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Ecclesiastical Architecture and Art in Egypt between the 5th and 7th centuries

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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Opponents: Prof. Dr. Miklós Takács, PhD

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INTRODUCTION

The scope of this study is defined by two parameters: the spatial factor and the science of archaeology itself. Coptic archaeology merges the classical heritage of Ancient Egyptians with Egypt's position as one of the frontier provinces of the Roman Empire, along with the role of Alexandria in the Christological debates during the Early Christian era. This research aims to analyze ecclesiastical architecture and art of the critical period of early Christianity, which spans from the 5th to the 7th centuries. This period is characterized by two major events - the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. and the Arab Conquest of Egypt in 641 A.D.

The direct consequence of Chalcedon's decisions in 451 A.D. was the so-called Great Schism of the Apostolic Church. The theological debates between the "Monophysites/Miaphsites" in Alexandria and the "Diophysites" in Rome and Constantinople were overrated as the root of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches. Persecution from imperialism against Copts resulted in violence from Copts too. To uncover the true reason(s) behind this conflict, I plan to examine the architectural and artistic manifestations of ecclesiastical life during this period and answer whether it was motivated by theological circumstances or political factors. By conducting this research, I hope to shed light on the popular peace that was hidden under the political face of history.

This research is significant because, on one hand, it can be useful not only for the sake of the neglected Coptic Heritage but might be a strong milestone towards building a solid cultural bridge between both the Western and Eastern churches. On the other hand, the rarity of research on this topic is another reason why it's important, which motivates me strongly to approach it. I believe this study will be a brave beginning for more potential research. It will open a significant locked gate to a very critical moment of the past.

Previous works such as Peter Grossmann's achievements in architecture are significantly useful in this study. However, my contribution here is going to be focusing on creating an interpretation of this invaluable work utilizing modern digital archaeological techniques to make the implications of Grossmann's work more understandable to further scholars. As for art, since the study of Coptic art was neglected for a long time, it required me to create a theme-

based artistic typology for Coptic art. Then, I am utilizing the same digital archaeological techniques to obtain reliable analyses.

After introducing the research methodology and the geographical setting, the dissertation delves into the historical background of the Late Roman Empire and its effects on Egypt as a southern frontier. This chapter also focuses on the circumstances surrounding the significant event of the Council of Chalcedon and its aftermath until the Arab Conquest of Egypt. The following chapter explores the symbolism of Coptic architectural and artistic elements and suggests their roots in various cultures in Late Antiquity.

The next chapter of my work is dedicated to showcasing the architectural typology and discussing the architectural manifestation, which leads to certain implications based on data analysis. Following this is the chapter on artistic analysis, where I present my theme-based artistic typology, followed by discussions and analysis of the character of Coptic art that offer invaluable perspectives, along with my view.

After these two most important chapters, there is an annex that proposes a modern digital archaeological technique for image recognition. This method can be enhanced and developed to be beneficial not only for archaeologists but also for the preservation and management of heritage.

Eventually, a conclusion that displays the results of the study and my statement is followed by the bibliography.

AREA OF RESEARCH

The area of this study is defined by two parameters: the spatial factor along with the science of archaeology itself. Dr. Langó Péter, the supervisor of this study, states: “The same iconographic element or the same architectural feature can be understood differently, according to not only the era but also the region. The reason is that each region has a unique cultural heritage, which affects the intended meanings behind utilizing such a characteristic.” Egyptian archaeology, namely Egyptology/Coptology has a unique sense, maybe because it combines its relevance with the classical heritage of Ancient Egyptians with the fact that Egypt was one of the frontier provinces

of the Roman Empire. In addition, Alexandria played a distinguished role in the Christological debates in the era of Early Christianity.

This research tends to analyze ecclesiastical architecture and art of a critical era of early Christianity, namely the period between the 5th and 7th centuries. It is the contemporary period of two influential events: the council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. and the Arab Conquest of Egypt in 641 A.D. Spatially, this study deals with the ecclesiastical heritage of Egypt from this era.

However, the term 'Coptic' does not describe only 'Christian' Egyptian heritage. It is worth explaining it in light of the definition of the nowadays scholars. Nowadays, specialists in the art and archaeology of the discipline of post-pharaonic Egypt define 'Coptic' archaeology much more broadly, not only to describe Christian archaeology of Egypt but also to encompass works made beginning in the late 3rd century for pagans as well as Christians with whom they shared motifs and taste down through the 4th and 5th centuries and further.¹

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The direct consequence of Chalcedon decisions in 451 A.D. was the so-called Great Schism of the Apostolic Church. The East was called by the West as Monophysite, while the West was described by the East as Diophysite. The rise of the so-called "Monophysitism/Miaphsism" in the East was led by the Copts of Egypt, the largest eastern Christian sect. This can be considered as a kind of growing provincial movement in the province of Egypt against the gradual intensification of Byzantine imperialism, soon to reach its peak during the reign of Iustinianus (527-65 A.D.). The theological debates between the "Monophysites" in Alexandria and the "Diophysites" in Rome and Constantinople had been overrated as the root of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches. However, political clouds are in the air. Consequently, some aspects of the fact have been overshadowed throughout history by purely religious considerations. So far, the Copts believe that the differences overstated at Chalcedon and the doctrinal gap gradually widened between the Sees.

After the deposition and exile of the native Egyptian Patriarch Dioscorus, who was involved in the council of Chalcedon, Byzantines installed a successor in the see of Alexandria in the person of

¹ Gabra & Eaton-Krauss, 2006: xiii.

Proterius (452-457 A.D.), a docile friend of Byzantine imperialism, who possessed a brutal military force. The Egyptians immediately responded by electing a rival native patriarch, Timothy Aelurus. Consequently, the united bishopric of Alexandria became split between two lines of patriarchal succession. The Melkite (royalist) line was Greek and originated from Constantinople, who were Chalcedonians. The other was “Monophysite”, native Egyptians, non-Chalcedonians.

Moreover, during the wars of Romans with the Vandals in North Africa and the Blemyes in the Thebaid, the Alexandrian populace -as an outcome against the rough persecution from imperialism against Copts- seized that opportunity to assassinate the unguarded Proterius, drag his body through the city streets, burn it, and cast his dust to the winds. Timothy momentarily became the only patriarch.

Therefore, when it comes to bloody conflicts, one must pause a bit and take a closer look at the situation beyond the circle. The implications and manifestations of that post-Chalcedonian so-called verbal schism may raise new hidden facts. Thus, I can illustrate the manifestations of that Great Schism in Egypt, from both clerical and popular aspects, in order to be able to get closer to the real reason(s) behind that conflict.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are there any traces of the so-called Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian direction that might suggest an impact on Architectural and Artistic life?
- Architecturally, where, and how were the architectural layouts of churches and monasteries at that time in Egypt? Monophysite or not? Influenced by Diophysites or not?
- Artistic, what are the iconographic characteristics of the depictions, and architectural sculptures? Sole local Egyptian character existed or did universal influences too exist? And what about the probable theological indications of the influences?
- What was the role of imperial financial support in architectural and artistic life?

RESEARCH AIM

By conducting this research, I aim to illustrate, by facts, whether this so-called Great Schism was motivated by theological circumstances or pushed by politicians under certain political conditions. The discussion is worth it so one may realize the popular peace covered under the political face of history!

SIGNIFICANCE

Generally, studying both Archaeology and Art History is not only noteworthy for historical research but also has a great deal of community and economic value. Archaeology has the potential to provide new information on the human past, solidify one's ties to their social or national heritage, and provide economic means to locations across the world.

In our case, it can be useful not only for the sake of the neglected Coptic Heritage but might be a strong milestone on the way to building a solid cultural bridge between both the Western and Eastern churches.

Specifically, the importance of this research comes from the rarity of research on this topic, which motivates me strongly to approach it. I believe this study will be a brave beginning for more potential research. It will open a significant locked door to a very critical moment of the past.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Previous Research

In this study, I tend to benefit from the typology of Peter Grossmann published in 2002, in which he divided churches into two main types: secular churches, and monastic churches. Then, he classified each into types, based on the type of the ground plan, in chronological order. Depending on his long-term surveys, along with the invaluable works of the previous and temporary scholars, Grossmann could achieve a clear architectural typology supported with a descriptive profile for each type, even for each mentioned church, of course, in the light of the amount and quality of available information.²

² Grossmann 2002.

As for art, the study of Coptic art was also neglected for a long time. The first scholar to admit the value of Coptic art and make an effort to preserve it was the French Gaston Maspero. Efforts have been made to classify Coptic art into eras, but this is relatively artificial.

Thus, studying Coptic art is still an open topic that needs further efforts to be made. In this study, I tend to conduct a theme-based artistic typology for Coptic art between the 5th and 7th centuries.

Historiography

Copts were not very interested in writing history in a chronological form. This can be explained by two historical observations.³

First, the belief that the end of the world would occur in the near future became widespread among Christians in general in the early Church. This mindset led the early Copts to pay no attention to the recording of history, which would normally be devoted to future generations. Second, the Coptic Church in the first three centuries was part of the universal Church and contrasted with the heretics and their schismatic churches. It had no sense of its own identity as a Coptic (Egyptian) Church since the Christian identity was above the individual Coptic identity, which was not existing so far back then. Politically, Egypt was also only a part of the Roman and later the Byzantine Empire. This ecclesiastical and political dependence in which the Coptic Church found itself at that time probably prevented any attempt to write down its own history.⁴

After the ecclesiastical schism at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and particularly after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641, the Copts found themselves accused of a heretical faith by other Christians and of unbelief by the Muslims. Therefore, they began to compile writings to defend their own beliefs and to explain the Coptic dogma to the Melkites and Christian beliefs to the Muslims. These apologies are significant historically as they contain historical evidence for the correctness of Coptic beliefs. The best example of such writings is the book by Bishop Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa⁵ from the 10th century on the councils (*Kitāb al-Majāmi*) and his work on the Christian creed (*Tafsīr al-Amāna*).⁵ However, in all the historical and semi-historical writings from Coptic Egypt, we lack the relationship and connection to pre-Christian Egypt.

³ Moawad 2014: 11-12

⁴ Moawad 2014: 12.

⁵ Moawad 2014: 16-17.

Architectural Analysis

The methodology of the architectural analysis in this research tends to benefit from the architectural typology created by Peter Grossmann and will employ one of the digital archaeology techniques, namely data analysis using the programming language Python.

To utilize this methodology successfully, I had to overcome two challenges: data collection and data analysis. As for data analysis, executing the process using the library named 'Pandas' in the programming language 'Python' facilitated obtaining reliable, accurate results depending on the input which is the outcome of data collection. Regarding collecting the data, after exploring the architectural typological database, it was easier to find out the specifications of each type, church, or region. Then, my role was to combine the available information to recognize facts and to conclude characteristics and influences. Remarkably, there are no sharp barriers between different types, as the majority of the architectural ground plans and designs combine different influences. However, the digital data analysis technique facilitated solving this dilemma.

Iconographic Analysis

An iconographic typology conducted by the author. There were certain obstacles. It is worth mentioning that dealing with the dating of the examined artifacts was challenging. In that sphere, on the sidelines of the 12th International Congress of Coptic Studies, Brussels, in July 2022, I have been recommended by Dr. Gertrud J.M. van Loon and Prof. Youhanna N. Youssef to avoid the challenge of seeking artifacts that are dated to a short period between two exact dates, to be able to obtain correct, reliable, and realistic results, since it is hard to define certain pieces of art between the very precise period between exactly 451 and 641 A.D. Elizabeth S. Bolman states: “Egyptian Christian paintings are extremely difficult to date, especially those executed before the medieval period ... Art historians have tended to group the bulk of the evidence into a general sixth-to seventh- and sometimes eighth-century period, with little discussion.”⁶ One more obstacle confronted me in this research. For creating a theme-based iconographic typology, it is almost impossible to find sharp barriers between various types. Indeed, most of the examples combine diverse elements that differ in type, origin, and religious insignia. As an indication, it is worth mentioning the monk Phocas, from the 6th century, who used to take communion in both churches

⁶ Bolman 2016: 163; Gabra & Eaton-Krauss 2006: 58-60, 65-67, 72-73; Badawy 1978: 247; Bourguet 1971: 138-141; Wessel 1965: 166-181.

in Kellia, Chalcedonian, and non-Chalcedonian.⁷ To overcome the first challenge, I conducted both a typology and analysis of examples, generally, dating between the 5th and 7th centuries. To enhance reliable results for the analysis that can be distorted due to the second challenge, I am employing digital data analysis techniques, using the library named 'Pandas' of the programming language 'Python'.

RESEARCH RESULTS

As for the results, architecturally, the basilica form was dominant in all types of this period. However, simultaneously, the Egyptian architectural character was minded too. That is in addition to the newly emerged elements due to the liturgical needs matching the number of believers and nature or rites. Remarkably, several locations include different types of ground plans for churches. These different types indicate also different influences: Egyptian and non-Egyptian. Out of seven locations, six of them include both influences together. Such a phenomenon may suggest relatively tolerance. For instance, in Abū Mīna complex, the north church, which is far from the rest of the churches of the complex, was non-Chalcedonian, whereas the other churches were Chalcedonian, under imperial support. Moreover, generally, Egyptian influence never appears alone without a non-Egyptian influence in any of the examined churches known so far. There is 65 % of the examples offer Egyptian with non-Egyptian influence, whereas 35 % offer only non-Egyptian influences. Nevertheless, influences varied, where the dominant percentage was for a dual character, namely Roman along with Egyptian influence with 27 %. However, the same percentage exists for the Roman influence alone. Then, 15% is the percentage of examples that offer the following influences: Byzantine with local influences, and Graeco-Roman, Byzantine, with local influences together. The Byzantine solely occupies 12 % of the examples, whereas Byzantine influence along with Roman influences represents only 4 %.

As for artistic results, the digital analysis examined 76 artifacts. In another experiment for a limited number of 14 artifacts, surprisingly, the general results were almost the same. That may suggest that the analysis was reliable enough due to the digital method used in it. 36% of the examples have early Byzantine/Christian alongside Graeco-Roman influences, and 24% have early Byzantine/Christian with Graeco-Roman and local influences. The rest of the examples are early

⁷ Guillaumont 1969: 8-9.

Byzantine/Christian 18%, early Byzantine/Christian with local 11%, Graeco-Roman 9%, and Graeco-Roman with local 3%. Generally, the percentage of solo non-Egyptian influences is 63%, while the percentage of dual character influences, namely non-Egyptian with Egyptian is 37%. Nevertheless, interestingly, though the non-Egyptian characteristics occurred alone, the local influence is never alone in any example. Considering these analyses alongside the scholarly discussion, the conclusion will be logically clear.

The ‘Great Schism’, most probably, could not split communities, but rather it resulted in this artistic fusion that enriched this period. And since art is one of the true expressions of human conscience, then, I believe that it was nothing but a purely political schism that did not express the full will of either the people or even the clergy. People, eventually, exchanged their cultures, and this was expressed and proved by art. One of the clearest examples is the White Monastery and the Red Monastery. Although these two important standing monasteries were under the influence of St. Shenute Archimandrite, who is famous for his strong Coptic faith and for his braveness in expressing his belief, both monasteries, architecturally and artistically accommodated non-Egyptian influences. Even, with the depiction of Pope Dioscorus which was in a later phase of depicting as suggested. Thus, it was an exchange rather than a controversy.

PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

Publications

- The Development of Ecclesiastical Architecture in Egypt during the Late Antique and Medieval Periods, Doctoral Student Association of the University of Pécs, Pécs, 2021: Published.
- Coptic defensive architecture during Roman and medieval times, University of Debrecen: Published.
- Main features of ecclesiastical architecture in Egypt between the 5th and 7th centuries, Studies in the Near Eastern Archaeology I., PPKE BTK, Budapest: accepted.
- Coptic Iconography in Egypt between the 5th and 7th centuries, International Association for Coptic Studies (IACS) 12th International Congress of Coptic Studies, Brussels, 11-16 July 2022: submitted.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

- CONFERENTIA DEBRECENIENSIS DOCTORANDORUM IUVENUM ‘CDDI’, October 15-16, 2021: Presenter.
- Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference, Pécs, 12-13th of November 2021: Presenter.
- International Association for Coptic Studies (IACS) 12th International Congress of Coptic Studies, Brussels, 11-16 July 2022: Presenter.
- From Antiquity to the Ottoman Period in the Levant (Conference on the Near Eastern Archaeology), Pázmány Péter Catholic University, September 26-27, 2022: Presenter & Organizer.
- Antiquity–Faith and Christianity -Artefacts and Finds from the Ancient History, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, September 29, 2022: Presenter.

BIO OF THE AUTHER

Basem Gabra has a Bachelor of Egyptology from Ain Shams University in 2007. In 2019, he obtained a master's degree in archaeology from Pázmány Péter Catholic University, on Ecclesiastical Architecture of Egypt in the Roman and Medieval Periods.

Basem's Ph.D. dissertation at Pázmány Péter Catholic University is on the Ecclesiastical architecture and art of Egypt in the period from the 5th century (marked by the council of Chalcedon 451) till the 7th century (marked by the Arab Conquest 641).

Basem is interested in Late Antiquity as well as heritage management and cultural preservation, particularly for this period, for which he is using his digital skills in classifications, analysis, and planning.

Basem is a native Arabic speaker who is fluent in English and German, in addition to some Hungarian. He has some knowledge of ancient languages; like Coptic and basic Latin, and he also reads hieroglyphs.

Basem aims to combine programming with his knowledge of archaeology and history.