

DEIR ST. MACARIUS OF ALEXANDRIA IN WADI EL-RAYAN, FAYOUM: A FORGOTTEN MONASTERY

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AN INTRODUCTION:

The Fayoum region is a very interesting and important place not only for papyrologists but also for archaeologists.¹ In fact, the archaeological studies in Fayoum have broad dimensions in time and space.² However, a decade ago, Gawdat Gabra,³ provided the recent and comprehensive book on Fayoumic Coptic studies (including history, language and archaeology etc.).⁴ Fayoum was regarded as a fertile archaeological region that promised to bring to light hitherto unknown antiquities. Consequently, the new discoveries and finds provide a great deal of information and details about Fayoum in Coptic era. Thanks to the dry climate, this preserved huge number of archaeological sites and finds. . One can say *‘No volume about the history of Christianity and Monasticism in Egypt would be complete without a chapter about Fayoum region’*. There is a strong reason to believe that Christianity found its way to the Fayoum region if not simultaneously with, then shortly after, its entrance into the Delta.⁵

As Siegfried G. Richter mentioned *“Wessely knew of 89 Ptolemaic sites, 141 Roman sites, and 198 sites from the Byzantine period. Before Wessel’s work,*

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¹ Enormous quantities of Greek, Coptic, and Arabic papyri were found by excavations or simply sold by dealers since the end of 19th century, and now held in well-known collections.

² Siegfried G. Richter, “The Importance of the Fayoum For Coptic Studies” in: Gawdat Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis*, Amercain University in Cairo, 2005, 2

³ Gawdat Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis*, Amercain University in Cairo, 2005.

⁴ The publication of the proceeding of the Fayoum Symposium was the first all-around collection on the historical Christianity in this region. i.e., it is the first summary of ancient evidence regarding both the roots of Christian culture and the remains of non-Christian culture in Fayoum.

⁵ N.Abbot, *The Monasteries of Fyayum*, SAOC- Chicago, 1937, 22

*Emile Amelineau had collected toponyms from literary sources such as (Coptic) Synaxarium for his geography of Coptic Egypt (Amelineau 1893). But even today the number of known toponyms in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic continues to grow, a new discoveries are made*⁶. With such extensive work on Fayoum region, still this article will shed light on one of the forgotten Coptic sites in the Fayoum so-called “Monastery of St. Macarius of Alexandria in Wadi el-Rayan”,⁷ In this article, the first textual material from the site will come to light as well. In fact, there are few remnants of monasteries in Fayoum according to what is mentioned in literature such as the history of Patriarchs, Abu Salih Al-Armani, and Al-Nabulsi; these sources indicate that Fayoum had thirty five monasteries in the past.⁸ Moreover, the deserts of Fayoum used to be a home of hermits and small groups of monks as early as the second half of the third century.⁹ In general, it is not known where in Fayoum the monasteries were located, or what kind of monasteries, or how big they were. This paper aims to present a general idea about the Monastery of St. Macarius of Alexandria; its history and the new archaeological finds, especially, the Coptic inscriptions which are recently discovered there.

DEIR ST. MACARIUS OF ALEXANDRIA:

Actually, there is a very little information about Deir St. Macarius of Alexandria in Wadi el-Rayan. However, it was already mentioned in a few published works as that of Ahmed Fakhry (1905-1973), an Egyptian archaeologist, visited the area of Deir St. Marcarius of Alexandria in Wadi el-Rayan in pursuit of his archaeological concerns,¹⁰ which is considered the only archaeological investigation carried out at this the site.¹¹ A few more details were recorded by traveling scholars who saw the monastery and the

⁶ Siegfried G. Richter, “The Importance of the Fayoum For Coptic Studies”, in Gawdat Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis*, Amercain University in Cairo, 2005, 2

⁷ For more details and the history of St. Macarius Alexandrinus, Cf. Antoine Guilaumont, “Marcarius Alexandrinus, Saint”, in *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 1489b-1490b; E. Amélineau, *Histoire des Monastères de la Basse Égypte*, Paris, 1894

⁸ Rene-Georges Coquin, “Monasteries of the Fayyum”, in *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 1650b-1651b

⁹ N.Abbott, *The Monasteries of the Fayyum*, 26

¹⁰ A. Fakhry, Wadi el-Rayan, in *Annales du service des Antiquites de l'Égypt ASAE*, XLVI (1947), 1-19

¹¹ At present, there is no archaeological investigation and Fayoum University is planning to make some excavations on the site.

hills in vicinity.¹² For instance, Otto Meinardus had examined and described the caves and the church.¹³

The monastery locates in the south of the depression of Wadi el-Rayan “Ain Al-Rayan al-Bahriya”. The monastery, repopulated since 1960s, is situated in the south eastern region of the Fayoum province in Egypt, at the foot of a ridge of desert hills that belong to the mountain on Wadi el-Rayan. It lies about 170 km southwest of Cairo, and 35 km southeast of the recent city of Fayoum, the capital of the province, the closest urban area is Gharaq al-Sultani in the southern part of the Fayoum oasis.

Traditionally, The origins of the monastic community in Deir St. Macarius of Alexandria is known as anchoritic life from the time of its establishment, it goes back to the fourth century (?), when the first hermitages were cut in the slopes of the desert mountain, and modern times thereafter as well. Whereas Abouna Matta al-Maskin and his group of anchoritic disciples, who since 1960 have established themselves in the area of Deir St. Macarius of Alexandria in Wadi el-Rayan.¹⁴

¹² Many travelers reported of Wadi Rayan starting from G. Belzoni, *Plates Illustrative and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia*, London (1820). Mainly for geographical structure, or for its archaeological remains.

¹³ Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern*, (Cairo-1977), 468-482

¹⁴ For more details about the modern anchoritic life in Deir St. Macarius of Alexandria in Wadi el-Rayan, see; O. Meonardus, “Recent Developments in Egyptian Monasticism 1960-1964”, in: *Oriens Christianus* XLIX (1965), 86-87

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS:

A topographical survey of these picturesque knolls, revealed until now; remains of buildings, tombs, ancient temple (?),¹⁵ and huge number of pottery, potsherds, coins, and anaphora etc... In addition, the presence of some rock-cut hermitages scattered all over the mountain, and caves. Some of them still have Coptic writings and inscriptions;¹⁶ added to this is the extensive flat ground in north and west of the modern monastery. The remains still exist in the hermitages, which are discovered recently by the monk's accidentally, give us strong evidences that some of these hermitages date back at least to the sixth and seventh centuries. Moreover, there is a ruin of a hill; the modern monks think that this is the Deir al-Zakawah,¹⁷ which is mentioned only one time as ruins on a map of the *Description de l'Égypte*.¹⁸

¹⁵ It could be the one Ahmed Fakhery mentioned in his article

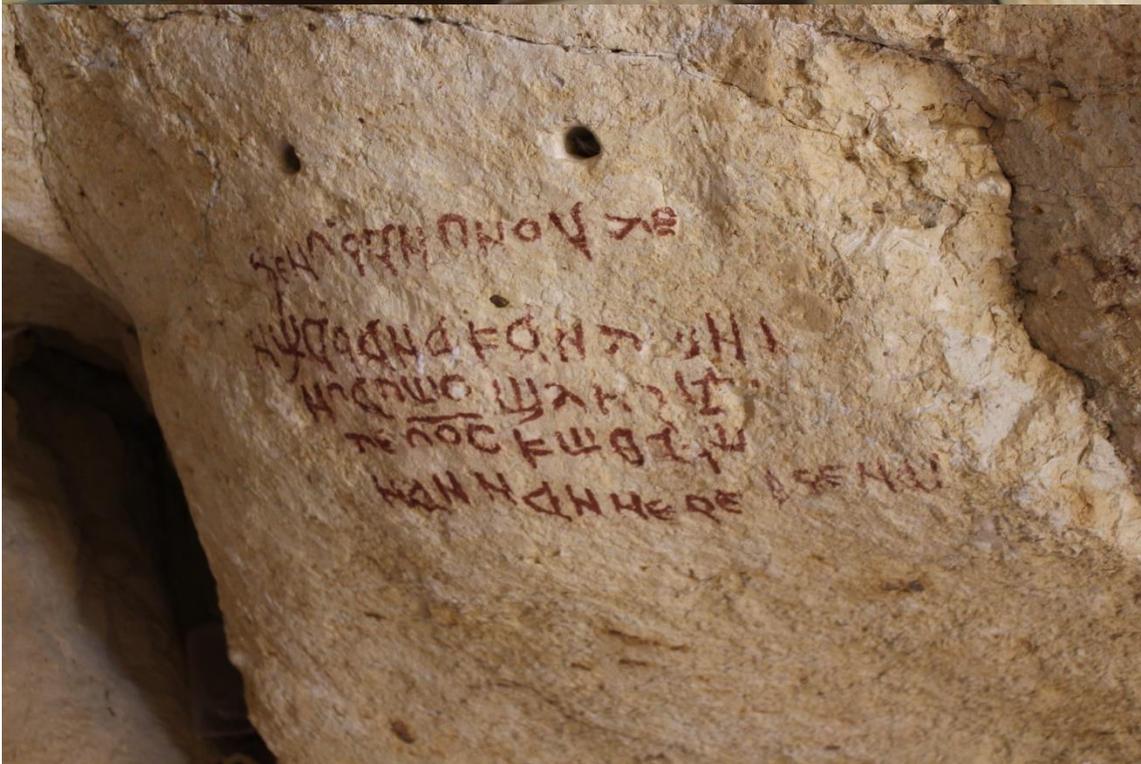
¹⁶ The Coptic writings and inscriptions on the side will be a topic for another article

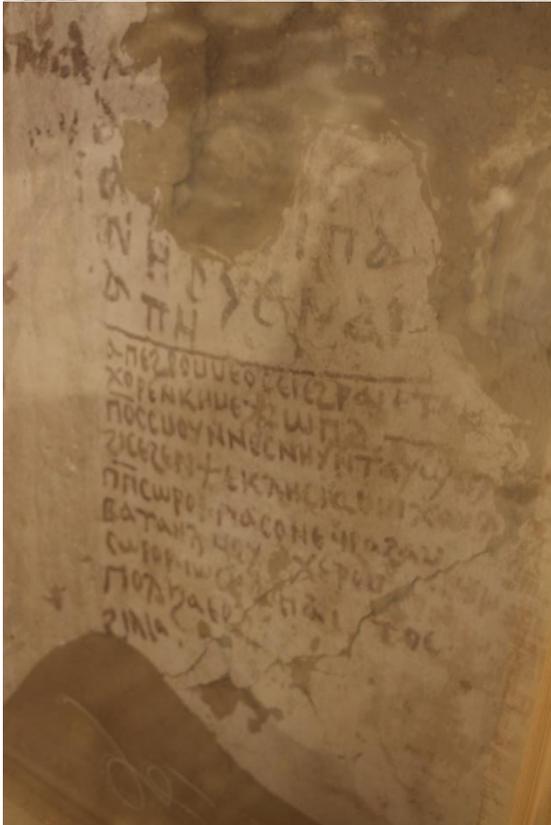
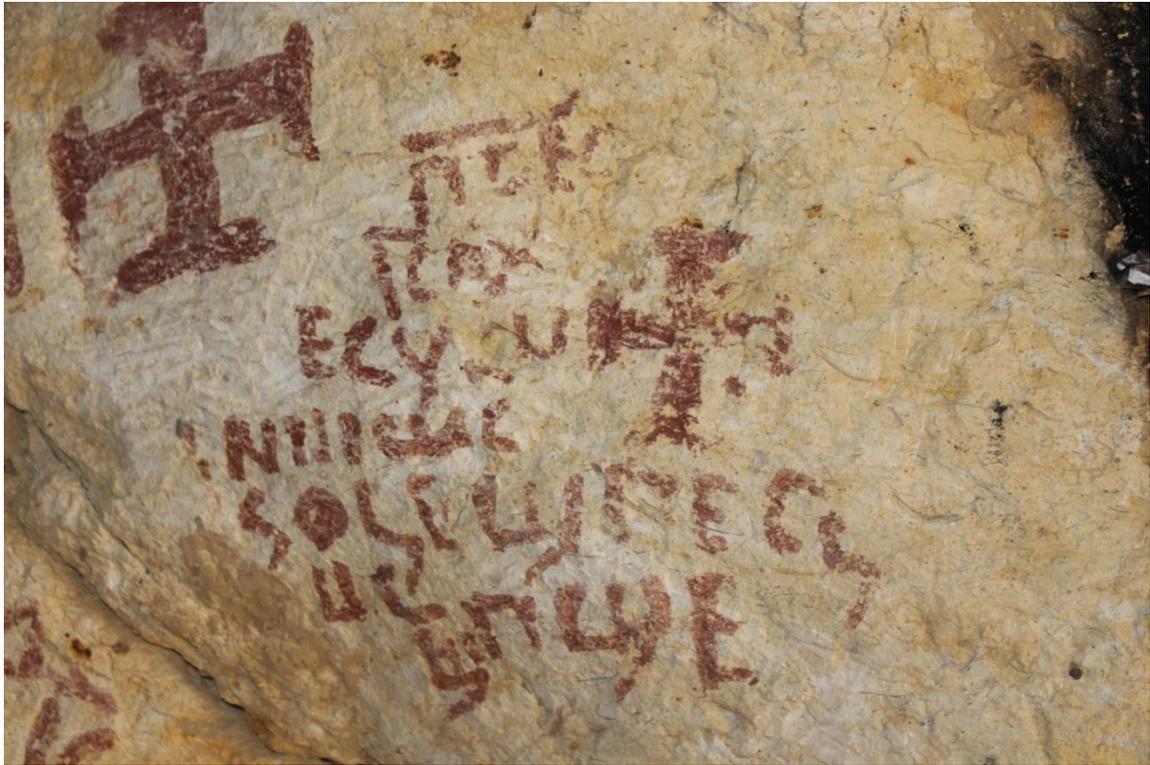
¹⁷ Amelineau mentioned that Anba Samuel stayed for a short period on it before moving to Deir Naqlun. It locates in the middle road between Monastery of Anba Sameul in Kalamoun and Deir Naqloun, in wadi el-Rayan, see: E. Amélineau, *Histoire des Monastères de la Basse Égypte*,

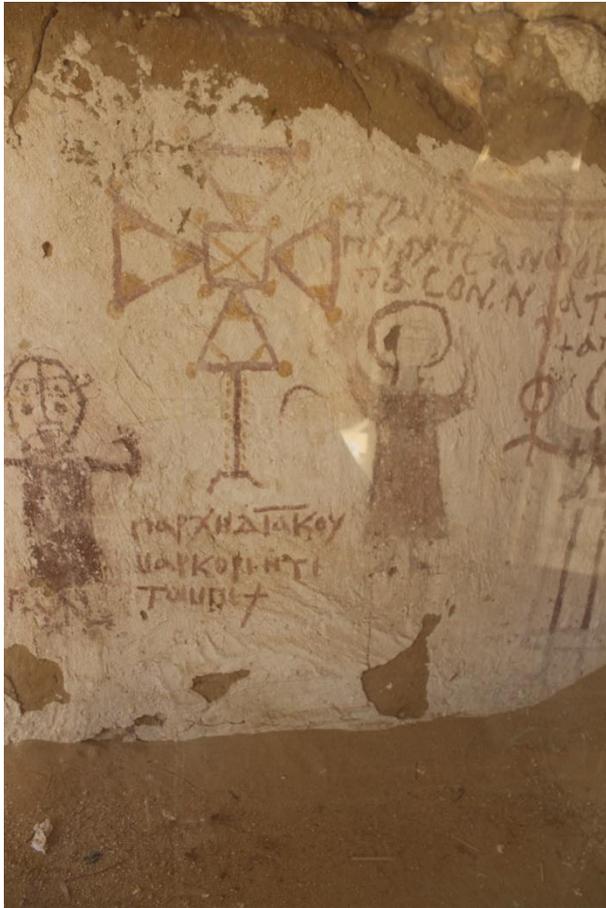
¹⁸ *Description de l'Égypte*, vol.16, p. 52; atlas, fol. 19

Fig. 3









THE HERMITAGES:

The hermitages were used in the past by the monks practicing anchoretic style of life. The site has, until now, about 20 hermitages some of them had human remains of such as No.2 has a body of a monk with his clothes, and No.21 has bodies of two saints (?), and No.9. Most of hermitages contain pottery, potsherd, and glass and remains of organic materials; No.5 of which is somehow big hermitage and it contains lot of potsherds and remains of organics, No.16 has a lot of potsherds, and No. 26, 27, 28 and 30 have pottery and glass. In some cases, the size of the hermitage is too small, and so it is only suitable for one person such as No.7, which is a rock-cut hermitage. On other cases, the hermitage is quite big such as No.5, No.10, 18 and No.15. Interestingly, hermitage No. 8 has a pottery with an ancient inscription, and hermitage No. 14 has a drawing map. There are 6 hermitages have Coptic texts and inscriptions on the walls, some of them are difficult to read such as in the hermitage No. 1: remains of Coptic texts and inscriptions, No.9: has a long Coptic text but it is almost faded, No.6 has small Coptic texts and inscriptions, and No. 26 has also unclear Coptic texts, and No.22 has Coptic graffiti and Coptic crosses. The most important hermitages are No. 3 which has nice Coptic texts (Bohairic and Sahidic) relating to *Apa Souror*, and No.4 which has Fayoumic texts.

As it used to be in Ascetic areas and elsewhere, in the site of St. Macarius of Alexandria in wadi el-Rayan, the hermitages/cells are wholly or partially contrived in the limestone or sandstone. The interior of which is partially or fully plastered with mud and white wash coloring. Each cell has either one or two windows, which in wadi rayan are fitted with screens, to protect monks from mosquitoes which come heavily to the depression of the wadi al-Rayan every summer. Especial places provide space for books and writing utensils.

Fig.4



FINAL WORD:

After this general idea about the Monastery of St. Macarius of Alexandria, and the new discoveries there, the scientific excavation will open up the possibility for studying in depth the Christianity and Monasticism in Fayoum. Moreover, to understand the caves of the early anchorites in Egypt, the experiment of the wadi Rayan is great importance, especially in view of the fact that we have no descriptions of any ancient cells, and casual allusions suffice to form only a very general picture of them.¹⁹ At present the monastery is experiencing a revival and is inhabited by about 140 monks; new buildings have been erected and the central church of the st. Macarius has recently been renovated.

Yet a comprehensive study of the site is lacking, and so the first task for us is to survey the remains and draw a map of the entire complex including the modern monastery, the archaeological sites east and north of it, and all the hermitages which could be identified in the surrounding hills on the basis of scattered potsherds and architectural traces.

¹⁹ O. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern*, (Cairo-1977), 481