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The Church of the Holy Virgin Mary in El-Shamyia, Assiut (An Archaeological Study)

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Keywords

Church
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El-Shamyia
dome of altar
Assiut.

Abstract

This study aims to identify the ancient Church of the Virgin Mary, which was not published before. It is located in the village of Al-Shamiya in Sahel Selim, Assiut Governorate. Unfortunately, despite all ancientness of this church, it was not mentioned in the ancient books of history. It is well known that the churches and monasteries of the east bank of the Nile did not receive sufficient attention from the ancient historians, unlike the monasteries of the West Bank. These churches adopt the Coptic Byzantine style in their design, taking the form of a cross with an octagonal central dome made of wood and surrounded by four sections that take the shape of a cross. It preserves some ancient antiquities such as the iconostasis, wooden beams, the ancient baptistery and its beautiful minaret, in addition to the most important masterpiece in the church, which is the dome of the altar. This study records the architectural outline of the church and its horizontal and vertical projections, which is published for the first time in this research.

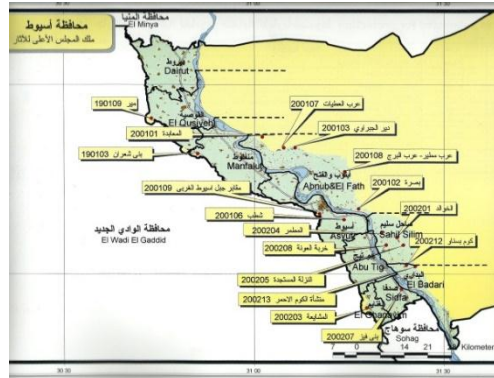
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The church of the Holy Virgin Mary¹ in El-Shamyia

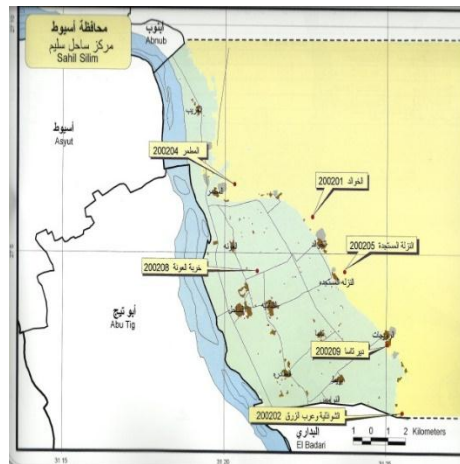
The Location of El-Shamyia:

El-Shamyia is mentioned in the Description of Egypt². It also occurs in El Khotat El Tawfikia.³ El-Shamyia originally belonged to Nazlet Al-Malak before it was separated in 1230 A.H / 1815 A.D.⁴



(Figure. 1) Map of Assiut governorat.

From : Raed Nabil Zaher Kamel, Woodwork in Archaeological Coptic Churches and Monasteries of Assiut, 350.



(Figure. 2) Map of Sahel Selim El-Ghanayem town.

From : Raed Nabil Zaher Kamel, Woodwork in Archaeological Coptic Churches and Monasteries of Assiut, 351.

¹ The Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ; she died in 48 A.D. and lived for fifteen years after the ascension of Christ to heaven and lived for sixty years. See:

اللجنة المجمعية للطقوس، السنكسار الجامع لأخبار الأنبياء والرسل والشهداء والقديسين، مطبعة امبريال بعابدين، الطبعة الثانية (منقحة ومزينة)، 2013م، ج1، 411.

² علماء الحملة الفرنسية، موسوعة وصف مصر، ترجمة منى زهير الشايب، ج 11، مكتبة الأسرة، 2006م، ص 232.

³ على باشا مبارك، الخطط التوفيقية الجديدة لمصر القاهرة ومدنها وبلادها القديمة والشهيرة، الطبعة الأولى، المطبعة الكبرى الأميرية ببولاق مصر، 1305 هـ (1887 : 1888م)، ج 10، ص 16.

⁴ محمد رمزي، القاموس الجغرافي، القسم الثاني، ج4، ص 37.



(Figure 3) The church of the Holy Virgin Mary in El-Shamiya (researcher).

An Overview of the Church:

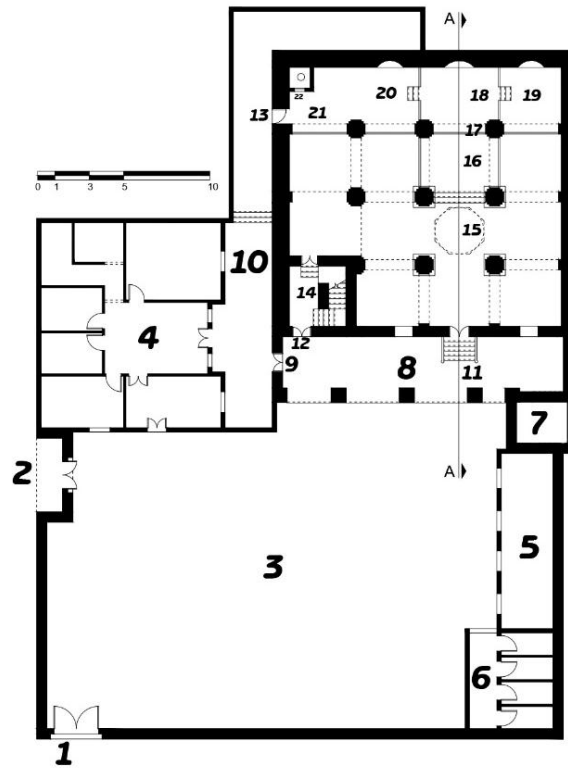
Despite the antique history of the church of the Holy Virgin Mary at El -Shamiya, there is no mention of it in the ancient historical documents. ⁽⁵⁾ Despite al-Shamiya village was mentioned in the "Description of Egypt", which documented the French scholars' observations on Egypt during the expedition of the French Army, and "Al-Khutat al-Tawfiqiya" of Ali Pasha Mubarak, they have no mention or description of the Church of the Virgin Mary in El-Shamiya.

The Egyptologist Somers Clarke mentioned this church in his Catalogue. He stated that it belongs to the Diocese of Assiut under the name "The Church of the Virgin Mary in al-Shamiya, al-Badari Division, Assiut, and classified it under No. 16⁽⁶⁾. Marcus Simaika mentioned this church in his Catalogue as belonging to the Diocese of Assiut under the name "The Church of the Virgin Mary in al-Shamia in Assiut, and

⁽⁵⁾ رائد نبيل زاهر، كنيسة ودير الشهيد مارجرس الرومانى بالعونة - أسيوط، مطبعة هيروبرنت للطباعة والتغليف بعين شمس، ط 1، 2017م، ص 11.

⁽⁶⁾ سومرز كلارك، الآثار القبطية فى وادى النيل، ترجمة ابراهيم سلامة، تقديم جودت جيرة، الهيئة العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1999 ص 317.

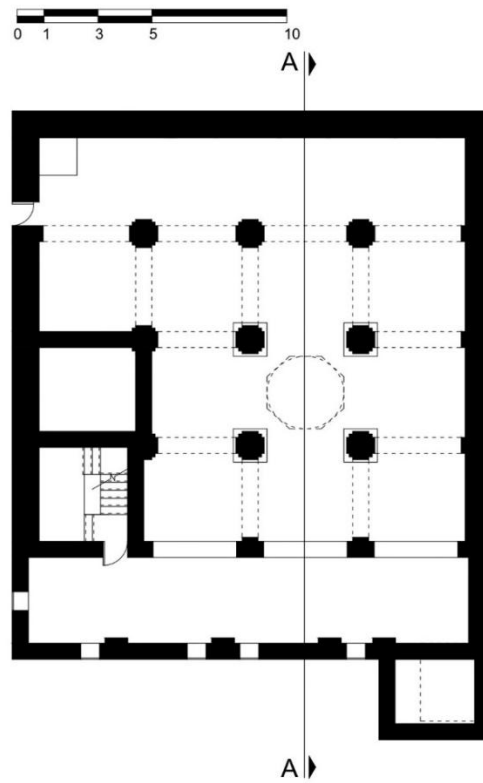
classified it under No. (20)⁽⁷⁾. Based on the archaeology of the church, in particular the dome of the altar, it becomes clear that the church was built in the nineteenth century AD.



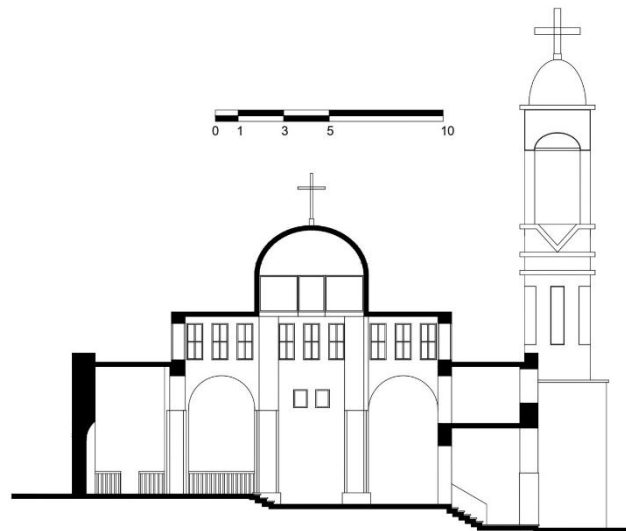
(Figure. 4) Plan of the First floor of the church. (The researcher).

- 1- The outer western entrance to the church.
- 2- The outer northern entrance to the church.
- 3- The courtyard.
- 4- The abode of the priest.
- 5- The Church library.
- 6- Bathrooms
- 7- Church Minaret:
- 8- The External Transverse Narthex
- 9- The entrance of Side Narthex of the Church.
- 10- The Side Narthex of the Church.
- 11- The Main Western Entrance.
- 12- The Northwest Entrance.
- 13- The North-Eastern Entrance.
- 14- The Vestibule of the Church.
- 15- The Nave.
- 16- The Deacon's Choir.
- 17- The Iconostasis.
- 18- The middle sanctuary.
- 19- The Southern sanctuary.
- 20- The Northern sanctuary.
- 21- The baptismal room.
- 22- The Baptistery.

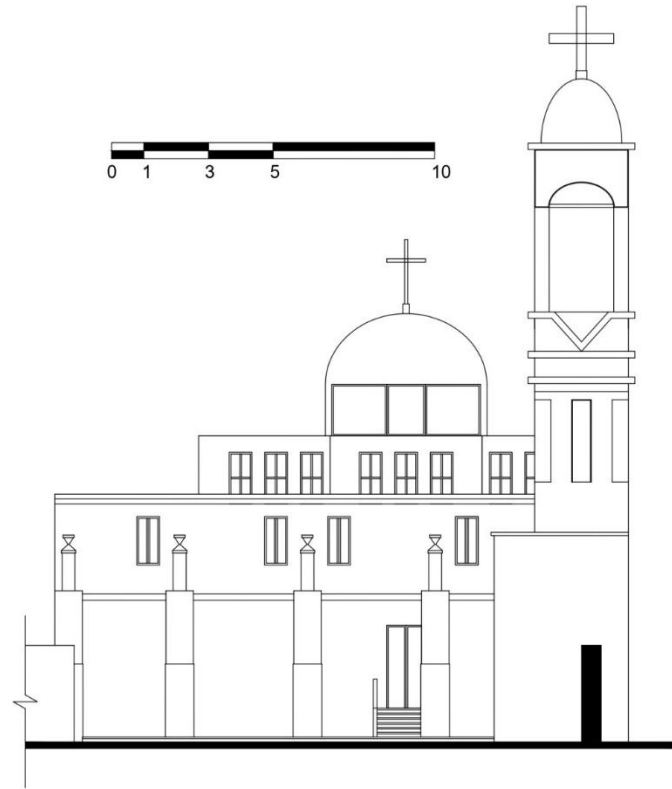
(7) مرقس سميقة باشا، دليل المتحف القبطي وأهم الكنائس والأديرة الأثرية، ج 2، المطبعة الأميرية بالقاهرة، 1932م، ص 198.



(Fig. 5) Second floor of the church. (The researcher)



(Fig. 6)Section A-A . (The researcher).



(Fig. 7) The outer façade of the church. (the researcher).

Archaeological Description of the Church:

The Outer Entrances:



(Fig. 8) The outer western entrance to the church. (The researcher).



(Fig. 9) The outer northern entrance to the church. (The researcher)

The church can be accessed through one of the church's outer entrances (the two external church gates), where the first entrance is located on the far north side of the western wall of the church (261 cm wide, 300 cm high). It overlooks the main street; it is an iron gate that is surmounted by a semi-circular façade. As for the second entrance, it is located on the north side of (165 cm wide, 293 cm high). It overlooks a side street of the church, and it has served as the main entrance to the church since its establishment. It is a wooden two-leaf gate that is devoid of decorations. Both entrances lead to the churchyard.

The Churchyard:

Having entered the church from one of its outer entrances, one finds the open courtyard of the church, which is a rectangular atrium with a large number of various architectural units and service buildings. These include an old building on the north side of the churchyard, which was used as a residence for the patriarch of the church. On the far south side of the courtyard there is a row of bathrooms and some rooms which are used as a library, souvenirs shops, and an offering-selling center.



(Fig. 10) Churchyard. (The researcher).



(Fig. 11) Library of books and souvenirs and a vending center. (The researcher)



(Fig. 12) The abode of the priest of the church. (The researcher)

Regarding the floor of the courtyard or atrium, it was made originally out of gravel mixed with mud. Yet, was later paved with a layer of cement. As for the eastern part, it was paved with tiles. These works were carried out during the renovations of the church in 1995 AD, as is mentioned in the Panel of Church Renovations (Fig. 18) .

The atrium was mainly used on the holy feasts, when the church is overcrowded with the worshipers.

The Minaret:

The minaret is located on the far southwest side of the church building (to the right of the passer to the church entrance).⁽⁸⁾ It is a high structure, consisting of three floors: The first floor is square in shape devoid of decorations. The second also has a square base that is smaller in width than the first floor. It bears pillars intermediated with longitudinal openings, and there is a 45-degree apse in the corners of these pillars from the outside. The third floor is rectangular in shape; it is based on four columns carrying the semicircular arches interconnected with

⁽⁸⁾ It is known that the minaret is the tower of the church, surmounted by a cross that symbolizes the church. It indicates that the church is the light of the world. See :

تادرس يعقوب ملطي، قاموس المصطلحات الكنسية، مطبعة الأخوة المصريين، القاهرة، 1991م، ص 33.

wooden beams. It is surmounted by a small semi-circular dome bearing a huge iron cross. The minaret also has openings for lighting.



(Fig. 13) Church Minaret. (The researcher)

The External Transverse Narthex:

In order to reach the western entrances to the church, one has to pass through the outer narthex, which is based on four square pillars. It rises one step above the church courtyard. It is a closed? section that is topped with the ladies' balcony in the second floor.

One can see the main western and northwestern entrances to the church from this narthex. There are two windows on the right and left sides of the western main entrance. They overlook the church nave from inside. This narthex also has an entrance to the north. It leads to the side narthex that surrounds the northern section of the church from outside.

This narthex is of particular importance as it is used to evacuate the unpleasant air and to offer shelter and shade to the church, as is the case of the majority of the ancient monasteries and churches in Egypt.



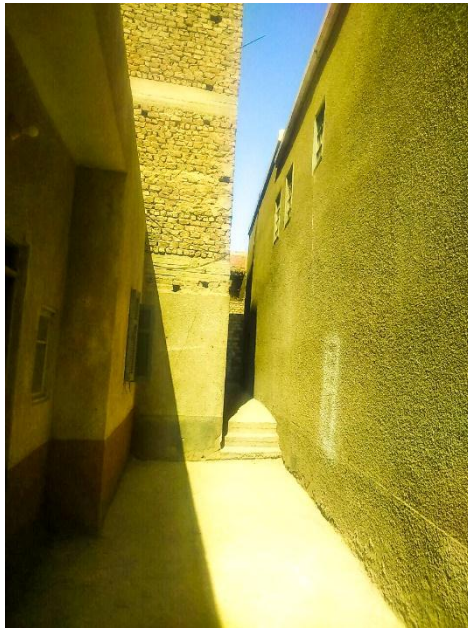
(Fig. 14) **The External Transverse Narthex.** (The researcher)

The Side Narthex of the Church:

It is located on the northern side and extends to the middle of the church from the eastern side. It is an empty space leading to the northeastern entrance of the church building. It also leads to a back entrance to the residence of the church pastor, which is located to the north of the church building.



(Fig. 15) The entrance of the Side Narthex of the Church. (The researcher)



(Fig. 16) The Side Narthex of the Church. (The researcher)

The Church Entrances:

There are several entrances leading to the interior of the church. They are as follows:

The Main Western Entrance:



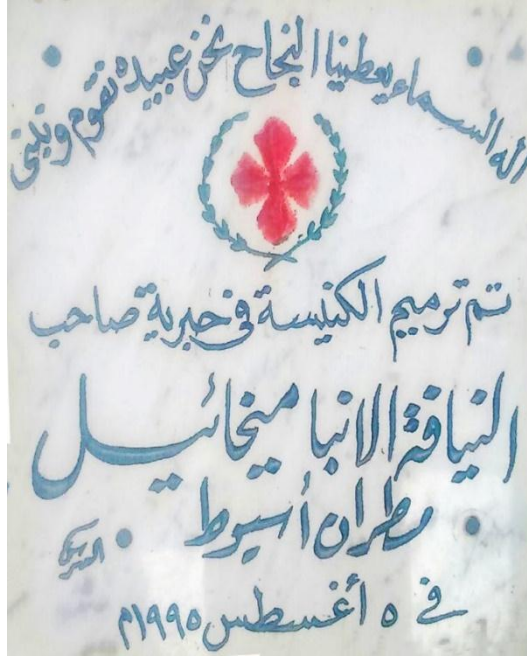
(Fig. 17) The Main Western Entrance. (The researcher)

The Main Western Entrance is approached through five mosaic steps, 72 cm high from the transverse external narthex. They lead to the entrance, which is a modern wooden door (257 cm high, 121 cm wide), adorned with high-relief motifs. Both shutters of the door are topped by two winged angels, followed by a rectangle adorned with intertwined floral motifs. In the center of these motifs, there is an oval shape depicting the scene of the Virgin Mary and here head is surrounded by a luminous halo. She carries in her hands the Holy Cross “True Cross” (such as the archaeological unique icon of the Virgin Mary carrying the Holy Cross in Abu Serga Church in Misr al-Kadima). It is followed by a floral frieze interspersed with the metal knob of the door. There is also another rectangle interspersed with floral decorations with a circle in the middle. This flower includes an octagonal flower (or equivalent to the Byzantine cross). In the end, there is a floral frieze interspersed with a floral cross.

To the left of the passer to the interior, there is a marble panel recording the date of the church's restoration, which reads as follows:

" الله السماء يعطينا النجاح نحن عباده نقوم ونبنى
تم ترميم الكنيسة في حبرية صاحب
النيافة الانبا ميخائيل مطران أسيوط
في 5 أغسطس 1995م "

"The God of Heaven gives us success. Therefore, we, His servants, will arise and build. The church was restored in the pontificate of His Eminence Bishop Michael, Metropolitan of Assiut on August 5, 1995."



(Fig. 18) The restoration text. (the researcher)

Based on the restoration text, the church was repaired in the Pontificate of His Eminence Bishop Michael, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Assiut on August 5, 1995 AD.

The Northwest Entrance:

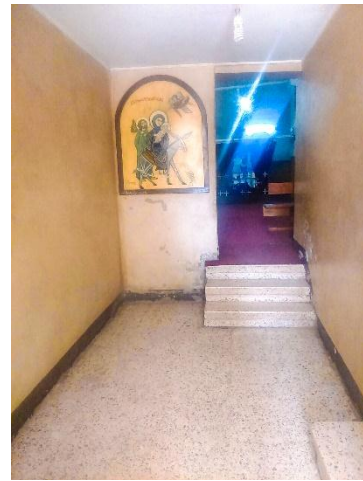


(Fig. 19) The Northwest Entrance (The researcher)

It is the second entrance of the church. It is a side entrance that is located in the northwest side of the church (249 cm high, 116 cm wide). It extends to the entrance portico, the eastern side of which leads to the nave through an entrance without a door. This entrance is (199 cm high, 100 cm wide). It is preceded by three steps (48 cm high), and on its right side there is a staircase leading to the upper balcony of women and the roof of the church.



(Fig. 20) Staircase of the church. (The researcher)

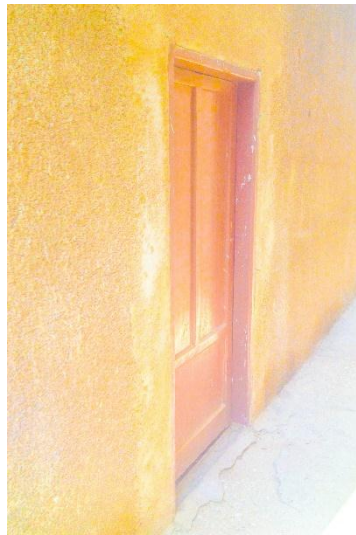


(Fig. 21) Church vestibule and staircase. (The researcher)

There is a staircase leading to the second floor. It is located on the right side of the church atrium and consists of 18 steps up to the second floor (the ladies' balcony). These are followed by 8 steps leading to the

roof of the church. At the middle of the staircase, there is a wooden window in the portico of the staircase. It overlooks the interior of church. This window is carved out of wood. It is adorned mainly with forms of crosses and hollow circles.

The North-Eastern Entrance:



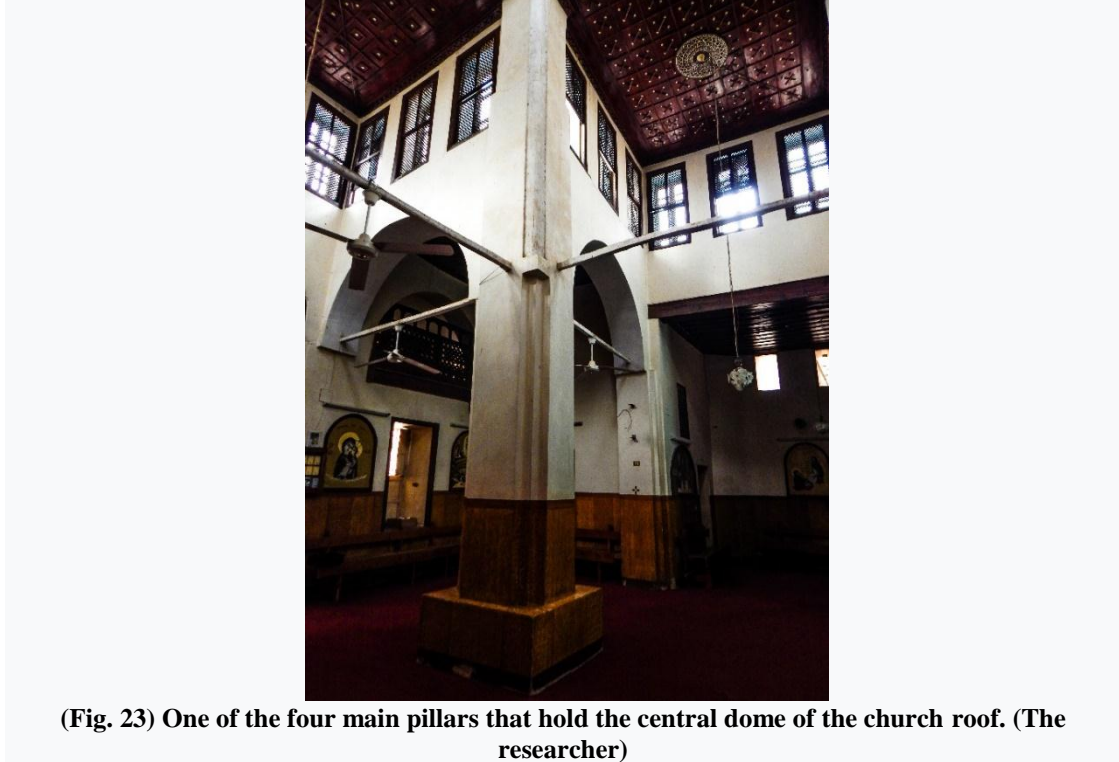
(Fig. 22) The North-Eastern Entrance. (The researcher)

There is a third entrance to the church (193 cm high, 84 cm wide). It is located to the northeastern side, which is only used by the church clergy and is not used by the laities. It is accessible through the side narthex that surrounds the church from outside on the northeastern side.

The Nave:

The church is built on the Byzantine Coptic style. It is divided into four equal main sections, where the main dome is surmounted on four pillars in the middle of the church. The nave rests on nine main pillars interconnected by semi-circular arches, except for the four pillars that bear the main dome of the church. The upper part of the pillars, which carry the ceiling of the church, is interconnected by wooden beams, similar to those used to hang lighting devices and strengthen the church building. The eastern side of the nave ends with the choir of deacons, the icon stand, and the three altars of the church.

At the northeastern end of the icon stand, there is an iron fence leading to the baptismal room, where the main baptismal font can be found. At the end of the nave from the northwest side, there is the aforementioned portico.



(Fig. 23) One of the four main pillars that hold the central dome of the church roof. (The researcher)

The Deacon's Choir:

It has transverse porches dedicated to the deacons and is separated from the sanctuaries by an iconostasis ⁽⁹⁾. It is 46 cm high from the floor of the church and has three main steps. The choir is preceded by two lecterns for the recitations in Arabic and Coptic.

⁽⁹⁾ تادرس يعقوب ملطي، قاموس المصطلحات الكنسية، ص 20.



(Fig. 24) The Deacon's Choir. (The researcher)

The Iconostasis:

The iconostasis consists of three sections, each one gives access to a sanctuary. The first part covers the southern sanctuary which is devoted to the archangel Michel, the second one leads into the central sanctuary which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, while the third section gives access to the northern sanctuary dedicated to the name of St. George.¹⁰



(Fig. 25) The iconostasis. (The researcher)

¹⁰ For further information, see Raed Kamel, *Woodwork in Archaeological Coptic Churches and Monasteries of Assiut, An Archaeological, Artistic, and Touristic Study*, Unpublished MA Thesis, The Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Minia University, 2017, 48 : 52.

The Altars and Sanctuaries:



(Fig. 26) The Northern sanctuary (The researcher)



(Fig. 27) The middle sanctuary (The researcher)



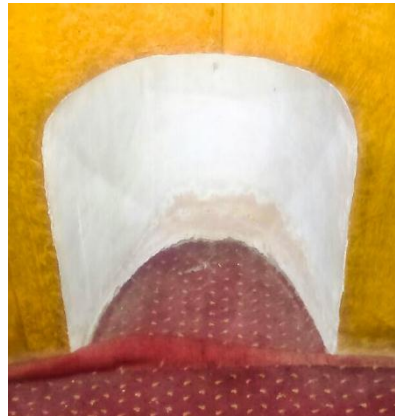
(Fig. 28) The Southern sanctuary (The researcher)

The church has three main sanctuaries including three altars, the middle is dedicated to the name of the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of the church, and the southern is named after the Archangel Michael (the Guardian Angel), as well as the northern sanctuary that is dedicated to the name of the Roman Martyr Saint George. The middle sanctuary rises about 40 cm from the two side sanctuaries and two steps are used to move between them.

The central altar of the church is surmounted by the most important masterpiece in the church, i.e., the dome of altar.



(Fig. 29) eastern apse at the Northern sanctuary
(The researcher)



(Fig. 30) eastern apse at the middle sanctuary
(The researcher)



(Fig. 31) eastern apse at the Southern sanctuary
(The researcher)

There are also three eastern apses¹¹, which are located in front of each altar, i.e., at the bottom of the eastern wall of altars. They vary in dimensions, as the eastern apse, which is located in front of the southern sanctuary, is 59 cm wide and 132 cm high. The eastern apse, which is located in front of the middle altar, is 53 cm wide and 75 cm high, while the eastern apse, which is located in front of the northern altar, is 36 cm wide and 97 cm high.

The Dome of the Altar:

It is worth mentioning that this dome is sometimes referred to as the canopy.¹² It is a high dome that surmounts the altar, it is supported by

¹¹ It is the vault that represents the eastern wall of the sanctuary. It surrounds the staircase to denote that God's bosom is open for us.

تادرس يعقوب، الكنيسة بيت الله، إسبورتنج الإسكندرية، ط 5، 1995م، ص 73. / تادرس يعقوب ملطي، قاموس المصطلحات الكنسية، ص 26.

¹² It was derived from the greek word " *konópeion* " (*konópeion*) which means acovering for protecting from insects and means " a sperial shape " ، the word canopy means alarge tent- curtain or dome. a canopy resting on four columns ، generally placed over the altar ، the canopy is usually made of wood though sometimes upheld by stone pillars beneath the dome of the canopy ،there is usually a painting of Christ with the cherubim and the seraphim ، this name was derived from an ancient city called (kanop) ، the recent name is Abu-qir. See :

عماد عادل ابراهيم، مناطق التجمعات الرهبانية بمحافظة أسيوط دراسة أثرية معمارية، مخطوط رسالة دكتوراة غير منشور، كلية الآداب، جامعة أسيوط، 2015م، ، ص 870.
13 سامية محمد عطية البلتاجي، دراسة فنية للأخشاب في الكنائس والأديرة المصرية من القرن 5م وحتى القرن 6هـ/12م، رسالة دكتوراة غير منشورة، كلية الآثار، جامعة القاهرة، 2003م، ص 50.

four columns¹³, the main function of this dome to prevent dust and flying insects to fall on the altar during the divine mass,¹⁴ according to the Coptic concept, the canopy dome is representing the heavens, where Jesus the Christ is sitting on his throne and the angels around him, while the four columns are referring to the four corners of the world or the four angelical who were drawn inside the dome sometimes, the interiors decorations of the dome are depicting Jesus the Christ is show in the middle while being flanked by flying angels and other symbolic forms¹⁵; the interior and exterior sides of the dome have figures of winged angels¹⁶ and other themes that are inspired from the bible or the stories of the saints and martyrs¹⁷. It worth mentioning here that this wooden dome is considered to be one of the most important domes in churches of Assiut where it is the only still wooden dome till now, and this dome not be mentioned by The previous sources of the history.



(Fig. 32) The dome of the altar (The researcher)

¹⁴ عماد عادل ابراهيم، المرجع السابق، ص 780،

¹⁵ الفريد بتلر، الكنائس القبطية القديمة في مصر، ترجمة ابراهيم سلامة ابراهيم، الجزء الثاني، الهيئة العامة المصرية للكتاب، 1993، ج2، ص 28.

¹⁶ عماد عادل، المرجع السابق، ص 780.

¹⁷ مصطفى عبدالله شحجة، دراسات في العمارة والفنون القبطية، مطبعة هيئة الآثار المصرية، القاهرة، 1988م، ص 66.

The Baptistry:



(Fig. 33) The baptistry room.



(Fig. 34) The baptistry.

The baptistry is located on the northeastern side of the church, to the north of the sanctuary of Saint George, the Roman Martyr. It is a distinctive small building (117.5 cm x 137 cm) with a height of 246 cm. Its center is surmounted by a gabled dome that is 45 cm high. The baptistry has a small two-leaf door (60 cm x 92 cm).

The baptismal font from inside is round. It is 80 cm high, while the diameter of its upper opening is 76 cm, and the diameter of its base is 47 cm. There is a small opening in the center of base for draining water after the baptismal prayer.

The Ladies' Balcony on the Second Floor of the Church:

It is located on the second floor that can be accessed through the northwestern entrance of the church, which leads to the portico where there is the staircase leading to the second floor as well as the roof of the church. It is a rectangular area (362 cm east-west, 1608 cm north-south). As for the ceiling of this floor, it is 250 cm high.



(Fig. 35) The Ladies' Balcony on the Second Floor of the Church. (The researcher)

The Roof of the church:

The roof follows the Byzantine style which take the cruciform within a central dome of wood encircled by four aisles decorated with various ornaments. There is a wooden ceiling situated on the north side of the church and there is another ceiling over the sanctuary. During the restoration works, the ceiling was painted with a new glaze painting. The sides of the cross have projections of the other parts of the church to show the shape of the cross at the top. It worth mentioning that the domes are made of brick, a characteristic of Coptic architecture.¹⁸

The roof of the church shows the four iwans, surrounding the central dome. One can catch a better view of the central dome of the church and the church's minaret.



(Fig. 36) The Roof of the Church. (The researcher)

¹⁸ For more See : Raed Nabil Zaher, Woodwork in Assiut, 211 : 217.



(Fig. 37) The four wings surrounding the central dome from the outside. (The researcher)

Conclusion:

This study aims to identify the ancient Church of The Holy Virgin Mary St. Church in El-Shamyia, which was not published before. It is located in the EL-Sahel selim, Assiut Governorate.. Unfortunately, despite all ancientness of this church, it was not mentioned in the ancient books of history.

- This church is considered a rare design among the churches of Assiut, as it follows the basilica system in its design, and also contains a distinctive wooden dome above the middle altar.
- This study records the architectural outline of the church, which is published for the first time in this research.
- This study records the horizontal and vertical projections, which is published for the first time in this research.

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