

The Saints Martyrs
SERGIUS & BACCHUS

with a description of their church

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(the book has not been printed)*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
One God, Amen*

Photo

*His Holiness, Amba Shenouda III,
Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, and the See of
the Predication of Saint Mark*

The numerous holy martyrs who gave their life for the Christian Faith during the various persecutions which took place in Egypt up to the time of Saint Constantine, Emperor of Constantinople, were from all races, of all ages, from all social ranks and cultural levels.

The most severe and most terrible of these persecutions was that which was inaugurated by the Emperor Diocletian; and for this reason, the Coptic Church adopted the year of the beginning of his reign, 284 AD, as the beginning of the Coptic Era, which is known as the Era of the Martyrs. However, it was only in 303 and 304 AD that Diocletian signed two edicts authorizing the persecution of the Christians. In 305 AD Diocletian abdicated, but his successors and collaborators continued the persecution. Maximin-Daia, Caesar in the Orient, whose capital was at Nicomedia, not far from the present site of Constantinople, was the most ferocious.

Among those martyrs were Saints Sergius and Bacchus, who were officers of high rank in the "Schola Gentilium" which was an equestrian body of men from all races. Sergius was one of the commanding officers of that equestrian body, and Bacchus was his second in command. According to their official functions and to their direct relation with the Emperor whose trust they had gained, these two young officers of high rank enjoyed great influence at the palace, and their prestige was felt in all the Orient, so much so that Antiochus, the commanding officer had been appointed to his post thanks to the influence of Saint Sergius.

We do not know whether Saints Sergius and Bacchus were born Christians; but it is certain that they were so when they commanded that equestrian body. They had news about the martyrs, and listened to their stories with emotion. They may have seen martyrs being tormented, condemned and put to death; and it is possible that some of these military martyrs were their comrades.

It is certain that there were many jealous fanatic pagans, or weak people paid by the authorities, who were ready to denounce the Christians to their persecutors. The Emperor learned that his devoted friends, these faithful military chiefs, these noble figures so familiar to him, whom he fully trusted, were Christians.

Maximin-Daia ordered all his high officials and his officers to go to the temple of Jupiter, where he offered a sacrifice to the idols, and ate together with his ministers of the sacrificial offering. Our Saints refused to take part in this solemn ceremony; and when the Emperor demanded an explanation for their absence, they answered that they were Christians, and that no sacrifice should be offered to the images of the evil spirits, to dead idols which have mouths, but speak not, and have ears but hear not; and that they owed to the Emperor the terrestrial service of their bodies in the army, but that their Eternal Emperor was Jesus-Christ, the Son of God.

Maximin-Daia became furious, and ordered that there should be taken off immediately from them the insignia of their dignity as officers of high rank, their golden collars, and their girdles. He dressed them in women's clothes and ordered that they should be mocked by being taken in parade through the whole city in this attire,

with heavy iron chains around their necks. They suffered this humiliation joyously, blessing God.

Having failed to convince Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus by means of threats, or promises, Maximin-Daia sent them to Antiochus who was in command of the region of the Euphrate River (Euphratesia). Saint Sergius had been his chief and had obtained for him his rank of commanding-officer thanks to his influence with the Emperor.

Maximin-Daia intended in this way to avoid personally the unpleasant task of dealing severely with faithful friends. He wished also to humiliate them the more, by forcing them to appear in front of the court of one of their subordinates, the more so, because the latter was known for his cruelty throughout the Empire. He hoped also to shake their firmness by means of the fatigue of the way and by the insults which they would receive on their long journey from Nicomedia to Sura where Antiochus resided.

The total distance which they had to travel was about a thousand kilometers. The way was rugged, the nature was hostile, and often the traveller would meet with wild beasts. We can imagine the clamorous procession of the two officers of that equestrian body, in chains, stripped of their insignia, driven along by soldiers to be judged, bearing patiently all the vicissitudes of their long journey, and blessing God, without paying any heed to all the insults and all the fatigues which they endured joyfully for the love of our Lord Jesus-Christ.

When they arrived, Antiochus threw them at first into prison, then on the following day he made them appear before him. He tried by every means to make them sacrifice to the idols, but they refused categorically. Antiochus then condemned Saint Bacchus to be scourged by four tormentors, and he was so severely scourged that he died from this torment at Sura.

His body was thrown into a cave, and wild beasts miraculously guarded it until some pious persons came and buried it with due veneration. The next night, Bacchus appeared to Sergius in the prison and encouraged him to endure courageously the torments of martyrdom.

The cruel Antiochus invented for Saint Sergius a cruel torture which had never been heard of. He made him wear boots fitted inside, with pointed nails, and forced him to run in front of his chariot for fifteen kilometers as far as Tetrabyrgia.

The military post of Tetrabyrgia was situated mid-way between Sura and Rusafah. It was a platform surrounded by a double wall which was reinforced by a tower at each corner. Tetrabyrgia means "four towers".

The following night, an angel appeared to Saint Sergius and healed all his wounds. Antiochus was surprised, and finding that all his efforts were of no avail, he made him endure the same torture by running from Tetrabyrgia to Rusafah. Then he sentenced him to death by decapitation. The place, where his blood was shed, opened and formed a chasm that still exists.

The inhabitants of Sura wished to take the body of Saint Sergius, but the saintly martyr prevented them from doing so by lighting a fire which alerted the people of Rusafah who came and expelled the intruders.

Rusafah

Rusafah is situated at a distance of about two hundred kilometers east of Alep, on the River Euphrate, in Iraq. It is a very ancient town. It is mentioned in the Old Testament (2 Kings 19:12; Isaiah 37:12) among the towns which fell under the domination of the Assyrians.

A magnificent church was built in the fifth century over the same place where Saint Sergius suffered martyrdom. The relics of his body were preserved there. It was one of the most beautiful churches of all the East.

A great wall, 3 meters large, was built around the town during the 6th century under the rule of the Emperor Justinian of Constantinople, in order to safeguard the churches, the monasteries, and all the riches which they contained, which the pilgrims, becoming more and more numerous, generously offered, in honour of Saints Sergius and Bacchus.

The cisterns which contained water that was carefully collected still exist. They had a capacity of about thirty thousand cubic metres, and made it possible to deliver twenty liters of drinkable water to each of the six thousand inhabitants every day.

Rusafah was an important station on the caravans route along the River Euphrate. It was also the starting-point of a track which led to Palmyra, and which was one hundred and fifty kilometers long. Its name was changed into Sergiopolis in honour of the Saint. Inside its surrounding walls there were five churches and a monastery; it was an animated city, where crowds of pilgrims came from every place, to visit the Saint's tomb.

To-day, one can see at Rusafah or Sergiopolis, nothing but ruins. The surrounding wall is about fifteen meters high, and forms a rectangle five hundred meters long, and four hundred meters wide. At each corner there is a large round tower. On every side, there are twelve square towers built in the wall. There is a path for the guards along the top of the walls. On the north side there is a huge door with three arches.

A few monuments still exist. The large church was almost entirely destroyed during an earthquake in 1068 AD. The tomb of Saint Sergius was then moved into the basilica of the monastery. It was rebuilt out of the materials of the first shrine. What remains of it is a small court surrounded by small white marble walls, with rose porphyry columns. The upper parts of the elegant columns are inscribed with Greek writing. There are some remains of the columns of the apsis; one is decorated with mural-paintings, a cross ornamented with rays. The large icon of the Saint is entirely destroyed; but a very beautiful copy of this still exists in the church of Saint Demetrius at Thessalonica.

The Church of Saints Sergius & Bacchus

This church is probably the oldest of the extant churches in Cairo, marking, as it does, one of the traditional sites of the resting-places of the Holy Family during their stay in Egypt. This hallowed spot is located in a small subterranean chapel beneath the actual church, at a depth of some ten meters below the present street level. This chapel

may, perhaps, be assigned to the sixth century, and replaces, most probably, an original shrine which may have been built over this traditional site in the fourth century.

The general structure of this church is basilican, comprising a narthex, nave flanked by aisles, a choir and three sanctuaries, and it measures 27 meters long, 17 meters wide and 15 meters high. A large western door gives access to the narthex, but it is usually closed, and entrance to the church is through a small door at the south-west corner of the church. In the narthex there is a large tank boarded over which was formerly used for the ceremony of the blessing of the water on the Feast of the Epiphany. The twelve monolithic columns round the nave are all, with the exception of one, of white marble. The exceptional column being of red Aswan granite. These columns have debased Corinthian capitals, and stand on square marble pedestals. They were doubtless taken from some Roman building. Traces of painted figures on these columns can still be dimly distinguished. A continuous wooden architrave originally painted in various colours joins these columns.

The narthex and northern and southern aisles are covered by a continuous gallery. The floor of the church is paved with hard siliceous gray lime-stone, and the sanctuary floor is two steps higher than the floor of the choir. A pointed roof with framed principals covers the nave, but the central part of the choir and the sanctuary have a wagon-vaulted roof, whilst the northern sanctuary is covered with a dome.

In the nave, the marble ambon which rests on ten columns, is a modern copy of the ambon in the Church of Saint Barbara. Remains of the previous ambon of rosewood, inlaid with ebony and ivory, which was seen and described by A.J. Butler in 1881, are now preserved in the Coptic Museum, where they have the exhibit number 878. In the nave there is the Mandatum Tank which is sunk in the floor and now boarded over. This tank was formerly used for the Service of the Foot-washing on Maundy Thursday and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Nowadays, a small portable basin is used for this service.

The sanctuary screen which is probably to be assigned to the thirteenth century, is of beautiful workmanship, incrustated with pentagons and other shapes of solid ivory, carved in relief with arabesques. The upper part of the screen contains small panels of ebony set with large crosses of solid ivory, exquisitely chiseled with scrollwork. Above these panels are icons of the Twelve Apostles with the Holy Virgin Mary in the center. This screen is pierced with two square windows on each side of the central door.

On the right side of the southern door, and on the left side of the northern door, are affixed some carved ebony panels which have come from the ruins of a door, and they have been assigned to the eleventh or twelfth century. Those on the right side of the southern door depict three warrior saints, and those on the left of the northern door depict the Nativity and the Last Supper. The sanctuary curtain dated 1735 AD which hung before the central door, when A.J. Butler visited this church, is now preserved in the Coptic Museum, where it is listed under exhibit number 85 (Room 19).

Within the sanctuary which is roofed with a small dome, the altar stands beneath a large and lofty canopy which is borne upon four Saracenic columns. Round the walls of the apse there rises a fine marble tribune consisting of seven steps, three short and

straight steps running north and south, and four seats sweeping round the whole curve of the apse. These steps and seats are faced with vertical stripes of red, black and white marble. In the center of the apse is the Synthronus, the bishop's throne, with a niche behind it. A low vaulted passage blocked in the middle by a partition wall, runs round the sanctuary beneath the steps of the tribune.

The screens of the northern and southern sanctuaries are inlaid with plain ivory, and the latter screen bears the date 1454 AM = 1738 AD.

The southern sanctuary is now no longer in use for services. Its apse which contains a niche, is covered with a low semi-dome, but the rest of the sanctuary is flat-roofed. On the walls of this southern sanctuary there is an icon of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, and many other icons.

On the wall of the southern aisle, from east to west, there is a series of icons in which we have the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Presentation in the Temple, the Baptism, the Marriage at Cana, the transfiguration, the Raising of Lazarus, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross, the Descent into Hades, the Appearance to Saint Thomas, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On the pier of the south aisle there is a large icon of the Holy Virgin Mary, together with two small ones of the Holy Virgin Mary. At the narthex there are two large icons representing the archangels Saint Gabriel and Saint Michael.

The northern sanctuary is roofed with a large dome, and in the east wall there is a small tribune of three bow-shaped steps in the center of which is the Synthronus.

At the western end of the northern aisle there is the baptistery. The southern gallery has a sanctuary which is dedicated to the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the northern gallery has a sanctuary which is dedicated to the Archangel Michael.

The Sanctuary of the Holy Family

The crypt in which this sanctuary is situated lies beneath the center of the choir and part of the central sanctuary. It is entered by a stairway which leads down from the southern sanctuary; another stairway also leads down to this crypt from the northern sanctuary. During the inundation of the Nile this crypt is inaccessible for about two months, as the water seeps into it to a depth of about one meter. By its contact with this sacred spot, the water is considered holy, and is much resorted to by the faithful.

This sanctuary measures 6 meters long, 5 meters wide and 2.50 meters high, and two rows of slender columns, five on the south side and four on the north, form a nave and side aisles. One of the columns is twisted and fluted, and it resembles a pair of similar columns which support the ambon in the church of the Virgin Al-Mu'allaqah. Two short walls, in the line of these columns, project from the east wall and form a sanctuary. In the northern, southern, and eastern wall there is an arched recess. The sanctuary has an altar, but no sanctuary screen. The southern aisle is used as baptistery, and it has at its east end a font in the form of a round stone basin set in solid masonry.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the Franciscan Friars had the right to celebrate the Holy Mass in this sanctuary, and up to the present time they organize a pilgrimage to this holy shrine during Lent. On the 1st of June, the day on which the Coptic Church commemorates the Flight into Egypt, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in this sanctuary.