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Al-Mu'allaha church in Old Cairo: history, legends and conservation

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The church of the Virgin 'Al-Mu'allaha' is considered one of the most respected and oldest Coptic shrines. Coptic tradition tightly connects the history of Al-Mu'allaha with the Gospel events — the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt from King Herod. There are several hypotheses on when the church was founded. Researchers agree with each other that the oldest part of the building is the so-called 'small church' today hosting St. Takla Haymanot's chapel. According to A. Butler, the 'small church' was built in the 3rd–4th centuries. M. Simaika Pacha believed the church was erected in late 4th — early 5th century since this date is indicated by numerous archaeological finds from within the fortress. O. Burmester presumed that the 'small church' was built in the fortress not long before the Arab conquest. It is highly probable that the 'small church' existed in the fortress' tower in 4th–5th centuries. However, since Al-Mu'allaha underwent numerous reconstructions, the 'small church' as it was initially constructed does not survive to our days. As to the main church, most modern scholars associate the erection of it with the epoch following the Arab conquest, i. e. the time when the fortress lost its military functions. Apparently, it occurred during the reign of patriarch Isaac (690–692). The first written mention of the 'hanging' church comes from the time of Patriarch Joseph (831–849).

Since February of 2004 until June of 2008 the large Russian-Egyptian project on saving Coptic heritage was undertaken — a complex restoration of Al-Mualaha's interiors. This project was conducted by the Centre for Egyptological Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences under the auspices of the Supreme Counsel of Antiquities. Scholars and conservators from various Russian institutions, such as Grabar Art Conservation Center, took part in the work. The Egyptian party was represented by the 'Aswan' conservation company. The Russian researches found out the church complex as now before us to be homogeneous in terms of chronology and concept and concluded it was built and decorated in the early 14th century. Subjects to restoration were wall paintings, wood and bone carvings, polychromic stone carvings, stone-made objects (mosaics, marble carvings, columns' capitals) and so on.

Keywords: Al-Mualaha' church, Old Cairo, Byzantine art, conservation, Coptic history, Babylon on Nile.

The church¹ of the Virgin ‘Al-Mu‘allaqa’, undoubtedly, is one of the most respected and oldest Coptic shrines. This church has been regarded as a symbol of the Coptic Orthodox Church by many generations of faithful Egyptians, pilgrims, and tourists since it witnessed the most dramatic pages of its history (fig. 1).

Foundation of the church

The full name of the church is † ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΝΤΕ † ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΣ † ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ ΉΝ ΒΑΒΥΛΩΝ ΝΧΗΜΙ, ‘The church of the Blessed Mother of God Mary in Babylon of Egypt’, in Coptic, and as Kanīsat as-sayyida Maryam al-ma‘rūfa bi-l-Mu‘allaqa, ‘The church of Our Lady Mary called suspended’, in Arabic. It owes its Arabic name, ‘Al-Mu‘allaqa’, or ‘suspended’, to its location above the southern gate of the fortress of Babylon, between the gate’s two U-shaped towers². From outside it looked as though the church was floating in the air (fig. 2).

Coptic tradition tightly connects the history of Al-Mu‘allaqa with the Gospel events — the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt from king Herod. The Coptic Orthodox Church considers these events to have significance for both Egypt and Egyptian Christianity. There are numerous Coptic legends in this regard. One of them describes the whole journey of the Virgin Mary with Her Son and Joseph thorough Egypt, monasteries and churches being erected along their route afterwards. At some point they came to Babylon. As the legend states, the Holy Family found shelter in an underground crypt, above which a church dedicated to St. Sergius and Bacchus was later built. Not far from there, in the area of the modern Greek cemetery, is a spring from which the fugitives quenched their thirst; at that place a church was also established.

A small courtyard located in front of the entrance to Al-Mu‘allaqa is also mentioned in Coptic legends narrating the Holy Family’s stay in Egypt. This courtyard is remarkable for several date palms growing on its territory (fig. 3). According to Affagart, a European traveler of the 16th century, upon the arrival of the Holy Family to Babylon these palms bent down to offer fugitives the fruits. Though no other mentions of this story are known, Affagart assures his readers that the Copts even called Al-Mu‘allaqa ‘the church of Our Lady of the Palm’ after this event³. A. Butler remarked that the Copts often used palm-leaves during religious celebrations: ‘Palm-leaves are largely used in the church festivals at Easter, and delicate baskets woven of palm are used to carry the eulogiae, or blessed bread, and are given as gifts among neighbors and friends at the season’⁴. It should be noted that this ethnographic information fully matches today’s situation: anyone who has watched the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in a Coptic church, will remember a picturesque procession with palm-leaves and skillfully woven palm-leaf crosses. A. Butler mentions one more Coptic legend

¹ This article was intended to be a part of a monograph devoted to history of studying and restoring of the Al-Mu‘allaqa church in Old Cairo (Горманюк, 2013). Regrettably, it came out in abridged form. Here is presented the original version of this paper. I would like to express deep gratitude to Tatiana Fedorenko for trans-

lating the article into English and to Tom Hardwick for proofreading the text.

² C. 12 m above the ground.

³ Affagart 1902: 168.

⁴ Butler 1884: 207.



Fig. 1. Al-Mu'allaqa. The great entrance.
Photo by S. V. Ivanov



Fig. 2. The 'suspended' church.
Photo by R. A. Orekhov



Fig. 3. Al-Mu'allaqa. View from the courtyard. Photo by R. A. Orekhov

about the date palm: ‘At the flight into Egypt the fruit of the palm was the first food of which Virgin partook, and that the little dent in the back of the datestone (not the cleft) was first caused by the Virgin’s tooth’⁵.

There are several hypotheses on when the ‘hanging’ church was founded. Researchers agree with each other that the oldest part of the building is the so-called ‘small church’ (fig. 4). Erected atop one of the fortress’ south gate towers, it hosts St. Takla Haymanot’s chapel. According to A. Butler, the ‘small church’ was built in the 3rd–4th centuries⁶. M. Simaika Pacha believed the church was erected in late 4th — early 5th century since this date is indicated by numerous archaeological finds from within the fortress⁷. O. Burmester presumed that the ‘small church’ was constructed in the fortress not long before the Arab conquest⁸.

It should be noted that nearly all assumptions on the foundation date of the first church in Babylon preceded meticulous archaeological and architectural studies of the site. Recent work conducted by P. Grossman, Ch. Le Quesne and P. Sheehan leaves no doubt that all constructions of the fortress (fig. 5) as now before us were erected in times of Diocletian (284–305). Most belonged to one stage of constructional works and, therefore, appeared nearly simultaneously⁹. Only a couple of buildings were erected around 20 years later¹⁰. Anyway, the ‘small church’ in the tower of the south gate could not have been built before the 4th century, namely 324 when Christianity became an official religion of the Roman Empire.

In my opinion, it is probable that the ‘small church’ existed in the fortress’ tower in 4th–5th centuries. However, since Al-Mu‘allaqa underwent numerous reconstructions, the ‘small church’ as it was initially constructed does not survive to our days.

As to the main church, which was erected directly above the fortress’ south gateway (see fig. 2), occupying two U-shaped towers, it is difficult to disagree with O. Burmester who remarked that he could not imagine a military commander allowing the use of two main bastions of the functioning fortress for a structure which undermined the defensive potential of the fortress¹¹. Trying to prove that the main church was built just before the Arab conquest, A. Butler mostly refers to the condition of the wall’s brickwork: ‘...the fine conditions in which the two bastions of the Roman fortress and gateway upholding Al Mu‘allaqa remain, — the clear level line where the Roman work ends and the native work above begins, — this shows at least that the first church was fitted on the Roman wall at the time when the parapet was uninjured, i. e. before the ruins or dismantling consequent on the Arab siege in the seventh century’¹². Against this it may be argued that, judging from information provided by Medieval historians and data from archaeological excavations, the siege and surrender of Babylon were not accompanied by serious destruction, at least in that part of the fortress where the ‘suspended’ church is located.

Medieval Arabic legends cited by A. Butler seem to support the hypothesis that the church already existed at the time of the conquest as they mention Al-Mu‘allaqa in connection with its events. These stories could well originate from later times, though. For instance,

⁵ Butler 1884: 207.

⁶ Butler 1884: 228–229.

⁷ Simaika Pacha 1937: 55. These finds are now kept in the Coptic Museum.

⁸ Khs-Burmester 1967: 24.

⁹ Grossman et al. 1994: 276, 286–287.

¹⁰ Grossman et al. 1998: 183.

¹¹ Khs-Burmester 1967: 24.

¹² Butler 1884: 229.



Fig. 4. Conservation of the St. Takla Haymanot's chapel. General view.
Photo by S. V. Ivanov



a



b



c

Fig. 5. The Babylon fortress (photos by R. A. Orekhov):

a, b — interiors;

c — reused Egyptian stone blocks

one of the legends refers to Abu Nafr, a companion of the prophet and a military commander of Amr ibn al-As' army, according to whom a bronze idol in form of a man in Arabic turban, seated atop a camel, had stood next to the gates of Al-Muʿallaqa church (i. e. the south gateway of the fortress) before Arabs came to Egypt¹³. Leaving aside the distinctly imaginary description of the monument, it is possible to presume that the 'idol' was actually a Pharaonic or Roman sculpture, probably a statue of a tetrarch once occupying the south gate courtyard; conclusions of archaeologists corresponding to this hypothesis¹⁴.

Another Arabic legend ascribes construction of Al-Muʿallaqa to a certain Balthazar (Bursa), a son of the Babylon king Nebuchadnezzar and an Egyptian captive¹⁵. There is one more legend reported by Dominican friar Vansleb who came to Egypt in 1672–1673 at the order of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a minister of the French king Louis XIV. Among other errands Vansleb visited Al-Muʿallaqa where he was told about an arrangement written on the church wall by Amr ibn al-As himself, acknowledging Copts' rights for this building and cursing those Muslims who dared to plunder it¹⁶. Regretfully, modern scholars researching the church have not registered this inscription.

Though A. Butler believed that 'without either wresting or straining the sense of the legend one may fairly gather, that at the time of the siege the church had been already so long built as to date in the imagination of Arab from time immemorial'¹⁷, most modern scholars are inclined to associate the erection of Al-Muʿallaqa with the epoch following the Arab conquest, i. e. the time when the fortress lost its military functions. Apparently, it occurred during the reign of patriarch Isaac (690–692)¹⁸. By his efforts the 'small church' expanded into all space between towers of the fortress and turned into huge three-aisled basilica.

The first written mention of the 'hanging' church comes from the time of patriarch Joseph (831–849) and is connected with gloomy events. A conflict between Ali ibn Yahya al-Armani, a governor of Egypt, and the patriarch who refused to ordain a certain Theodore, a protégé of the governor, as a bishop, resulted in the order to ruin all churches of Fustat: '...and he came to the church which is in the Fortress of Ash-Shama, called the Suspended, and they demolished its upper part until they reached the columns'¹⁹.

History of the church in the Middle Ages

Though the 'hanging' church was probably reconstructed, there is no mention of it until the 10th century. During the reign of patriarch Abraham (975–978) the miraculous apparition of the Virgin took place in Al-Muʿallaqa, this event being mentioned in numerous legends and depicted on many Coptic icons including the one by Ibrahim al-Nasikh, an icon-painter of 18th century, now kept in the church (fig. 6).

As the legend says, the Fatimid caliph al-Muizz li-din Allah (952–975) or, according to the other version of this story, his son and successor al-Aziz bi-Allah (975–996) demanded patriarch Abraham to confirm Christ's words: '...if you have faith the size of a mustard seed,

¹³ Butler 1884: 230–232.

¹⁴ Grossman et al. 1994: 282.

¹⁵ Butler 1884: 230.

¹⁶ Vansleb 1677: 237. Цит. по: Coquin 1974: 80.

¹⁷ Butler 1884: 232.

¹⁸ Khs-Burmester 1967: 25; Meinardus 1965: 187; Meinardus 1999: 183.

¹⁹ Evetts 1910/15: 519–522.



a



b

Fig. 6. Coptic icons (photos by S. V. Ivanov):

a — icon-case with St. Abraham icon (in the centre) after conservation;

b — St. Abraham icon

you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there”, and it will move...’ (Matthew 17:20). Otherwise, the caliph threatened to demolish all Christian churches in Egypt. After three days fast and prayer in the ‘suspended’ church, Abraham saw the Virgin who pointed at Simeon the Tanner, famous for his righteousness and love of God. The patriarch called for Simeon, but he humbly refused as he considered himself sinful. However, Abraham assured Simon that he would be capable of this miracle as soon as the Mother of God herself had singled him out. Then Simeon asked to conduct a liturgy near the Muqattam Mountain while he fasted and prayed for several days and nights. Finally, in the presence of the caliph and his courtiers a solemn liturgy at the foot of the mountain was carried out by patriarch Abraham. As Simeon was praying, an earthquake began, and the mountain moved. The caliph admitted the forth and righteousness of Christian religion and ordered the reconstruction of many churches including Al-Muʿallaqa²⁰.

According to a version of the legend, which survive in multiple notes of European pilgrims and travelers who visited this church in the Middle Ages and later, the God’s Mother appeared to the patriarch near a column or Her voice was coming out of this column. That is the reason why Al-Muʿallaqa is also called the ‘column church’²¹.

Modern Copts consider this miracle extremely important. They have an annual celebration on November 27 preceded by a three day fast to commemorate these events. Simeon and Abraham are among the most popular Coptic saints. There even exists a legend, according to which patriarch Abraham was buried in Al-Muʿallaqa.

The epoch of caliph al-Aziz bi-Ilah being the time of glorious wins and conquests, rise of arts, the rebuilding of Cairo and religious tolerance, this ruler was succeeded by his complete opposite — caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996–1021), a cruel fanatic merciless to Sunni Muslims, Jews, and Christians. According to a Medieval Egyptian historian, al-Makrizi, in the time of patriarch Zacharias (1004–1032) al-Hakim ordered the enclosure of the ‘hanging’ church with a wall to deny access²². Some sources inform us that the church was temporarily turned into a mosque (July 1012)²³. Throughout Egypt Christian churches were plundered, and Al-Muʿallaqa was no exception — many clerical garments and other items were taken from there²⁴.

In spite of these dramatic events, in this period the patriarch’s chair moved from Alexandria to Babylon (Misr), namely to Al-Muʿallaqa. It happened during the reign of patriarch Christodoulos (1047–1077) and was accompanied by rivalry between two churches located within Qasr al-Sham — the ‘hanging’ church and the church of St. Sergius (Abu Sargah). Though there was a tradition to celebrate patriarchs’ ordination in the St. Sergius church, Christodoulos chose Al-Muʿallaqa for this important ceremony, which, of course, caused a priest from Abu Sargah to be unsatisfied: ‘The priest of Abu Sargah, angry at infringement of his prerogative, refused to mention the patriarch’s name in the diptychs at the holy Eucharist: whereat Christodoulos was so concerned, that he was fain to make peace by celebrating also in Abu Sargah’²⁵.

²⁰ For modern interpretation of this legend see: The biography 1994.

²¹ For list of European travelers’ references to miraculous apparition of the Virgin near the column of Al-Muʿallaqa see: Coquin 1974: 74–75.

²² Wüstenfeld 1847: 65.

²³ Coquin 1974: 67.

²⁴ Wüstenfeld 1847: 65–66.

²⁵ Butler 1884: 233. See also: Meinardus 1965: 187; Gabra 2010: 222.

Thus, the ‘suspended’ church became an official residence of Christodoulus, where he spent most of his lifetime and passed away. This patriarch started a long tradition — from him until the 14th century, Coptic patriarchs resided in Old Cairo, in Al-Mu‘allaqa or in the other significant Coptic church of St. Mercurius Abu Sayfayn. In this period in the ‘hanging’ church such Coptic patriarchs as Christodoulus, Cyril II (1078–1092), Michael IV (1092–1102), Macarius II (1102–1128), Gabriel II (1131–1145), Michael V (1145–1146), John V (1146–1166) were elected and ordained, local councils took place, chrism was prepared and blessed. On order of Michael IV one of the Roman bastions, where now St. Takla Haymanot’s chapel is situated, was expanded by an additional room serving as a patriarch’s cell. For many patriarchs Al-Mu‘allaqa was more than just an official residence — they were also buried there²⁶.

Afterwards, Al-Mu‘allaqa survived several episodes of destruction and reconstruction. In the reign of Ayyub sultan al-Malik al-Kamil (1218–1238) the ‘hanging’ church was temporarily closed, and in 1240 it was looted²⁷.

Mamluk Egypt (1250–1517) was distinguished by an unstable political situation when periods of economic and cultural growth and those of military dictatorship succeeded one another. The status of the Copts reflected this shift: relative tolerance alternated with different discriminatory measures. For instance, according to al-Makrizi, the ‘hanging’ church was again plundered during the reign of emir Al-Ashraf Salah ad-Din Khalil ibn Qalawun (1290–1293)²⁸. But the real catastrophe broke out in the time of patriarch John VIII (1300–1320). In March of 1301 a number of Egyptian churches were destroyed while the others, including Al-Mu‘allaqa and the St. Sergius church, became closed. After 603 days, only once special emissaries from the Byzantine emperor had come to Egypt, services in the ‘suspended’ church were resumed. Some researchers believe the emissaries were accompanied by Greek artists who completely renovated the church in 1301–1302. Most likely, this reconstruction was financed by the Byzantine empire²⁹.

Written sources also describe cases when intervention of Egyptian officials saved the church from being demolished. For example, in times of sultan Al-Malik an-Nasir Nasir ad-Din Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1285–1341) the personal intervention of emir Aydagm helped to put out a fire in Al-Mu‘allaqa³⁰.

The ‘hanging’ church was destroyed two more times in August 1384 and in October — November 1438³¹. Nevertheless, it still functioned as cathedral: patriarchs Athanasius III (1250–1261), John VII (1262–1268), and John VIII (1300–1320) were elected and ordained there.

In Middle Ages many travelers and pilgrims visited Egypt in order to make a pilgrimage to holy sites. A prior from Dublin, Symon Semeonis, who was in Cairo in 1324, left notes where he describes Christian churches in the Babylon fortress, the most attention being paid to the crypt under the St. Sergius church where he was lucky to ‘celebrate Mass on the feast of purification of the Virgin’. Besides other churches, the pilgrim visited Al-Mu‘allaqa, ‘another glorious church in that same city, known as Sancta Maria della Scala, and properly so named

²⁶ Coquin 1974: 69–73.

²⁷ Coquin 1974: 67.

²⁸ Wüstenfeld 1847: 73.

²⁹ Evans 2004: 420.

³⁰ Wüstenfeld 1847: 123.

³¹ Coquin 1974: 69.

because it is approached by way of steps'³². In his notes he also refers to 'a column of white marble', next to which 'a certain Jacobite saw the Virgin who told him that Christians would gain freedom'³³.

The 'hanging' church is also mentioned in notes by the Florentine Leonardo di Frescobaldi who visited it in 1384, the Italian Niccolo da Poggibonsi who went on pilgrimage to holy sites in 1346–1350, the French Antoine de Crémone, the Dutch Van Ghistele who was in Al-Mu'allaqa in 1485 and left a detailed description of its interior³⁴, and many others. Mostly belonging to the so-called itinerarium genre, writings of this kind list numerous shrines, churches, and monasteries the faithful can visit during their pilgrimage, retell legends and tales about local miracles to praise them throughout the whole Christian world. It is these notes where the name 'Santa Maria della Scala', or the 'stairway' church, being frequently applied to Al-Mu'allaqa in the Middle Ages, appeared for the first time — since the pilgrims were impressed by the scale of the stairway consisting of 29 steps needed to be passed to reach the church entrance. All pilgrims also mention the miraculous apparition of the Virgin near the column and the relics of St. Martin and St. Barbara being kept in this church.

Guests from far away Muscovy visited Babylon as well. For instance, a merchant living in the time of the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible, Trifon Korobeynikov, visited Egypt and Sinai in 1583 and then left a brief description of his journey: 'Among Egyptian antiquities are the Greek monastery of Great Martyrs St. George, the church of the Mother of God and a small monastery of the Roman lawyers³⁵, along with three Coptic churches, out of which one has a cave where the Virgin with Jesus Christ were living after their flight from Jerusalem'³⁶.

In 1517 the Turkish army of sultan Selim I (1512–1520) entered Cairo, and, so, the last Mamluk ruler was overthrown. For several centuries Egypt became a province of Ottoman Empire (1517–1798), Turkish pashas appointed by Sultans being its governors.

Revival of the Coptic Church: history of Al-Mu'allaqa in the Modern Period

Since the mid-17th century colossal changes took place in the economic, political, and religious life of Egypt. Its economic rise was accompanied by serious social and political transformations. These changes affected the status of the Coptic Church and the Christian population of Egypt. The period from the mid-17th to 18th century was distinguished by a rapid rise of Coptic culture, widespread building of new churches and restoring of old ones, revival of icon-painting tradition and general renewal of Coptic religious life.

In his monograph devoted to the famous Coptic icon-painter of the 18th century Yuhanna al-Armani³⁷, Magdi Girgis traced the reasons that had caused such a considerable cultural rise. All began from change in the political and administrative organization of society, when the pashas became less powerful whereas the Mamluk military and administrative top, emirs, on the contrary, gained more strength. It led to that the status and importance of high-ranked

³² Wolff 2003: 140–141.

³³ Coquin 1974: 74.

³⁴ Coquin 1974: 74–79.

³⁵ It is unclear what particular building the pilgrim refers to here.

³⁶ Путешествие 1899: 31.

³⁷ Girgis 2008.

Coptic mubashirs (scribes and officials), who helped emirs to administrate and control finance, increased. As a result, all issues of finance management fell into hands of representatives of the three main social and religious groups — Mamluk emirs, Coptic mubashirs, and Muslim theologians. Magdi Girgis remarks that ‘a spirit of tolerance and coexistence spread among Egyptian Copts and Muslims during this period, for the new economic interests bound Coptic scribes to Mamluk amir as well as Muslim men of religion’³⁸.

The economic prosperity of the newly emerged civil Coptic establishment allied with a general spirit of tolerance and changed attitude of men in power gave wealthy Copts the opportunity to finance the erection and reconstruction of churches. Tight contact with civil and religious authorities allowed Copts to get permission for this easily whereas in previous centuries it was nearly impossible³⁹. Thus, throughout Egypt new churches rapidly appeared and old shrines were actively renovated, which, naturally, caused a revival of religious art: ‘This upsurge in building work was accompanied by an artistic revival as manuscripts were copied and icons and wall-painting were commissioned to adorn the new or newly restored religious structures’⁴⁰.

All these could not but affect the destiny of Al-Mu‘allaqa, one of the major churches in the capital. During the reign of patriarch John XVI (1676–1718) a large-scale restoration was conducted in Al-Mu‘allaqa, and, as it is stated in a manuscript written in 1704–1705, the works was accompanied by various miracles⁴¹. Archive documents from the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchy confirm the restoration was financed by muallim⁴² Guirguis Abu Mansur al-Tukhi (died in 1718), a mubashir of emir Murad Katkhud Mustahfazan⁴³. Most probably, as a result of this restoration, Al-Mu‘allaqa gained a large collection of icons dated to the late 17th century, which were painted on paper glued to the wooden board in a technique similar to the miniature illustrations one⁴⁴.

In the mid — late 18th century the church’s interior was enriched by acquiring a number of icons painted by such outstanding Coptic masters of those times as Ibrahim al-Nasikh and Yuhanna al-Armani. For instance, the church owns a big icon of the Virgin with scenes depicting main events and celebrations connected with this Bible personage, by these two icon-painters, which dates 1759 (fig. 7).

A large-scale reconstruction of Al-Mu‘allaqa’s interior took place in 1775–1779 and was funded by mualim Abid Khuzam al-Bayad⁴⁵. Yuhanna al-Armani was commissioned to paint a great number of icons, including for iconostases of the main church. A. Butler mentions a series of 34 icons by this master dated 1777, each depicting a saint ‘carrying cross and palm-branch’⁴⁶. In total amount, Yuhanna al-Armani painted for the ‘suspended’ church around 65 icons⁴⁷.

³⁸ Girgis 2008: 35.

³⁹ Girgis 2008: 36–40.

⁴⁰ Girgis 2008: 36.

⁴¹ Coquin 1974: 69.

⁴² Arabic ‘the teacher’, way of addressing and a title of an educated person in Egypt in those times.

⁴³ Girgis 2008: 42.

⁴⁴ The miniature illustrations technique was one of the sources for the so-called ‘new style’ in Coptic icon-painting of 18th century, which found its most bril-

liant epitome in icons painted by Ibrahim al-Nasikh and Yuhanna al-Armani. For how the miniature illustrations technique affected Coptic icon-painting tradition see: Girgis 2008: 46, 74–75 etc.

⁴⁵ According to R. Habib this restoration took place in 1775 (Habib 1967: 21), while in M. Girgis’ opinion, it happened in 1779 (Girgis 2008: 87).

⁴⁶ Butler 1884: 219.

⁴⁷ Girgis 2008: 87.

The 19th century started a new page in history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The enlightened activities of patriarch Cyril IV (1854–1861) and his successors caused the church print media and Christian schools to emerge; new churches were built throughout Egypt. The Coptic community gained permission to form a council, Maglis al-Milli, which actively participated in Church property management. In 1875 a theological seminary was established in Cairo.

Throughout the 19th century interest in Coptic culture and religion grew rapidly among Western researchers. Whereas before Babylon and Al-Muʿallaqa had been mentioned mostly in notes of pilgrims and travelers, since the boundary of the 19th and 20th centuries academic works on history of the Old Cairo started to appear. Besides the fortress and the ancient churches on its territory, Coptic art itself became the subject of researchers' intense interest. French specialists P. Casanova and E. Amélineau paid much attention in their works to historical geography of Old Cairo⁴⁸. Churches of Old Cairo, including Al-Muʿallaqa, were studied by A. Butler⁴⁹, J. H. Middleton⁵⁰, R. M. Fowler⁵¹, O. M. Dalton⁵² and some others.

The work by A. Butler 'The ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt' (1884) provides us with the most thorough description of the exterior and interior of Al-Muʿallaqa from the 19th century. A. Butler provided a plan of the church (fig. 8), described architecture, details of the interior and the most important artifacts. His book also contains invaluable for history of Al-Muʿallaqa studying information on a large-scaled restoration project started in 1884 after the church fell down in 1879⁵³.

In course of the reconstruction the classical three-aisled basilica was turned into a four-aisled church. According to R. M. Fowler, the whole enterprise was funded by the rich Coptic churchgoer Nachli Bey, who spent the astronomical sum of 6000 £⁵⁴. For comparison, a priest's salary was 2 £ per month. Regretfully, work on antiquities protection was only getting started in Egypt in the third quarter of the 19th century, so during the restoration nobody paid attention to the preservation of ancient artifacts. A. Butler preserved a meticulous description of the process: 'Inside a fresh west gallery has been built; a number of beautiful old carved screens have been huddled and hammered together into a long wooden wall; the altars and altar canopies have been thrown down, and will be replaced by new Greek designs from Alexandria; new glass tasteless and staring in colors has been put in the eastern window in lieu of the old... Of three altars not a stone was left standing at my last visit in 1884; they were pulled down, one might say out of sheer mischief, four or five years previously; and to be replaced, if the priest is right, by slabs on pillars — the latest Greek fashion from Alexandria'⁵⁵.

⁴⁸ Casanova 1901; Amélineau 1893.

⁴⁹ Butler 1884.

⁵⁰ Middleton 1882; Middleton 1885.

⁵¹ Fowler 1901.

⁵² Dalton 1901.

⁵³ Whereas the restoration of 1884 is a historical fact, the falling down of 1879 is a matter of discussion. This information was reported to A. Butler by a priest of Al-Muʿallaqa, suspected by the researcher in telling lies to hide a theft. Here is how A. Butler describes the conversation between them: 'When, after searching everywhere, I asked the priest about them [i. e. the doors decorated with invaluable carved panels], he could only reply,

"Ma fish" — there is no such a thing. "But", I persisted, "I have read books written in English by people who have seen the doors; what has become of them?" "The church was falling down in 1879, and doubtless they were destroyed". "What? Only a year ago? In 1879?" "No", he said, changing his tone; "I meant seven years ago". "Or seventy-seven", I thought; but it was idle arguing, since obviously the doors had been either stolen, or sold by the priest' (Butler 1884: 209–210). Afterwards the artifact in question was found in a private collection (Butler 1884: 210, note 1).

⁵⁴ Fowler 1901: 194.

⁵⁵ Butler 1884: 209, 221.



Fig. 7. The icon of the Mother of God 'Hodegetria' with the scenes from Her earthly life. In process of conservation. Photo by S. V. Ivanov

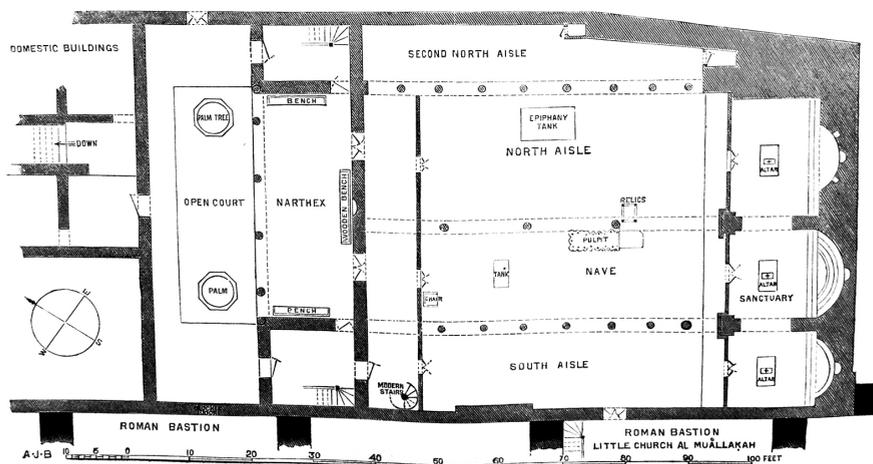


Fig. 8. Plan of the 'hanging' church drawn by A. Butler. According to: Butler 1884: 211, fig.13

The biggest loss for the church was 6 unique carved panels of cedar wood of the early 14th century, depicting Gospel events such as Annunciation, Nativity, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and some others. These panels mysteriously went missing from the church. As A. Butler found out, they were sold for only 100 £ to a rich collector of antiquities. After decorating his house in Paris for a while, the panels were later resold to the British Museum⁵⁶ where they remain⁵⁷.

This and many other incidents caused considerable anxiety in the Egyptian Antiquities Service, Coptic Orthodox Church and among eminent representatives of the Coptic community. Protection of Coptic antiquities became a matter of special attention. After G. Maspero became director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service in 1881, he decided to include Coptic monuments and artifacts in the scope of its activities. There was organized the Committee for Arabic Artworks Conservation⁵⁸ to catalogue and protect Medieval Egyptian artifacts. For everybody involved there was an obvious need for a special museum where the most valuable pieces of Coptic early-Christian and Medieval art could be kept and displayed. That is how Sir Ronald Storrs, a member of the British administration of Egypt and the Committee for Arabic Artworks Conservation, describes the prehistory of the Coptic museum: 'The first person to perceive that as the majority of the Coptic churches and convents were outside the scope of the Comité, so there remained many categories of objects unsuitable to the Egyptian Museum, was Morcos (Marc) Simaika Pasha, a high official of the Railway Administration and (still more for the purpose), Vice-president of the Maglis Milli, the Coptic Community Council. Simaika Pasha began... to catalogue all the objects of interest that had survived the apathy of the abbots and the centenarian patriarch, and enterprise of the dealers; and he had begun to house icons and bibles in a room adjoining one of the churches of Old Cairo'⁵⁹.

Therefore, supported by patriarch Cyril (1874–1927), the public and researchers, Morcos Simaika Pasha founded the Coptic Museum. In 1902 he received permission to use one of the rooms of Al-Mu'allaqa for storing a collection of antiquities coming to patriarchate from churches after inventory. Simultaneously, Morcos Simaika with a group of sympathizers started to work out an architect project of special museum building. Place for the future museum was chosen for a reason. Its founders wanted it to be situated between two towers of Roman fortress of Babylon, next to Al-Mu'allaqa and Greek Orthodox church of St. George, i. e. as though in the very heart of Christian culture.

The first room of the exhibition of the Coptic Museum's world famous collection opened to public on March 14, 1910. Initially the museum building occupied grounds belonging to the Coptic Patriarchy that actively participated in forming the collection by donating wooden workpieces, marble columns, mosaic panels and other Christian Egyptian artifacts and artworks to the Museum (fig. 9). Among other items, masterpieces of 5th–13th centuries coming from Al-Mu'allaqa were displayed⁶⁰. Another donation was a part of the richest collection of Coptic manuscripts (the earliest ones dating to the 11th century) of the 'hanging' church⁶¹.

⁵⁶ Butler 1884: 210. See also footnote 54.

⁵⁷ For objects' details see, for instance: Hunt 1990.

⁵⁸ Original name — Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe.

⁵⁹ Storrs 1937: 105.

⁶⁰ On one of the most famous objects coming from the church, the epistyle 'Entry of Christ into Jerusalem', see: Hammerstaedt 1999; MacCoull 1986; Vliet 2007.

⁶¹ The other part of this collection is now kept in the Coptic Patriarchate.

The museum belonged to the Coptic Patriarchy until 1931 when the Egyptian Government decided to nationalize it, a decision recognizing the importance of Coptic heritage to the country. The old building was reconstructed and expanded by adding a new wing. After the works were completed, the Coptic collection of the Egyptian Museum moved to the new site.

Restorations of the church in the 20th–21st centuries

In the 20th century Al-Mu'allafa survived several more reconstructions. In 1915–1919, 1927–1929, 1941–1945, and 1951–1952 the Committee for Arabic Artworks Conservation renewed and restored the church in different ways⁶².

Ever since Egypt became presidential republic, protection and restoration of Coptic heritage have been a subject of constant care by the government. In 1980s Al-Mu'allafa underwent one more restoration, after which was inaugurated by Hosni Mubarak.

However, an earthquake of 1992 nullified all efforts of specialists, and the 'suspended' church urgently needed new restoration. In mid-1990s an international research project took place, during which Egyptian, German, American, and Canadian archaeologists studied the Babylon fortress. In 1999–2005 the Supreme Council of Antiquities of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture⁶³ conducted architectural restoration of Al-Mu'allafa within the Old Cairo Groundwater Lowering Project generally funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 1999 the Supreme Council of Antiquities initiated a project on study and restoration of Coptic icons that lasted until 2002 and involved scholars and restorers from the American Research Center in Cairo, Netherlands Institute of the Egyptological and Arabic Studies in Cairo, Institute of the Coptic Studies in Cairo and Coptic Orthodox Patriarchy as well as Grabar Art Conservation Center (Moscow, Russia) and the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow, Russia). Within this project Al-Mu'allafa's collection of icons were restored by Russian and Egyptian specialists in 2001–2002.

In several years another, even larger Russian-Egyptian project on saving Coptic heritage started — a complex restoration of Al-Mualafa's interiors. This project was conducted since February of 2004 until June of 2008 by the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences under the auspices of the Supreme Counsel of Antiquities. Scholars and conservators from various Russian institutions, such as Grabar Art Conservation Center, took part in the works. The Egyptian party was represented by the 'Aswan' conservation company⁶⁴.

The Russian researches found out the church complex to be homogeneous in terms of chronology and concept and concluded it was built and decorated mainly in the 13th — early 14th century (fig. 10). Subjects to restoration were wall paintings, wood and bone carvings, polychromic stone carvings, stone-made objects (mosaics, marble carvings, columns' capitals) and others.

Numerous cases of reconstruction and renovation that took place in the 1980s completely changed the interior of the church's atrium. Polychromic stone carving and ornamental

⁶² Coquin 1974: 69.

⁶³ Former Egyptian Antiquities Service.

⁶⁴ All details of process and results of this restoration are reported in Горпмяюк 2013.

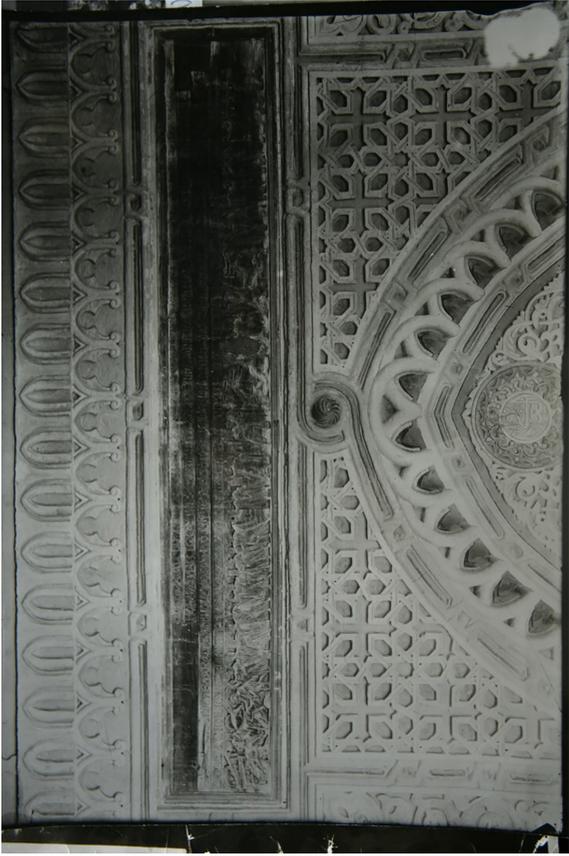


Fig. 9 (left). Old photo of the central entrance to the church with one of the donated masterpieces, the epistyle 'Entry of Christ into Jerusalem', in *situ*. Photo from the church's archive

Fig. 10 (right). Interior of the church. Photo by R. A. Orekhov

panels made in sgraffito technique⁶⁵ (fig. 11) decorating the walls of the atrium, marble columns and carved marble panels of the side entrances (fig. 12) — all were covered with a thick layer of dirt and overpainting, in some places restorers counting up to 5 later coats of paint (fig. 13). In course of the works specialists removed the overpainting and dirt, and restored missing fragments of carving. Once decorated with oriental ornaments, the wooden ceiling of atrium was cleaned of multiple later coats of paint and a layer of synthetic glue.

Into the church itself one enters through the doors ornamented with fine carving and carved ivory inlays, dated to the early 14th century (1301–1302). Later coats of paint were slowly and meticulously removed and the original appearance of the ornamental composition was restored (see fig. 11, c and f).

The inner space of the church is divided into three main and one ‘side’ aisles by rows of marble columns, part of which came from Roman constructions in the fortress (fig. 14). These columns were originally covered with colourful paintings. An image of Archangel Michael, dated by specialists to the late 13th — early 14th century, is the only one that now survives. In course of restoration this painting was brought to its initial appearance (fig. 15).

Made of white and colourful marble and decorated with a mosaic, a pulpit consists of fragments dated to different periods (fig. 16). For example, whereas the relief marble panel representing its front side is, probably, dated to the 8th–9th centuries (fig. 17), the mosaic decorative panel belongs to the 18th–19th centuries (fig. 18). The pulpit rests on columns of different styles and quality. It was in imminent danger of collapse, missing fragments of mosaic and carving, and lacking part of the carved ornamental marble frieze framing its perimeter. During restoration conservators dismantled columns, enforced the construction with metal bars and returned the pillars to their original places. Missing fragments of the marble frieze and mosaic panel were also reconstructed.

The restoration of the 11th–18th century wooden altar screens ornamented with fine carving and black-wood and ivory inlays was the most labor-consuming part of work (fig. 19). Some of the carved ivory inlays, probably, belong to the 8th–9th centuries.

Each of the three altars contains a ciborium (fig. 20). The altar of St. John the Baptist has a ciborium painted in icon-painting technique dated to the late 13th — early 14th century. Its inner surface is decorated with depictions of Jesus Christ and four angels accompanied by seraphs and cherubs⁶⁶ (fig. 21). The synthronon in the altar of St. John the Baptist is ornamented with stone panels made in the Florentine mosaic technique⁶⁷. The mosaic was badly damaged in a recent earthquake. Though some fragments were missing, restorers reconstructed them by analogy with what remained (fig. 22).

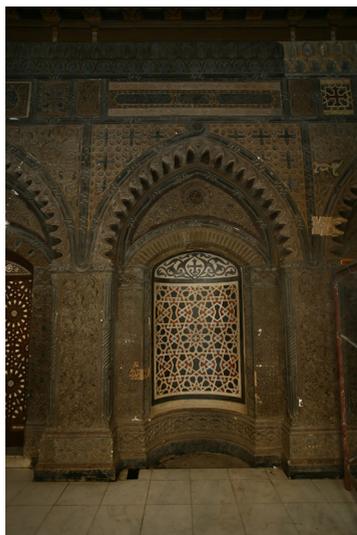
The oldest part of Al-Mu‘allaqa is a side chapel that was later dedicated to the 13th–14th century Ethiopian saint Takla Haymanot⁶⁸ (fig. 23). In the small apse were uncovered a fragment with sanctifiers, probably from the 11th century. The rest of the painting belongs to the

⁶⁵ A technique of wall decor, produced by applying layers of plaster tinted in contrasting colours to a moistened surface and then scratching so as to reveal parts of the underlying layer.

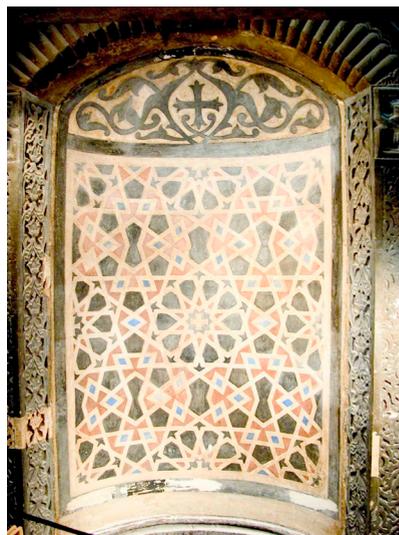
⁶⁶ For more details about ciborium paintings and some controversies in naming of seraphs and cherubs see: Горматюк 2013: 165–172.

⁶⁷ A mosaic of colourful semi-precious stones of different forms, gathered into a composition so that the joins are scarcely seen.

⁶⁸ Among publications on this subject it should be mentioned following: Urbaniak-Walczak 1993; Горматюк 2013: 127–152.



a



b



c

Fig. 11. Atrium. Main entrance (photos by S. V. Ivanov, A. A. Gormatyuk, R. A. Orekhov; the begginging):

- a — stone carving and a panel made in sgraffito technique in process of conservation;
- b — a panel made in sgraffito technique in the process of conservation;
- c — stone carving and wooden doors ornamented with black-wood and ivory inlays



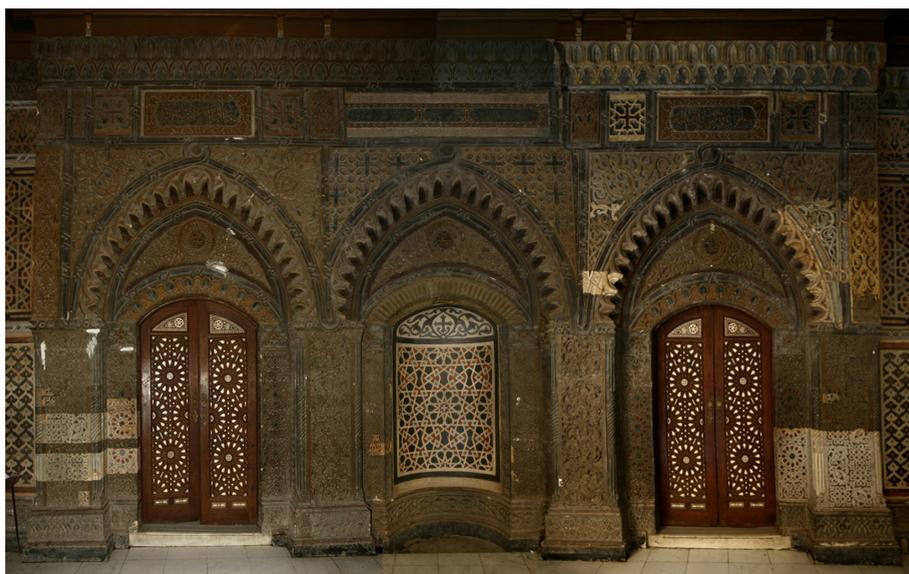
d

Fig. 11. Atrium. Main entrance (photos by S. V. Ivanov, A. A. Gormatyuk, R. A. Orekhov; the continuation):

d — stone carving (fragment) before, in process and after conservation



e



f

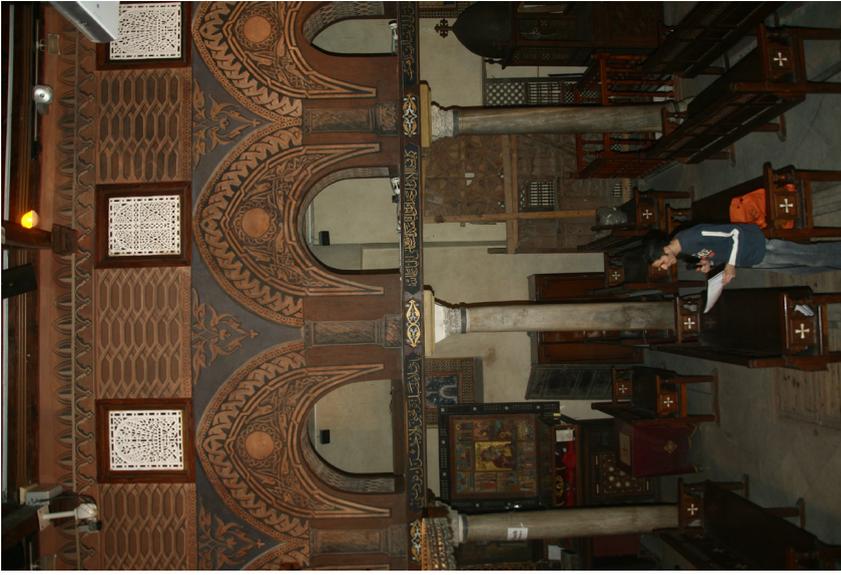
Fig. 11. Atrium. Main entrance (photos by S. V. Ivanov, A. A. Gormatyuk, R. A. Orekhov; the end):

e — conservation process;
f — main entrance before and after conservation



Fig. 12 (left). South (side-) entrance after conservation. Photo by S. V. Ivanov

fig. 13 (right). Polychromatic stone carving. Removing of the overpainting (process of conservation). Photo by S. V. Ivanov



a



b

Fig. 14 (left). The church's aisle. Photo by A. A. Gormatyuk

Fig. 15 (right). Painting on the column. In process of conservation (photos by S. V. Ivanov):

a — general view;

b — fragment



a



b

Fig. 16. Marble pulpit (photos by S. V. Ivanov):
a — general view;
b — conservation process (conservator A. N. Klenchev)



Fig. 17 (left). Pulpit (fragment). Marble panel. 8th–9th centuries.

Photo by R. A. Orekhov

Fig. 18 (right). Pulpit (fragment). The mosaic decorative panel. 18th–19th centuries.

Photo by S. V. Ivanov



a

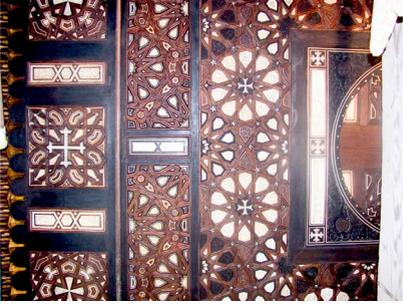


b

Fig. 19. Conservation of the wooden altar screen (beginning):

a — cleaning of the altar screen, testing area;

b — cleaning of the altar screen, work in progress (conservators V. V. Zanozin, S. V. Medvedeva);



c

Fig. 19. Conservation of the wooden altar screen (end):
c — fragments of the altar screen, after conservation



Fig.20. Paintings of ciboriums (photos by S. V. Ivanov, A. A. Gormatyuk):
 a — ciborium in the altar dedicated to St. George, Jesus Christ before and after cleaning;
 b — ciborium in the altar dedicated to the Virgin, an angel before and after cleaning;
 c — conservation of the ciborium (the conservator A. A. Gormatyuk)



a



b

Fig. 21. The ciborium in the altar dedicated to St. John the Baptist after conservation (photos by S. V. Ivanov, A. A. Gormatyuk):
a — Jesus Christ;
b — an angel



Fig. 22 (left). Conservation of the mosaic in the altar of St. John the Baptist. Conservator S. I. Semenov. Photo by S. V. Ivanov
Fig. 23 (right). Wooden doors to a side-chapel dedicated to St. Takla Haymanot in the process of conservation. Photo by S. V. Ivanov

13th — early 14th century. The Virgin with angels (fig. 24) and the 24 Elders of the Apocalypse (fig. 25) occupying the big apse were painted by Byzantine masters, while the Nativity (fig. 26) and Purification (fig. 27) were probably painted by local Coptic ones. After uncovering and fixing fragments of what survived from these murals, Russian restorers managed to find a method of retouching most suitable in that case — not harming original paintings (fig. 28).

It took many efforts to restore paintings occupying more than 500 m² of surfaces in the main space of the church as well as paintings in carved stucco in the atrium that had been covered with numerous coats of dirt and paint.

Russian restorers' work was recognized by international experts and the Ministry of Culture of ARE, which expressed interest in further collaboration with Russia in the sphere of restoration and safeguarding the cultural and historical heritage of Egyptian civilization.



Fig. 24. The Virgin (fragment). Reconstruction on transparent plastic by A. A. Gormatyuk.
Photo by S. V. Ivanov



Fig. 25. 24 Elders of Apocalypse after conservation.
Photos by S. V. Ivanov

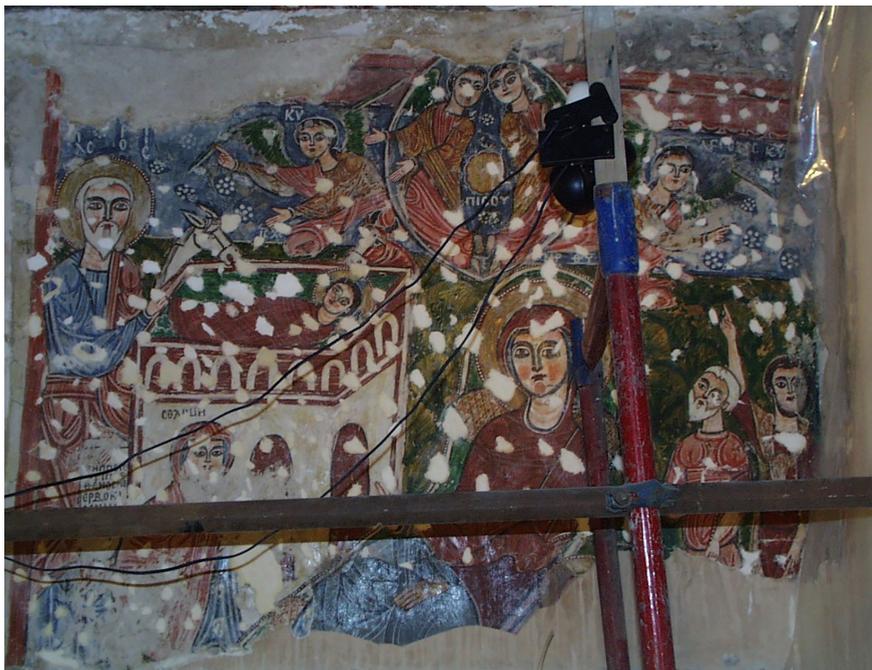


Fig. 26. Nativity in process and after conservation



a



b

Fig. 27. Purification (fragments) in process of conservation (photos by S. V. Ivanov):

a — Archangel and St. Joseph the Betrothed;

b — St. Anna the Prophetess



Fig.28. Conservation of the wall painting at the St. Takla Haymanot's chapel.
Conservators A. A. Gormatiuk, V.D. Sarabianov, T. N. Zolotinskaya

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История храма Богоматери «аль-Муаллака»: факты, легенды, реставрационные работы

Е. Г. Толмачева

Храм Богоматери «аль-Муаллака» принадлежит к числу наиболее почитаемых и древних коптских церквей. В египетской христианской традиции история этого храма тесно связана с евангельскими событиями — бегством Святого Семейства в Египет от преследований царя Ирода. Существует несколько версий относительно даты основания аль-Муаллаки. Ученые сходятся во мнении, что ее древнейшей частью является «маленькая церковь», построенная над одной из башен южных ворот крепости Вавилон, в которой в настоящее время расположен придел св. Тэкл Хайманота. А. Батлер относит основание «маленькой церкви» к III–IV вв. По мнению М. Симайки-паши, она была построена в конце IV — начале V в., на что указывают многочисленные археологические находки, сделанные в пределах крепости. О. Бурместер также предполагает, что небольшой храм существовал в крепости незадолго до арабского завоевания. Весьма вероятно, что «маленькая церковь» в самом деле возникла в башне южных ворот крепости Вавилон уже в IV–V вв. Однако, из-за того что храм Богоматери неоднократно перестраивался, следов первоначальной постройки не сохранилось. Что касается основной церкви, то большинство современных исследователей склонно полагать, что ее основание относится к эпохе, последовавшей за арабским завоеванием, т. е. к тому времени, когда крепость утратила оборонительную функцию. Вероятнее всего, она возникла в правление патриарха Исаака (690–692). Первое письменное упоминание об аль-Муаллаке относится к правлению патриарха Иосифа (831–849).

С февраля 2004 по июнь 2008 г. по инициативе Верховного совета древностей АРЕ российские и египетские специалисты проводили комплексную реставрацию внутреннего убранства храма аль-Муаллака. В проекте принимали участие исследователи и реставраторы Центра египтологических исследований РАН, а также целого ряда других российских учреждений, в частности Всероссийского художественного научно-реставрационного центра им. академика И. Э. Грабаря. Египетская сторона была представлена компанией «Асуан». Проведенные исследования показали, что храм представляет собой единый в хронологическом и смысловом плане комплекс, восходящий к XIV в. Работы проводились по разным направлениям: реставрация настенной живописи, темперной станковой живописи, резьбы по дереву и кости, полихромной резьбы по камню, реставрация объектов из камня (каменной мозаики, мраморной резьбы, капителей колон) и т. д.

Ключевые слова: аль-Муаллака, Старый Каир, византийское искусство, реставрация, история коптов, египетский Вавилон.