

## The Rock-Cut Archaeological Coptic Sites in Western Mountain of Asyut, Egypt: Archaeological, Religious and Social Importance of the Monasteries of Durunka, Rifa and Al- Ganadla

المواقع القبطية الأثرية المنحوتة في الصخر بجبل أسويط الغربي في مصر الأهمية الأثرية، والدينية، والاجتماعية لأديرة  
جبل درنكة، وريفا، والجنادلة

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### Abstract

الملخص

The western mountain of Asyut contains thousands of ancient tombs and several ancient quarries. During the early centuries of Christianity, Copts took those ancient quarries and tombs as refuges. Then, Copts abandoned them and settled the nearby villages on the edge of the cultivations. A considerable number of these tombs were inhabited by early hermits during the early times of Christianity and later they became hermitages and monasteries.

Asyut Region contains many Coptic sites of archaeological, historical and religious significance. This study highlights the three Coptic rock-cut sites of remarkable religious and artistic importance: Durunka, Rifa and Al-Ganadla monasteries. Durunka is considered a holy site because the Holy Family stayed there on the way back to Israel. The site of Rifa Monastery has a long history since the ancient Egyptian era. In addition to the fact that Al-Ganadla Monastery contains mural paintings of great artistic value dating back to the early centuries of Christianity, it is believed that the Holy Family also stayed at that site, making it a holy place as well.

Due to the limitations of Coptic studies in general the aim of this study is to provide a useful study of these important Coptic sites. Therefore, the study highlights the architectural description of the selected monasteries in order to reach to an understanding of the archaeological, historical, religious and artistic value of these sites. The descriptive analytical method has been used to detail the significance of these sites and their association with some religious and social practices.

يحتوي الجبل الغربي لمحافظة أسويط على عدد ضخم من المقابر المنحوتة في الصخر والمحاجر التي ترجع إلى العصور المصرية القديمة. وترجع الأهمية الأثرية لتلك المواقع إلى عصور تاريخية مختلفة حيث اتخذ الأقباط في العصور المسيحية الأولى من تلك المقابر القديمة والمغارات المنحوتة في الصخر ملاجئ للممارسة عقيدتهم بعيداً عن أعين الأباطرة الرومان. وفي وقت لاحق اعتبر النساك والرهبان تلك الكهوف القديمة أماكن بعيدة مناسبة لتعبدتهم فسكنوها وعاشوا فيها في عزلة عن الحياة وملذاتها. ومع الوقت تحول العديد من تلك الأماكن إلى أديرة ذات قيمة تاريخية، وأثرية، ودينية أيضاً.

وبذلك تحتوي أسويط الآن على الكثير من الأديرة ذات الأهمية الأثرية والدينية؛ لذلك سوف تقتصر هذه الدراسة على ثلاثة مواقع قبطية هامة بها أجزاء قديمة منحوتة في الصخر ذات قيمة تاريخية كبيرة وهي دير جبل درنكة، دير ريفا، ودير الجنادلة.

ونظراً لمحدودية الدراسات والبحوث الأثرية القبطية بوجه عام، فإن تلك الدراسة تهدف إلى تقديم مادة علمية مفيدة لهذه المواقع القبطية الهامة من خلال تسليط الضوء على الوصف المعماري لتلك الأديرة من أجل الوصول إلى القيمة الأثرية والتاريخية والدينية لتلك المواقع محل الدراسة. وقد تم استخدام المنهج الوصفي التحليلي لشرح هذه الأديرة معمارياً، وفنياً، وتاريخياً وعرض أهميتها في الماضي والحاضر وارتباطها ببعض الممارسات الدينية والاجتماعية على مر العصور.

**Keywords:** Holy Family; Durunka; Cave Church; Cliffside; Rock-Cut; Murals Paintings

**الكلمات الدالة:** العائلة المقدسة؛ درنكة؛ كنيسة المغارة؛ التصوير

الجداري؛ المنحوت في الصخر

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## 1. Introduction

Along the Nile Valley, more than 200 ancient quarries sites have been discovered. Those quarries are not only sources of stones, but also are rich archaeological sites. Thus, there are archaeological remains and ruins along the mountains of the Eastern and Western Deserts of Egypt from the late Pre-dynastic Period until the Late Roman Period. Quarrying in ancient Egyptian times were done in open pits or trenches. In some other cases, workers followed some desirable rock layers and created cave-like galleries. In this way of quarrying, they left unquarried rock pillars to support the roofs from collapsing. This way of quarrying left several chambers cut into cliff. Many of these limestone galleries<sup>1</sup> which were scattered along the Nile Valley later became sites of Coptic monasteries and suitable isolated places for hermits. Some of these monastic settlements still active till today (Harell and Storemyr 2009; Clarke 1912).

Asyut governorate is located about 370 km south of Cairo and stretches for about 120 km from the north to the south along the Nile (Harell and Storemyr 2009). The site is continuously inhabited for about five thousand years. It is written in the Pyramid Texts that Asyut was the place where Isis and Nephthys watched over the body of Osiris until it was mummified. In ancient times, it was called *Sioot* which means (the guardian) as it was situated in the middle Egypt and played a role as protector of the borders between Memphis and Heliopolis in the north and the realm of Thebes in the south. It was a cosmopolitan region with a strong military presence. Its strategic location in the middle of Egypt attracted traders, travellers, artisans and craftsmen. Foreigners that invaded Egypt such as Hyksos, Kushites, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans inhabited the governorate of Asyut (Regulski and Golia 2018).

The region of Asyut is flanked by Asyut Western Mountains and Asyut Eastern Mountains. The Western Mountain of Asyut (*Gabal Asut al-Gharbi*) was used during the ancient Egyptian era as sites for rock-cut tombs. Thus, the history of the cliffside of Asyut is dating back to the Pharaonic era. Many ancient isolated rock-cut tombs were inhabited by early hermits and later on, they have been converted into monasteries (Harell and Storemyr, 2009). These caves, which were inhabited by the Copts in the first centuries of Christianity, were the first seed for the emergence of monasteries that were carved in the rock, such as Dair al-Sabaa, Dair al-Jandala, Wadi Serga and others (Maqrizi 1906-1907). From the fourth century AD on, Asyut has a large Coptic population whose monasteries, churches and chapels became major pilgrimage centres (Regulski and Golia 2018).

That is, the site of Asyut was a suitable place for monastic settlements as it is flanked by the mountains on both sides with agricultural fields down of the mountains. Cutting caves in the rock gave the hermits suitable isolated shelters adequate their requirements. Thus, the broad cliffside of Asyut has some rock-cut monasteries and churches with historical and archaeological importance. Rock-cut monasteries on the western bank of the Nile are selected for this study.

The objective of this study is providing a full understanding of the three Rock-cut monasteries on the western bank of the Nile in Asyut; Durunka, Rifa and Al-Ganadla via describing the archaeological, religious, historical and artistic value of the sites under study.

## 2. Historical Background of the Monasteries of Asyut

The region of Asyut has a long history connected to the holy family and its stay in Egypt before travelling to the land of Israel. The monastery of the Holy Virgin, called al-Muharraq, traditionally, the Holy Family stayed there for about six months until an angel appeared to Joseph telling him to go

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<sup>1</sup>. The cave-like galleries were never cut into sandstone or any harder type of stone (See: Harell and Storemyr, 2009, p. 29)

to Israel after the death of the King Herod (Capuani 2002). Asyut contains some remains of early Christian churches dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD such as the churches of the village of Mnqabad which is about 12 kilometres northwest of Asyut city (Iskander 2015). The monastery of St. Theodore Stratelates (Dair al-Amir Tadrus) opposite the village of Bani Shuquir on the east bank of the Nile is located within an ancient cemetery. The church of this monastery was built in a natural cave which was certainly inhabited before Christian times (Capuani 2002).

The emergence of monastic communities in Asyut differed from other similar sites in Egypt. Some monks gathered in old buildings, others settled in isolated desert areas, and others settled in cultivated areas of the Nile Valley. Among these areas is the site of the rock-cut tombs of the rulers of Asyut in the Western Mountains, which were inhabited by early monks and became places of worship and a place for teaching children to read and write as well (Nessim 1986).

Each one of the three selected monasteries has two churches either completely or partly cut into the mother rock. The two monasteries of Durunka and Al-Gandala are associated with the flight of the Holy Family (Meinardus 1965).

### **3. The Monastery of the Holy Virgin on Durunka Mountain (Dair Durunka)**

The monastery of the Holy Virgin or *Dair Durunka* is located about 10 km south-west of Asyut city. It lays a little north of Rifa. Coming from the city of Asyut, the visitor takes the desert road along the foot of the mountain and passing by the village of Durunka and then, the monastery of Durunka. The monastery complex is located in the cliffside on the western bank of the Nile and elevated about 100 m, above sea level. It is belonging to the Diocese of Asyut and controlled by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt (Meinardus 1965; Kamil 2002). The monks called this monastery Aba Sawiris Monastery, who was one of the most popular monks of the monastery, who reached the position of head of the patriarchate. It is said that before his death he prophesied that at the moment of his death the mountain would split open and a huge stone block would fall over the church without causing any damage. Then, when a huge block of stone fell down on the church the monks of the monastery knew that Anba Sawiris had passed away, and they called this monastery the Monastery of Anba Sawiris (Habib 1979).

According to Coptic tradition, the Holy Family stayed in an ancient cave in this area after having left al-Muharraq in the journey back to Israel. Afterwards, on this cave the monastery was built. Therefore, this site is considered a holy place and thousands of pilgrimages come from all over Egypt to visit it every year.<sup>2</sup> The heart of the monastery contains that cave which has historical and religious value (Adly 1999). In the first century AD, the cave was converted into a church, and early Christians were resorted it during the times of the persecution by Roman Emperors (Capuani 2002; Meinardus 1965; Meinardus 1999).

From the current monastery which is relatively new but built around ruins of the ancient convent, ruins of other monasteries on the mountain can be seen; Dair al-Izam and Dair al-Muttin on the north and Dair Rifa on the south (Michka 2021; Capuani 2002). During the excavations of the sites in 1916, some ancient Egyptian finds were discovered in this area which indicates that the using of this site is dating back to the ancient Egyptian era. Archaeological evidence represent that this site was used as quarries during the Pharaonic era (Wild 1971). Moreover, there are remains of Pharaonic rock-cut tombs which were inhabited by early hermits about 2 km south of the monastery and 800m west of the cultivated land (Meinardus 1965).

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<sup>2</sup>. According to Al-Maqrizi, people at Durunka and Mushah (south of Asyut) spoke Coptic language and translated it into Arabic till the 15<sup>th</sup> century (See: Evetts, B. and Butler, A. (1895). p. 35,214)

### 3.1 Description of the Monastery

The current monastery has some churches; the old one is dedicated to the Holy Virgin upon which the monastery was started in the first century AD, Al-Manara Church, the Russian Church and the Church of the Holy Virgin Al-Maidan (Kamel 2011).

Clarke mentions that the monastery had a new church dedicated to the Archangel Michael (*El-Malak*) (Clarke 1912),

#### 3.1.1 Church of the Holy Virgin (Cave-Church)

The Church of the Holy Virgin is located to the right of the main entrance of the monastery. Parts of the ancient cave church of the Holy Virgin where the Holy family took refuge during their flight into Egypt in the time of King Herod are still accessible by flight of steps (Kamel 2011; Meinardus 1965; Meinardus 1999). The western part of the church of the Holy Virgin is the oldest part of this church which is cut into the rock of an ancient quarry from the Old Kingdom, while the eastern part was built on an artificial platform (Meinardus 1999; Clarke 1912). This ancient cave was inhabited by early Copts during the times of the Roman persecution. The cave was transformed into a church from the first to the end of third century AD. Then, the church was converted into a monastery by St. John of Asyut who inhabited this cave for thirty years in the fourth century AD (Kamel 2011).

That is, inside the monastery is a cave, inside the cave is the church and inside the church is the house of the Holy Virgin *al- 'Adra* (Michka 2021). The normal subdivisions of the church are maintained; men's division, next women's division, choirs and lastly the altars (Fig.1). The entrance of the church is at the western end of the church within the ancient quarry (Clarke 1912). The ceiling of the quarry is slightly higher than the roof of the church which permitted the necessary light to get inside the church (Fig.2). The cave contains a new altar dating back to modern times dedicated to the Holy Virgin with a modern icon of the Last Supper at the top. The cave church also contains a main icon depicting the Holy Virgin sitting on the throne and carrying Jesus Christ with the twelve disciples (Kamel 2011).

In 2021, the monastery witnessed a major event which is the reopening of the cave-church after its renovation. The restoration works took into account the preservation of its archaeological character (Fig.2). The cave church was renovated and air-conditioned to accommodate the largest number of visitors and provide ventilation for them. The reopening was in the presence of His Grace Aba Youaness the bishop of Asyut, and other 15 bishops of the Coptic Church.

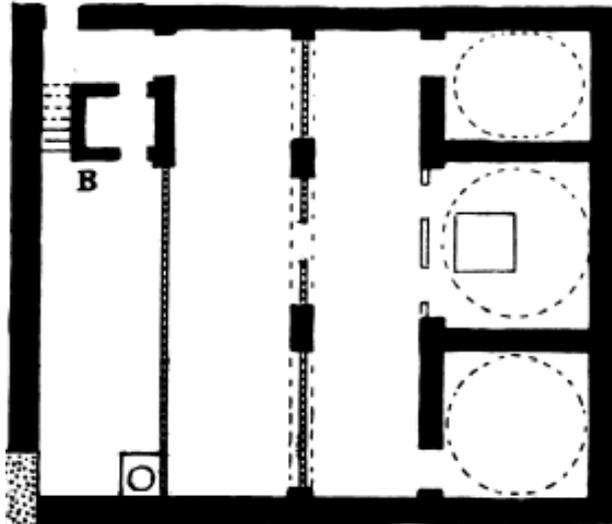
#### 3.1.2 Al-Manara Church

This modern church is located directly in front of the cave church. It is built on the ruins of an older church that destroyed by time. It is a small modern church contains only some altars dedicated to Holy Virgin Mary (Kamel 2011).

#### 3.1.3 Church of the Archangel Michael

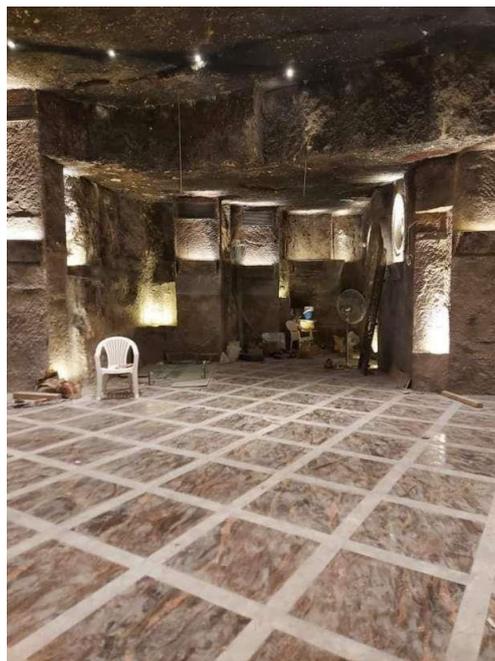
Clarke mentions that the church of the Archangel Michael has the normal subdivisions; the western division for the women, then comes the men's division, next the choir and lastly the sanctuary (*haykal*) on the east (Fig.3). The central altar is dedicated to the archangel Michael and the northern one is dedicated to Aba Bishoi. The eastern bays of the church are covered with brick domes, while the western section is roofed with beams covered with flat mud bricks (Clarke 1912).

**Figure 1.** The Old Church of Holy Virgin (Al-'Adra) at Durunka, Asyut.

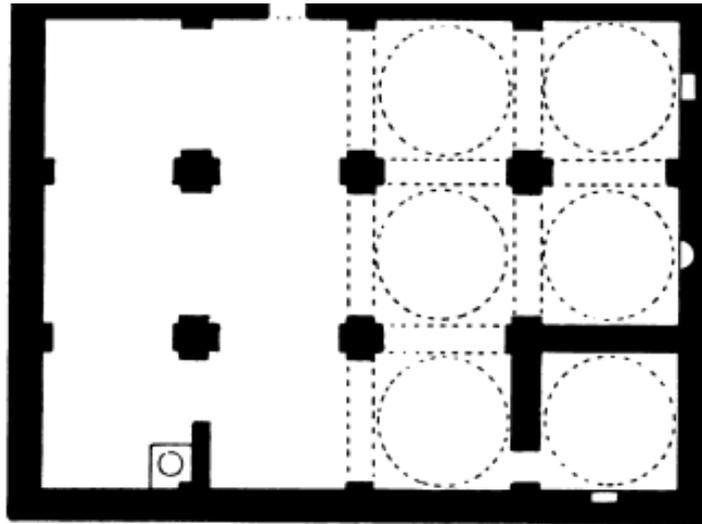


**Source:** Clarke, S. (1912). p. 173.

**Figure 2:** Restoration Works at the Cave-church of Durunka.



**Source:** <http://www.soutalomma.com/Article/981571/>

**Figure 3.** The Church of Archangel Michael at Dair Durunka, Asyut.

Source: Clarke, S. (1912). p.173

### 3.2 Coptic Celebrations of Dair Durunka

#### 3.2.1 Coptic Mulid

*Mulid* is an Arabic term from the root word “*wald*” which means birth. It is a celebration of the birthday of a Coptic saint or the anniversary of a saint’s martyrdom. The *mulid* is always held around a saint’s shrine or church. The Concept of *mulid* also exists in Islamic religions as Muslims also have their special *mulids*. *Mulids* in Egypt are very popular among all social classes and both Muslims and Copts are attending each other’s celebrations (Naguib 2008).

In 1960s, Pope Shenouda made the first initiatives to transform the *mulid* celebration from social festivity attending by Muslims and Copts into religious celebrations of the Coptic saints. Therefore, the official name of this Coptic celebration has been changed from “*maualid*” into “feasts of the saints”. However, today the most common name for this type of celebrations in the Coptic Orthodox Christianity is “*Ihtifalat*” which is an Arabic term means “social celebrations”. This changing in the name was in order to differentiate it from the Muslim saint’s celebrations also known as *mulids* (Ramzy 2014).

#### 3.2.2 Festivities of the Virgin Mary at Durunka

Dair Durunka is one of the most important pilgrimage destinations for the Copts in Egypt. It is said that the *Mulid* of Durunka might be the largest *Mulid* in Upper Egypt which is celebrated in August 7-22, which is the celebration of the fast of the Holy Virgin Mary. Therefore, many modern buildings were built on the slope of the mountain as accommodation for Coptic pilgrims (Capuani 2002; Meinardus 1965).

Huge number of pilgrims comes from all over Egypt and Africa to attend the celebrations of Durunka. The festivities of the monastery usually take part in an open-air procession going to the compound of Durunka which is a space controlled by the Coptic Orthodox Church. The celebrations of the monastery of Durunka are not only limited to Christians, but also many Muslims attending and sharing in these activities. Currently, there are no monks live in Durunka monastery anymore but it is one of the largest Coptic pilgrimage sites in Egypt (Michka 2021).

#### 4. The Monastery of Rifa (Dair Rifa)

The monastery is located about 5 km. south of Durunka Complex and elevated about 66 m above sea level (Meinardus, 1999). The ancient town was the 11<sup>th</sup> Nome of Upper Egypt which was called *Shashotep* in ancient Egyptian times and extended from Durunka monastery in the north to Abu-Tig in the south (Regulski and Golia 2018).

Hermits and monks of this monastic complex reused ancient Egyptian rock-cut tombs as churches. Rifa Monastery contains Hieroglyphic inscriptions from Middle and New Kingdoms which represent how the churches of Rifa are clear examples of reusing the ancient Egyptian tombs as religious places by early Copts (Porter and Moss 1962). The tombs of this site most probably were private tombs dating back to the Middle Kingdom (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty) and earlier (Dodson 1991; Regulski and Golia 2018). It is also suggested that Rifa village contains the rock-cut tombs of the high officials of the 11<sup>th</sup> Nome of Upper Egypt in the Middle and New Kingdoms (Meinardus, 1999). In addition, there are some tombs from the First and Second Intermediate Periods of the ancient Egyptian history. The using of these cemeteries as quarries caused an extensive damage to the tombs (Regulski and Golia 2018).

The site of *Dair Rifa* and Rifa village was excavated by W. Petrie in 1907. He mentions that the rock-cut ancient tombs at Rifa became in possession of the Copts (Fig.4). The excavations of Petrie reveal burials from the 7<sup>th</sup> dynasty down to the mediaeval times<sup>3</sup>. Greek, Coptic and Arabic manuscripts were found there (Clarke 1912). Rifa monastery complexes are mentioned by Abu Al-Makarem in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and Al-Maqrizi in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD (Evetts and Butler 1895; Regulski and Golia 2018).

Till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although some houses built on the little shelves of the cliff, most of the residences of Rifa village were in the ancient tombs. In some cases, people-built enclosures in front of the ancient tomb to create an extra room or a yard. Little doors were added by the inhabitants to give access to their houses (Clarke 1912). The reuse of the ancient tombs by the inhabitants of Rifa village in modern era indicates the large number of such ancient cemeteries and their good condition which led to consider them as inhabitable places.

**Figure 4.** Rock-Cut Churches in Rifa Monastery.



**Source: Regulski, I. and Golia, M. (2018), p. 34**

<sup>3</sup>. According to Petrie, most of the ancient rock-cut tombs of Rifa are extended for few hundred yards and most probably are dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty and earlier times. Some of the tombs were burials and also used as quarries in ancient times. During his excavations in 1907, the ancient tombs were occupied by the Copts (See: Petrie, 1907, pp. 11-14).

#### 4.1 Churches of Rifa Monastery

The monastery contains a small church dedicated to St. Theodore (*Al-Amir Tadrus Al- Mashriqi*). This church is built inside a rock-cut temple or a great tomb from the Pharaonic era (Capuani 2002). Abu Salih describes this church as a little shrine made of mud bricks covered with one dome dedicated to the valiant martyr St. Theodore or Tadrus (Meinardus 1965; Meinardus 1999; Clarke 1912). Copts used to pray in the ancient church on the mountain till 1951 when a new church dedicated also to St. Theodore was built in the village of Dair Rifa. Since that time, the Copts of the village of Dair Rifa have prayed in the modern church, leaving the ancient one in the mountain.

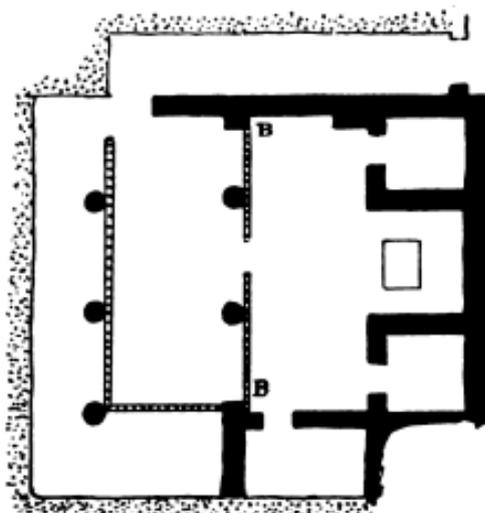
The second church is about 100m south of the old church of St. Theodore and dedicated to Holy Virgin (Al- 'Adra). It is completely carved into the rock (Capuani 2002). One enters the church through a massive arched doorway to its four sections; women's section, men's section, choir and *Haikal* (Meinardus 1965, Clarke 1912). The correct orientation of the church had been taken in consideration when it was cut; the doorway is leading to the western part of the church, then the women's and men's divisions (Clarke 1912). The two parts (BB) of the church contain wooden screens built of three arches resting on two pillars, and one altar dedicated to Holy Virgin (Fig.5) (Clarke 1912). According to Al- Maqrizi, this church dates back to the fourth century AD (Maqrizi 1906-1907)

The light enters the church through a hole in its roof in front of the sanctuary. The church contains several icons; the most ancient one is depicting Holy Virgin (Meinardus 1965; Meinardus 1999).

This church was inside a monastery for nuns, which was destroyed due to the torrential rain. There are remains of this nunnery still visible in the site.

Thus, Rifa Monastery with its rock-cut churches in the western mountain of Asyut is a unique model the Coptic architecture carved in the rock, in addition to being a remarkable archaeological site since the ancient times.

**Figure 5.** The Rock-Cut Church of Holy Virgin, Rifa Monastery, Asyut.



Source: Clarke, S. (1912). p.173

## 5. The Monastery of Al- Ganadla (Dair al-Ganadla)

The monastery of Al- Ganadla located about 30 km south of Dair Durunka at the west of the Nile valley opposite the village of Al- Ganadla. The village stands on a mound and considered as an archaeological site. This monastic complex is belonging to the Diocese of Abu Tig, to the west the village of Al- Ganadla and about 25 km southwest Asyut city (Capuani 2002; Clarke 1912).

The monastery lies against a cliff in the western mountain of Asyut and contains many ancient quarries which were inhabited by hermits during the early centuries of Christianity. The cliff in this site is vertical and has darker in colour than the nearby limestone cliffs (Fig.6). The monastery is surrounded by a vast archaeological site containing several ancient rock-cut tombs. The area also has evidences of being used in ancient times as quarries (Clarke 1912). Copts believe that the Holy Virgin also rested in the cave of the old church of this monastery (Michka 2021). Therefore, the monastery also called “The Holy Virgin Al-Ganadla”, The Coptic site is called Sirga Valley (*Wady Sirga*) and the mountain there is also called “Sirga Mountain” (Kamel 2011). Thus, the area has historical and religious importance since the Old Kingdom. There are some ancient caves still can be seen where Copts used them as refuges at the time of the Roman persecution (Michka 2021).

### 5.1 Components of the Monastery

The monastery is cut into the rock, and has an enclosure wall and surrounding two churches; the older church and the new church.

**The older church** is dedicated to the Holy Virgin and built in an ancient quarry which was used from the Old Kingdom to the late period (Harrell and Storemyr 2009). This archaeological church is situated behind the new one and extended further back into the cliff and most probably dating back to the sixth century (Clarke 1912). It is also called the “cave-church” and there is an opening under a rocky outcropping leading to this old church (Michka 2021).

The church contains series of images of Coptic saints with crapped off eyes on a flat rocky surface hanging from the ceiling of that old cave (Fig.8). These images probably go back as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Michka 2021). This oldness of this cave and the popular believes that the Holy Virgin stayed there has made it a very attractive place for Coptic pilgrims.

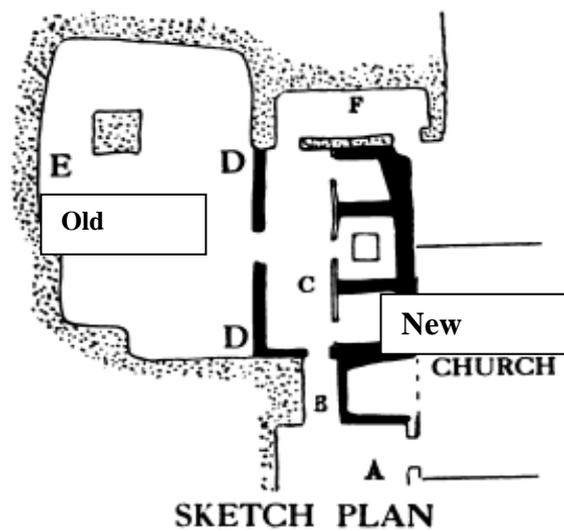
Dating the cave accurately is problematic, but it is believed that the cave church had been built before the council of Chalcedon and the separation of the eastern and western churches in 451 AD (Michka 2021). The church follows the Basilican Plan with two Haykals; the principal one is dedicated to the Holy Virgin and the other one is dedicated to the Archangel Michael (Kamel 2011).

**The new church** (Fig. 7) is situated to the right after the enclosure wall of the monastery, in the north-west part of the enclosure wall and goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It contains three altars dedicated to St. Abu Maqrufah (Makrufius), SS. Peter and Paul and Mari Girgis (Evetts and Butler 1895; Clarke 1912). Therefore, the monastery was also called *Abu Maqrufah* Monastery after the name of St. Makrufius who founded the monastic life at this site in the fourth century (Kamel 2011). The church has three bays from east to west covered by nine domes (Clarke 1912). This modern church most probably was built in 1865 AD (Meinardus 1999) (Fig. 8).

**Figure 6.** Ancient Quarries, Al-Gandadla Monastery.



Source: An Overview of Rock-Cut Coptic Sites in Asyut, <https://coptic-wiki.org/>  
**Figure 7.** Al-Ganadla Monastery at Asyut.



Source: Clarke, S. (1912). p. 173.

**Figure 8.** The New Church with the Nine Domes.



Source: <https://www.bing.com/>

The festival of the church takes place in August. Thus, this monastery is also called the monastery of the Holy Virgin (Dair al 'Adra) (Harrell and Storemyr 2009; Clarke 1912). Thus, there are many monasteries in Asyut dedicated to the Holy Virgin which means the Virgin is their patroness (Michka 2021).

## 5.2 Mural Paintings in the Church of the Holy Virgin

### 5.2.1 Mural Painting Art

The origin of this type of art goes back to the ancient Egyptian era. It was used to depict the daily life, religious and political beliefs. The ancient Egyptian used to prepare the surface with a layer of plaster and then paint over that smooth surface using tempera or fresco techniques. Different colours came from the nature such as natural mineral oxides, charcoal and burnt bones. The oldest example of this form of art was found in Al-Kom Al-Ahmar necropolis which is dating back to the prehistoric period (Ali and Youssef 2020).

From the end of the third century, Copts used this form of art to decorate their religious places. They inherited the tempera technique from the ancient Egyptians (Khalaf 2021). In the fourth and fifth centuries, Copts also shared taste and some motifs with ancient Egyptians (Gabra and Eaton-Krauss 2006). In Coptic mural painting, surfaces should be smoothed and covered with a layer of plaster. Then, the plaster is painted with different religious scenes and other decorative elements. Colours were made by mixing pigments with water and lime (Khalaf 2021; Rassart-Debergh 1991).

### 5.2.2 Mural Painting Decorating the Church

Coptic saints, angels, floral and geometrical motifs, Old and New Testaments themes are the major themes occur in Coptic wall paintings. Monasteries are considered the major source for Coptic mural painting as they contain wonderful monastic paintings such as those of the monasteries of Wadi Al-Natrun (Gabra and Eaton-Krauss 2006) and the monastery of Al-Ganadla in Asyut.

The church of the Holy Virgin at Al-Ganadla Monastery contains unique mural paintings covering its walls, ceilings and niches most probably are dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD (Van Loon 2014). The wall paintings were plastered probably in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and repainted with the scenes

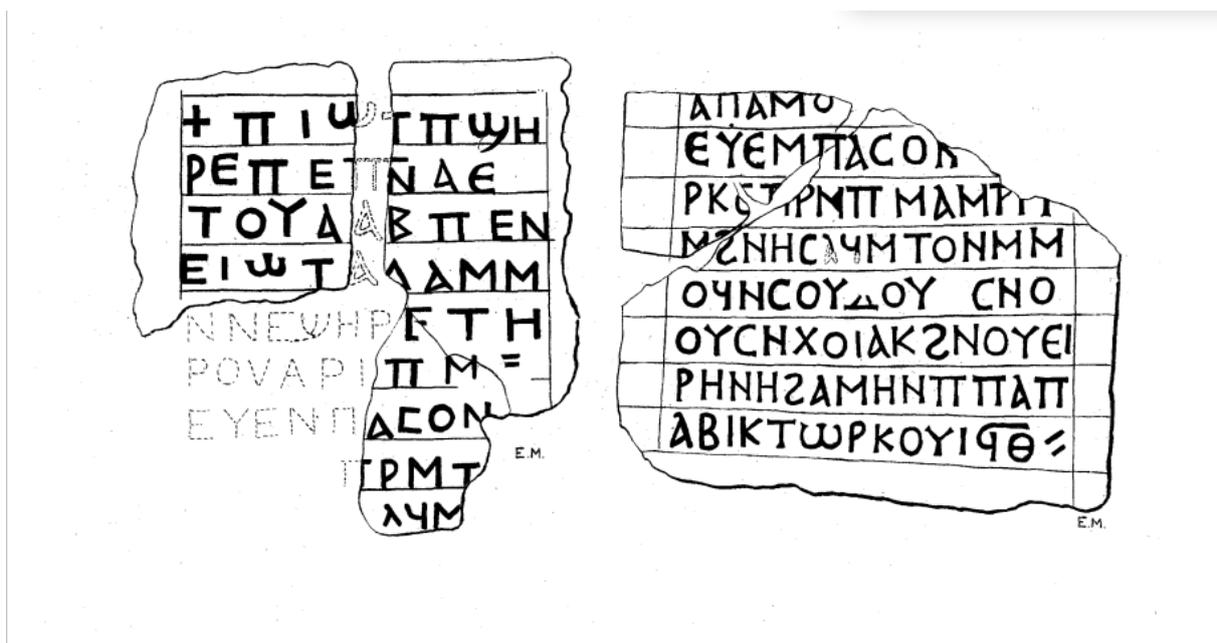
of saints, angels and Coptic inscriptions (Fig.9). Petrie described this Coptic site as a large quarry-cave full of mural paintings and Coptic inscriptions (Petrie 1907).

The iconostasis of the church has older stone work decorated with vine bunches and birds. The ceiling is formed by a curved small dome that supported by a single rocky pillar in the middle. In the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, decorations representing Christ, apostles, angels and Coptic saints (Fig.10) were painted over older floral decorations from the sixth century (Gabra 2007).

On the upper part of the northern wall of the church mural paintings from the sixth century still can be seen. The paintings show traces of two painted arches decorated with palm and olive branches represented in bright colours. Vine leaves are painted inside the circular of the right painted arch (Fig.11). Most probably a series of such colourful arches used to decorate the whole wall of the church in early times but only two of which still preserved while the rest have been demolished (Khalaf 2021).

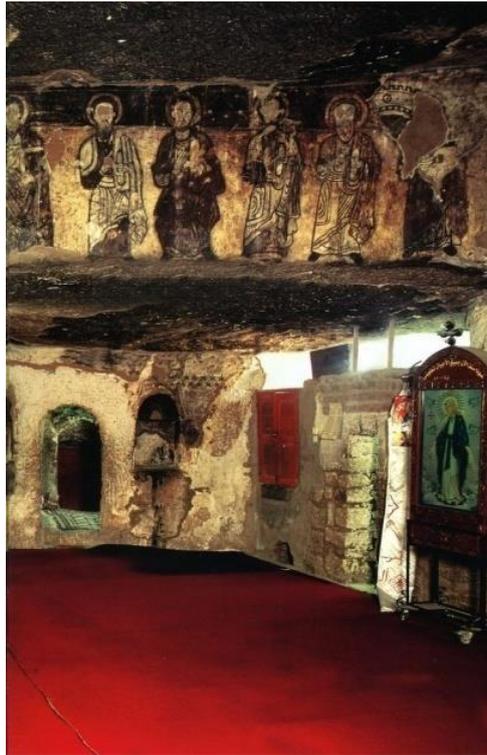
The ceiling of the church is unique of its decoration as it is divided into square units filled with various Coptic ornaments including crosses, vine leaves, lotus flowers and laurel wreath which are originated in the Egyptian environment since the ancient times and also have significance in Christian belief (Fig.12) (Khalaf 2021).

**Figure 9.** Coptic Inscriptions from Dair al-Ganadla.



**Source:** Petrie, W. (1907). p, XL.

**Figure 10:** Apostles and Coptic Saints Decoration (11<sup>th</sup> Century)



Source: <https://coptic-wiki.org/the-monastery-of-al-ganadla-asyut>

**Figure 11:** Older Painted Arches on the Northern Wall of the Church (6th Century).



Source: <https://coptic-wiki.org/the-monastery-of-al-ganadla-asyut>

**Figure 12:** The Decoration of the Ceiling of Al-'Adra Church (6<sup>th</sup> Century).



**Source:** <https://coptic-wiki.org/the-monastery-of-al-ganadla-asyut>

## 6. Conclusion

Asyut is one of the most important religious centres since the Pharaonic era as it was the second religious city after Thebes in the south, and Heliopolis and Memphis in the north. It is associated with the major god Osiris whose temple was standing in Asyut region from the First Intermediate Period and lasted for almost two millennia. Hathor, the ancient goddess of motherhood and fertility was venerated there from the Old Kingdom till the Roman Era. Evidences also represent that some other ancient deities were venerated in Asyut such as Maat, Khnum, Amon-Ra, Khonsu, Sekhmet, Isis, Osiris and Horus.

Coptic hermits inhabited the ancient Egyptian tombs in Asyut from the 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD during the time of the persecution of Roman Emperors. However, the dating of some these rock-cut Coptic sites in Asyut is a problematic and needs further researches.

Based upon the religious, historical and artistic importance of the Coptic sites detailed above in this study and their connection with the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, both Muslims and Christians are coming from all over Egypt to visit these sites and to attend the annual religious celebrations.

The site of Durunka monastery is a holy place due to the stay of the Holy Family in an ancient cave in the old church of the Holy Virgin in the monastery. Since 2017, the concerned organizations began studying the project of reviving the path of the Holy Family in Egypt and developing its holy sites. The Pope's visit to Egypt and his official announcement of the inclusion of Egypt in the Vatican pilgrimage programs in 2018 were among the most important drivers of the national legislation initiated by the concerned authorities and state agencies to develop the path of the Holy Family to revive religious tourism (Egypt's Ministry of Local Development 2019).

The magnificent mural paintings decorated the monastery of Al-Ganadla can make this site one of the most remarkable tourism destinations for many tourists to see the artistic aspect of the monastery.

Although the initiatives of the Egyptian National Authorities to revive the sites of the flight of the Holy Family in Egypt which includes the monastery of Al-Ganadla, the site still needs more efforts to include it among the most important tourism destinations in Egypt due to its religious, historical and artistic value. The historical and artistic importance of Deir al-Jandala makes the inclusion of this site in the tourist programs necessary and valuable, as visiting this area is no less important than visiting some important tourist places such as Minya and Sohag.

That is, it is necessary to take advantage of the Coptic sites of Asyut region, especially those cut into the rock due to their historical and archaeological importance since the ancient Egyptian era. In addition to facilitating the accesses to these sites and provide them with facilities and services.

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