



# A Visit to El Souryan Monastery

Summarized by: A Mighty Arrow  
St. Mary and Archangel Michael Church, Houston TX



*Reference Book: A Visit to El Souryan Monastery  
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## Introduction:

**O**ver the years, the whole world in

general and researchers in particular has focussed their attention on the Coptic monasteries. These monasteries are the source of monasticism, the founder of which is St. Anthony from the fourth Century.

The Coptic monasteries helped preserve the true Christian faith and dogma, handing it down to the following generations until the present day.

It is from the monasteries that the head of the church, the pope,

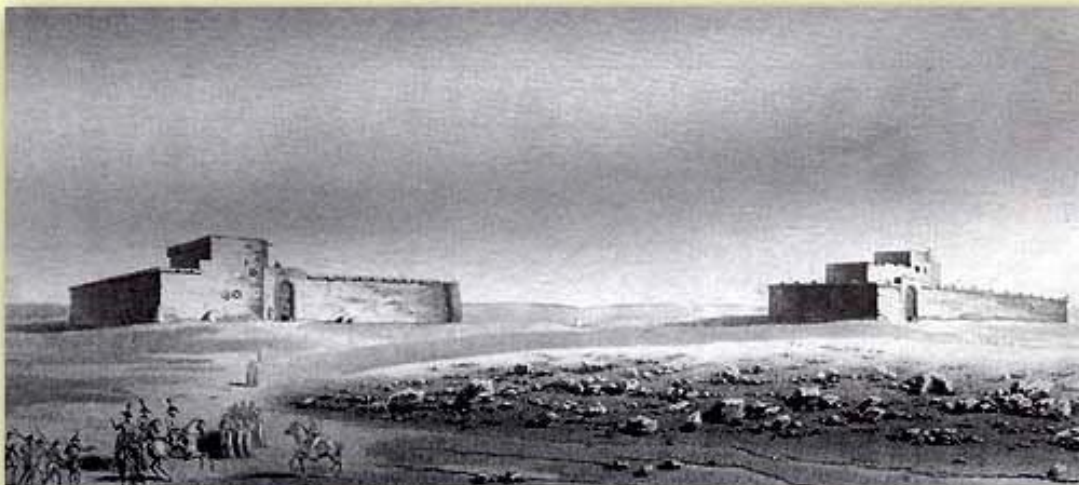
and bishops of the various dioceses get selected. In addition, it is there that newly ordained priests receive the rituals of administering the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

If that is the magnitude of the importance of the monasteries in the life of our church, it behooves us then to get to know and preserve this heritage.

There are many monasteries in Egypt located in different areas. In this issue of Mighty Arrows, we will take the reader on a tour around El Souryan Monastery.



*St. Mary's Church,  
El Souryan Monastery*



*The Monasteries of St. Pshoi and the Syrians as illustrated in  
Description de l’Egypte (1809)*

## Location

**E**l Souryan Monastery is located in Wadi El Natroun, an area in Egypt, which had been blessed by the passage of the Holy Family through it during their three and a half years journey to Egypt in escape from Herod.

## History of the Monastery:

**E**l Souryan Monastery was founded in the fifth Century and was named after the Virgin Mary mother of God. The aim behind the name was to consolidate the dogma of the Theotokos which Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople had heretically denied. The dogma of the Theotokos is basically the faith in the Blessed Virgin Mary being the mother of God. Nestorius was subsequently excommunicated by the church during the Synod of Ephesus in the year 431.

Later on, the monastery got to be called El Souryan Monastery because some Syrian monks lived there for sometime either in solitude or in community life with the Egyptian monks. This is because both the Egyptian and Syrian churches share the same Orthodox faith and dogma up to this date. Thus the monastery’s library became rich in the Coptic and Syrian culture as well as some Arabic during the ninth and tenth century.

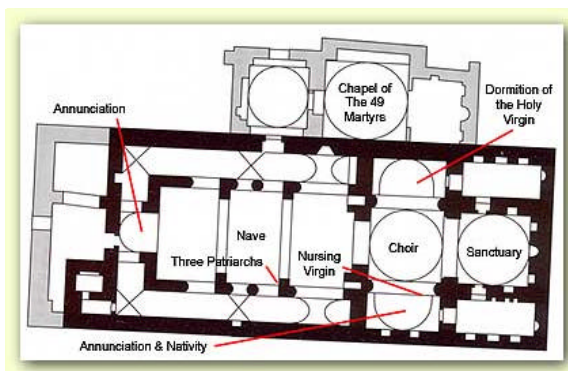
The Syrian monks continued to live in the monastery until the sixteenth century after which their number began to dwindle until they disappeared completely.

## What is there in the El Souryan Monastery?

**T**here is a lot of precious old artifact. For example: St. Mary’s church, the door of the symbols, the old fortress, Abba Bishoy’s cell, Mar Ephrem’s tree and many others.



## St. Mary's Church:



**D**esigned on the shape of the cross, the church was built in the year 645. It has an elevated full dome in the first part of the church surrounded by three other half domes. These domes with paintings representing St. Mary reposed with the apostles surrounding her, the assumption of her body, and the annunciation and birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and the ascension of our Lord into heaven are located in the far east, inside

the Holy Sanctuary, in the north and in the south. The ceiling of the middle part of the church is half cylindrical in shape. A Dutch mission doing some excavation in the monastery discovered five layers on the church walls. The dates of these layers are as follows:

1. The first layer with Coptic art from the seventh Century.
2. The second layer from the eighth Century.
3. The third layer with both Coptic and Syrian art from the tenth Century.
4. The fourth layer with Syrian art and Coptic script from the thirteen Century.
5. The fifth layer with Coptic art from the eighteenth Century.

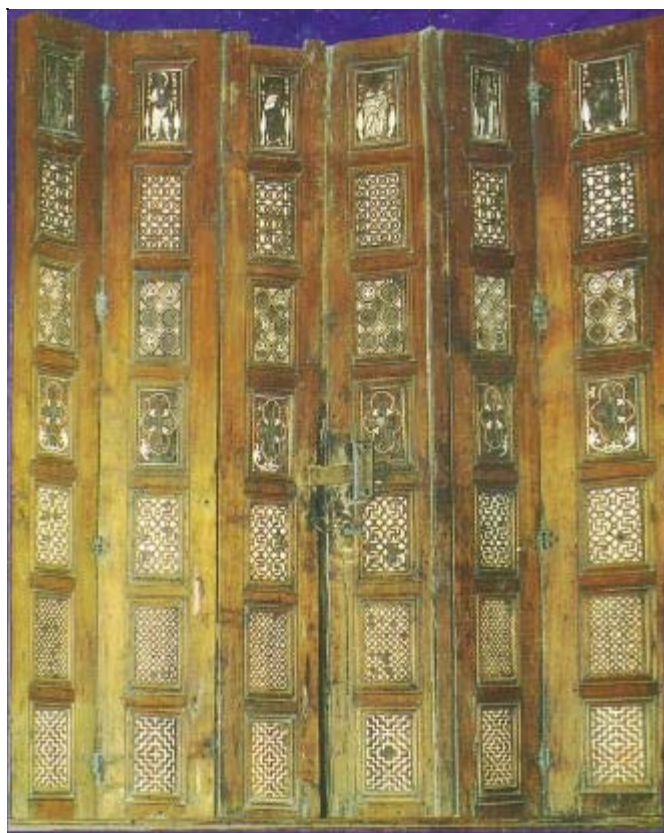
A French mission working on cleaning the painting of the Ascension discovered



another exclusively picturesque painting dating back to the seventh Century. This painting is of the Holy Virgin Mary with Gabriel the Archangel, Isaiah, Moses, Ezekiel and Daniel. Each figure



has some biblical prophecies concerning the Divine Incarnation, the annunciation, and the perpetual virginity of the mother of God.



*The Symbol Door*

## The Symbol Door

Constructed in the middle altar in 914 during the years of Pope Gabriel the first of Alexandria and John the fourth of Antioch, this door signifies the relationship between the two

churches. On the left upper section of the left side of the door there an icon of our Lord with St. Mark and St. Dioscorus. The upper section on the right side of the door carries an icon of the Virgin Mary with St. Ignatius, the first patriarch in Antioch and St. Severus of Antioch. The rest of the two sides of the door are divided into six vertical sections, each signifying an epoch from the onset of Christianity to the end of the world.

1. The Persecution Era: symbolized by circles surrounding a big cross and this big cross joins other crosses as a sign of the strength and unity of the Christian faith.
2. The era of the spread of Christianity: symbolized by six circles with a cross in each signifying the six different parts of the world; Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople and Carthage.
3. The era of the spread of Islam in Egypt: signified by a crescent and some Islamic decorations surrounding the cross.
4. The era of the spread of heresies and false teachings: signified by six crosses aslant surrounded by two straight ones that represent the steadfastness of the church's faith.
5. The era of the weakening of faith and spiritual coldness: signified by many unclear divided crosses representing the appearance of too many denominations.
6. The second coming; signified by a big distinct cross, surrounded by a halo



of light signifying the restored unity and strength of faith.

### St. Bishoy's Cell

**D**ating back to the fourth Century and located on the western side of the church is the entrance to St. Bishoy's cell where he had lived in seclusion for thirty five years and saw the Lord Jesus Christ himself several times. The loop to which he used to tie his hair to keep himself awake in order not to miss on praying is still attached to the ceiling.

### The relics of the saints

**I**n this church there are the relics of twelve saints.



**1. St John Khame:** The monastery intercessor: reposed in the Lord on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 859. The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to him giving him three Denarii and asking him to put them in the monastery saying,

"This is my dwelling forever, and I shall be with them as I have been with you and this monastery will be named after me."

### **2. St. Moses the Black:**

Born in the fourth Century of heathen parents, he was a murderer, swindler and a thief. Not satisfied with his state, he was constantly searching



about the nature of the universe and the power behind it until one day he reached the wilderness of St. Macarius. He met with St. Isidore and St. Macarius who had seen an angel cleaning a black board, replacing the black color with white at each sin confessed. St. Moses was martyred by the Berbers in 407.

### **3. St. Ephraim the Syrian:**

A man of prayer and monastic life, he is one of the great saints in the Orthodox Church.



With his poetic instinct, he wrote more than one hundred and fifty songs the themes of which were about Faith, the Holy Trinity and



refuting the heretics. Like St. John, he too had a stick that bloomed into a tree, which is still in existence in the monastery. St. Ephraim reposed peacefully in the Lord in 373 leaving behind a wealth of songs, hymns and homilies. That is why the church calls him "The Harp of the Holy Spirit".

4. **St. John the short:** He is the owner of the Tree of Obedience



found in his monastery. Tradition tells us that this tree is the original stick that had bloomed and flowered because of his utter obedience to his spiritual father who had ordered him to walk twelve miles daily fetching water to water the stick. "This is

the fruit of obedience," his spiritual father used to say picking the fruit of that tree and giving to the fathers. On his ordination day, a voice was heard saying, "worthy, worthy, worthy." He performed many miracles of healing, casting out demons and raising dead in the name of Jesus. Wild animals used to obey him just as he did his spiritual father. He reposed peacefully in 409 after he had been informed about the time

by St. Mary, St. Macarius and St. Bemwa, his teacher.

5. **S t .**

**Dioscorus:**

The twenty fifth patriarch of Alexandria, he was educated by Pope Cyril the 24<sup>th</sup> who is known as the pillar of religion.



Both were

present at the council of Ephesus that met in 431. St. Dioscorus was elected Patriarch in 444. In 449, he defended the Orthodox faith at the second council after which he was exiled by Queen Bulcharia and King Martin in the island of Gagra in Asia Minor, (Turkey) where he spent five years defending the Orthodox faith. In 475, he reposed in peace receiving the crown of martyrdom.

6. **St. Severus of Antioch:** At his baptism, a hand appeared over his head and a voice was heard saying: "worthy, worthy, worthy." He fought and overcame the heretics and wrote a lot against them. On the day of his ordaining as patriarch of Antioch in 512, a sweet aroma filled the city. In 518, he escaped from Egypt because of his defense of the



Orthodox faith against the Chalcedians. During his presence in one of the churches at Wadi El Natron, while a priest was about to pray the Divine Liturgy, he discovered the absence of the bread from the

alter. After tearful prayers and supplication, an angel appeared and informed the priest of the presence of Patriarch Severus in the church. On inviting him to come forth to conduct the prayers, the bread was returned back on the alter. He reposed peacefully in 538.

**7 & 8 St. Kyriakous and Juliet His Mother:**



Descending from a royal family, St. Juliet was born in a Christian family, in the city of Iconia, Asia Minor. Juliet married a devout Christian who soon died leaving her with a baby boy, Kyriakus. She and her son underwent a

lot of persecution during the attack launched by the Emperor Diocletian. Both received martyrdom in 305.

**9. Prince Tadros the Eastern:** Born

in Antioch in 275 of Christian parents, he became a renowned army officer. He was given a sword by Michael, the Archangel in order to fight the fights of the Lord. He



saved his cousin from captivity with a fiery sword from the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Angels came down from heaven destroying the idols and singing "Behold Tadros the Eastern who came to win". He was martyred by Diocletian.

**10. The Martyr Jacob the amputated:** He used to hold a high

office at the Persian Palace. At the beginning of his Christian life, his faith weakened. However, when his mother, wife and sister came to know, they blamed him strongly. So, he felt remorseful and occupied himself with studying the bible. When the king got to know about





Jacob's practicing of Christianity, he ordered that he be beaten and eventually his arms and legs cut off. He used to pray saying, " I have no legs by which to stand before you Lord nor hands to raise; but I offer you myself." He received martyrdom in 421.

**11. The Forty Martyrs of Sebastia:**



These were forty Roman soldiers, of a troop serving Emperor Lilinkos, who refused to bow down to the idols. Upon hearing this, the Emperor who had already started persecuting Christians, tortured them and finally ordered

that they be thrown in a lake of ice till they died. During the night one of the guards saw forty angels carrying forty crowns, of which they used thirty nine to crown the martyrs. It turned out that one of the forty Roman soldiers, having weakened before the painful ice, gave up his faith and withdrew to the warm baths that had been prepared for whoever denounced his Christian faith. Having witnessed this, the guard confessed his faith in Jesus Christ, accepted martyrdom and received the fortieth crown of

that soldier who soon died after denouncing his faith.

**12. Mary Magdalene's Hair:** Her name

is after the city of Magdal in Capernaum where she was born. She is the one from whom the Lord Jesus Christ had cast out seven demons. She served Him and followed Him during his suffering and crucifixion.



She is also one of the Marys who had gone early to the tomb and found that the stone had been removed. Mary Magdalene is the one the Lord spoke to; but she did not recognize him at first thinking that he was the gardener. After the ascension she remained with the apostles serving with them and bringing many women to Christ. Mary Magdalene suffered a lot from the Jews and some believe that she was martyred.

**T here are other churches in the monastery:**

- St. Mary's Church: dates back to the fourteenth Century. It has a cave that is why it called the church of the cave.
- Church of the forty Sebastian Martyrs: dates back to the tenth Century.





- The Church of Michael the Archangel in the fortress which dates back to the ninth Century. The fortress is eighteen meters high and has four floors and seventeen domes.

## Conclusion

These monasteries should be a source of pride for every Coptic

Orthodox for the rich architectural, artistic and, above all, spiritual heritage that we have in them. A visit to those holy places will definitely bring about a fruitful harvest. Our home country where these holy places are, have also been blessed by the visit that our Lord's visit when He was a baby. May the blessings of El Souryan Monastery and the prayers of His Grace Abba Mettaous, the abbot of the monastery be with us all. Amen

### Wall Icons Located in El Souryan Monastery



This is a tableau depicting three patriarchs, including Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here, they are enthroned in paradise with the souls of the blessed on their laps.



Here, one painting depicts St. Pistentios, bishop of Koptos, and St. Apakir. Pistentios is dressed as a traditional sixth century Coptic bishop, while Apakir takes on the attire of a doctor.



It is a depiction of the annunciation on the left and the nativity on the right. This iconography is Byzantine in style. In the painting of the annunciation, the Holy Virgin is seated, and we see within her expression surprise at Gabriel's announcement. She has her hand raised to her chin, while the angle Gabriel approaches her from the right, extending his right arm in greeting and carrying the herald's staff.