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New Life for an Old Church. Investigating the Village Church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis in Middle Egypt

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New Life for an Old Church

Investigating the Village Church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis in Middle Egypt

GERTRUD J.M. VAN LOON, DINA ISHAK BAKHOUM,
NAGLAA HAMDI BOUTROS

ABSTRACT

The oldest church in the village of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis (Middle Egypt) is dedicated to Saint John the Little (Saint John Kolobos, Abū Ḥinnis al-Qaṣīr). The Saint's association to this area remains unclear. Some historical sources indicate that the church was once part of a monastery. This setting is now lost as the church is surrounded by modern buildings. Previous scholarship has focused on architectural research, although some issues remain unresolved. Consequently, questions relating to the patron saint, history, modern restorations, decoration and graffiti, have not yet been fully examined. The church is also in need of a comprehensive documentation, research and conservation project.

This article discusses historical sources, the church's patron saint, reports of travellers and early scholars, church renovations during the early 1940s, and the involvement of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe* in an effort to protect the building. It is a first step towards a documentation and research programme that will support the restoration and conservation of this ancient monument.

Keywords: Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, Saint John the Little, Hegumen Miṣā'īl Baḥr, *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe*, Antinoupolis/Ansina, living heritage.

RÉSUMÉ

La plus ancienne église du village de Dayr Abū Ḥinnis (Moyenne Égypte) est consacrée à saint Jean le Petit (saint Jean Colobos, Abū Ḥinnis al-Qaṣīr), dont le lien avec ce lieu reste inconnu. Certaines sources historiques indiquent que l'église faisait partie d'un monastère plus

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étendu, aujourd'hui disparu, l'église étant entourée de bâtiments modernes. Des recherches antérieures ont approfondi les données architecturales, bien que certains problèmes subsistent. En outre, les questions relatives à son saint patron, à son histoire, aux restaurations modernes, à la décoration et aux graffitis n'ont pas encore été entièrement examinées. L'église a également besoin d'un projet complet de documentation, de recherche et de conservation.

Cet article traite des sources historiques, du saint patron, des témoignages des voyageurs et des premiers chercheurs, des rénovations de l'église au début des années 1940 et de l'implication du *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe* dans la protection de l'édifice. Il s'agit d'un premier pas vers un programme de documentation et de recherche qui soutiendra la restauration et la conservation de ce monument ancien.

Mots-clés : Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, saint Jean le Petit, Higoumène Miṣā'īl Baḫr, Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe, Antinoupolis/Ansina, patrimoine vivant.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient church in the village of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, Middle Egypt (Fig. 1), is located in the north-eastern part of the village (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3a–b). It is the oldest parish church in the village and it is dedicated to Saint John the Little (Saint John Kolobos, Abū Ḥinnis al-Qaṣīr). Although it is also one of the oldest churches still in use in Egypt, and it has most likely functioned continuously since its foundation, it has been rarely investigated. 17th to early 20th-century travellers and scholars who have left their impressions on the area and the architecture of the church, initially described it as being part of a monastery.

In 1971, Peter Grossmann dedicated a study to its architecture and sculpture, in which he summarizes earlier research. Since that time, no further examination of the history of the church, its architecture and subsequent restorations and renovations, interior decoration (sculpture, wall paintings, and icons) and graffiti found on the walls, has been conducted.

At present, the building is in a precarious state of conservation. Several preventive conservation measures have been carried out, but the church needs a comprehensive conservation project, in combination with documentation and research. Such a project would, on the one hand, ensure the protection of this ancient church for future generations. On the other hand, further investigation and documentation would greatly contribute to a reconstruction of the history of the church. A multidisciplinary approach would aim to give an overview of the church, not only focussing on architecture and sculpture, but also on wall paintings, inscriptions/graffiti and the history of the building, its patron saint, and its importance to the village community.

This contribution provides an overview of previous research on the Church of Saint John the Little. It is a first step prior to any potential conservation project, and ahead of any interventions that could alter the building and possibly affect its proper understanding. It includes

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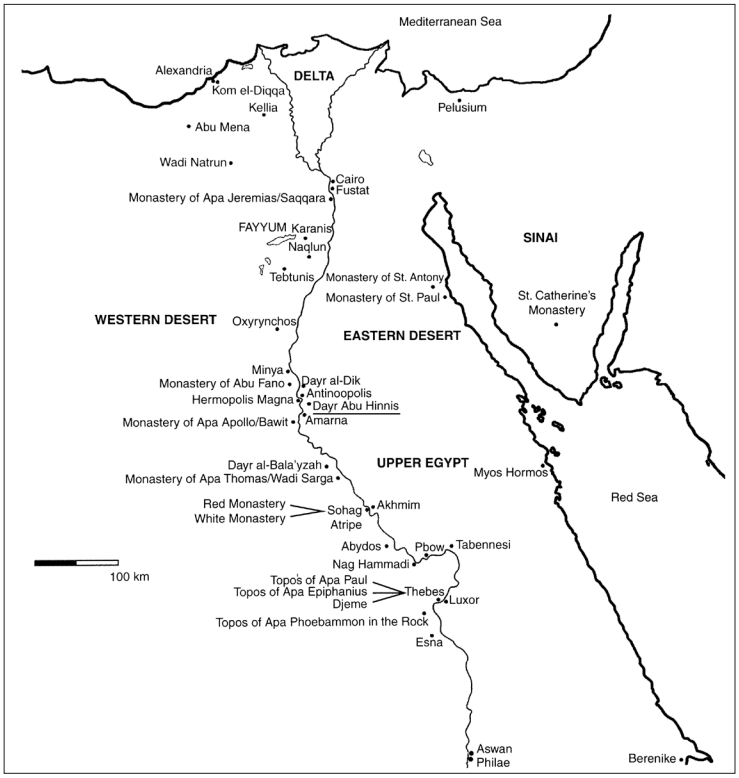


Fig. 1. Map of Egypt showing some of the monasteries. Dayr Abū Ḥinnis is underlined. (after Brooks Hedstrom 2017, fig. 7, with minor corrections).



Google Earth/Gertrud J.M. van Loon

Fig. 2. Map of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis and direct surroundings.

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a range of subjects, such as a discussion of historical sources, the patron saint, reports of travellers and early scholars, investigations considering the restoration in the early 1940s under the direction of the local priest, Hegumen Miṣā'īl Baḥr, and the involvement of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe*. It also includes our own observations during several visits to the church over the past twenty years. Specific subjects, such as architectural issues, sculptural decoration, wall paintings and graffiti/inscriptions, will be discussed separately in forthcoming publications.[1]

HISTORICAL SOURCES AND THE DEDICATION OF THE CHURCH TO SAINT JOHN THE LITTLE[2]

So far, we have not uncovered any historical sources that mention the church directly. In the *History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* (*HCME*; 12th-14th centuries),[3] Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, village or monastic community in the hills, is not mentioned in the description of Upper Ansina and surrounding area.[4] The historian al-Maqrīzī (15th century) recorded in his list of monasteries: "Monastery of Abû 'n-Nanâ. This monastery stands near Ansinâ, and is one of the old buildings of that city; its church is in a tower, not on the ground and the monastery bears the name of Saint John the Dwarf. A festival is kept there [each year] on the 20th of Bâbah [Bābah]."[5]

The colophon of an 18th-century manuscript preserved in Cairo states that this manuscript was dedicated to "the Church of Abū Ḥinnis al-Qaṣīr, to the East of al-Bayāḍīah in the Mount an-Niʿnāʿ."[6] However, a monastery or mountain of an-Niʿnāʿ or "'n-Nanâ" ("mint") at this spot has not been found in any other source so far. Nevertheless, the colophon makes the identification of the village church with al-Maqrīzī's "Monastery of Abû 'n-Nanâ," which

1 The village church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis is a historic church that is still in use today. The priest in charge is Hegumen Yūsāb Hišmat. He has been in dialogue with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities (now under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities) and other entities to begin a restoration project of the church. After visits to the village church by some of the authors of this article, and communication between the Hegumen and IFAO team members, it was decided to apply to IFAO for an *action spécifique*, which was approved (IFAO, *action spécifique* no. 22471: "Abu Yuhannis. The documentation and study of the 5th century church of St. John the Short/Little [Abu Yuhannis/Anba Yehness] in the village of Deir Abū Ḥinnis, Middle Egypt"). The team is composed of the three authors and Matjaž Kačičnik, photographer. This article, an outcome of the *action spécifique*, builds on earlier research carried out by Gertrud J.M. van Loon, Alain Delattre and Véronique De Laet in the region of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis in the framework of the Dayr al-Barsha Project (KU Leuven: https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/dayr-al-barsha/project-sites) and expands on topics not fully researched before. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive remarks and Anne-Marie Shaker for copy-editing our English text.

2 Part of this paragraph is based on sections in Van Loon, De Laet 2014, updated with new material.

3 Traditionally, the *HCME* was ascribed to Abū Ṣāliḥ al-Armanī. It was, however, compiled by various authors with most probably Abū l-Makārim Saʿdallāh ibn Ǧirǧis ibn Masʿūd as the principal author. On the codicology and history of this book, see Zanetti 1995; Den Heijer 1996, pp. 77–81; Den Heijer, Pilette 2012.

4 Evetts, Butler (eds.) 1895, pp. 244–245.

5 Wüstenfeld 1845, p. 93; Evetts, Butler (eds.) 1895, p. 309 no. 11. Cf. Timm 1984–1992, vol. 2, p. 579 and 583; Doresse 2000 II-1, p. 472; Ducène 2015, p. 145. The additions between square brackets are by the authors.

6 Cairo, Coptic Museum, Lit. 155, 1734 AD (Graf 1934, pp. 39–40 (no. 102); Simaika 1939, pp. 103–104 (no. 220). Cf. Timm 1984–1992, vol. 2, p. 580). The village of al-Bayāḍiyya still exists and is situated along the Nile on the west side, to the south of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, that is situated on the east bank.

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Photo Gertrud J.M. van Loon 2004

3a.



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik 2021

3b.

Fig. 3a-b. Exterior view of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, showing the 1940s bell tower, the domes, and the adjoining southern room.

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"bears the name of Saint John the Dwarf," most likely.[7] There is, however, one complication: al-Maqrīzī's "church in a tower," does not correspond to the church in the village. Whatever al-Maqrīzī meant is not clear yet.

Based on the *Vitae*, Lucien Regnault hypothesizes that Dayr Abū Ḥinnis was perhaps the place where Saint John lived as a hermit before going to Scetis (Wādī al-Naṭrūn), although, he admits, the surviving texts give no evidence of such a connection.[8]

In short, there seems to be no direct link between Dayr Abū Ḥinnis and the life of Saint John the Little. As far as is known, the church, the actual building in the village, does not figure in historical texts. Its original dedication is still unclear. It might have been dedicated to Saint John the Little, another saint called John, a saintly monk called John, or a different saint altogether and rededicated at a later date.[9]

Nevertheless, al-Maqrīzī's notice proves that Saint John the Little was venerated in this area from at least the first half of the 15th century onwards.

SAINT JOHN THE LITTLE

Saint John (ca. 339–409 AD), surnamed Kolobos, ("the Little," "the Short," or "the Dwarf"), was one of the most revered saints of the Scetis Desert (Wādī al-Naṭrūn), a major monastic centre in the western desert, situated between Cairo and Alexandria. He was known for his short stature and profound humility, earning him the nickname "John the Little" (Fig. 4). Belonging to the third generation of monks who flourished after Macarius the Great, he lived alongside other notable monastic figures, such as Apollon, Moses the Black, and Serapion. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,[10] forty-eight sayings and stories related to John are found.[11]

Born around 339 AD to a devout but impoverished family[12] in the region of Pemje (Upper Egypt) in a village called Tse,[13] John felt drawn to monasticism from an early age. Seeking solitude, he retreated to remote areas to prepare himself for the rigors of ascetic life. While still a young man of eighteen, heeding divine inspiration, he left his home and journeyed to the wilderness of Scetis, determined to embody the spirit of Christ. There, he became a disciple of the elder hermit Abba Poimen, who initially resisted accepting him due

7 The name "al-Niʿnāʿ" or "al-Naʿnāʿ" returns in recent history. In 2009, authorities decided (as they had tried earlier, in the 1960s and 1970s) to change the village name from Dayr Abū Ḥinnis to Wādī al-Niʿnāʿ, the Valley of Mint (According to Martin 2015, p. 99, the latter name appeared on a map of the Survey of Egypt. Unfortunately, he doesn't give the date of the Survey maps). After strong protests by the inhabitants, the Governor of al-Minya signed a decree to restore the original name 'Dayr Abū Ḥinnis' (see the newspaper articles collected in *Arab West Report* 2009 week 24, nos. 28-29, 46–47; week 25, nos. 13, 16, 27–29; week 26, nos. 15, 27, 50–51).

8 Timm 1984–1992, vol. 2, pp. 577–579; Regnault, Van Esbroeck 1991.

9 An association might perhaps be that Saint John the Little's close friend, Apa Pshoi/Anba Bishoi had fled directly from Scetis to this area; he is the titular saint of the old church of the village of Dayr al-Baršā (formerly also part of a monastic complex), a few kilometers south of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis. Saint John the Little is said to have been the author of the *Life of Saint Bishoi* (Timm 1984–1992, vol. 2, pp. 692–696; Davis 2008, pp. 13–14).

10 Guy 1993, pp. 46–79.

11 Davis 2008, p. 3, n. 4.

12 Mikhail, Vivian (eds.) 2010, pp. 69–70.

13 Mikhail, Vivian (eds.) 2010, p. 69. For more information about this village, see Timm (1984–1992, vol. 6, pp. 2851–2852).

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Photo Matjaž Kačičnik 2021

Fig. 4. Icon of St. John the Little and Abū Maqqār (St. Macarius), dated 1580 AM/1864–1865 and signed by the painter Anasṭāsī al-Rūmī al-muṣawarātī al-Qudsī, in the village church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis.

to the harshness of monastic discipline. However, after an angel appeared at night instructing Poimen to take John as his disciple, the elder conceded. Following three days of fasting and prayer, both master and disciple witnessed an angel blessing John's new monastic garments.

Though a novice, John endured his trials with the fortitude of a seasoned ascetic. Under Poimen's guidance, he cultivated virtues that are essential to monastic life. Abba Poimen assigned John an extraordinary task: to plant a dry walking stick in the desert ground and water it daily until it bore fruit. Despite the river being twelve miles away, John obeyed without question. For three years he made this daily journey in silence until the miracle occurred—the stick took root, sprouted leaves, and finally produced fruit. Abba Poimen gathering the fruit, carried it to the church, and giving it to some of the brethren, said, "Take, eat from the fruit of obedience".[14]

Abba Poimen died in 374 AD after twelve years of illness during which John served as his caregiver. John initially lived in solitude, digging a cave near the tree, where he devoted himself to prayer. His reputation for holiness soon attracted disciples, including his own elder brother, and eventually necessitated the establishment of a monastery at the site.[15]

14 Mikhail, Vivian (eds.) 2010, p. 88.

15 Interestingly, another episode on Saint John the Little survives in Saint Paesia's hagiographical entry in the Synaxarion, where Saint John had a vision of angels bearing Saint Paesia's soul heavenwards (Forget [ed.] 1926, pp. 252–253 and Ward 1987, pp. 77–78).

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The famous obedience miracle, while central to John the Little's hagiography, actually derives from an earlier tradition about John of Lycopolis, which is recorded in John Cassian's *Institutes* (ca. 400 AD).[16] This adaptation—where the stick, which in John the Little's biography, miraculously bears fruit rather than being discarded as in the version of John of Lycopolis—exemplifies how monastic traditions evolved. The transformation raises important historiographical questions about how much these accounts reflect historical practice versus later editorial contributions shaped by monastic traditions. The narrative serves a dual purpose: it both constructs John's sanctity through demonstrative miracles and also reveals the spiritual values that 5th- and 6th-century monastic communities sought to perpetuate through such stories. These stories thus provide a window into both the saint's perceived life and the devotional culture that preserved his memory.

During the Berber raids on Scetis around 395 AD, Saint John crossed the Nile toward the Red Sea region, settling approximately one day's journey away from the area sanctified by Saint Anthony's presence. While living in this remote location, he made rare visits to the nearby village (modern Suez), where his missionary efforts, accompanied by reports of miraculous deeds, converted most inhabitants to Christianity.

Saint John died in 409 AD at the age of seventy, with the Coptic Orthodox Church commemorating his feast on 20 Paopi (Bābah).[17] This date follows the testimony of the Coptic *Life of Saint John the Little*, a panegyric delivered annually on the anniversary of his death. The date also corresponds to al-Maqrīzī's account (see above).

Modern scholars accept this chronology as it aligns with Poemen's later accounts and the historical context of the barbarian incursions that prompted John's relocation to Clysma.[18] According to tradition, at the moment of John's death, his servant returning from the village witnessed angels transporting the saint's soul to heaven accompanied by a host of saints. The servant prepared the body with reverence and brought it to the village. In 515 AD, John's relics were translated to the monastic wilderness of Scetis,[19] completing his spiritual journey back to the desert where his monastic legacy began.

The *Life of Saint John the Little* was attributed to Zacharias, an 8th-century Coptic bishop of Sakhā. Zacharias was a highly educated bishop who served in the early Islamic period of Egypt. He was fluent in Greek and Coptic, which allowed him to work as a government secretary before entering monastic life. He became a monk at the monastery of Saint John the Little.[20] It is likely that he wrote the *Life* in Sahidic Coptic, though the only complete version we have is in Bohairic Coptic. The text was later translated into Syriac and Arabic.

The *Vita/Life* was composed in the 8th century, during a period of renewed interest in monasticism and the veneration of saints. Zacharias' work helped to solidify John's legacy and contributed to the growth of his monastic community. The *Life of Saint John the Little* is a rich and complex text that reflects the spiritual and cultural milieu of 8th-century Coptic Christianity. Through his skilful editing and storytelling, Zacharias created a work that not

16 Harmless 2004, p. 222.
17 Forget (ed.) 1926, pp. 69–72.
18 Davis 2008, p. 2, n. 3.
19 The various theories concerning the displacement of the relics of Saint John the Little have been studied by Davis (Davis 2008, pp. 11–12).
20 Basset (ed.) 1915, pp. 838–839.

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only commemorates John's life but also serves as a guide for monastic spirituality. The *Life* is a composite work, blending oral and written sources, including the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, to create a narrative that emphasizes John's virtues and spiritual teachings. The *Life* is structured as an encomium delivered on John's feast day. It combines sayings, stories, and miracles attributed to John. Zacharias also incorporated independent traditions, including stories about John's early life.

The text's complex transmission history—from a probable Sahidic original to a Bohairic preservation and subsequent translations—mirrors the evolving reception of John's legacy across Coptic Christian traditions. As both a literary artifact and spiritual manual, the *Life* demonstrates how hagiography could have simultaneously served to preserve memory, shape community identity, and articulate theological values during the early Islamic period.

Two important critical editions were recently published presenting the *Life* of John Kolobos. The first one is the Arabic version of the *Life* (Göttingen MS Arabic 114), edited and translated by Stephen J. Davis, with an introduction situating the work in the context of scribal and liturgical activity at the Monastery of Saint John the Little in Wādī al-Naṭrūn.[21]

The second is a re-edition and English translation of the Coptic (Bohairic) text accompanied by a translation of the Syriac version of the same text.[22] The edition provides an in-depth analysis of the hagiographical text and explores the historical, literary, and theological contexts of the *Life*, focusing on Zacharias' role as an author-editor, the sources he used, and the ways in which he shaped the narrative to serve his pastoral and theological goals. However, some unresolved debates persist: for example, the authenticity of the attribution is never questioned, even though pseudepigraphy is one of the most striking phenomena in Coptic literature.[23]

LOCATION AND SETTING[24]

To the south of the Roman city of Antinoupolis (Ansina in Arabic), a vast archaeological site to the east of the present village of Šayḫ ʿIbāda (East bank of the Nile), is a large field of ruins, called Upper Ansina (Fig. 2).[25] This area is demarcated by walls, whose remains are still easily recognizable. Upper Ansina contains the southern cemetery of Antinoupolis (just southwest of the city wall) with a large fourth century church, a monastery, cemeteries, and the remains of another large church, which was probably part of a monastery. In the southern part there is hardly any domestic architecture, but at least four churches (fifth to early eighth centuries) have been identified, and an adjoining (monastic?) complex, which included multi-storeyed

21 Davis 2008.

22 For differences between Coptic, Arabic and Syriac versions, see Mikhail, Vivian (eds.) 2010, pp. 48–60.

23 Boud'hors 2011.

24 Part of this paragraph is based on sections in Van Loon, De Laet 2014, updated with new material.

25 In Arabic texts, Antinoupolis is called Ansina or Lower Ansina while Upper Ansina designates the southern sector (Stewart 1991; Grossmann 1969, p. 144, note 5 and 148, with references). For a short historical overview of Antinoupolis, see Römer 2021, pp. 178–179.

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buildings.[26] Surface pottery finds can be dated to the same period.[27] More research and archaeological investigations are needed to better understand the nature of this settlement. The village church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis is located c. 1 km south of this settlement. Today, the strip of land between Upper Ansina and the church is filled with fields and modern buildings. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the church was part of this site.[28]

To the east of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis is a range of hills, honeycombed by limestone quarries mainly dating as far back as the New Kingdom. A group of quarries to the south-east of the village was converted by monks into a monastic settlement, with a church (dedicated to St John the Baptist), communal spaces, living quarters and workshops.[29] Farther south is the village of Dayr al-Baršā with the ancient church of Saint Bishoi.[30] In the hills to the east of this village lies a complex of Middle Kingdom tombs and some quarries.[31]

The first known visitors who left an account of their visits to this area describe Dayr Abū Ḥinnis as a monastery. Johann Michael Wansleben (1635–1679), also known as Jean-Michel Vansleb, a Dominican monk who was sent to Egypt to obtain manuscripts and antiquities for the library of King Louis XIV of France,[32] wrote in his travel journal that he arrived on Holy Saturday, 1 April 1673, in the "…*monasterio di Abu hennis il Kessir, ò sia S[an] Giovanne il piccolo*…" . The monastery was situated on the East bank of the Nile, in the vicinity of the antique city of Insine (Ansina; Antinoupolis). Wansleben's plan was to see the "curiosities" in the neighbourhood.[33] In the French publication of his diary, he adds that his friend, the archpriest who was the superior of this monastery, had advised him to stay there.[34] The journal contains a note that the Copts call this monastery "…*Dêr is-Sultán, ò sià il monasterio del Rè*."[35] To date, this is the only mention of Dayr al-Sulṭān/Monastery of the King as an alternative name for Dayr Abū Ḥinnis.[36]

Father Wansleben had a map made of the area showing the ruins of Upper Ansina, the hills to the east with the monastic settlement in the quarries, Dayr Abū Ḥinnis and, to the south, Dayr Anba Bishoi (Dayr al-Baršā). The latter two sites are shown as a group of buildings that include a church with three domes, surrounded by a wall.[37]

Like Wansleben, Father Claude Sicard S.J. (1677–1726)[38] lodged in "…*l'ancien monastère de Saint Jean*…" to explore the surrounding area in 1714. However, contrary to Wansleben,

26 Grossmann 1969; al-Syriany, Habib 1990, pp. 116–117 and photos 143-1, 143-2; Grossmann 2000; Abdal-Tawab, Ghattas, Grossmann 2001; Grossmann 2002, p. 75, 101, 175, 273–74, 282, 291, 303; Römer 2021 pp. 177–180.

27 Pyke 2009, p. 384.

28 Van Loon, De Laet 2014, pp. 162–163, 171.

29 Van Loon, Delattre 2014; Van Loon, De Laet 2014; Van Loon 2016. The quarry church has recently been taken into use again and is now dedicated to Saint Colluthos.

30 Grossmann 1982, pp. 39–42.

31 https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/dayr-al-barsha.

32 On Wansleben's/Vansleb's life and travels, see most recently Hamilton 2018, pp. 1–56.

33 Paris, BnF, Ms. Italien 435: 121[141] (= Vansleb 1675. The manuscript, written in Italian, has two numbering systems). An annotated edition was published recently (Hamilton 2018, this passage: p. 366).

34 Vansleb R.D. 1677, p. 384.

35 Vansleb 1675: 121[141]; Hamilton 2018, p. 366.

36 Timm 1984–1992 (cf. Brune 2007) does not list a "Dayr as-Sultan".

37 Vansleb 1675, p. [127]; Martin 1997, fig. 12; Hamilton 2018, fig. 16.

38 Sicard, a Jesuit priest and scholar, arrived in Egypt in 1712 as the new head of the Jesuit mission in Cairo. He died of the plague in 1726 (Sicard, *Œuvres*, vol. I, pp. v–vii, pp. 148–155; Cf. Thompson 2015, pp. 77–78).

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Sicard called it a monastery only in name. Forty years after Wansleben's visit, Christian families had settled around the church, building around fifty houses.[39] Sicard returned in 1721 with a friend, the Italian priest Pietro Lorenzo Pincia, who repeated almost literally Sicard's observations of 1714 in his diary.[40]

Claude Tourtechot, alias Granger, a physician from Lyon, stated some fifteen years later (1730) that "… *au pied de la montagne, il y a un Convent de Coptes très-pauvre dédié à saint Jean le Petit; j'y trouvai trois vieux Religieux qui sçavoient à peine parler*."[41] He says nothing about families living in the church enclosure.

In 1737, Frederik Ludvig Norden passed by the convent, "Deier Abuichhanna"[42] and Richard Pococke, a bishop of the Church of Ireland, mentioned a "convent of St. John (Der-Abou-Ennis) where there are several priests".[43] Again, nothing is said about families living around the church but apparently, in the first half of the 18th century (or perhaps earlier), a process of transition from monastery to village had set in.[44]

In the atlas of the *Description de l'Égypte*, the landmark publication on Egypt by a team of scholars who explored the country from 1798 to 1801 as part of Napoleon's campaign, Upper Ansina is roughly indicated. It continued further south, but the original size of the settlement is not known.[45]

Jean-Jacques Rifaud (1786–1852) arrived in Egypt in 1813. He was a sculptor and artist turned explorer and archaeologist. His book of 1830, which was intended as a guidebook for travellers in Egypt and Nubia, described the area very precisely: "*Egalement au sud, par rapport à Cheik-Abadèh, on a les ruines d'une ville chrétienne*[46]*, et au village d'El-Deyr-Abouennes, où sont des tombeaux chrétiens. Ce dernier village est divisé en deux hameaux dont, l'un, celui du sud, se nomme El-Rechaideh. À l'orient d'El-Rechaideh subsiste une église bâtie au milieu des rochers*[47]*, et près de là des carrières et des grottes*."[48] He does not mention the village church, but his topographical overview is pictured in the atlas of the *Description de l'Égypte*, and, in more detail, in a map of the area.[49]

At the end of the 19th century, more visitors followed. They were mainly interested in the church and monastic settlement in the quarries to the south-east of the village, but some of

39 Sicard, *Œuvres*, vol. II, p. 80.

40 Pincia, *In Egitto*, 1998, p. 163.

41 Granger 1745, pp. 128–129. For Granger and his travel journal, see most recently Meurice 2005, pp. 328–333.

42 Norden 1755, vol. 2, p. 132 and pl. LXXIX. Norden was a naval captain of King Christian VI of Denmark and Norway, in charge of a mission to Nubia (Manley 2004).

43 Pococke 1743, vol. I, Book II, p. 73. On Pococke, see Baigent 2011. For more 18th-century travellers mentioning Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, see Grossmann 1971, p. 157.

44 See, for example, Pococke, who said about the Convent of Saint Antony on the Nile near Bush: "Here as in most of the convents of Egypt, the priests are seculars, so that they live in the convent with their wives and children." On Dayr al-Šuhadā', the Monastery of the Martyrs near Esna, he comments: "There are only two monks in it, who cannot marry; but their relations, both women and children, live in the convent" (Pococke 1743, p. 70 and p. 112). John Gardner Wilkinson remarks, in the context of Ǧabal al-Ṭīr (Middle Egypt): "Like all the Coptic "Dayrs" in Egypt, it is a walled village with a church, a few monks, and a few lay inhabitants, men, women and children" (Wilkinson 1875, p. 349). For the definition of "dayr," as a monastery, a place of pilgrimage or a village, see Boutros 2004.

45 Jacotin 1826, feuille 14, fig. 6; cf. *DE* 1817, pl. 54.

46 Upper Ansina.

47 The quarry church, dedicated to St John the Baptist (van Loon 2016).

48 Rifaud 1830, pp. 206–207.

49 Jacotin 1826, feuille 14; in more detail: *DE* 1817, p. 20 and pl. 54.

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them did devote some time to the village church. Alfred Joshua Butler (1850–1936), however, had, for various reasons, not been able to visit the area and he based his description of churches in this region on notes by previous travellers.[50] Therefore, he confused the village church with "the subterranean church of St. John", built in "an ancient quarry".[51] It is not known whether or not John the Baptist, the patron saint of the quarry church since at least the 6th century, has anything to do with the village church. Moreover, whether the John of the quarries and the John of the village were completely different saints, cannot be traced.

The orientalist and linguist Archibald Henry Sayce (1846–1933) toured the area in search of inscriptions and wrote about "Deir Abû Hannes", referring to it as "the monastery of Father John". He notes that it "is a small village a little to the south of the ruins of Antinoê. It has succeeded to a walled Coptic town, the remains of which still stand between it and the mounds of Antinoê, and are known (like similar remains at How) by the name of el-Medineh, "the city". The village is Christian, and the church is an old one, though not as old as the time of the Empress Helena, as it claims to be."[52]

The information gleaned from this small collection of reports is diverse. Geographically speaking, it is interesting to note that Jomard and Sayce both considered the village a remnant or successor of Upper Ansina.[53] Most authors see the church as part of a monastery, surrounded by walls, as on Wansleben's map of the region. The name of this monastic settlement is alternatively "St. John" or "St. John the Short/the Little". Dayr al-Naʿnāʿ (al-Maqrīzī) and Dayr al-Sulṭān (Wansleben) are exceptions that cannot be explained so far.

Although not a well-known monument and located away from the beaten track, private diaries, drawings and photographs show that travellers continued to visit the church.[54]

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CHURCH

The Church of Saint John the Little is small (c. 19 × 12.5 m). Wansleben did not discuss its architecture, but the outline of the church can be seen on his map as a schematic shape with three domes.

The first description of the Old Church and its interior appeared in the *Description de l'Égypte*. After describing Upper Ansina, Edme François Jomard (1777–1862), one of the contributors to the *Description*,[55] wrote:

50 Butler 1884, vol. I, p. 341.

51 Butler 1884, vol. I, pp. 364–366. Village and quarry site, both called Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, are often mixed up. Similarly, the village of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis and Upper Ansina are frequently combined or confused in publications.

52 Sayce 1886, p. 176. "el-Medineh" is Upper Ansina.

53 Analysis of the roads of the area and a study of old maps, have led us to a similar conclusion. See van Loon, De Laet 2014, pp. 162–163, 171.

54 For example, Mrs Bertha Goldman Gutmann (wife of the American artist Bernard Gutmann and a member of the Goldman-Sachs family, New York bankers), noted in her travel diary on 24 January 1930: "Deir Abou Hennes, copt. village. Priest took us into dirty little church, very old; red granite steps; Hellenistic columns; very ancient alter [sic] stone w. Greek inscription." (The diary is in a private collection—we thank Peter Der Manuelian [Harvard University] for this information). The Greek inscription must be the epitaph of Febronia (see below).

55 For Jomard and his work for the *Description de l'Égypte*, see most recently Grinevald 2014.

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Le village qui subsiste encore auprès, sous le nom de Deyr Abou-Hennys [ou monastère de Saint-Jean], est le reste de l'ancienne population Chrétienne qui a habité cette ancienne ville :[56] *il est bâti sur une éminence de sable. Sa population est uniquement composée de Chrétiens très-pauvres. L'église actuelle est vers le sud-ouest. Pour y entrer, on traverse une cour qui renferme une grande pierre creusée, appelée hôd : l'entrée est étroite et obscure. L'église est composée de plusieurs salles mal construites, et encore plus mal réparées : on me dit que la partie intérieure étoit d'ouvrage Grec ; elle est, en effet, bâtie par assises réglées, tandis que le reste est en moellons et plâtre. Quelques piliers sont décorés de chapiteaux Corinthiens, tirés d'Antinoé. Au seuil d'une porte, je vis deux morceaux de beau granit rouge, dont l'un est bien poli sur toutes ses faces. La disposition des salles est confuse. Au fond de l'autel est un tableau dont l'exécution, quoique fort mauvaise, fixa mes regards, à cause de la rareté des ouvrages de peinture en Égypte. Il y a deux sujets. L'un représente le saint qui a donné son nom à l'église et au village, el-Kaddys Abou-Hennys : il est debout et revêtu d'une chape ; le dessin est incorrect, et la couleur plate. Le peintre y a mis son nom en arabe, et la date de l'ouvrage, qui est récent (du treizième siècle de l'hégire).*[57] *L'autre sujet représente l'archange Michel, avec cette inscription : el-Melek Mykhâyl. Il est à pied, tient un sabre dans la main gauche ; de la droite, il porte un très-petit buste, dont on ne voit rien que la tête et les épaules. Le prêtre que j'interrogeai, ne put absolument me dire ce que c'étoit que cette sorte d'idole. Il me raconta que le roi d'Antinoé s'appeloit Arianos. Hasan-bey et ses mamlouks, me dit-il, avoient pillé, brisé et brûlé l'église quelques années auparavant.*[58]

Jomard's description highlights that there is a doorway with a granite threshold, and the church has several halls that are badly constructed and even worse repaired. The mention of halls could indicate that the plan is relatively similar to what exists today.

Father Michel Marie Jullien S.J. (1827–1911) gives some more details: "*Le village chrétien d'Abou-Hennès, le Père Jean, se montre au nord-est dans la plaine et marque notre route. Il doit son origine à un ancien monastère de St-Jean-le-Petit. L'église, fort ancienne, présente au complet les dispositions des plus vieilles églises coptes ; les colonnes, les chapiteaux, les portes offrent des restes d'architecture de l'époque romaine ; mais tout le haut de l'édifice et ses quinze coupoles, en simples briques de limon séchées au soleil, sont sans doute d'une époque moins reculée.*"[59]

Butler was the first to publish an architectural plan of the church, which he obtained from Sir Arthur Gordon, who is identified in the preface of the book as Governor General of Ceylon.[60] It is not known who has drawn this plan. According to Grossmann, it shows several inaccuracies and whoever produced it, did not understand the building phases.[61]

56 Upper Ansina.

57 As far as is known, the oldest icon still preserved in the church, depicting Saint John the Little and Abū Maqqār (Saint Macarius), dates to 1580 AM/1864-1865 AD, which is after Jomard's visit. The icon is dated and signed by the painter Anasṭāsī al-Rūmī al-muṣawarātī al-Qudsī (fig. 4 in this article; a photo was previously published in al-Syriany, Habib 1990, photo 142-2).

58 Jomard 1818, p. 38.

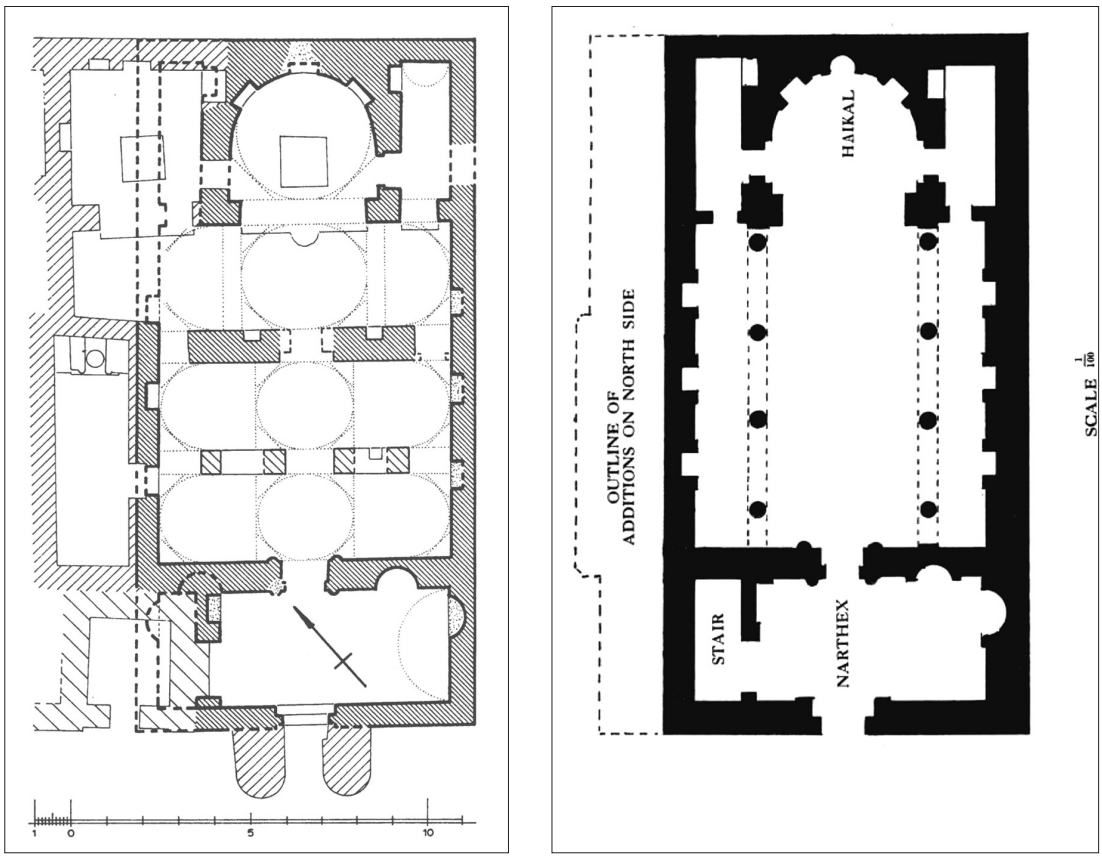
59 Jullien 1894, p. 496.

60 Butler 1884, vol. I, fig. 29 and p. xiii. Sir Arthur Charles Hamilton Gordon, first Baron Stanmore (1829–1912), was Governor of Ceylon from 1883 to 1890 (Francis 2011). Nothing in his biography points to an interest in churches in Egypt and his involvement in Butler's book is an enigma.

61 Grossmann 1971, p. 158.

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George Somers Clarke (1841–1926), an accomplished British architect, provided the first reliable plans, cross sections, and architectural details of the church at the turn of the century.[62] Clarke also provided a reconstruction of what the church, in his view, would have initially looked like (Fig. 5b). He interprets the original building as a basilican church with a narthex (with a staircase in its northern part), nave and aisles divided by rows of four columns, and an apse with narrow side rooms. The apse has three niches (Fig. 13) and doorways to the side-rooms. These rooms could also be entered from the side aisles. The north and south walls of the church were provided with three niches each, corresponding to the centre of the intercolumnia. A wooden roof would have covered the nave while the apse would have had a dome. The side rooms were barrel-vaulted. In the narthex were some niches, and in the northern part a blocked doorway that would have led to stairs going up to the roof.



5a. 5b.

Fig. 5. Plan of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis: **a.** Plan of the church, showing the original outline and later additions, except the hall adjoining the south wall and the connecting arched windows (after Grossmann 2002, fig. 141); **b.** Reconstruction of the original plan according to Somers Clarke (after Clarke 1912, pl. LVI).

62 As far as is known, there is no precise date for his visit to Dayr Abū Ḥinnis. His book was published in 1912, but most of his architectural drawings were produced between 1899 and 1901, as mentioned in the entries for other churches. An indication regarding the date might be that he visited the church in the neighbouring village of Dayr al-Baršā (called "Dêr el Nakhla") in November 1900 (Clarke 1912, p. 181). Somers Clarke's papers, plans, and photographs of Egyptian churches are kept in London and Oxford (Grossmann 1971, p. 159, n. 17; for the present locations, see https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F68275). We have not been able to consult these archives.

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The doorway from the narthex to the nave, and niches in the narthex, the nave and the apse are provided with half columns or pilasters and sculpted capitals, parts of sculpted friezes, and in the apse, sculpted niche heads (Figs. 6, 7, 8a, 9, 13 and 14).

At an unknown point in time (which Clarke described as "medieval"), the wooden roof of the nave was replaced by domes, half domes and barrel vaults, which required more support. Therefore, heavy pillars, more in the shape of walls, were built in the nave, leaving narrow "doorways" for circulation. The eastern half of the northern wall was—at another unknown date—demolished to enlarge the northern side room and to build a longitudinal room parallel to the nave.

Whereas Peter Grossmann agrees with Somers Clarke on the medieval phase of the church, where domes and half domes replaced the wooden roof, supported by heavy wall-like structures in the nave, he has a different opinion concerning the original construction. His study of the church was published in 1971, and he elaborated on several points in his 1982 book. In his 2002 handbook on Christian architecture in Egypt, he summarized his views.[63] Over time, some of his ideas concerning adjustments of the interior changed. The following reconstruction of the timeline of the architectural history of the Old Church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis is a synthesis of his thoughts (Fig. 5a).

Originally, starting at the west, the narthex was a continuous room with symmetrically placed niches (Figs. 5a, 6 and 7). The northern part was later turned into a small room, although not for accommodating a staircase.



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

Fig. 6. The narthex of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, with a view to the east. Doorway and niches are flanked by pilasters with sculpted capitals. The tiled floor dates to the 1940s.

63 Grossmann 1971; Grossmann 1973; Grossmann 1982, pp. 120–121, 205–206 and fig. 50; Grossmann 2002, pp. 522–523 and fig. 141.

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Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

Fig. 7. The narthex of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, view of the northern part.

Grossmann argues that the church is too small and too narrow for a nave with side-aisles and that the intercolumnia of the colonnades that Clarke proposed are unusually wide. Moreover, he adds that the suggested placement of the columns near the apse and western wall would have been awkward (Fig. 5b). Besides, he claims that columns have never been recorded nor found. However, later tests carried out by the Supreme Council of Antiquities have shown that a column is still in place in the northern part of the western division wall (Figs. 8a-8b). This undermines Grossmann's theory and questions his architectural model regarding the original state of the church.

Grossman proposes a one room naos, with a wide apse (another argument for a one-room structure) and two narrow side rooms. He estimates that the width of the church could easily have been covered with single beams. Furthermore, in his view, the doorway between the apse and the northern side room (Fig. 5a-5b) did probably not exist, while the central niche in the apse could have been of a later date.

On the basis of the architectural sculpture, Grossmann's 1971 and 1982 publications dated the construction of the church to the middle of the 6th century.[64] In his 2002 publication he revised the date to the 5th century, again in relation to the architectural sculpture.[65] The possibility of reused sculpture from Antinoupolis, *spolia*, already mentioned by Jomard, Jullien and Clédat (see below), is not mentioned.[66]

64 Grossmann 1971, p. 169; Grossmann 1982, p. 205.

65 Grossmann 2002, p. 523, n. 440, with reference to Hans-Georg Severin for the date of the sculpture.

66 In Grossmann's publication of 1971, mainly photographs of individual capitals in the narthex and the nave were published. Hans-Georg Severin recently confirmed a 5th-century date for the specific pieces he studied. Previously, he did not have an overview of all architectural sculpture in the church. Considering the sculpture of the niches in the altar room and the way these different pieces are assembled, the preliminary assessment is that many pieces of sculpture (capitals, pilasters, [half-] columns and niche heads) can be dated to the 5th century. However, given the clumsy and unprofessional manner the niche decoration in the apse is put together, these elements are definitely *spolia*. Therefore, a mid-6th century date for the church is plausible (with many thanks to H.-G. Severin, email correspondence 2025). It seems that Grossmann's change of date to the 5th century was most likely due to a misunderstanding. A forthcoming full study of the architecture and sculpture will, hopefully, shed more light on the building history of the church.

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Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

8a.



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

8b.

Fig. 8. Interior of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis: **a.** View to the north-west, with a photograph of Hegumen Mīṣā'īl Baḥr on the northern wall. Next to the photograph are remains of paintings; the column in the pillar to the right is marked with a white frame (fig. 8b). At the left is one of the arched windows with brick trellis work to the southern hall. **b.** Detail of fig. 8a. Part of a column in the northern part of the western division wall.

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Around the 7th century or shortly after, a ḫūrus, a transverse space between the eastern rooms (altar room and side rooms) and the naos,[67] was created by constructing the eastern wall parts in the naos, which originally only had a central and southern doorway (Fig. 5a). The western piers/walls in the naos would have been added when the wooden roof was replaced by domes and half domes.

At another unknown point in time, the northern side room was enlarged, and the northern room parallel to the naos of the church, which is now the baptistery, was added (Figs. 5a and 9). The heavy semicircular "masses of masonry" flanking the western entrance, are also an addition to the original fabric, likewise from a later, unspecified period.[68] These changes are present in the plan published by Butler in 1884.[69]

Currently, a southern hall, adjacent to the church, is connected to the naos through large arched windows, set in the original southern naos wall. Clarke describes the southern wall as being intact and, from the outside, "free from accumulation," which is shown in a drawing.[70] This means that it did not yet exist at the time of Clarke's visit, and it must have been built sometime in the first decades of the 20th century.[71]



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

Fig. 9. Interior of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, western part, view to the north with the entrance to the northern room that is now the baptistery.

67 The ḫūrus (Grossmann 2002, pp. 72–76) was accessible to the clergy. During the Eucharistic liturgy, it was the place for the Liturgy of the Word (the readings, psalms, hymns and sermons). The subsequent part, the Liturgy of the Faithful (all prayers and acts around the Eucharistic sacrifice), takes place in the altar room (Brakmann 1995, pp. 115–132).

68 Clarke 1912, pp. 181–187, pls. LIII (fig. 2), LIV-LVI and figs. 40–41.

69 Butler 1884, vol. I, p. 365, and fig. 29. See also note 60.

70 Clarke 1912, pp. 185–186 and fig. 40.

71 See the next section.

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French archaeologist Jean Clédat (1871–1943) visited Dayr Abū Ḥinnis in March 1901, most probably just after Somers Clarke. His main objective was a study of the quarry church but he made a brief stop at the village church. Clédat noted: "… *une vieille église, construite en pierre, dont les montants de portes, chapiteaux corinthiens et tous les fragments de sculptures proviennent des ruines d'Antinoé. Le baptistère, qui est au fond de l'église à gauche, a au centre une grande vasque surmontée d'un pied cylindrique. Au centre de la vasque a été encastrée une antique table d'offrande en forme de demi-cercle dans le creux de laquelle on a gravé une inscription copte, qui n'a pas été signalée par M.M. Jomard, Sayce, et Butler*."[72] Clédat continues with a copy of the inscription, an epitaph for a woman called Febronia, who died in 750 AD.[73] This inscription is engraved on a marble table top that was reused as a tombstone. Clédat found it set in the bottom of the basin of a font;[74] it now covers the altar in the northern side room (Fig. 10).



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik 2021

Fig. 10. The tombstone of Febronia on the northern altar of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis.

72 Clédat 1902, p. 44.

73 Cramer 1941, pp. 5–7: no. 1; Niccacci 1985; *KSB* I, no. 428. The text belongs to the so-called *Totenklage*-type, a funerary lament, that is especially known from the Antinoupolis area (Cramer 1941).
Yassa ʿAbd al-Masīḥ (1898–1959), curator of the Coptic Museum's library, translated this inscription from Coptic into Arabic (Baḥr 1957, pp. 83–84).

74 The description "*une grande vasque surmontée d'un pied cylindrique*" is puzzling. The other way round would be expected: a basin placed on a cylindrical foot. Perhaps the basin was covered with a cylindrical top or lid when not in use?

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Whereas he identifies the northern side room as a baptistery, Somers Clarke says that there is a font in the southern side room and an altar in the northern side room. In his plan he indicates this altar, topped with the tombstone of Febronia, while he shows an empty southern room.[75]

Clédat adds in a footnote that he had heard that after his visit to Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, that part of the church which contained the epitaph for Febronia, had collapsed, killing several people who were inside at that time.[76] At the time of Somers Clarke's investigations, the church was still intact. However, the street level to the north of the church had risen and at the north-eastern end, the accumulation of debris and sand was so high that it was possible to step directly onto the roof.[77] Therefore, the collapse of the north-eastern part might have been caused by pressure on the walls from outside.

In 1912, the German prince Johann Georg, Duke of Saxony (1869–1938), who was interested in Egypt's Christian past, visited Dayr Abū Ḥinnis.[78] He knew Clarke's work and adds: "*Das Innere ist ziemlich dunkel, entbehrt aber nicht einer gewissen feierlichen Wirkung. Einige Kapitäle gehen bestimmt ins erste Jahrtausend zurück. Ich schätze sie auf etwa VII. Jahrhundert. Am schönsten derselben ist die alte Polychromie erhalten. Natürlich soll die Kirche von der hl. Helena erbaut sein. Leider habe ich eine Inschrift übersehen, von der mir nachher Lefèbvre* [sic] *erzählt hat*."[79] This inscription mentioned by Gustave Lefebvre, a French archaeologist, was most likely the tombstone of Febronia.

The prince was an enthusiastic photographer. He published two photographs of the church: the western façade with a small bell tower to the left (Fig. 11), and a view of the narthex with two pilasters and capitals.[80] The façade, with the modest, simple tower in this photo differs from Clarke's description. Neither Clarke nor Clédat mention a tower. Clarke describes the two semi-circular wall masses flanking the door and adds that "[t]here is a platform above the doorway approached by steps from the north."[81] There were no longer any steps and platform in place in 1912, while the large niche and doorway to the north of the church entrance do not feature in Clarke's plan. Thus, it is likely that the tower would have been built approximately between 1901 and 1912, probably in conjunction with the restoration after the collapse of the north-eastern part of the church.

75 Clarke 1912, p. 185 and pl. LV.

76 Clédat 1902, p. 44, note 1.

77 Clarke 1912, p. 185 and pl. LV, cf. Grossmann 1971, p. 158, n. 15 and 161, n. 31. Grossmann wrongly asserts that Clarke reported that the northern side room and the northern room now used as a baptistery were filled with debris at the time of the latter's visit. Clarke, however, says nothing of the sort; he spoke about debris accumulating against the outside of the walls. He could not have measured the northern part of the church if it had been buried in debris, nor could he have seen the altar with the tombstone of Febronia, indicated in his plan.

78 On Prince Johann Georg, see Heide 2004.

79 Johann Georg Herzog zu Sachsen 1914, pp. 42–43.

80 Johann Georg Herzog zu Sachsen 1914, figs. 110–111. A second photo of the façade, taken during a subsequent journey in 1927 is preserved in Freiburg im Breisgau, Universitätsarchiv der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität (Bestand C 197-00350, see Petersen 2014, p. 2974).

81 Clarke 1912, p. 185 and pl. LV.

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Fig. 11. Prince Johann Georg, photograph of the façade of the village church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis (1912), showing the first bell tower (Freiburg im Breisgau, Universitätsarchiv der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Bestand C 197, UAF_C0197_08101, published in von Sachsen 1914, fig. 110).

HEGUMEN MIṢĀʾĪL BAḤRʾS RENOVATIONS OF THE CHURCH DURING THE 1940S

Labīb Baḥr (1903–1983), the son of the *ʿUmda/Šayḫ al-balad* (mayor) of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, was born in the village. As a young man he went to Cairo to attend the Coptic Clerical College, from which he graduated in 1923. He was ordained as a priest in 1924, taking the name Miṣāʾīl Baḥr, and in 1938 he was ordained as hegumen.[82] Hegumen Miṣāʾīl Baḥr was a man of wide reading, learned, and a prolific writer. Other than his religious activities and work with the community, he also carried out restorations as well as architectural additions to the church in the 1940s.

One of his interventions was the construction of brick altar screens (Fig. 12). In his book *Tārīḫ al-qiddīs al-Anbā Yūḥannis al-qaṣīr wa manṭiqat Anṣinā (Antinoé)*, he notes that "the central altar [apse] has a wooden screen with crosses and that it is said that the original screen was inlaid with ivory, and was moved to the Church of the Virgin Mary in Mallawī, and that it was replaced by another one, which was damaged [and infested] by termites."[83] The book

82 Luwayd 2019, p. 138.

83 Baḥr 1957, p. 80. Translation by the authors.
Although this book on the history of Saint John the Little and the area of Ansina was published in 1957, it must have been written before the renovations of the 1940s. All photographs show the condition of the church prior to these restoration works, that are not mentioned in the text. The villagers informed us that the Church of the Virgin Mary in Mallawī has recently burnt down.

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does not include a photograph of this wooden screen, and it is not known what it looked like. While the use of red bricks for the altar screen did not please contemporary scholars,[84] especially from aesthetic and historical perspectives, the termites must have been the reason for this solution. It seems that at that time, for years, the village had been terrorized by termites, destroying everything built of wood.[85] A square fragment of a former wooden screen was preserved in the Hegumen's collection of antiques, but it is unclear to which screen it belonged.[86]

The floor of the church was tiled with modern patterned cement tiles (Figs. 6, 7, 8a, 9 and 12). There is no evidence of how the previous flooring looked.

Moreover, the hall at the southern side of the church with large arched windows in the connecting wall, was renovated.[87] A light-weight roof with steel beams was constructed, the floor was tiled, and the arched openings were filled with trellis work of fired brick (Figs. 8a and 12), which replaced the wooden screens. These measures were, no doubt, also linked to the termite plague.[88]

The most visible addition, however, was the new bell tower constructed in the 1940s, that is still extant today (Figs. 3a-3b).[89] The earlier bell tower, shown in Prince Johann Georg's photographs (Fig. 11) must have been demolished to construct the new one. With time, this new bell tower became an iconic feature of this church and till very recently its bell was regularly ringing to announce the start of the different prayers to the village residents.[90]

84 Serge Sauneron, at that time librarian of IFAO and not yet its director, was very critical of the modern restorations and specifically the use of red bricks (Archives IFAO, Sauneron 1073 – 283, boîte de fiches: Deir Abou Hennes et la montagne d'Antinoë 26-1-1964).

85 The situation was so bad that people were killed by collapsing roof beams, and homeowners deserted their houses and moved elsewhere, see Galdas, Finney 1959, pp. 208–209.

86 Meinardus 1965–1966, p. 265; "A square fragment (21 cm. by 21 cm.) of the former haikal-screen of the Church of St. John the Short." Hegumen Miṣā'īl Baḥr had a small collection of manuscripts, woodwork, liturgical objects and engraved marble fragments, which he kept in a cupboard in the reception room of his house. Otto Meinardus documented this collection (Meinardus 1965–1966).

87 The building date of this room is not known. However, a photograph of an arched opening with a wooden screen was published in Hegumen Miṣā'īl Baḥr book on Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, that, as noted, was most probably written before the renovations of the 1940s (Baḥr 1957, p. 80).

88 The technical details of the renovations that took place in the early 1940s show that the brick work of the altar screens, the floor tiles of the church and the southern hall, as well as the ceiling of the latter room are very similar to some elements of the façade and the front porch of the house of Hegumen Miṣā'īl Baḥr and his family. This similarity might point to work carried out during the same time. While it was not possible to find information regarding the funding of the renovation of the church, it was common in villages in Upper Egypt that the family of the priest, when they could afford it, paid for works in the church, along with donations from the congregation.

89 Luwayd 2019, p. 122. In a guide of Coptic churches and monasteries in Upper Egypt a photograph of this bell tower accompanies the short description of the church (al-Syriany, Habib 1990, p. 116 and photo 142-1).

90 Due to the appearance of some cracks in the body of the bell tower, a consultant recently advised the current priest, Abuna Yūsāb Hišmat, to shore it and not to ring the bell due to the vibration it causes. Other consolidation and preventive conservation measures, such as the repair of the cracks in the domes and their re-plastering were carried out, with the approval and under the supervision of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities in collaboration with the Coptic Church who funded these works.

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Photo Matjaž Kačičnik /IFAO 2022

Fig. 12. The brick altar screens constructed in the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis in the 1940s.



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik 2021

Fig. 13 The apse of the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis with its three niches.

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THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE *COMITÉ DE CONSERVATION DES MONUMENTS DE L'ART ARABE*

Shortly after, in 1948, the members of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe* (hereinafter *Comité*)[91] discussed the archaeological and historical value of numerous Coptic monuments outside Cairo. They decided that it would be worthwhile to inventory them, and to work on the preparation of a plan that would ensure their conservation.[92]

In fact, three decades earlier, the issue of how to protect Coptic churches and monasteries in the governorates was raised by Marcus Simaika Pasha (1864–1944),[93] based on a notice he had received from Somers Clarke regarding the demolition of a Coptic monastery, Dayr al-Ṣalīb, near the village of Naqada in Upper Egypt. As the *Comité* did not yet have an inventory of Coptic monuments in the provinces, Simaika compiled a list for the *Comité*, which also included the village church of Abū Ḥinnis. The *Comité* members decided to write to the local governorates and the ecclesiastical authorities to ensure that the registered sites were protected. They recommended that nothing should be done to these monuments prior to informing the *Comité*.[94]

It is unlikely that this guideline was strictly applied, due to several administrative and practical reasons. However, the *Comité*'s interest to inventory and conserve Islamic and Coptic monuments in the governorates remained on the agenda until more systematic action was taken at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s.

During that time, *Comité* members started to inventory Islamic and Coptic monuments in the different Egyptian provinces and to examine them. Reports on their state of conservation were produced, including recommendations on the possible or needed consolidation and restoration measures. This was done in stages. In 1952, *Comité* member ʿAbdel Raḥman Maḥmoud ʿAbdel Tawāb and his *Comité* colleagues, engineer Fatḥi ʿAbdel Rahman and photographer Maḥmoud ʿAbdel Raouf, went to inspect the monuments—classified or not—in the governorate of Assiūṭ, Upper Egypt.

ʿAbdel Tawāb's report included the village church of Abū Ḥinnis. He suggested to classify the church as a monument, to which the *Comité* member Muḥammad ʿAbdel Fattāḥ Ḥelmī responded that it was already classified.[95] The village church of Abū Ḥinnis was, like other monuments in the governorates, registered in the earlier list compiled by Simaika, and also in the list published in 1922.[96] This registration seems to have become only legally effective at a

91 The *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe* was the body established in December 1881 through a khedival decree to inventory, restore and conserve Egypt's Islamic Monuments. It was created under the Ministry of *Awqāf* (Islamic religious and charitable endowments). In 1896, Coptic monuments that were in use, not archaeological sites, were added to the *Comité*'s mandate; works were carried out with funding from the Coptic Patriarchate and other secular sources. For an overview on studies carried out on the *Comité* as well as on its foundation, see Bakhoum 2021, pp. 19–36 and pp. 54–64. For the *Comité*'s involvement on Coptic monuments see Reid 1995 and his later publications, as well as Bakhoum 2017, pp. 102–104.

92 Bull. *CCMAA* 40, 1946-1953, "875ᵉ Rapport du Comité Permanent," pp. 63–64 and "Procès-Verbal No. 299," pp. 68–74, esp. p. 71.

93 On Simaika, see Simaika, Henein 2017.

94 Bull. *CCMAA* 32, 1915–1919, "Procès-Verbal Nº 233", pp. 526–528.

95 Bull. *CCMAA* 40, 1946–1953, "Rapport sur l'inspection des monuments de Haute-Égypte," pp. 387–400, esp. pp. 399–400.

96 Bull. *CCMAA* 32, 1915–1919, "Liste des édifices classés d'Alexandrie et des provinces," pp. 813–816, esp. p. 813 (as Abou Hennis). This bulletin was published in 1922, and the list published in this bulletin was put together in response to

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later date, namely when Law no. 215 of the year 1951 for the protection of antiquities was issued, followed by the Ministerial Decree no. 10357 (also of 1951), that included the list of registered monuments in Cairo (numbered from 1 to 623) as well as those in the governorates, which were, however, unnumbered.[97] The latter list also included the village church of Abū Ḥinnis, and it is most likely this classification that ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Ḥelmī was referring to. In all official communications and documents of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities (currently under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities) regarding this church, the registration mentioned is as per this decree.[98]

In his report, ʿAbdel Tawāb also provided a short background of the church's architecture as well as a brief description of its earlier mention by other scholars. He dated the church to the 5th century and wrote that the wooden roof was replaced by domes for which the original columns were concealed in pillars.[99]

Regarding the interventions that could be carried out in the church, he suggested the following:

> *L'église dans son état actuel n'a besoin d'aucune réparation ; mais si l'on juge nécessaire de la restaurer dans son état originel, il faudra supprimer les murs de refend qui se trouvent à l'intérieur et rétablir son plafond à condition de le construire en béton armé pour éviter les méfaits des xylophages.*
>
> *Mais si l'on juge opportun de la laisser dans son état actuel conformément à la théorie qui veut que ces constructions aient acquis un caractère archéologique, elle n'aurait besoin, dans ce cas, que de travaux de consolidation dans les maçonneries qui supportent les coupoles et de quelques autres travaux.*[100]

The *Comité*'s decision was to keep the state of the church as it is, "*sauf à consolider les maçonneries de la coupole.*"[101]

the issuance of Law no. 8 of the year 1918 for the protection of Arab monuments. It seems, however, that for some of the monuments included in this list, the legal implications of this classification were unclear, and in other circumstances they proved to be a complicated issue. For more on this matter, see Bakhoum forthcoming.

97 For more details on these lists, see al-Ḥabašī, Warner 1998.

98 What the registration of an active church as a monument meant after the issuance of Law no. 215 of the year 1951, and what it means today is a subject that is not discussed here. But in general, it is important to highlight that one of the aims of this registration is to legally protect the monuments from being demolished or drastically altered. It also means that all restoration works must be approved and supervised by the responsible antiquities' authority, today the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. For church properties, Law no. 117 of the year 1983 stipulates that the costs for such works are to be borne by the body in charge of Coptic endowments or Egyptian churches; the same applies to Islamic endowments and other private properties.

99 It is clear that ʿAbdel Tawāb follows Somers Clarke's arguments; he does not say, whether he has seen remains of columns himself. In his report, ʿAbdel Tawāb also wrote that the wooden roof was replaced by domes after an attack by Arabs and wood eating insects (probably the termites), which, according to Abū Ṣāliḥ [*sic*] (at that time seen as the author of *The History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* (*HCME*)—see note 3) were destroying the wood in the monastery and the church. However, the author(s) of the *HCME* do not even mention Dayr Abū Ḥinnis, monastery or church. Somers Clarke does list this type of remarks in the *HCME* in his chapter on the village church of Abū Ḥinnis, as examples for reasons why wooden roofs were replaced by domes, but these remarks refer to other churches (Clarke 1912, pp. 186–187).

100 Bull. *CCMAA* 40, 1946–1953, "Rapport sur l'inspection des monuments de Haute-Égypte", pp. 387–400, esp. pp. 399–400. The *Comité* did reconstruct several Cairene Mamluk domes in reinforced concrete (Bakhoum 2021, pp. 111–160).

101 Bull. *CCMAA* 40, 1946–1953, "9ii[e] Rapport du Comité Permanent," pp. 384–386, esp. p. 386.

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CONCLUSION

Since the renovations of the 1940s and the registration of the village church of Abū Ḥinnis as a monument in 1951, only preventive conservation measures have been carried out. The church is in need of a comprehensive documentation, research and conservation project. On-site investigations and analysis would allow for more detailed research on the architecture, sculpture (Figs. 6, 7, 8a, 9 and 13-14), wall paintings (Fig. 14), icons (Fig. 4), inscriptions and graffiti. This endeavour will certainly shed light on, for example, questions on what the original structure of the church looked like, whether all architectural sculpture consisted of *spolia* or was partly made to order, possible dates for its foundation and successive phases of renovation and restoration, why visitors or pilgrims came to this church (graffiti), and its potential link to the nearby sites of Upper Ansina and Antinoupolis, as well as the monastic settlement in the hills to the south-east.

This article is a first step in this process, presenting historical sources, the patron saint, reports of travellers and early scholars, previous research, renovations of the church during the early 1940s, and the involvement of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe*.

Archaeological excavations and in-situ research would provide a more profound understanding of the church and direct neighbourhood. However, archaeological research will most likely remain a desideratum; the church is nowadays surrounded by modern buildings. Any potential archaeological remains around the church are no longer visible, nor accessible.

Meanwhile, the church remains a living heritage site of great significance to the inhabitants of the village, the clergy, the wider Coptic community as well as the scientific community at large.



Photo Matjaž Kačičnik/IFAO 2022

Fig. 14. Remains of a wall painting of two standing saints on the eastern part of the north wall of the naos in the church of Dayr Abū Ḥinnis.

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