

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF COPTIC INCENSE BURNER ON THE MURALS OF MONASTERIES

Manal Mahmoud Abd El-Hamid
Lecturer, Guidance Department
Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University

Abstract

Incense and incense burner constitute an outstanding part in the Coptic Liturgy, influenced by ancient Egyptian rituals with almost similar concept and symbolism. Many of incense burners, mostly made of bronze, were found with different shapes and decorations like the hollow-dish censer with or without lid, the box censer, and the censer with a handle.

Besides these various incense burners which are widely spread in different museums all over the world, the Coptic incense burner is clearly represented on the walls of many monasteries, swung, suspended or placed on a column, forming an important clear item in many monastic murals. These representations of the censer on murals confirm the importance of the incense and incense burner in the Coptic liturgy as symbols of fertility and resurrection, became analogies for The Christ and The Blessed Virgin herself, who held within her womb, as does a censer, the coal of divinity that produced spiritual fragrance filled the ground with the savour of its glorious sweetness.

Keywords: *Incense, Incense-Burner, Censer, Coptic, Iconography, Virgin, Christ, Angel, Priest, Monastery, Mural, Savour, Odor*

Introduction

The incense burner or censer is an important liturgical object widely used in the monasteries and churches of Coptic Orthodoxy, most were made of bronze, takes the shape of a metal bowl of about five inches in diameter, in which incense is added to the glowing coal, to it are attached three chains, each measuring about twenty-two inches in length, which end with a small domelike lid and a hook ⁽¹⁾.

Coptic censers may be divided into three groups according to the shape: hollow-dish censers, box censers, and censers with a handle. However, the presence or absence of a lid, the way of holding or suspending the censer, and the extraordinary decorative variety make each one almost unique.

Hollow-dish censer without a lid, which is the most common form found in paintings, has a bowl-shaped bellies decorated with moldings, flutings, a perforated geometrical motif, derived from the open dish or chalice. Three rings on the edge of the dish make it possible to hang the censer on chains linked by a holding ring **(Pl. 1)**⁽²⁾.

Some hollow-dish censers with a lid are shaped like a chalice, the belly of which is a hemisphere, mounted on a slender foot, a hemispherical lid connected by a hinge makes the chalice a complete sphere and surmounted by a cross **(Pl. 2)**.

Box censer may be cylindrical, rectangular, or polygonal in shape and is set on several feet, generally has little decoration, mostly surmounted by an animal group in relief such as a lioness bringing down a boar (**Pl. 3**). The censer with a handle has a slightly rounded dish from which emerges a handle or a ferrule intended to receive a handle, this category of censers was meant to be held, not swung⁽³⁾.

The incense box is sometimes represented with the censer as a container or case for incense made usually of silver or carved wood, and placed at the right hand of the officiating priest, a small spoon is usually placed in it used for putting the incense in the censer⁽⁴⁾.

The using of Incense in Ancient Egypt and its Influence on Coptic Incense

Fragrance has permeated the land and culture of Egypt for millennia. Early graves dug into the hot sand still contain traces of resin, sweet-smelling lotus flowers blossom along the Nile. The numerous reliefs and papyri depicting fumigation ceremonies attest to the central role that incense played in ancient Egypt.

Art and ceremonies venerated it as the embodiment of life and an aromatic manifestation of the gods. The pharaohs cultivated incense trees like myrrh and frankincense and imported expensive resins from the land of Punt to satisfy the needs of Egypt's prolific temples and tombs⁽⁵⁾.

Hatshepsut immortalized her expensive expeditions to Punt on the walls of her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri, showing rows of men carry incense trees back to Egypt⁽⁶⁾.

The most common depictions of incense in ancient Egypt come from tombs and temples where standard scenes represent a pharaoh or priest fumigating a mummy or the statue of a god, the smoking censer often takes the shape of a human arm ending in a hand holding a coal-filled bowl to prevent burns from the hot charcoal and also protect the incense from being polluted by human hands⁽⁷⁾.

The incense signifies veneration and prayer, and on a deeper level it also evokes the actual presence of the deity by creating the "fragrance of the gods." Some texts identify deities with specific scents or types of incense. Secret recipes for incense carved onto the walls of the temple of Horus at Edfu explain that the finest myrrh "springs from the eye of Re," while other grades of myrrh come from the eyes of Thoth and Osiris, the back of Horus, "the divine limbs," "the spittle," and the bone of the gods.

The Egyptians worshipped several patrons of fragrance, including Merehet, goddess of unguents, Chesmou, deity of perfume production, and Nefertum, the lion-headed god of incense described as "the lotus in the nostril of Re"⁽⁸⁾.

Osiris has a particularly ancient connection to incense, scholars believe his name used to mean "place of the eye" in reference to the legend of Horus offering his "sweet smelling" Eye to his father as a token of victory over Seth⁽⁹⁾. The decoration of many arm-shaped censers confirms the pharaoh's role as chief intercessor with the gods, using the clouds of smoke to mediate between heaven and earth⁽¹⁰⁾.

Incense accompanied the corpse as the vehicle for restoring fragrance, warmth, and moisture to the scentless and cold bodies of the deads, and the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony functioned similarly to the rites that animated statues of the gods, with the smoke infusing the corpse with the "odor of the living"⁽¹¹⁾. The funeral fumigation resurrected the dead by administering Osiris's resinous flesh, bones, and sweat to the mummy, thus transforming the corpse into Osiris⁽¹²⁾.

Birth symbolism in censer and incense intensifies the power of fertility and renewed life, the ancient Egyptians even interpreted the bowl resting on the hand of the arm-shaped censer as a womb, which “conceives” new life as it burns frankincense and myrrh. In the *Book of the Dead* the goddess bears a divine child who rises from her womb like an aroma—“the flower which came out of the Abyss, [whose] mother is Nut.”. Nut gives birth to the sun each morning, and in a similar way, the censer “gives birth” to the rejuvenating, solar Eye of Horus⁽¹³⁾.

Although the use of incense in Coptic art and liturgy most likely derives from ancient Egyptian rituals with similar concept and symbolism, the Church at first felt reluctant to embrace fumigation because of its pagan associations. For this reason, indications of incense in the official liturgy float unreliably in and out of historical documents for several centuries.

However, long before its appearance at services, some Christians used incense in their funeral rites, as early believers considered incense as a symbol for prayer rising to heaven. The mystical writings of the Coptic Gnostics parallel the symbolism of pharonic incense, the concept of the “fragrance of the gods” and the sensory presence of deity finds a corollary in the Christian God who reveals himself through the “odor of sanctity”⁽¹⁴⁾.

The Iconography of Coptic Incense Burner

The Surveying of the Coptic paintings in different monasteries all over Egypt, shows many incense burners represented, these representations can be divided into three categories as follows:

A-Incense-burner held or swung by Saint /Priest / Apostle/ Holy person

The Mural of the Christ and the Four Evangelists (Pl. 4). Southern conch of the eastern wall in the Church of the Red Monastery, Fifth century

The painting in this conch resembles that of the northern conch, but the principal personage here is the Christ instead of the Virgin. It consists of three arches supported by four columns and above them, there are four smaller arches with a conch shell, and the whole scene is surmounted by a double garland, partially destroyed, with wreathed cross in the middle.

In the central arch, the Christ is enthroned, holding the Gospel on his left knee, the lower part of the throne is destroyed and also the right foot of the Christ. On the left pillar of the Christ, stands Zacharia “The priest of the service of the temple” swinging a censer with three chains in his right hand, on the right column is depicted priest John the Baptist who baptized the Christ in Jordan river⁽¹⁵⁾.

The arch to the right of the Christ is decorated with circles and suspended censers on both sides of a Greek cross. Under it stand two Evangelists John and Mark, each one of them holds the Gospel by his left arm. The arch to the left of the Christ bears the same band of decoration without suspended censers, under it stand the other two Evangelists Luka and Mathieu holding the Gospel.

In the upper register, there are two angels leaning toward the Christ, while in the semi-arches, the nimbi of two unidentified saints are still preserved, each one of them is enclosed in a medallion resting on a column⁽¹⁶⁾.

The Mural of the Resurrection of the Christ (Pl. 5). The Church of the Monastery of Tebtunis , Tenth century

The scene represents the coming of the Holy Women to the tomb of The Christ. The tomb is depicted here as an impressive two-storeyed construction with an angel in front of it pointing with the right hand and holding a stick in the left hand. Three figures complete the portion of the scene ,none of them is named. The two to the left are, by their dresses, clearly female. This cannot be said with such certainty of the figure on the extreme right, but the slenderness of the body strongly suggests that this, too, is a woman.

Of the four Gospel accounts, only Mark (16.1) specifies three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, and Salome. If the three figures have been correctly identified, it would mean that this version does not conform with normal practice, according to which East Christian art favored two women rather than the three common in the West.

East Christian art, in particular, commonly depicts the spices which, according to Mark and Luke, were brought to the tomb by the women to anoint the body of Christ. These are sometimes carried in small boxes and sometimes in small bottles, as at St. Antony's Monastery. On other occasions censers are shown instead, and that is what we have here, with the second figure from the left is swinging one with three chains in her right hand. Although we cannot know whether her companion on the left also had one, we can see that the third figure did not. The left portion of the painting is destroyed, but it can be imagined that it was covered with a figure of the risen Christ to whom the women and the angel are pointing⁽¹⁷⁾.

The Mural of the Dormition of The Virgin (Pl.6). The Upper Eastern wall of the khurus, the Church of the Virgin in Deir al-Surian, Wadi al-Natrun, Tenth century

On the upper part of the eastern wall a number of unusual paintings were discovered. Just under the level of the dome on the left part of the wall, there is an elaborate unique scene of the Dormition of The Virgin who is shown laid on her deathbed, and instead of The Christ who is usually shown in this scene standing behind the bed, holding in his arms Mary's soul in the form of a baby in swaddling white clothing, a symbol of her rebirth, there is a representation of archangel Michael standing behind her to receive her soul. In the upper part the twelve apostles are sitting weeping for her, and around her bed, there are six holy women swinging censers, the one to the right of the bed is holding the incense box in her left hand⁽¹⁸⁾.

The Mural of Moses, Aaron and the Deesis (Pl. 7). The Eastern wall of the Sanctuary of St.Mark, Monastery of Saint Macarius, Twelfth century

It represents an arch with the Christ stands holding the Holy Bible and raising the right hand in blessing, to his right is represented the Virgin Mary inside a medallion , Saint John the Baptist is depicted in a medallion to his left , and above the arch , priest Aaron is represented to the right as an old man has a white beard with a long hair ,wearing a red cloak, holding in his right hand the incense box with conical lid , and swinging a censer with three chains in his left hand, and Moses is depicted to the left, wearing a red cloak and stretching his arms to take the incense box⁽¹⁹⁾.

The Mural of the Announce to Zacheria (Pl. 8). The Eastern wall of the Sanctuary of St.Mark , Monastery of Saint Macarius, Twelfth century.

On the same wall is depicted another scene represents “ Theannounce to Zacheria.“The Gospel of Luke states that while Zacheria ministered at the altar of incense, an angel of

the Lord appeared and announced to him that his wife would give birth to a son, whom he was to name John, and that this son would be the forerunner of the Lord (Luke 1:8-22).

Zacheria is represented with a long beard, holding an incense box with conical lid partially opened in his left hand, and by right hand swinging the censer that reaches to a rectangular altar covered with red tablecloth and placed under a dome with four columns, to the left is the angel raising the right arm to tell Zacheria the announcement, and holding a staff in the left hand⁽²⁰⁾.

The Mural of the Twenty-Four Elders (Pl. 9). The Sanctuary of Great Church of Saint Antony Monastery, Thirteenth century

The Great Church has a sanctuary, with open arches decorated with a frieze of seventy centimeters high, filled with the representation of the Twenty-Four Elders or “Priests ‘ of the Apocalypse who represent the priests on earth⁽²¹⁾ .

Around the throne of the God, there are twenty-four thrones occupied by the Twenty-Four Elders who are the emblems or personifications of the twenty-four virtues ruling in the mind when the Kingdom of Christ is established in the heart, and this explain their representation, most of the time, as “elders “or aged men, as the discipline of years is required for the full development of those graces⁽²²⁾.

The saints are depicted here as beardless youths, sitting on a wooden decorated bench covered with cushions and holding, in the left hand, golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints, every one of them shows his hand in a different gesture referring to the seriousness of their liturgical role .Between their heads are engraved the first letters of their names with suspended censers with three chains⁽²³⁾.

However, the most common representation of the twenty-four Elders in Coptic art is showing them as aged men not youths, a detailed wall painting is in the church of Saint Mercurius (Abu Sayfayn) in Old Cairo, dated back to the thirteenth century, showing them as bearded men, standing in two rows, swinging censers with three chains and holding incense boxes with conical lids(Pl. 10)⁽²⁴⁾.

The Mural of the Twenty-Four Elders (Pl. 11). The Haykal of the Church of St. Paul, the Monastery of Saint Paul, Thirteenth century

There are four churches in the monastery, but the Church of St. Paul, also known as the Cave of Saint Paul, is the most sacred part of the monastery, it has a haykal of the Twenty-Four Elders who are represented sitting on individual stools under canopies decorated with crosses, and they are separated from each other by a tube-like element.

They are all crowned with similar crown , each one of them holds in his right hand a censer with three chains that rests on a base, and an incense box with conical lid in his left, in the upper part of the scene , a band of Coptic inscriptions mentions the name of each saint above his canopy, for example the three shown in the detailed section are named from right to left : Achael, Banouel and Ganouel, and all names of the Twenty-Four priests are inscribed in a complete list in the same Monastery⁽²⁵⁾.

The Mural of the Monk Kaau and the Martyr Thouan (Pl. 12). The Southern wall of the western domed bay, Great Church of Saint Antony Monastery, Thirteenth century:

It is a faint scene consists of three arches, under the right one stand the two martyred brothers Piro and Athom, only the head of Athom is still preserved, and under the middle arch stands the priest and martyr Thouan swinging a censer with his right hand and holding a box of incense in the left, and finally to the left stands the monk and martyr Kaau holding a little figure that symbolizes a demon⁽²⁶⁾.

B-Incense-burner held/swung by an angel or a peacock**The Mural of the Virgin Galaktrophousa and the Four Great Prophets (Pl. 13).**

Northern conch of the eastern wall in the Church of the Red Monastery, Fifth century

This conch, consists of three arches supported by four pillars, which are decorated with acanthus leaves, with four smaller arches in the upper part and a conch shell in the middle.

Only two of the four smaller arches are complete, while the other two ones are cut by a decoration panel of double garland above them with wreathed cross in the center. Under the central arch, Virgin Galaktrophousa (Virgin nursing The Christ) is enthroned on a high-backed richly decorated throne, with huge cushion and the infant Christ on her lap, the gesture of the hand presents the breast to the Child is very beautiful because it is natural.

Under the arch to the right of The Virgin stand the great prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah while the other two prophets Isiah and Daniel are shown under the arch to the left. Vases, lamps and censers are suspended from the two arches. On the far pillar, forming the right border of the scene, there is a representation of Moses the hero of the Exodus and on the opposite side, on the pillar to the far left stands Elia the prophet and the destroyer of the king of Israel⁽²⁷⁾.

On the pillar to the right of The Virgin stands unknown saint because his name is erased, but it is noticed that he is repeating, with his finger, the same gesture of Isiah, probably he is Cyrille I or saint Ephrem, and on the left pillar of the Virgin stands saint Paul holding rolls under his left arm. Above the arch of The Virgin, there are two angels under arches holding two censers with three chains decorated with a cross in the upper part, letting them down towards The Virgin. Under the above left arch stands saint Joseph "The Fair", under the opposite right arch stands a woman whose name is written "Salome", the midwife of the Christ, who has a high black hair with a diadem and is wearing a necklace of pearls around her neck⁽²⁸⁾.

The Mural of the Holy Cross (Pl. 14). On the western wall of the nave walls of the Church in Red Monastery, the upper register, the central cross, Fifth century.

Many crosses are represented on the walls of monasteries decorated with shroud with folds symbolizing the shroud that was laid on the Holy Cross as witness of the resurrection.

The Cross is the altar on which the Son was sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins; this is the sacrifice whose aroma The Father has accepted on behalf of humanity. Through the Cross, Christ descended into Hades to save those who departed in the hope of faith of resurrection to come, St. Basil the Great mentions in his liturgy when he writes "He descended into Hades through the Cross" and by the cross, the gates of Paradise were opened⁽²⁹⁾.

This encircled cross is with a height of about 1.10 m., width of about 2.20 m., in its center, there is a circle encloses another small cross of the type called the "cross of Malta". The four branches of the cross are widened out towards the ends which are decorated with palm leaves and lozenges. They are richly decorated with circles and lozenges connected together by a single lace and adorned with flowers and rosettes. Above the horizontal branches, there are two big standing peacocks holding in their peaks two incense burners with three chains. To the lower part of the horizontal branches is attached

a shroud with folds, and on both sides of the lower branch, there are two animals in medallions, probably lambs⁽³⁰⁾.

The Mural of the Virgin and the Christ (Pl. 15). Lunette painting, Monastery of Saint Apollo in Bawit, Sixth century

The scene shows The Virgin Mary The otokos “The Mother of The God” enthroned on a high-backed throne covered with cushions holding an icon of the Christ against her left side, and flanked by two archangels wearing white garments and swinging two censers with three chains, the conch is decorated in the upper part with zigzag pattern and dots⁽³¹⁾

The Mural of the Holy Cross (Pl. 16). The chapel of the four living Creatures in the Great Church of Saint Antony Monastery, Thirteenth century

A large opening in the south wall of the western part of the nave of the Great Church leads to a room of irregular shape which, in turn, gives access to a small chapel whose decoration features the Four Beasts of the Apocalypse.

A small niche on the eastern wall is entirely filled with a scene of a big cross decorated with medallions of roses and an adorned shroud placed on the horizontal branches, the lower branch is flanked by two angels, wearing red cloaks, and swinging two censers with three chains, the arch of the niche is decorated with a zig-zag pattern and supported by two columns with vegetal capitals⁽³²⁾.

C-Incense-burner Freely Suspended or Placed on a Column

Mural of the Holy Cross (Pl. 17). The Northern wall of the nave in the Church of the Red Monastery, the Western Cross, Fifth Century

Its height is about 1.35 m. and width of about 1.60 m., enclosed inside a circle that takes the shape of semi-circles connected to each other with trifoliate flowers. In the center, there is an encircled cross, the four branches are decorated with small circles and lozenges connected to each other. At the end of each branch, there are two pearls and a conch-like decoration, the horizontal branches are decorated with a shroud with folds, and above them are suspended two censers with three chains⁽³³⁾.

The Mural of the Holy Cross (Pl. 18). The Northern wall of the nave in the Church of the Red Monastery, the Eastern Cross, Fifth century

Its height is about 3.86 m. and width of about 1.30 m., a big cross is decorated with rosettes and a shroud laid on the horizontal branches with two unidentified suspended globular objects, depicted under a pediment supported by two columns with two twisted ornamented curtains, and the preserved outer frame is decorated with twisted ribbons.

The upper part of the pediment is decorated with a bird, probably a dove, a wreathed cross with zigzag line, and under the pediment, there is also another dove, the upper vertical branch of the cross is flanked by two suspended censers with three chains⁽³⁴⁾.

The Mural of the Holy Cross and the *Deesis* (Pl. 19). The Southern Conch in the Church of the White Monastery, Fifth century.

This mural painting represents a cross with a height of 2.60 m., and a width of 2.80 m., placed inside a mandorla carried by two angels who wear garments with folds, their wings and hair are decorated with fish scales.

The cross is richly decorated with wreathed crosses and floral designs, upon the horizontal branches is laid a shroud with folds and two censers with three chains are suspended, the upper branch and the two horizontal branches are connected with two laces of suspended globular objects.

To the left stands Virgin Mary raising her hands in praying attitude with the sun and an illegible inscription above her, and to the right stands John the Baptist in the same attitude with the moon and an inscription of his name above him. The upper part of the conch is adorned with a band consists of fourteen medallions of eight prophets and six crosses, the prophets are holding wooden tablets inscribed with their names, two of them are still legible, those of Moses and Ezekiel, and it is easy to identify the prophet, who occupies the last medallion to the right, he is Elia with his long white beard, pointing with his right hand⁽³⁵⁾.

The Mural of Saint Luke and Saint Barnabas (Pl.20). Northern wall of the Khurus (Layer two of paintings), Church of the Holy Virgin, The Monastery the Syrians, Wadi-Natrun, Tenth century.

The figures of the two saints are represented in a framework of two arches, separated by a column, above it, two incense burners with three chains are suspended inside two niches. To the right stands St. Luke holding a roll in his left hand and to the left stands St. Barnabas holding the Holy Bible with his left hand, and the names of the two saints are inscribed in Coptic on the back walls of the arches (36).

The Mural of the Annunciation (Pl. 21). Western conch of the Church of The Virgin in The Monasterythe Syrians, WadiNatrun, Twelfth century

A richly symbolical wall painting of the Annunciation was brought to light in 1991, represents The Virgin enthroned, as the Queen of Heaven, on a high-backed throne, her left hand is raised in a delicate gesture holding a spindle with threads, approached by angel Gabriel and both of them are surrounded by Old Testament prophets, including Moses and Isaiah to their left and Ezekiel and Daniel to their right, confirming their role as witnessing the Incarnation. Moses, Ezekiel and Isaiah wear tunics and pallia, while Daniel on the extreme right wears Phrygian costume with a short tunic and peaked cap, their names are written in Greek.⁽³⁷⁾

These are the prophets who foretold of the incarnation, and they carry the text of their prophecies, written in Boharic Coptic on an opened scroll. The text of Moses reads: "I saw the bush while the fire was blazing in it, without being consumed." This text was adapted from Exodus 3:2, referring to the common title of The Virgin the otokos as "The Burning Bush" in Orthodox hymns. The text of Isaiah is the better known prophecy: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). The prophecy of Ezekiel reads: "Then said the Lord unto me: this gate shall be shut and no man shall enter in by it save the Lord, the God of Israel" (Ezekiel 44:2). The last text is a variant of Daniel 2:34, and reads: "I saw a stone cut out from the mountain without being touched by hands."⁽³⁸⁾

In the background one sees Nazareth, both The Virgin's own birth place and the site of the Annunciation, represented as a walled town with gates, a church tower, other domed buildings and gardens with trees⁽³⁹⁾. The Archangel Gabriel approaches to announce the message of the Incarnation. He holds his cross-staff in his right hand while gesturing towards The Virgin as he delivers his message written in Greek in front of the angel's forward leg between him and The Virgin, it reads: "Hail, you that are highly favored, The Lord is with you! blessed are you among women"(Luke 1:28).⁽⁴⁰⁾ In the middle of this scene is a censer, of unusual form taking the shape of a bowl, placed on a column, with blue flame that curls around the inscription⁽⁴¹⁾.

The using of Incense and Censer in the Official Coptic Liturgy and their Significance

In the Old Testament, the censer was a receptacle carried by hand to be filled with live coals from the altar, censers used in the Tabernacle were made of bronze (Ex.27:3, 38:3), whereas those used on the altar, as well as the censer which was taken by the chief priest to the *sanctumsanctorum* on the day of atonement were made of pure gold. God commanded Moses to make an altar on which exclusive sweet incense was burnt by Aaron every morning (Ex.30:7), the perfume of incense thus came to be symbolical of prayer and the presence of God⁽⁴²⁾.

Many details of the Christian worship and church mysteries were intentionally unrecorded; nevertheless, the use of incense may be inferred from several sources. The History of the Patriarchs supplies clear evidence of the use of censers and incense in the postapostolic age, when the congregation raised objections against Demetrius as the twelfth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark on the grounds of his being a married man, he demonstrated his chastity by pouring glowing coals from the censer onto his garment in front of the congregation without being burned.

From the Revelation of John, it can be confirmed that the censer was used: “*And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God*” (Rev.8:3-4). At the vision of Patriarch Benjamin, he saw the prayers of monks taking part in the liturgy issuing from their mouths like incense, the roof of the church opened to let the prayers pass through, like incense, and up to heaven, where angels received the sweet-smelling prayers and carried them to the throne of God, here angels are seen as intermediaries for those who pray.

The next chapter speaks of the Twenty-Four Elders: “*each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*” (Rev.9:8). This must be an indication of the prevalent manner of Christian worship, featuring the use of censers and incense. The Didascalia provides an indication to the necessity of using the censer, instructing that the bishop shall carry the incense and make three circuits around the altar in glorification of the Holy Trinity and then hand the censer to the priest who shall go round the whole congregation carrying it⁽⁴³⁾.

Censing in the Coptic liturgy reflects the themes of fertility and resurrection associated with ancient fumigations, since incense and water libations over the altar to the Holy Trinity is also accompanied by prayers for the fertility of the land, and the swinging censer animates the local crops as the priest prays for “*the vegetation and the herbs of the field,*” “*the face of the earth . . . for sowing and harvesting,*” and for the “*rising of the waters*” of the Nile.

Concerning the resurrection symbolism of incense, in the services of evening and morning incense, as well as in the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, priests burn frankincense while petitioning the Lord to accept the deceased Church members into the “waters of restfulness,” and the “Paradise of Delight,” to “raise . . . their bodies” and “grant them the incorruptible in place of the corruptible.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Incense ritually helps also to restore life to the dead Christ Himself on Easter morning after the clergy “inters” an icon of the Lord beneath the church altar, the priest censes the altar and then “resurrects” the icon from its liturgical tomb to the sound of a triumphant anthem, meaning that the icon becomes a mystical “window” of communication with the divine only after being blessed, incensed, and anointed with holy water or oil⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Moreover, just as the pellets of resin embodied the actual blood, sweat, and tears of the pagan deities, Coptic incense symbolizes The Christ, particularly as he hung bleeding from the cross. In a text from the "Raising of Incense rite", the priest censes towards the east and north and announces : "*This is He Who offered Himself an acceptable sacrifice on the cross . . . and His good Father smelt It in the evening on Golgotha.*"⁽⁴⁶⁾

Incense so strongly evoked the presence of Christ that twelfth century Copts developed a custom of confessing their sins into a censer at the beginning of the liturgy for sacramental confession , in place of individual private confession, the faithful ones probably imagined that the smoke would carry their confession up to God, and they may have also viewed the ceremony as an opportunity to whisper their faults directly into the ear of Christ, mystically presents in the white smoke billowing from the golden censer, The Christ is beseeched to accept the incense on behalf of mankind for the remission of sins⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The censing continues with the prayer to remember The Virgin, the holy prophets, apostles and martyrs, priests, the righteous and the church itself. Furthermore, the censing, undertaken during Sundays and feast days, was completed with a tour by the priest around the church anticlockwise from the altar via the north side of the church to the west end and then back up the south side for the purification of the church and the driving away of disease in particular .

According to "The Paulin Procession of Incense", the deacon presents the censer to the priest, who adds five spoons of incense that represent: The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit, Glory be to The Father and The Son and The Holy Spirit, Now and Forever and unto the ages of ages, swinging the censer to the right, then to the left, then to the middle, and finally in a circular motion that connects the three swings into one. This movement represents the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), who is One in Essence.

Besides the Christ ,in Christian worship the offering of incense and the censer acquired another essential symbolic significance , since the censer that bears live coals and sweet-smelling incense became an analogy for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the God and the intercessor for mankind, who bore the Savior of the world in her womb, and this is evident through the various Hymns to The Virgin :"*This is the censer of pure gold, containing the ambergris , that was entrusted to the hands of Aaron the Priest, raising incense upon the altar*". On fast days the following section is chanted :"*The Virgin is the gold censer , our Savior is its ambergris. She gave birth to Him who has saved us and forgiven our sins*" , and throughout the Fast of Lent , the following verse is chanted :"*You are the pure gold censer, containing the Blessed live coals*"⁽⁴⁸⁾.

The live coal in the censer, according to Saint Cyril the Great, points to the unity of the divinity and humanity of The Christ, and the fire also symbolizes the purity of The Virgin Mary, cited poetically in a Coptic hymn: "*The fine incense of your virginity, Virgin Mary, rose more still than that of the Cherubim and Seraphim up to the throne of the Father.*"⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The spherical censer symbolizes the womb of The Virgin who brought the new life, "The Christ " springing up from the censer as a blossom that filled the ground with the savour of its glorious sweetness, exactly like the sweet incense which connotes the hope for life after death, and the fertility of the land⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Conclusion

Incense and censers with different shapes are widely used in the Coptic churches, representing the prayers and praises of the saints and angels requesting the Lord's blessing.

This is evident through the different representations of the Coptic incense burner on the walls of different monasteries usually accompanied with The Christ, The Virgin, The Four Evangelists, prophets, martyrs, saints, angels and the Holy Cross.

Through this survey of the monastic wall paintings, it can be concluded that:-

- The greater percentage of the murals shows the censer held or swung, mostly by priests, rather than being suspended or placed on a column.
- The gesture of swinging the censer, mostly by the right hand, represents a special significance in Coptic liturgy.
- The hollow-dish censer with a slender foot and three chains, representing the Holy Trinity, is the most common form of the Coptic censer in all paintings.
- The flame and fumigation of the incense are rarely represented, and can only be seen in the unique mural of the Annunciatin in Deir el-Surian.
- The incense box, with conical or semi-circular lid, is usually represented carried in the left hand of the same person who swings the censer, reflecting the continuance of censuring.
- Although there are few murals representing the censer dated back to the fifth and sixth centuries, the great number of murals are dated back to the period from the tenth to the thirteenth century, this is probably due to the connection between the practice of the public confession of sins that was adopted by the Coptic church at the second half of the twelfth century, and the increasing importance of the censer that was heavily reflected in such late murals.



Pl.1

Pl.2

Pl.3

Pl.1: Coptic Censer in the form of a hollow-dish

After, Bénazeth, Dominique, “Les encensoirs de la collection copte du Louvre”, *Revue du Louvre*, 1988, cat.no.272, inv.no.5711

Pl.2: Coptic Censer in the form of a chalice with hemispherical lid

After, Bénazeth, Dominique, “Metalwork, Coptic”, *Coptic Encyclopedia*, V.5, p.1470

Pl.3: Coptic Box Censer surmounted by a lioness bringing down a boar

After, Ross, M. Chauncey, “A Group of Coptic Incense Burners”, *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1942), p.10, F.1



Pl.4: The Mural of the Christ and the Four Evangelists

Right: The complete mural painting, Left: Detailed section shows priest Zacheria swinging a censer, After,



Pl.5: The Mural of the Resurrection of the Christ

Right: The Complete scene of the Woman, the angel, and the Tomb of the Christ

Left: Detailed section shows the woman swinging a censer

After, Walters C.C., "Christian Paintings from Tebtunis", *JEA* 75, 1998, p.198, Pl. XXII



Pl.6: The Mural of the Dormition of The Virgin

Above: The complete scene The Virgin, Holywomen, and the Apostles

Below: Detailed section shows The Virgin surrounded by the women swinging censers

After, Innemée, Karel, "Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings in Deir al-Surian", *Journal of Syriac Studies*, vol. 1, nr. 2, 2000, pl.4



Pl. 7: The Mural of Moses, Aaron and the *Deesis*

Above: The Original Eastern wall of the Sanctuary of St. Mark

Below Right: Colored scene of the Mural

Below Left: Detailed section shows Aaron swinging a censer

After, Leroy, Jules, "Les Peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natrun", *MIFAO* 2, 1982, Pl. 54



Pl. 8: The Mural of The Announce to Zacharia

Right: The complete colored scene of the Mural

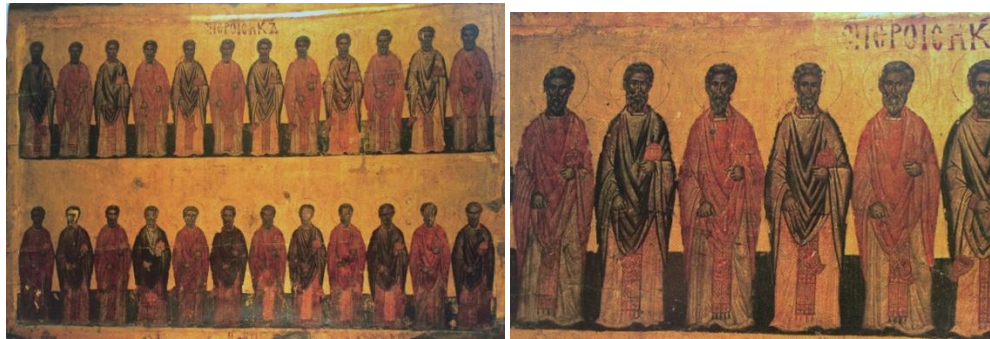
Left: Detailed section shows Zacharia swinging a censer

After, Leroy, Jules., “Les Peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natrun”, MIFAO 2 ,1982,Pl.62



Pl. 9: The Mural of the Twenty-Four Elders

After, Moorsel, Paul V., Le Monastère de Saint-Antoine, MIFAO 112/2, 1997pl.14



Pl. 10: The Mural of the Twenty-four Elders, Church of St. Mercurius , Old Cairo

After, Gabra, Gawdat, *The Churches of Egypt From the Journey of the Holy Family*, 2012 Pl.104



Pl. 11: The Mural of the Twenty-Four Elders

Right: The complete mural on The Haykal of The Church of St,Paul

Left: Detailed section shows three of them swinging censers, and holding incense boxes

After, Gabra, Gawdat, *Coptic Civilization, Two Thousand years of Christianity*, p.209, fig.16.12

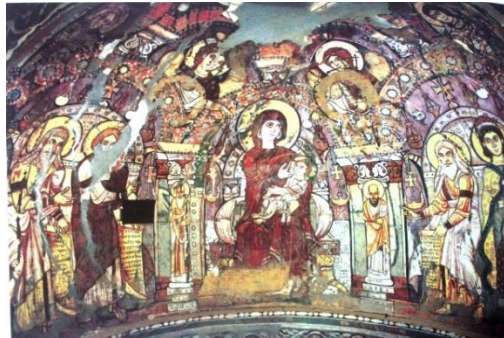


Pl. 12: The Mural of the Monk Kaau and the Martyr Thouan

Right: The complete mural on the southern wall,Great Church of St.Antony

Left : Detailed section shows martyrThouan swinging a censer

After, Gabra,Gawdat, *Churches of Egypt*,2012, Pl.104



Pl.13: The Mural of the Virgin Galaktrophousa and the Four Great Prophets

Above: The Original Mural of the northern conch in the Church of The Red Monastery

Below Right: The complete mural of the northern conch,BelowLeft:Detailed section shows the two angels holding censers

After, Laferrier,Pierre., “La Bible Murale”,pl.IV;Gabra,Gawdat,*Coptic Civilization*,p.198 fig.16.2



Pl.14: The Mural of the Holy Cross, The Church of the Red Monastery

After, Laferrière, Pierre, “Les Croix Murals des Monastere Rouge” ,*BIFAO* 93,1993 ,pl.5-b

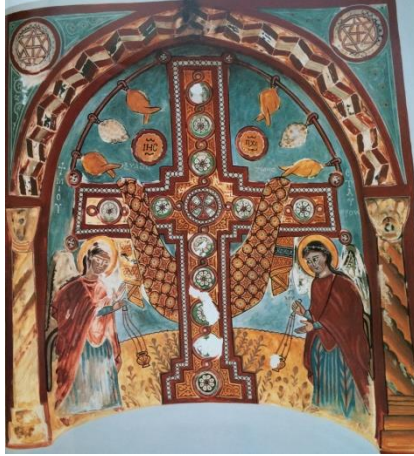


Pl. 15: The Mural of The Virgin and The Christ

Right: The Complete mural of the Luenette, Monastery of St. Apollo,Bawit

Left: Two detailed sections show the two angels swinging censers

After,Bolman,Elezabeth,“Joining the Community of Saints :Monastic Paintings and Ascetic practice in Early Christian Egypt”,in: *Shaping community:The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism*,Oxford,2001,F.5



Pl. 16: The Mural of the Holy Cross,Great Church of St.Antony Monastery

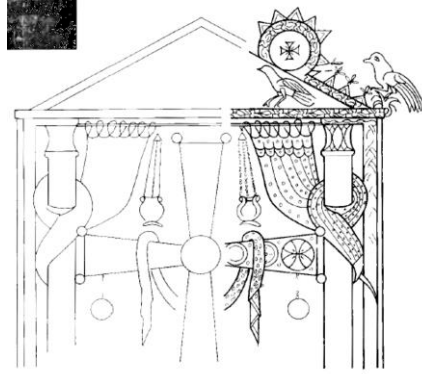
Above: The complete mural of the Chapel, Below Right and Left: Two Detailed sections show The two angels swinging censers

After, Moorsel,Paul,V., LeMonastère de Saint-Antoine, MIFAO 122/2,1997,pls.113-114-115



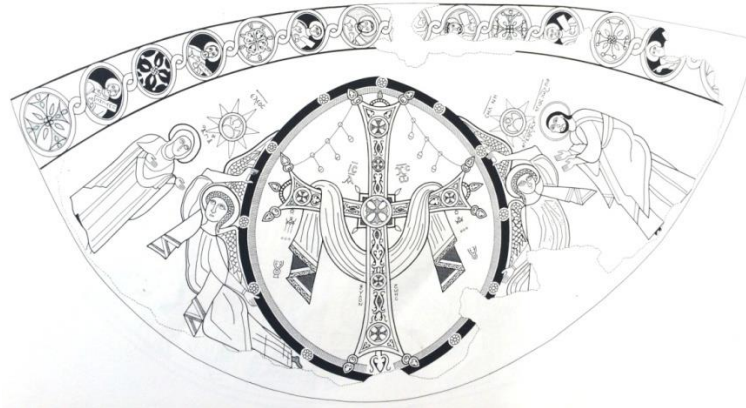
Pl. 17: Mural of the Holy Cross, The Red Monastery

After, Laferriere,Pierre, Les Croix Murals des Monastère Rouge” ,BIFAO 93,1993,F.10



Pl. 18: The Mural of the Holy Cross,Red Monastery

After, Laferriere,Pierre,Les Croix Murals des Monastère Rouge” ,*BIFAO* 93,1993,F.11b



Pl.19: The Mural of the Holy Cross and the *Deesis*

Above: The complete mural of the southern conch Church of the White Monastery

Below: Detailed section shows the Holy Cross with two suspended censers

After Laferriere,Pierre,“La Bible Murale”, Pl.II



Pl. 20: Mural of Saint Luke and Saint Barnabas

Right: The complete mural of the northern wall of the Khurus, Left: Detailed section shows the two suspended censers

After, Bolman, Elezabeth, "Joining the Community of Saints : Monastic Paintings and Ascetic practice in Early Christian Egypt", in: *Shaping community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism*, Oxford, 2001, p. 19, Fig. 7



Pl. 21: The Mural of the Annunciation

Right: The original mural of the western conch of the Virgin's Church

After, Angelo, C. Grace, "Depictions of women in Egyptian Monastic Wall Paintings, Carvings, and Sculptures from the 6th-13th Century CE", in *The Art and Archeology of Egyptian Monasticism* November 25, 2014, f. 13, p. 26

Left: Detailed section shows the censer between The Virgin and Gabriel

After, Laferrière, Pierre, "La Bible Murale", p. 101, pl. XVII

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 - (2) Benazeth, Dominique, "Metalwork, Coptic", *Coptic Encyclopedia*, V.5, New York, 1991, edited by Aziz S. Atiya, p.1599
 - (3) Benazeth, "Metalwork", pp.1600-1601
 - (4) Basilios, "Liturgical Instruments", p.1474
 - (5) Lucas, Alfred, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, London, 1962, pp.96-97
 - (6) Bergdoll, Stefan, *The Temple of Deir El-Bahari*, Berlin, 2013, pp.98-99
 - (7) Wilkinson Richard H., *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*, London, 1992, p.53
 - (8) Malaise, Michel, *Emplois des Parfums dans la Vie Quotidienne et Religieuse de L'egyptedans L'art du Parfums*, Paris, 1993, pp.40-42
 - (9) Baly, T.J. Colin, "A note on the Origin of Osiris", *JEA* 17, 1931, P.222
 - (10) Wise, Elliot, An "Odor of Sanctity": The Iconography, Magic, and Ritual of Egyptian Incense, *Studia Antiqua* 7.1-Spring 2009, p.71
 - (11) Wilkinson, Richard H., *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London, 1994, p.92
 - (12) Blackman, Aylward M., "The Significance of Incense and Libations in Funerary and Temple Ritual", *ZÄS* 50, 1912, P.74
 - (13) Wise, An "Odor of Sanctity", p.76, Spell 42 in "Book of the Dead"
 - (14) Basilios, "Liturgical Instruments", p.1474
 - (15) Laferrière, Pierre, "La Bible Murale dans les Sanctuaires Coptes", *MIFAO* 127, 2008, Le Caire, p.28
- The "Red Monastery"** is the name for the monastery of Anpa Bishay (St. Bishoi), located in Sohag and known as the Red Monastery because of the colour of its external walls, which are built of baked bricks. The Red Monastery church is most probably dated back to the second half of the fifth century, Gabra, Gawdat, *Coptic Monasteries, Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*, New York, 2004, p.101
- (16) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.29
 - (17) Walters, C.C., "Christian Paintings From Tebtunis", *JEA* 75, 1989, pp.197-198
In 1899 Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt discovered a Christian building in Tebtunis with various Coptic paintings that are dated back to the tenth century, Grenfell, Bernard P., Hunt, Arthur S., *Tebtunis Papyri* 1, London, 1907; Walters, "Christian Paintings", P.197.
 - (18) Innemée, Karel, "Recent Discoveries of wall Paintings in Deir el-Surian", *Journal of Syriac Studies*, Vol.1, Nr.2, 2000, p.292
- The Monastery of The Syrians** was founded by the Copts in the sixth century as an adjunct to another monastery in the Wadi Al-Natrun, in the ninth century, the monastery was acquired by Syrians from Takrit from the Coptic patriarch as a permanent home for Syrian monks, remained in Syrian hands until the late seventeenth century. This monastery provides the opportunity to study the development of the Coptic wall paintings, since many of them were discovered in the church of The Holy Virgin and in the chapel of the Forty-nine Martyrs in 1991, Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, pp.47-48; White, H.G. Evelyn, *The Monasteries of the Wadi'n Natrun*, part II, New York, 1932, p.309
- (19) Leroy, Jules, "Les Peintures des Couvents du Ouadi Natroun", *MIFAO* 2, 1982, P.37

The Monastery of Saint Macarius (Anpa Maqar), named after its patron saint Macarius the Great, is the southernmost monastery in Wadi al-Natrun, contains the Old Church of St. Macarius which has two sanctuaries, the southern is dedicated to St. Benjamin, and the northern to St. Mark, Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, p.56
 - (20) Leroy, "Les Peintures des Couvents", P.38
 - (21) Gabra, Gawdat, *The A to Z of the Coptic Church*, United Kingdom, 2008, p.127

Saint Antony Monastery

In the second half of the fourth century a monastic community seems to have grown up around the site where the saint Antony lived in the Eastern Desert near the Red Sea, the recent Monastery possesses a number of churches, the most important one is the Old Church or the Great Church of Saint Antony that has many impressive preserved paintings., Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, pp.73-75

(22) Opera, Patrum A., "Analysis of the Emblems of St. John, Rev. i-iv", *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record*, No. VIII, January, 1857, London, pp.356-357

(23) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.46; Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, p.83

(24) Gabra, Gawdat, *The Churches of Egypt from the Journey of the Holy Family to the Present Day*, Cairo, 2012, p.104; Meinardus, Otto F. August, "The Twenty Four Elders of the A pocalypse in the Iconography of the Coptic Church", *Studia Orientalia Christians* 41, 1968, p.46

(25) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.46

The Monastery of St. Paul "Dayr Anba Bula" is located about thirty-nine kilometers southwest of the Red Sea lighthouse station of Za'farana . It bears the name of its patron , Saint Paul , presumably Paul of Thebes, who withdrew into the Eastern Desert in about 250 to escape the persecution of the Emperor Decius .He lived in an underground cave for almost ninety years shortly before his death , about 340/341 St. Antony visited him , and after his death , the cave became a pilgrimage site and developed gradually into a monastery, Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, p.88, A list with the names of the Twenty Four Elders are inscribed on the wall of the Haikal in the Monastery of St. Paul, Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", p.51, f.26

(26) Moorsel, Paul V., "Les Peintures du Monastère de Saint-Antoine près de la Mer Rouge", *MIFAO* 112/2, 1997, Le Caire, p.92, pl.62

(27) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.26

(28) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.27

(29) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.14; Mikail, Deacon Albair Gamal, *The Essentials in the Deacon's Service, Egypt*, 2002, pp.196-197

The Cross is the power of the Christians , the Coptic Orthodox church celebrates two feasts dedicated to the cross with procession of the Holy Cross, during these feasts the prayers are chanted with joyful tunes and raising of incense :-

The First one on 17th of Thout , lasts for three days, in which the church commemorates the discovery of the Holy Cross on which the Christ was crucified, The Second Feast on the 2nd of Paramhotep , lasts for only one day, commemorate the appearance of the Holy Cross during the reign of emperor Heracle, Viaud, Gabriel, "La Procession des deux Fêtes du Croix et du dimanche des Rameaux dans L'Eglise Copte", *BSAC* 19, 1967, pp.221-225

(30) Laferrière, Pierre, "Les Croix Murales du monastère rouge à Sohag", *BIFAO* 93, 1993, PP.302-303, f.5

(31) Clédat, Jean, "Le Monastère et la Nécropole de Baouit", *MIFAO* 111, 1999, P.110

The archaeological site of Bawit is located on the western bank of the Nile about three hundred and twenty kilometers south of Cairo , it is consisted of many small monasteries with cells and a little church , all protected by an enclosure and most of them are destroyed, Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, pp.116-117

(32) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", P.16, f.11

(33) Laferrière, "Les Croix Murales", p.306, f.10

(34) Laferrière, "Les Croix Murales", p.307, f.11

(35) Laferrière, "La Bible Murale", pp.16-17

The Monastery of St. Shenute, known as the White Monastery , is located on the edge of the cultivation in the Libyan desert, about eight kilometers to the west of the city of Sohag .

It is very close to the ancient village of Atripe, where Christianity existed long before Shenute. The hermits knew the mountain of Atripe prior to the beginning of the fourth century, but it was under the leadership of St. Shenute that the monastery grew considerably. The church of the monastery is the most important Christian monument in Upper Egypt , dated back to the middle of the fifth century, Gabra, *Coptic Monasteries*, pp.94-95

(36) Innemée, Karel, "Mural Painting in Egypt, Problems of Dating and Conservation", *proceedings of a symposium at the University of Minnesota*, Minneapolis, March 6-9. 2003, p.19, Fig.7

(37) Hunt, Lucy-Anne, " The Fine Incense of Virginité : A late Twelfth century wall painting of the Annunciation at the Monastery of the Syrians, Egypt", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, Vol.19, 1995, p.182

(38) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginité", p.197

(39) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginité", p.202

(40) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginité", p.189

(41) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginité", p.193

(42) Basilios, "Liturgical Instruments", p.1470

Tabernacle: According to the Hebrew Bible , it was the portable dwelling place for the divine presence from the time of the Exodus from Egypt, built according to the specifications revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, Soltau, H.W., *The Tabernacle, the Priesthood, and the Offerings*, U.S.A., 1972, p.4, **Sanctum sanctorum:** is the

- Holy of Holies, the holiest place of Tabernacle, Waite, Arthur E., *The Veil of the Sanctum sanctorum*, Kessinger Publishing, 2005, p.6
- (43) Basilios, "Liturgical Instruments", pp.1471-1472; Coquin, René, G., *Livre de la consecration du sanctuaire de Benjamin*, Cairo, 1975, p.141
- The Seat of the Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria is commonly known as the **Holy See of St. Mark**, as the Coptic Pope claims to be the successor of St. Mark, Gabra, *The A to Z of the Coptic Church*, p.221

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- (44) Saint Basil Coptic Liturgy, Reference Book, *The Full Texts step by Step Explanations, Commentaries*, edited by Abraam D. Sleman, Cairo, Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, 1963, "The Hymn of the Censer", p.42, "The Intercession for the Oblation from the Raising of Incense Service", p.30
- (45) Butler, Alfred J., *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, Piscataway, 2004, p.351
- (46) Saint Basil Coptic Liturgy, "Liturgy Following the Creed at the Raising of Incense Service", p.39, Golgotha" A hill near Jerusalem where The Christ was crucified, Wise, An "Odor of Sanctity", p.78
- (47) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginitiy", p.195; Brightman F.E., *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, Oxford, 1896, pp.74
- (48) Basilios, "Liturgical Instruments", p.1470; Hunt, The Fine Incense of Virginitiy, pp.194-195; Saint Basil Coptic Liturgy, "Pauline procession of Incense", p.68
- (49) Hunt, "The Fine Incense of Virginitiy", p.193

Seraphim and Cherubim are celestial winged creatures occupying the highest order of angels, with the seraphim ranking above the cherubim, appear in Scripture and make their most memorable appearances in the visions of Ezekiel (1:4-28, 10:3-22), Isaiah (6:2-6), and John (Rev 4:7). Although not specifically called angels, seraphim and cherubim are revealed as *living creatures* or *heavenly beings* whose primary purpose is to worship God at His throne, Leclercq, Henri, "Angeles.", *In Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Vol. 1, cols. 2080-2161. Paris, 1907; Basilios, Archbishop, "Cherubim and Seraphim", *Coptic Encyclopedia*, V.2.P.415

- (50) Wise, "The Odor of Sanctity", p.80

