurius.

<sup>(2)</sup> Butler identifies these chapels and states that they were dedicated to St. Antony, St. Onuphrius and St. Michael. BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, pp. 118-122.



4. The central niche in the Upper Church of the Holy Virgin is adorned with a very beautiful representation of the Ascension of Christ, which, however, shows clearly the transformation which this theme has undergone in the hands of Coptic artists<sup>(1)</sup>. A horizontal line separates the original Ascension picture into two distinct representations. The upper part of the wall-painting shows the enthroned Pantocrator, holding in His left hand the Gospel — the writing has disappeared — and having his right hand raised for the blessing. The lower part represents the Holy Virgin in the centre with her hands raised in the orans position, and surrounded by ten Apostles, five on either side of her (Pl. VII, B).

The similarities of our painting with the famous VIth century wall-painting of the Monastery of St. Apollo in Bāwīt, now in the Coptic Museum, are striking; and whereas there are some very definite distinctions between these two representations of the same theme, one cannot deny the dependence of our painting upon the Coptic prototype of Bāwīt.

With regard to the upper part of the painting, we see in both instances a beardless Christ surrounded by an aureole and attended by two angels as well as the two medallions with the sun and the moon. The symbols of the Four Bodiless Living Creatures representing the Four Evangelists are shown on the outer frame of the aureole. In the upper right corner, there is the Eagle representing St. John the Evangelist; in the lower right corner, there is the Ox representing St. Luke the Evangelist; in the lower left corner, there is the Lion representing St. Mark the Evangelist. The painting of the Angel representing St. Matthew the Evangelist is damaged. In the case of the Pantocrator of

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God the Lord bless him. It was during the primacy of Anba Maqarah, the 69th Patriarch» (*sic*). *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>(1)</sup> The original iconographical representation of this theme may well have been the illustration of the Ascension of Christ in the VIth century Rabbula Gospel of Zagba, eastern Syria, now in the Laurentian Library in Florence. Cf. Rice, D.T., *op. cit.*, p. 36. For a discussion on the transformation, which this theme underwent, especially in Egypt, cf. Wessel, Klaus, *Koptische Kunst. Die Spätantike in Ägypten*. Recklinghausen, 1963, pp. 173 f.

Bâwîṭ, the throne with the prominent royal cushion corresponds to a beautifully decorated early Christian cathedra without a back. On the other hand, our painting shows Christ seated on a wooden chair, which is decorated with fine carvings, and the upholstery shows delicate embroidery<sup>(1)</sup>. The painting of the Pantocrator of Bâwîṭ conforms to a rigid and hieratic style, which is seen by the manner in which Christ holds the Gospel. The Christ of our painting, on the other hand, appears more relaxed with the Gospel resting on His right thigh. The wheels of the celestial chariot (*Ez. X : 9-14*), which appear so prominently in the apse-painting of Bâwîṭ, are omitted in our painting, although the posture of the two attending angels shows again very definite similarities of the two paintings. The monogram IHC, which appears to the left of the head of Christ in our painting, is not found in the Bâwîṭ painting (Pl. VIII, A).

With regard to the lower part of the painting, the Bâwîṭ painting portrays the Holy Virgin with Child enthroned in the centre and surrounded by fourteen Apostles. In our painting, the Holy Virgin stands with her hands raised as in the case of the VIth century Rabbula miniature, though the position of the hands are more stylized in our painting than in the miniature. In the Bâwîṭ painting, the Apostles have pronounced long faces, and their hieratic postures give the appearance of a static rigidity. On the other hand, our painting shows only ten Apostles, with the heads of eight of them turned upwards to Christ. On either side of the Holy Virgin, the third Apostle turns his head away from Christ looking at the other two Apostles. The posture of the Apostles is supposed to demonstrate motion and amazement, though to a lesser degree than in the Rabbula miniature. Nine of the ten Apostles can be identified, and in the case of the three Apostles furthest to the right, the names are still legible. Beginning from the left, the figures represent : ?, St. Thomas, St. Philip?, St. Andrew, St. Peter, the Holy Virgin, St. John?, St. James?, St. Bartholomew, St. Matthew, and St. Thaddeaus. The arrangement of the Apostles

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<sup>(1)</sup> This throne is similar to the one portrayed in the lower part of the painting, and which is occupied by the Holy Virgin and Child.

corresponds only partially to that of the painting of Bâwîṭ. If we exclude from the painting of Bâwîṭ the two saints, who do not belong to the Twelve, we discover that St. Bartholomew appears in the painting of Bâwîṭ on the left side of the Holy Virgin, whereas in our painting he occupies the position of the third Apostle to the right of the Holy Virgin. St. Matthew appears on the painting of Bâwîṭ on the left side of the Holy Virgin, whereas on our painting he stands next to St. Bartholomew (Pl. VIII, B).

St. Thomas (only MAC is legible) points with his right hand to Christ. St. Philip (only π is legible) turns his head away from Christ. His representation follows the traditional Coptic iconographical typology with black hair and a black beard. St. Andrew, who stands between St. Philip and St. Peter, has his right arm raised and in his left hand he holds a scroll (?) or a short staff (?). The flaming hair of the Apostle, which is so characteristic in the painting of Bâwîṭ, is omitted in our painting. St. Peter (only POC is legible) stands immediately to the left of the Holy Virgin and has his right hand raised in the orans position. In his left hand he holds a key. St. John (?), normally depicted as a young man, is portayed with a white beard. In his left hand he holds a Gospel and with his right hand he points to the Gospel. The representation of St. James follows the iconographical tradition with dark hair and a dark beard. His left arm is raised while his right hand points to the Holy Virgin. St. Bartholomew (BAPΘOΛΩM) has turned his head away from Christ. In his left hand he holds a short staff (?) and with his right hand he points to St. Matthew. St. Matthew (ΘΘΙOC) (sic) has both of his arms raised. St. Thaddaeus (TAΘΘ) concludes the Apostolic Assembly. The Apostles are clothed alternately in light and dark vestments (Pl. IX, A).

The rim of the upper part of the niche is adorned with twelve medallions with the heads of saints, similar to the arrangement on the outer rim of the painting of Bâwîṭ.

This wall-painting was uncovered in the beginning of this century by the Committee for the Preservation of Monuments of Arab Art, since Alfred Butler still states that «the niche in the eastern wall is unusual in size and in structure. It is 9 ft. high, and 6 ft. broad,

and covered with most beautiful old Persian or Damascene tiles, of a design and colour which seem to be unique: the ground of the tiles is an extremely delicate olive hue, upon which clusters of marigolds are figured in very dark green»<sup>(1)</sup>. The tiles have been removed, and one can clearly distinguish two layers of plaster. Our painting covers the lower layer, while the second layer, which was also adorned with a painting, was removed, except for a few fragments on the northern corner of the niche. The painting shows many marks of intentional damage.

5. In the adjacent chapel to the south, the niche is adorned with a monochrome wall-painting of the Baptism of Christ. St. John the Baptist is standing on a high rock by the river-side and is pouring water on Christ's head. Above a dove is descending, and sending down three rays. At each side is a tree laden with fruit, perhaps pomegranate, and another very curious shrub, possibly an aloe<sup>(2)</sup>. This painting is of much inferior quality and we must assign it to the late XVIIIth or XIXth century (Pl. IX, B).

6. Butler already noticed that the niche of the Church of St. George above the southern aisle was adorned with a wall-painting of Christ in an aureole, holding a Gospel in the left and raising the right hand in benediction<sup>(3)</sup>. This painting shows the Pantocrator seated on a beautifully carved throne and attended by two angels (?). On the left side of Christ, there is a vertical inscription . . MMANOYHA (Immanuel). On the left side of the nimbus, we read the letters IHC, on the right side of the nimbus the letters XC̄. The height of the painting is 131 cm., and its width at the base is 183 cm. The painting is in a poor condition, though not intentionally damaged (Pl. X, A).

With respect to the sanctuaries of the Lower Church, there are even fewer remains of wall-paintings than in the Upper Church. In the Sanctuary of St. James the Sawn-Asunder to the north of the main

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<sup>(1)</sup> BUTLER, A., *op. cit.*, I, p. 121.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

church, there are two fragments of wall-paintings, and in the Church of St. Mercurius, there are two columns, which are adorned with paintings, and on the south-eastern pier, there is a fragment of a wall-painting.

On the southern part of the eastern wall of the Sanctuary of St. James the Sawn-Asunder, there is a heavily damaged fragment of a wall-painting showing an Angel. The head is surrounded by a nimbus and the contours of the wings are barely visible (Pl. X, B). In the upper north-east corner of the north-wall of the same sanctuary, there is a fragment depicting the left half of a saint, and to the left of him, there is a column. The head with a white beard is surrounded by a nimbus. The right hand of the saint is raised for the blessing (Pl. XI, A).

On the wall of the south-eastern pier of the Church of St. Mercurius, facing the nave, there is a fragment of an equestrian saint. The  $\Theta$  in the left part of the nimbus may indicate that this Saint is St. Theodore (Pl. XI, B).

In the main Church of St. Mercurius, the two columns on either side of the Royal Doors leading to the central haikal are adorned with paintings. At the occasion of the restoration of the church in 1909, the head architect noticed these paintings, and Mr. de Wiegand, an artist, was commissioned to examine the means to clean these columns<sup>(1)</sup>. Apparently, however, they were not cleaned. The column-paintings were noticed by E. Loukianoff, who merely remarked that the painting on the northern column was fairly clear<sup>(2)</sup>.

The painting on the northern column shows Christ. His head is surrounded with a cross-nimbus, and in His left hand, He holds a Gospel, while His right hand is raised for the blessing. The left

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<sup>(1)</sup> In the report of the Committee for the Conservation of Monuments of Arab Art, vol. XXVI, 1910, p. 140, reference is made to Mr. de Wiegand, who offered to examine the means for the cleaning of these two columns. Mr. de Wiegand's offer, however, was not accepted, since his estimate was too high. He offered to do it for L.E. 6.000, but the committee considered that L.E. 4.000 would be sufficient.

<sup>(2)</sup> LOUKIANOFF, E., *op. cit.*, p. 29.



portion of the face is best preserved. The painting is severely damaged (Pl. XII, A).

The painting on the southern column shows the Holy Virgin holding the Divine Child in front of her. The nimbus surrounding the head of the Holy Virgin is scarcely visible. The face of the Christchild and the left hand of the Holy Virgin are best preserved (Pl. XII, B).





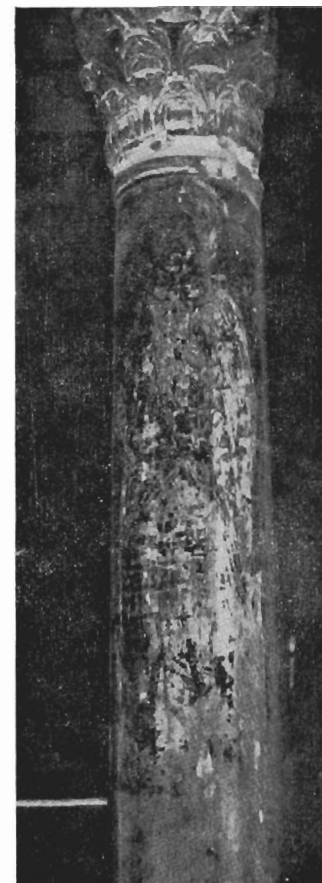
Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. Two Saints, central apse.



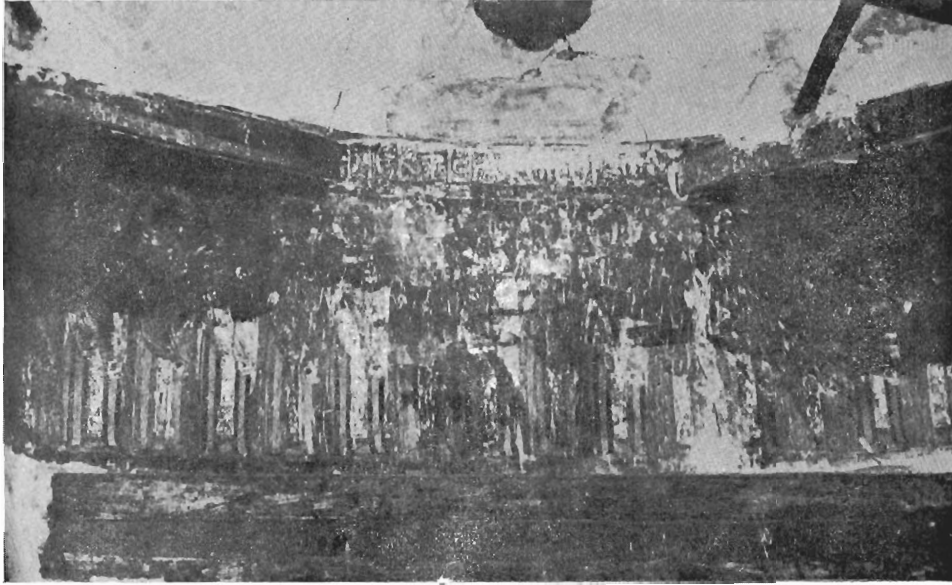
A.— Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. Southern column, west row.



B.— Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. Easternmost column, south row.



C.— Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. Westernmost column, south row.



A.— Church of al-Muʿallaqah. The Twenty-four Elders.



B.— Church of al-Muʿallaqah. The Holy Virgin and Child.



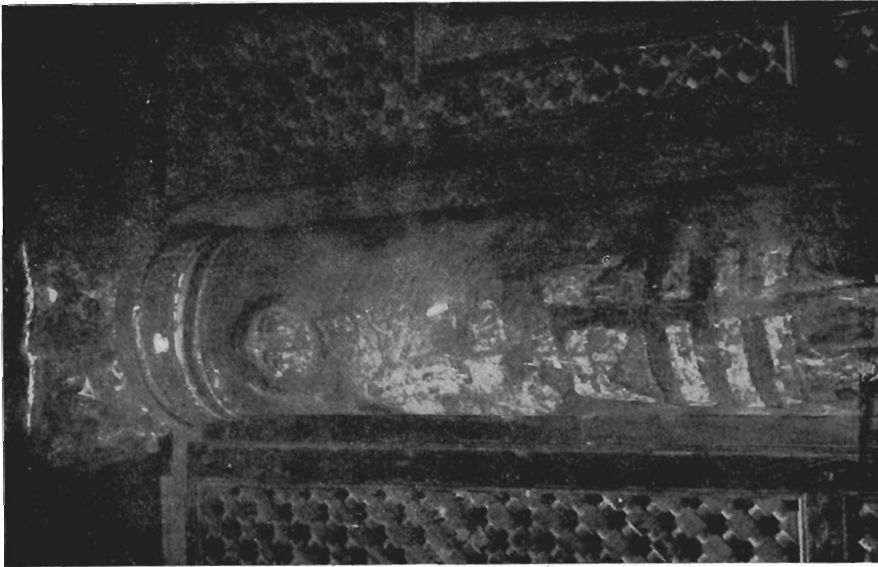
A.— Church of al-Mu'allaqah. A Female Saint.



B.— Church of St. Shenute. Upper Church.  
The Holy Virgin and Child.



B.— Church of St. Shenute.



A.— Church of St. Shenute.



A.— Dair Abū Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.  
Upper Church. Northern pier.



B.— Dair Abū Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.  
Upper Church facing south. Northern pier.

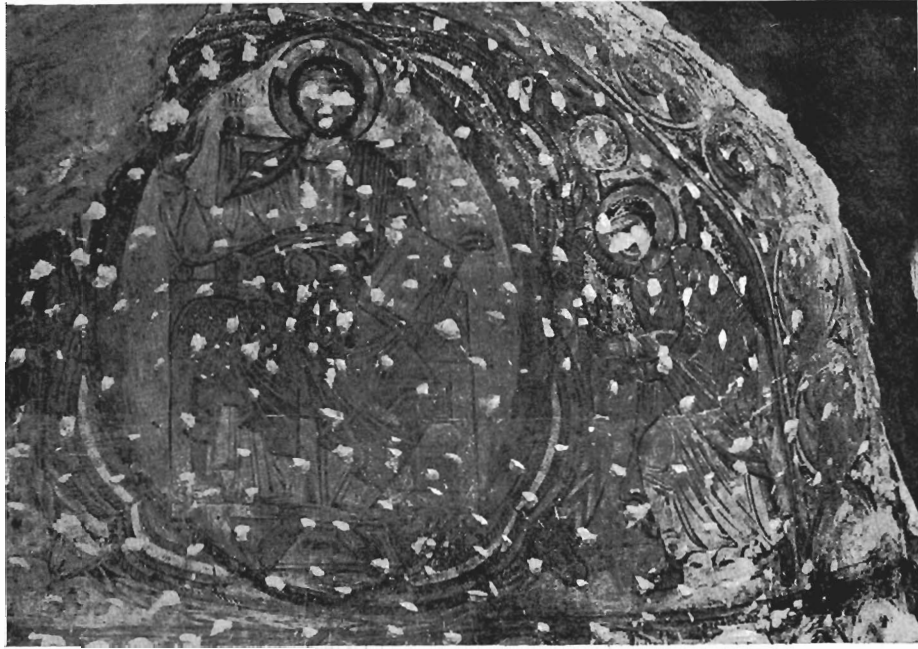




A.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.  
Upper Church.



B.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.  
Upper Church.



A.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius. Upper Church.



B.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius. Upper Church.



A.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius. Upper Church.



B.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius. Upper Church.



A.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of St. George.



B.— Dair Abû Saifain. Church of  
St. James the Sawn-Asunder.



A.— Dair Abù Saifain. Church of St. James  
the Sawn-Asunder.



B.— Dair Abù Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.



A.— Dair Abū Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.



B.— Dair Abū Saifain. Church of St. Mercurius.



