XX.—*On the Coptic Churches of Old Cairo.* By JOHN HENRY MIDDLETON,
Esq., M.A., F.S.A.

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THE site of El-Fustât, or Old Cairo, lies about a mile and a half from the modern city, on the plain between the Nile and the Mokattam hills.

With the exception of the Coptic churches and monasteries little of it now remains, and its site is covered by great heaps of rubbish full of fragments of pottery of various dates.

The Coptic churches are grouped together in "dayrs," or inclosures surrounded by high walls, into which there is only one small entrance; these walls were to protect the Copts from the attacks of the Moslem population.

The larger dayrs are labyrinths of narrow streets, composed of monastic buildings and other Coptic houses, and among these the churches stand, generally almost hidden by the surrounding buildings.

In one instance the remains of a large Roman fortress, called "Babylon,"^a have been used for the inclosing walls: this is the largest of the dayrs, and contains six or seven churches, the principal of which is Abou Sergeh.

CHURCH OF ABOU SERGEH (ST. SERGIUS), OLD CAIRO.

Abou Sergeh is a good representative example of the usual plan of a Coptic church. (See Pl. XXIX.)

The general arrangement is as follows: It has a central nave with elliptical apse at the east end, and north and south aisles two stories high. This second story does not, however, extend over the easternmost bay of the north aisle, or the square chapel at its eastern end, but stops short at the pair of columns by the

^a It was from this fortress that the mediæval name for Cairo—Babylon—was derived. In romances of the Middle Ages the "Sultan of Babylon" usually means the Sultan of Egypt.

pulpit. This eastern bay thus forms a north transept, with roof nearly as high as that of the nave, though on plan it does not project beyond the line of the north aisle wall. The south aisle, on the other hand, is in two stories along its whole length, the upper floor even extending over its eastern apsidal end. West of the nave and aisles there is, in the centre, a large narthex; and, at the end of the north aisle, a chapel with apsidal termination to the north. There was probably once a similar chapel at the west end of the south aisle, but this has been destroyed, and in its place there is now a somewhat complicated system of entrances and porches, which were obviously not part of the original building. The narthex and chapel are, like the aisles, two stories high, and have a flat roof at the same level as the aisle-roofs.

The general plan is one which has been largely adopted for the early basilicas, both of the Eastern and Western Churches. Examples very nearly identical in form and date with this Coptic church are to be found in great numbers among the early Christian churches of Central Syria. (See Count De Vogüe, *La Syrie Centrale*.) As, for instance, at El-Barah, Baquoza, Qualb-Louzeh, and Tourmanin; all these churches have an apsidal nave, aisles with eastern chapels, and a western narthex. They date from the sixth and seventh centuries.

The resemblance, however, between the Syrian and Coptic churches extends no further than the plan. All those above named are built of large carefully worked stones, generally have arches with wide spans, and always have numbers of windows, and a considerable amount of external decoration.

At Constantinople the church of St. Irene has a similar plan, and at Cassaba in Lycia, and at Myra (St. Nicholas), we find a plan originally the same, but further developed by the grouping of additional chapels and porches round the west end.

Western examples are not less numerous. To take a few from among the churches of Rome, we may note St. Niccolo-in-Carcere, St. Giovanni by the Porta Latina, St. Pietro-in-Vincoli, Sta. Sabina, and Sta. Agnese-fuori-le-mura, all of which were originally almost exactly the same in arrangement as the church of Abou Sergeh, though in some cases later alterations have modified the old arrangement.

Mr. Edwin Freshfield has shown in an interesting paper on Byzantine churches (printed in *Archaeologia*, vol. XLIV. p. 383, *seq.*) that the arrangement of three apses at the end of Greek churches is not older than the time of Justinian II., and that it was then first introduced to suit the ritual connected with a new

COPTIC CHURCH OF ABOU SERCEH, - OLD CAIRO.

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processional hymn. This rule would not apply to Coptic churches, as in them the three apses were provided to find space for the three important altars at the east end; and not, as in the Greek church, simply for one altar with the prothesis and diaconicon at its sides.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to come to any decided opinion as to the date at which the church of Abou Sergeh was built. Setting aside the screens and other fittings, which are all much later than the main structure, there is little in way of carving or ornament of any kind to assist in fixing the century to which the church belongs; nearly all the columns and richly-carved capitals being fragments taken from earlier Roman buildings and thus affording no clue. On the whole, judging from the appearance of the nave arcade, and the semi-classical style of those few carved caps which appear specially made for their position, I think we shall not be far wrong in assigning this church to the eighth century, in spite of the Coptic tradition which declares its founding to have been two centuries earlier.

Outside.—The appearance of this church, seen from outside, like all Coptic churches, is in no way striking. It is a plain rectangular building, about 100 × 60 ft. outside, without buttresses or decoration of any kind; the side walls are pierced by no windows, and the only openings to admit light are two triangular windows fitted with wooden lattice-work, which fill up the spandrels of the roof in the western and eastern gables.

The only entrances were either two or three plain square-headed doorways in the west wall, only one of which is now used, the others being carefully built up.

The church is built of small hard bricks, light brown in colour; shaped, not after the Roman fashion, but much like a modern English brick, only smaller. Pieces of bond timber are built in at irregular intervals of from 2 ft. 6 in. to 4 ft. up the whole height of the wall. The wood is that of the palm or tamarisk.

This excessive plainness of the exterior, which is common to all the Coptic churches of Old Cairo, may be accounted for by the fact of their being almost always surrounded on two or three sides by high houses, built close up against them, while the free side or sides are in streets so narrow that it is impossible from any point to get a general view of the whole. For the same reason even the main roof, which is high in pitch, is practically invisible from the ground outside.

The dedication of this church is to Abou Sergeh or St. Sergius, a very favourite

saint in the East, especially in Russia. There is near Moscow a very large monastery dedicated to him, which, like the dayr, in which this church stands, is a small town surrounded by walls, and containing many churches and streets of monastic buildings.

The orientation of Abou Sergeh is not quite true, its axis pointing almost exactly south-east.

It will be well to describe first the main structure of the church, and then to pass on to its fittings and the changes that have been made.

Nave.—The nave arcade consists of monolithic columns about 16 inches in diameter, of marble, nearly white, with grey streaks, apparently the same material as that *cippolino* which is used so largely in Italy, and especially among the slabs which cover the outside of St. Mark's at Venice. These columns have both diminution and entasis, and must once have formed part of some Roman building.

The capitals, of the same material, are in style a sort of debased Corinthian, such as was much used by the Romans in the third and fourth centuries A.D. The bases also are classical, with *astragal*, *scotia*, and *torus*; they stand on square pedestals; both are of the same marble as the columns.

On most of these columns, on the side towards the nave, there is a small deeply-cut cross, which looks like a consecration cross.

Dim traces still remain of a nearly life-sized figure of a saint painted on all these marble shafts. At the point marked L on the plan there is one column different from the rest, which is perhaps a later insertion, owing to the fracture of the original slender marble one. It is larger than the others, being 22 inches in diameter, and is made of red granite from the quarries near Philæ. It has no traces of paint. The pair of small marble columns near the pulpit have, instead of proper bases, two fine Corinthian capitals turned upside down; their capitals are bell-shaped, of the usual early Moslem form.

On the *abaci* of the columns there rests a continuous wooden architrave, formed of two beams, side by side; and in order to distribute the bearing there are short flat pieces of wood between the cap and the architrave, projecting a few inches beyond the abacus. (See sections, Pl. XXX). This wooden architrave, which, in spite of its great age, seems perfectly preserved, is ornamented the whole way along, on the side towards the nave, with a painted inscription in Arabic; and its soffit is decorated with a graceful arabesque design in various colours—now much faded.

CHOIR ROOF.

THESE SPACES
BROCKED UP

PLASTERED WALL

WOOD ARCHITRAVE

WOOD ARCHITRAVE

LONGITUDINAL SECTION THRO' NAVE.

TRANSVERSE SECTION THRO' NAVE & AISLES.

COPTIC CHURCH OF ABOU SERGEH, - OLD CAIRO.

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The arches of the nave arcade which rest on the wooden architrave are pointed arches of a common Moslem form, much stilted. They are very narrow in span, so that a considerable mass of solid brick wall comes above each nave column. They are square in section, and devoid of any moulding or other kind of ornament; like the rest of the internal walls of the church, they are plastered and whitewashed. This whitewash probably conceals further polychromatic decoration like that on the architraves.

This curious combination of the *trabeated* and *arched* constructions, which is common to most of the Coptic churches of Old Cairo, suggests the manner in which the transition from one form to the other was effected. The ancient Greeks, who employed a *pyknostyle* or *eustyle* inter-columniation, had little difficulty in finding single architrave stones of ample strength to carry the weight above. The Romans, who preferred a wider or more *aræostyle* intercolumniation, resorted frequently to the device of building concealed relieving arches over the long bearings of their architraves. From this arrangement to that of having the relieving arches *open* the transition would be easy, and the result would then be the form we see here; except that here the architrave is of wood. A slight widening of the span of the arches, thus reducing the impost to a size that would rest conveniently on the abacus of the capital, would do away with the necessity of having any architrave at all, and complete the development to a purely arched form of construction.

At the church of Santa-Maria-in-Trastevere, Rome, there is a parallel instance of continuous architraves, with pierced brick-relieving arches over them. In this case the architraves are of marble, the series of brick-relieving arches occupy the place of the frieze, and above comes the marble cornice. This is now concealed by a recent "restoration."

One may observe throughout the church of Abou Sergeh a marked avoidance of any arched construction, the walls in many places being carried on wooden beams, in spite of the length of the bearings and the considerable thickness of the wall above, a thing which in a European climate would long ago have seriously endangered the stability of the fabric. The plans show these various instances of walls resting on long lintels.

Above the main nave arcade there are large square-headed openings in the wall supported by plain piers, and small marble shafts which carry a straight wooden lintel.

These large openings communicate with the upper story over the aisles and narthex. This upper floor, besides having altars at its eastern ends, may probably, like the similar upper floor at Sta. Agnese and S. Lorenzo fuori le mura, near Rome, and other early basilicas, have served as a *matroneum*, or place where the women of the congregation could assist at the service below, without mixing with, or even being seen by, the male part of the congregation.

At present these openings are built up (at least in Abou Sergeh—in many other Coptic churches they remain open), and the whole upper story of the church is divided into rooms, and used for domestic purposes by the families of the priests. In the thin walls which block up these openings there are projecting lattice windows to admit light and air into the rooms, not to enable the women to join in the service, the modern Coptic custom being to screen off the western part of the nave on the ground floor for the exclusive use of the women.

The upper apsidal chapel at the south-east angle of the church is roofed with a dome.

Nave Roof.—The nave roof has framed principals of rather complicated construction, about seven feet apart. They have king-post, collar-beam, queen-posts, and tie-beam, with various struts. (See section, Pl. XXX.)

The whole is put together without any metal work, the tenons being pinned through by flat wooden bolts, secured at both ends by wedges which pass through them at each end. The queen-posts are double, and lie flat against and on each side of the other timbers. There are no purlins, but the small rafters run longitudinally. The whole of the various roofs throughout the church are covered with a coarse cement, through which the ends of king-posts and tie-beams project.

Pavement.—The present level of the nave floor is three feet below that of the ground outside; the whole pavement consists of large slabs of a hard siliceous limestone from some neighbouring quarries, with the exception of some pieces of white marble let in irregularly round the water-tanks.

Choir.—The long bench, with its steps between nave and choir, is also of white marble; from the line of these steps to the chord of the apse (*i. e.* the main part of the choir) the roof is different to that over the nave; it is a curved wagon-roof, with queen-posts, struts, and tie-beam; it is framed in the same way as that over the nave (see section, Pl. XXX). The junction between these two roofs is managed very awkwardly.

Sanctuary.—The sanctuary, or *Hékel* as the Copts call it, corresponds to the

Greek βῆμα or ἱερατεῖον; it consists of the space in the central apse, to which additional area is given by the way in which the *iconostasis* projects westward into the choir.

Though the present *iconostasis* is certainly not original, yet it probably occupies the exact place of the old one; in fact, without this projection westwards, there would not be room for the altar and its ministers. Round the apse are four tiers of white marble seats (A), to the lowest of which access is given by three marble steps going straight across (B). In the centre, and raised a little above the highest of the curved lines of seats, is the *cathedra* or bishop's throne, formed in a niche with pointed arch, much enriched with very beautiful minute mosaic work of marble, mother-of-pearl, and coloured enamels. Round the whole apse the wall is panelled with marble for several feet above the highest range of seats.

I have called the four marble tiers "seats," but I think that probably the two lower ranges are steps, and that only the two upper and wider tiers are seats. It would hardly have looked dignified for priests to be sitting on the lowest row with their feet dangling in the air.

These seats and the *cathedra* are not now used for any purpose except to put pictures on.

Many basilicas, in Italy especially, have precisely this arrangement of seats and central throne. Perhaps the best preserved instance, and the one which most closely resembles that of Abou Sergeh, is the little basilica of Torcello, near Venice. There the whole plan is very much the same as this Coptic example, and the apsidal seats, throne, and straight steps across are exactly the same as those described above. The only instance I know of where the *cathedra* is regularly used whenever the bishop pontificates is at the cathedral of Gerona, in Spain; the throne there is cut out of one block of marble; thirteen steps lead up to it.

Father Goar, a missionary in the East during the seventeenth century (see Goar's *Rituale Græcorum*), describes this arrangement in the Greek churches thus: "Retro altare in apsidis sinu sedes sacerdotibus Pontifici assistantibus et simul celebrantibus sunt exstructæ. In medio thronum eminentiorem obtinet Pontifex, quem Chrysostomus in Liturgiâ τὴν ἄνω καθέδραν recte intelligit."

The sanctuary floor is not raised above that of the choir, and there is no step up to the altar.

South Aisle.—As before mentioned, the whole of this aisle is in two stories: the under-side of the upper floor is quite plain, with roughly hewn main-beams and joists. On this side of the church a massive pier does the work of the pair of

slender marble columns on the north; its use is not very apparent: one of the stairs to the crypt passes through it.

In the centre of the eastern apse of this aisle there is one marble recessed seat, but no ranges of seats as on the north side.

The west end of the south aisle has been cut off by a later wall to form an inner porch, and other alterations at this part of the church have caused the complete destruction of the chapel which once probably existed still further west.

North-East Chapel.—This chapel, unlike the others, has a rectangular east end. There is a central recessed throne, and three ranges of seats (A), or possibly one of seats and two steps carried not straight across, but in a curved line; all are of marble.

This chapel is roofed with a dome, slightly oval on plan; it has pendentives decorated with Moslem *stalactite* work in stucco.

On the north side there is a small window immediately under the dome: the opening between this little chapel and the main church is formed by a high pointed arch.

North Aisle and North-West Chapel.—At the west end of this aisle is the chapel with a northern apse, mentioned above; it is to be observed that neither this apse nor those at the east end are visible outside the church, but are, as it were, formed in the thickness of the wall.

At present the floor of this western chapel is raised about 3 feet 6 inches above the nave pavement, and access to it is given by a large landing and flight of steps in the adjoining aisle.

The priests of the church assert that the space beneath is a tomb, and it is possible that this landing was formed, and the floor of the chapel raised, when some holy personage was buried underneath. At the same time walls were built closing up the south and east sides of the chapel, so that it is now without any natural light, and practically quite useless. There are some signs of its once having had a western external doorway at the ground level, probably corresponding to the present door on the south, but the indications are not very clear; and I have not ventured to show it on the plan; at present two aumbries occupy what may have been the head of this doorway.

The analogy of other early churches with a similar plan would certainly lead one to suppose that there were originally three western entrances.

In the north-western apse are remains, much injured, of figures of saints, nearly life-size, painted in tempera on stucco: these are very early in character, and appear almost, if not quite, contemporary with the building itself.

It seems probable that the font originally stood in this apse, and that this chapel formed the baptistery. The present font which stands in the north aisle near the stairs up to this chapel is obviously of no great antiquity. It is, like most Coptic fonts, in shape and size very like a modern scullery copper, and is made of brickwork covered with plaster; behind it, against the wall, is a projection, into which is sunk a shallow recess with pointed arch to hold the chrismatory.

Narthex.—This is marked off from the nave by two marble columns which carry on a wood lintel the wall of the story above.

There was originally a central western entrance here, but it is now blocked up (M).

Crypt.—Perhaps the most interesting and certainly the least altered part of the original church is the crypt, dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

It is a small chapel about 20 feet long by 17 feet wide, divided by arcades

LONGITUDINAL SECTION

The walls and vault are plastered except the Eastern Niche which is lined with Ashlar stone

ABU SERGEH
CRYPT UNDER MAIN CHURCH
DEDICATED TO THE B.V. MARY

PLAN OF CRYPT

TRANSVERSE SECTION

- A Central Altar.
- B Side Altar.
- C Recess with Marble slab slightly sunk.
- D Font.
- E Stairs to Upper Church.
- F Circular Slab of Marble (over Virgin's well?)
- G Squint between North Aisle and Nave.
- H H Iron rings for hanging lamps.

10 5 10 20 Feet

into nave and aisles. Its central axis coincides with that of the upper church, and it occupies a position partly under the choir and partly under the *Hékel*.

Its exact position with reference to the church above is shown on the plans by the two flights of steps leading down to it from the choir. The pavement of the crypt is 8 ft. 9 in. below that of the choir.

This little crypt is vaulted in three spans by a plain, rudely-built waggon-vault with a very depressed curve. (See transverse section.) This vault and all the wall-surface is covered with plaster, so that it is impossible to be sure whether any part of it is excavated in the rock or whether the whole is built up. I believe the latter to be the case; though, at the same time, it appears clear that this chapel was always a subterranean place, and that it has not become a crypt (like the original oratory of S. Clemente in Rome) by the accumulation for centuries of soil around and above it.^a

The arcade of the crypt is formed of slender marble columns averaging about 5 feet in height; some of them have evidently belonged to some earlier building, and their variety in height is made up by different sized capitals.

One column has half a fine Corinthian capital used as a base, and has a late classical cap; another has at the top a cubical piece of white marble; the rest have almost shapeless capitals of different thicknesses. On the south side there is one twisted shaft, evidently not classical, and probably of the same date as the crypt itself. At the east end of the nave is the high altar; this is a recess nearly semi-circular in plan, with a half-domed head; it opens into the nave by a round arch; the bottom of this recess is 2 ft. $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. from the floor; it is formed of various pieces of white marble about $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick. On one of them there is a deeply-carved floriated cross in a circle 13 in. in diameter. The back and semi-dome of this niche are carefully built in closely-jointed ashlar work of fine yellow limestone. This is the only bit of ashlar stone now visible either in the crypt or upper church. In front of this altar there is a circular slab of white marble 2 ft. 6 in. in diameter let into the pavement, which, like that of the church above, is made of hard flags of limestone.

It is to be observed that the high altar of the upper church is so placed as to

^a The present level of the nave of the upper church is now about ten feet below the ground outside the Roman bastions which form the enclosing wall of the dayr.

The pediment and architrave of one of the principal Roman entrances is still visible above the ground outside; the whole of the opening itself being buried in the sand, which, on the great plain where Old Cairo once stood, is always being heaped up by the driving wind, wherever any solid obstacle forms a check to its further movement. If we give a height of ten feet to this buried doorway (the width of which makes this a probable dimension) we shall make the ground level of the old Roman fortress coincide with the present level of the nave of the church: and this I believe to have been the case.

be exactly over this circular slab, and it appears probable that it covers the sacred well, by the side of which the Holy Family are said to have rested on the occasion of the flight into Egypt. The priests of Abou Sergeh are now quite ignorant of the meaning of this slab, which is now cemented down and cannot be raised. Over it, fixed in the vault, there is an iron ring, from which a lamp was once hung, and further west there is another; round both these rings the vault is blackened with smoke.

Between the nave and north aisle there is a sort of squint, but not splayed towards the altar.

In the middle of the south wall of the south aisle there is another recess with marble altar-slab, carved with a foliated cross, very like that at the east end, except that the recess itself is smaller.

At the east end of the south aisle there is a font which, like that in the upper church, resembles a modern copper.

On the north side of it there is a shallow recess in the wall, probably to hold the chrisms bottles.

In the middle of the north wall there is a niche corresponding almost exactly to that on the south; but, instead of the slab with consecration cross, it has in it a rectangular slab about 2 ft. $\times$ 1 ft. 10 in., of white marble, like the others, but it is hollowed to the depth of nearly an inch, thus forming a sort of square shallow dish. It has no drain or aperture of any kind, and its precise use is perhaps impossible to discover. It may have been simply a credence or table of prothesis for the bread and wine; or possibly it was intended for a kneading-trough, in which to make the corban or sacramental bread.

The eastern part of the north aisle is widened out, but there is no altar or recess at the end.

Present Fittings of the Church.—As will be seen from a glance at the plan, the church is now divided up into many parts by a complicated arrangement of screens. None of these appear to be older than the sixteenth century, while some are much later; and I do not think that the arrangement they are intended to provide for was in any respect that of the original church.

The nave proper is divided into three parts: the eastern compartment for the men of the congregation, the western for the women, and a narrow intermediate space in which stands a large wooden chair for the patriarch.

This western position on the ground floor of the nave has probably only been assigned to the women since they ceased to occupy the upper story over the aisles and narthex.

This upper story opened so freely into the nave, and must have afforded so complete a view of the services there, that it is impossible to doubt that, in part at least, it was intended for the use of sharers in the worship below.

Another screen divides the south aisle into two nearly equal parts. At present this division appears quite useless.

There are also other screens, which cut off the baptistery and narthex.

Iconostasis.—The most important screen of all is the *iconostasis*, which cuts off the sanctuary and the two eastern chapels from the *Chorus Cantorum*.

This probably occupies the place of a much earlier *iconostasis*; it has fitted into it five panels of a hard, dark wood, carved with reliefs of the Last Supper, the Nativity, and three saints on horseback, called by the priests St. Mark, St. Sepheyn, and St. Girghis,^a which, judging from their style, may be contemporary with the church itself.^b

The present *iconostasis* is a high, close screen, richly decorated with minutely-moulded panel-work, carving, and inlay of ivory and various woods. Above one of the doors is a modern Arabic inscription, inlaid in ivory, with the date A. H. 1195 (A.D. 1816), and above a Coptic inscription, "Greeting to the Church of the Father."

Above, at the top, there is a row of rude pictures painted in tempera on panel covered with gesso; none of these appear older than the sixteenth century.

The central door into the sanctuary (Greek, *ὥραία πύλη*) is in two valves, and has hung in front of it a silk curtain, embroidered with a large cross and other ornaments. On each side of this central door there is a small square window, with a sliding shutter, and on the north and south sides of the projecting part of the *iconostasis* there are sliding doors.

Small low doors on both sides communicate with the space under the tiers of marble seats; this is a narrow arched passage, and is now used as a place of concealment for the vessels of the altar.

The parts of the *iconostasis* that screen off the north and south chapels have each a central curtained door, between sliding windows (DDDD), like those (DD) to the *Hékel*.

Between the *Hékel* and the north chapel there is fastened on to the *iconostasis* a small wooden cup, in which the wine-cruet is kept. (E).

WOODEN CUP ON
ICONOSTASIS.

^a St. George of Cappadocia.

^b The British Museum possesses a very fine and interesting series of carved reliefs from a Coptic iconostasis very similar in style and date to those in Abou Sergeh.

Choir Screen.—The next screen, passing westward, is a sort of second *iconostasis*. It is a high, close screen, ornamented like that just described, and has a similar row of pictures fixed along the top. It has folding-doors in the centres of the nave and aisles: the space between it and the sanctuary-screen forms the choir, the western limit of which is also defined by a marble bench, 1 ft. 8 in. high, with two steps opposite each door in the second screen, which stands upon it.

Third Screen.—The next compartment, that used by the men, has on the west a low lattice screen, about 4 ft. 6 in. high, made of delicately-moulded framing, filled in with open patterns, composed of small pieces of wood, turned with a string and bow. This sort of lattice-work is the same as that which, up to about the end of the last century, was commonly used for harem and other windows in the houses of Cairo, Damascus, and many other eastern cities; since then, unfortunately, the introduction of European glass has almost entirely superseded this beautiful woodwork. The northern extension of this screen serves to divide the present baptistery from the rest of the north aisle. On the south side the men's compartment is cut off from the aisle by a high, close screen, on which are fixed pictures like those on the *iconostasis*.

In this division stands the pulpit, which is of wood, richly decorated with intricate patterns and inlay.

The next compartment is very narrow, and appears to serve no other purpose than to contain the modern patriarch's throne, which is a large wooden chair, the back and sides of which are ornamented with open lattice-work: another use of this compartment may be to make the division between the men and women of the congregation more complete.

West of this, the next compartment is for the women: the screens which bound it on the east and west sides are high, and are formed of open lattice-work, like the others.

On the north there is a row of lockers, or aumbries, now disused; and on the south is the modern inner porch.

Altars.—As is shown on the Plan, there are three altars (H.I.J.) on the ground-floor of the church; and, judging from the analogy of other Coptic churches, there were others at the east ends of the upper story, over the aisles. These were all real altars for the celebration of mass, and not (like the Greek *prothesis* and *diaconicon*) merely *credences* on which the various vessels and vestments were placed. This old use of many altars has, to a great extent, passed away, and in the present degraded form of Coptic worship only the high altar is regularly

used; the side-chapels being mostly utilised only as lumber-rooms and receptacles for dirt and rubbish.

The general peculiarities of these altars are always the same, though there is considerable variety in their sizes, which vary from 4 ft. 6 in. to 5 ft. 6 in. in length, 3 ft. to 4 ft. 4 in. in width, and from 2 ft. 10 in. to 3 ft. 4 in. in height. The high altar is not always the largest. They are built either of brick or rubble masonry, plastered, and are formed hollow with an opening at the back.

This hollow was probably meant originally to hold relics, or sacred vessels, but is now simply a dust-hole.

USUAL FORM OF ALTAR IN COPTIC CHURCHES.

The *mensa* is not composed of one slab of stone, as in the Latin churches, but is made up of several pieces, and does not project beyond the body of the altar. In the middle of this mensa there is formed a rectangular sinking, about 1 inch deep and 2 feet long by 9 inches wide, into which a wooden board, generally

the same size as the sinking, is laid, but not fixed. This board is nearly always about the size shown here.

On the centre of this board is incised a cross within a circle; above the cross the letters A. and IC. XX. and below it XC. ΘC. and Ω.

This would read IHCOTC XPICTOC, XPICTOC ΘEOC; but these letters are usually more or less blundered.

At the celebration of mass the chalice and paten are placed on this slab of wood—a curious reversal of the Latin custom, which required the *super-altar*, if there was one, to be of stone, and the modern Roman custom of having wooden altars with a piece of stone let in to the top.

The object of having this slab of wood may possibly have been to prevent injury to the chalice and paten from being set on the hard stone: at present the whole altar is always vested with a tight-fitting silk cover, which makes the wooden board, in this respect, useless.

The high altar of Abou Sergeh stands under a domed baldacchino (Greek *κιβώριον*), which rests on four slender marble columns: the dome is of wood and plaster, once decorated with painting. In many Coptic churches, side-altars, as well as the high altar, have a baldacchino over them. There is at present no trace of the old custom of having curtains hung round them.^a

The Coptic custom of making the altars hollow was also observed in the Greek Church, and to some extent in the early altars of the West.

Ardon, Abbé of Aniane, who died A.D. 821, describes the altar of St. Saviour's at Aniane as being formed with a sort of aumbry in it. He says, "Altare illud forinsecus est solidum, ab intus autem cavum retrorsum habens ostiolum, quo privatis diebus inclusæ tenentur capsæ cum diversis reliquiis Patrum." (See Thiers' *Les Principaux Autels des Eglises*, p. 20, ed. 1688; also Goar's *Rituale Græcorum*).

In the Greek Church this cavity was called τὸ θαλασσίδιον, because originally

^a The one altar in a Greek church is called the *ἁγία τράπεζα* or *θυσιαστήριον*: the *prothesis* which stands on the north was so called because on it was laid the oblation of bread and wine before consecration.

The southern table, or *diaconicon*, was so called because by it stood the deacons and other ministers of the altar; on it are placed the censers, service-books, vestments of the celebrant, and other things required for mass.

WOODEN ALTAR-BOARD
(Three times size of smaller drawing)

it was used as a *piscina*, but it appears to have kept the name even when it was used as an aumbry for relics or for the eucharistic vestments. “Vesperâ precedente, sanctum habitum suscepturi vestimenta ad sanctum altare asportantur, et in sanctæ mensæ gremio, seu mari (ἐν τῷ θαλασσιδίῳ τῆς ἀγίας τραπέζης) reponuntur.” (Thiers, p. 33.)

It appears as if a similar practice in the West was alluded to as late as the beginning of the sixteenth century in Archbishop Bainbridge's Pontifical, where the following passage occurs in the rubric of the service for the consecration of altars: “Residuum veræ aquæ crismatæ fundat ad basim (altaris) in fossam ad hoc factam.”

Tanks for Ablution.—Besides the Virgin's well in the crypt there is another well in the transept or north part of the choir. Its mouth is formed of an octagonal stone on a square base, about 1 ft. 8 in. across; by the side of it there is a sink hollowed in the pavement.

In the middle of the women's compartment there is a tank full of water, three feet square, boarded over; and in the narthex there is a large deep tank 6 ft. 2 in. by 8 ft. 2 in., also boarded over. Round these tanks there are pieces of marble let into the pavement, probably to prevent the splashings from the water sinking into the more porous stone of the main pavement.

Near the present entrance into the nave there is, in the floor, a hole connected with a drain.

The large tank in the *narthex* is used about midnight on the eve of the Festival of the *Gheetas*, January 18th, when the male part of the Coptic congregation plunge into it to commemorate the baptism of Christ. The others are used for ablutions before the services, and also for a ceremony when the priest washes the feet of some of the congregation. The atrium of the early Latin basilicas seems always to have had a well for the former of these uses; examples exist at S. Clemente, Rome, and S. Ambrogio, Milan.

The Modern Alterations are shown by the lighter tint on the plan. The whole south-west angle of the church has been considerably altered to suit the later habits and notions of the Coptic priests.

The two western bays of the south aisle have been cut off by walls, thus forming an inner porch; besides this a staircase to the floor above (N), now used for domestic purposes, and other walls have been built, so that the present entrance into the church is by a circuitous way, instead of the old direct doorways into the narthex.

This plan of avoiding a direct entrance is one which is always, if possible,

adopted in the houses of the Mahommedans, who are anxious that the inner court should not be visible from the street outside. The result of these alterations is that a great part of the south division of the narthex is now dark and useless. In the inner porch are two wooden benches and a large chair with lattice-work ornaments. A recess contains three receptacles, or settling-jars, for drinking-water.

The part of this porch that extends beyond the south wall of the original church is without a roof, and the upper part of the wall that has been broken through is carried on beams of wood. No trace remains to show the position of the original stairs to the upper floor.

Sta. Agnese-fuori-le-mura, Rome, the plan of which is almost exactly the same as that of Abou Sergeh, has winding-stairs in a square projection at the south-west angle of the nave, and this was probably the position here.

CHURCH FURNITURE.

Lecterns.—Of these there are three in the choir, each with a high, wooden candlestick by it; one is placed near the centre, and two in the southern part of the choir. They are square stands with a slightly sloping book-rest, and are made of wood, generally with fine panel-work, ivory inlay, inscriptions, and lattice ornament. The lower part generally forms a cupboard to hold the service-books.

They are placed facing east, not towards the congregation. Some have embroidered hangings, and stools inlaid with ivory.

Vestments.—Special priestly vestments are, as a rule, only worn at the service of the Mass, and then only while the priests are actually within the sanctuary. When officiating in the choir, or other parts of the church, they wear their ordinary oriental costume, with black turbans; these are not removed even within the *Hékel*, but the priests take off their shoes before they pass the door of the *iconostasis*. The vestments now in use do not exactly resemble any used in the west; there is nothing in shape precisely like a cope or chasuble, though both of these are represented in the earlier Coptic paintings. The present Mass vestment is something like a Dalmatic, and they also use richly-embroidered stoles and sleeve-like maniples, the *ἐπιμανίχια* of the Greek Church.

The dalmatic-like vestment is ornamented with figures of saints and flowing

patterns, either in *appliqué* work or else wholly embroidered in silk thread. The material of the ground is fine linen or sometimes silk.

Some churches have small square corporals, worked with a richly-embroidered cross.

The altar-coverings, which are of linen or silk, fit closely all over and round the four sides of the altar: they are embroidered in a similar way with figures of saints and angels, very rudely drawn, but executed with very minute stitches. No existing vestments appear to be of any great antiquity, few being older than the seventeenth century.

The curtains which hang in front of the doors of the *iconostasis* are generally of silk, embroidered with a large cross, figures of saints and angels, and Arabic or Coptic inscriptions. The cross on the central curtain is always kissed, and prostrations are made before it by the Copts when they first enter the church.

Altar Plate.—The chalice and paten are generally modern, and of no great interest. Sometimes European cut-glass is used, or else a quite plain cup and

SACRAMENTAL SPOON, of base silver, $7\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, with dedicatory inscription in Arabic.

plate of silver. At the church of Tedrus, a seventeenth-century goblet of Spanish or Venetian glass was used for the chalice, and an earthenware dish of Seville ware for the paten. At the Communion the bread is put into the wine, and the two kinds administered together to both priests and laity in a spoon. These are quite plain in design, and generally have an engraved inscription commemorating the fact of their being gifts to the church, though the donor's name does not appear. One from Old Cairo has the following inscription, "A gift to the church of the glorious martyr, the Prince Tedrus, between the two hills: for it reward me, O Lord."

Service-Books.—These are nearly always MSS. and are written partly in Arabic and partly in Coptic; the Coptic is regarded as the hieratic language, and no other is used within the sanctuary; other parts of the services, and the rubrics of the mass itself, are written in Arabic.^a

These MSS., few of which appear to be older than the sixteenth century, are

^a As a rule, the earlier the MS. the less the Arabic used.

written on fine vellum-like paper, *carta bombycina*, or more rarely on parchment ; the usual, and as a rule only, adornment that they have is the title, on which is painted a large foliated cross, with interlacing arabesque ornaments. Some churches possess large quantities of these MSS. which are generally heaped up among the dirt and rubbish in some unused corner of the church—often in the chapels at the end of the aisles.

Tabernacles.—After the consecration of the elements they are placed in a wooden box, gaudily decorated with scenes from the life of Christ and the saints. None of these appear of any great age.

The custom of reserving the Host does not now^a exist among the Copts.

Silver-cased Textus.—It is the custom in nearly all the churches to have a MS. copy of the Gospels, covered on all sides with plates of silver, decorated with *repoussé* work. These plates are all fastened together with small nails, so that

WOODEN STAND FOR SILVER-CASED TEXTUS (ABOU TEDRUS).

the book can never be opened or even seen. At certain festivals this silver-cased book is brought out, and fitted into a rude wooden stand, which is placed in the choir, and has candles on prickets all round it. This silver-work is very coarse, and in no case older than the sixteenth or seventeenth century, while many examples are quite modern. The design has usually the emblems of the Evangelists and figures of cherubim among scroll-ornaments, with Coptic inscriptions. It is made by first hammering from behind a thin plate of silver bedded in elastic cement till it takes the required design ; the plate is afterwards finished on the face with punches and gravers.

^a Tradition says, that the custom of reservation was given up because a serpent once got into a Coptic church and devoured the Host.

Crosses.—In some churches fine processional crosses exist of silver *repoussé* work or else bronze, cast and then tooled. Some of these have Greek inscriptions.

There are also in all the churches a considerable number of small crosses made of silver, base white metal, or bronze; these are engraved with dedicatory inscriptions, and are held up by the priest when he blesses the people.

The Pictures, which exist in great numbers in all the churches, are of three kinds: First, the most ancient, are painted *a secco in tempera* on plaster or marble.

The best and earliest examples of these are nearly life-size figures of saints on the wall of the north-west apse of Abou Sergeh, and others on the marble columns of the nave arcade.

2nd. Paintings on panel covered with gesso, often with gold ground, come next in order of date: they are generally large half-length figures of Christ and the saints, or events from their lives: they are often painted with miniature-like delicacy; and in style resemble the works of painters of the early Sienese and Florentine schools, such as Buoninsegna and Cimabue.

3rd. Paintings on canvas, chiefly of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: these have little merit as works of art.

Besides the row of pictures on the *iconostasis*, which generally represent Christ and the Apostles, with incidents in the life of Our Lord, the favourite subjects seem to be St. George, St. Menas (two saints of this name), and St. Barbara. Pictures representing these and many other subjects are fixed at almost every part of the churches, and many are propped up against the apsidal seats and central throne.

Owing to the stereotyped style of art which has so long prevailed in the East, it is impossible to fix the dates of these various paintings. Even at the present time artists in Greece and Russia are producing works which have many of the characteristics of the thirteenth-century painters of Umbria or Florence—especially the peculiarity of the strong green tints in the flesh shadows.

Fans (Flabella).—These are thin silver disks *repoussé*, with rude figures of cherubim, and scroll-work ornaments like the coverings to the MS. Gospels. They are circular, about seven inches in diameter, and have a silver socket, into which is fitted a wooden handle (See Pl. XXXI.) They are not now used for their original purpose, but are stuck on iron prickets round the *textus-stand*; and little wax candles are fastened on the edges of the disks on those occasions when the silver-cased book is brought out, and exhibited as described above. In the Greek

A. Coptic Fan or Flabellum.

Church fans of this sort, called *ῥιπίδια*, were used from very early times, and are still to some extent in use.

In the Liturgy of St. James two deacons, one at each end of the altar, were ordered to stand holding fans at the celebration of Mass, to keep flies from falling into the chalice.

A very interesting article by the late Mr. Albert Way in the *Archæol. Journ.* vol. v. p. 201, gives many examples of their use both in the Eastern and Western Churches. In early times *flabella* were commonly used in the Latin Church, and notices of them often occur in the inventories of cathedral and abbey churches. In England they are usually described as being made of peacock's feathers, but there are some instances of silver ones. A missal and a pontifical in the Rouen Library (see *Archæol. Journ.* vol. v. p. 205) have miniature paintings of the celebration of High Mass, in which the use of fans, closely resembling the Coptic ones, is shown.

ILLUMINATIONS FROM MSS. IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, ROUEN.^a

Their use in the Middle Ages was not solely ecclesiastical. A French fourteenth-century MS. in the British Museum (20 B. 1, fol. 1) has a miniature of a king attended by a servant holding a metal fan with a long handle.

The Maronites still use fans at Mass very like the Coptic ones; they generally have little bells hung all round them.

Censers and Incense Boxes.—The censers now in use resemble in form those used in the West during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They are made

^a The Society is indebted for these two illustrations to the courtesy of Messrs. Parker and Co. of Oxford. See also Smith's *Dict. of Christ. Antiq.* 1875, art. "Flabellum."

of base silver or bronze, ornamented with pierced and *repoussé* devices : as a rule they have three chains.^a

Some of the boxes in which the stock of incense is kept are very gracefully ornamented. They are generally round, and are made of wood or ivory, richly carved with interlacing patterns and Arabic or Coptic inscriptions. A few are rectangular boxes, like a small tea-caddy, made of beaten silver, decorated in the same fashion as the fans and textus-covers.

GLASS LAMP OF ARAB FORM.
(ABOU SERGEH.)

Glass Lamps.—Till within the last few years some of the Coptic churches possessed exceedingly beautiful glass lamps, made probably at Damascus in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for the use of mosques ; they had sentences from the Koran, and very delicate arabesque patterns painted on them in enamel colours, some of which stand out in considerable relief.^b None of these richly-ornamented lamps are still to be found in any of the churches of Old Cairo, though a few of plain clear glass, of graceful shapes but without ornament, still remain; there is a fine large specimen in the church of Abou Sergeh ; it is only used on Good Friday.

Musical Instruments.—Cymbals, small bells struck with a piece of wood, and triangles, are used to accompany the hymns.

The commencement of the service is announced at some churches by the priest striking a large wooden board at the door. This is instead of a bell. Some few instances exist of bronze bells having been used, but they are rare, probably because the Mohammedan population have a great dislike to them.

Candlesticks and Metal Lamps.—Some of the hanging lamps are enriched with very beautiful work, *repoussé*, pierced and engraved. They are of silver and bronze, and are hung before the pictures, and at other places in the churches.

The tall, standing candlesticks by the lecterns are generally of wood with turned mouldings ; some few are of bronze or iron, with three branches and prickets.

At the church of St. Menas there are two very curious bronze candelabra, set in niches before pictures. They are formed each of two winged dragons with

^a For some early Coptic sacred vessels, see *Archæol. Journ.* vol. xxv. p. 242.

^b A fine example from a church in Old Cairo was presented to the British Museum by A. W. Franks, Esq. F.S.A.

tails crossing ; in the mouths and along the backs are rows of sockets for candles, seventeen in all. One of these appears to be sixteenth-century work, the other is a later copy.

Chrismatory.—In the church of Anba Shenouda there is a curious chrismatory, cut out of a solid cylindrical block of wood, $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, in which are sunk three holes, which contain three little glass bottles for oils. The lid revolves on a central pivot, and has one hole in it so that only one bottle is exposed at once.

WOODEN CHRISMATORY WITH REVOLVING LID.

At present the Coptic priests only use *one* holy oil, and have quite forgotten that it was ever the custom to have three sorts.

Crutches.—Owing to the great length of some of the services, and the absence of any seats in the churches, both priests and laity have wooden crutches, like a *tau-cross* in shape, to lean upon. The women sit on the floor, and so do not need crutches.

Relics.—Nearly all the churches have relics which are wrapped up in rolls of silk, the size and shape of an ordinary bolster. The outer covering of these is richly embroidered. These are generally placed in niches formed in the screens, often in the *iconostasis*, and as a rule have a picture behind them. In some cases they are put in wooden shrines, standing on four legs, with pictures hung all round them. The bundle containing the relics is seen through a small grating in front, before which an embroidered curtain hangs.^a

USUAL FORM OF IRON DOOR-KEY IN COPTIC CHURCHES.

^a A large amount of information on Coptic Churches and Ritual will be given in a work by A. J. Butler, Esq. F.S.A. shortly to be published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

One of the smaller churches within the Roman fortress of Babylon—El Moallaka or Sitt Miriam—is here represented in further illustration of the subject.

CHURCH OF EL MOALLAKA.

As compared with Abou Sergeh, it appears to have undergone less alteration from its original state, and to exhibit some interesting differences of arrangement. The shaded part represents the old Roman wall of the fortress. Compare also the three plans in *The Coptic Morning Service for the Lord's Day*, translated by John, Marquess of Bute, K.T. 1882.