

SOME THEOLOGICAL
AND
SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE COPTIC MULID⁽¹⁾

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The literature pertaining to our study of the Coptic mûlid is limited. It might be advisable, therefore, to introduce the subject-matter by mentioning briefly the most significant studies. The principal work on the Egyptian mawâlid is J.W. McPherson's *The Moulids of Egypt*. Cairo : The Nile Mission Press, 1941. This very comprehensive study, which enumerates and describes a large number of mawâlid, is mainly concerned with the Islamic mûlid, though the Coptic mawâlid of St. George, St. Dimiana, St. Barsum the Naked and the Holy Virgin are briefly mentioned. McPherson, greatly involved in his subject, provides the reader with excellent phenomenological descriptions of the mawâlid. Two articles by Elie Sidawy are important contributions in this context. Sidawy's account « Sitti Dimiana, sa légende, son mouled » in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Egypte*, VIII (1917), 78-99, is a description of the annual mûlid in honour of St. Dimiana near Bilqas, based upon a visit by the author in 1913. His article « Le mouled d'Abou-Guerg » in *Revue du Monde Egyptien*, I (1921), 146-152 ; 225-234, provides us with the history and topography of the area of Kafr Abou-Guerg and introduces explanations of the traditions, beliefs and parallels of the mûlid of St. George. Another local account of a mûlid was written by George Legrain « Abou Seifein et les fous » in *La Revue Egyptienne*, I, 9 (Sept. 1912), 257-263. In addition to a description of the locality of Qamûlah north of Luxor, Legrain mentions exorcisms and healings, miraculous manifestations and displays, which are an integral part of the Coptic mûlid. An article entitled « An ancient Egyptian custom illustrated by a modern survival » by Winifred S.

⁽¹⁾ Delivered at the meeting held on 22.4.63.

Blackman and published in *Man*, XXV, 38 (May 1925), 65-67 discusses the rite of dedication of the tufts of children's hair to Islamic shaikhs and Coptic saints. Popular narratives of the mûlid of St. George at Mit Damsîs have been published by F. Labib in *al-Mussawar* of September 5, 1958 and September 4, 1959.

Equally significant are the descriptions of the Coptic mawâlid in some of the anthropological and sociological studies of the Egyptians. Thus, S.H. Leeder, *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs, A Study of the Manners and Customs of the Copts of Egypt*. London : Hodder and Stoughton, 1914, provides us with interesting accounts of the mawâlid of St. Barsum the Naked at Ma'sara, St. George at Mît Damsîs and St. Dimiana at Bilqas in his chapter « The Marvels of the Saints' Tombs, and their Birthday Fairs ». Winifred S. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*. London : George Harrap and Co., 1927, deals with the institution of the mûlid in her chapters « Muslim Sheikhs and Coptic Saints » and « Some Annual Festivals ». The standard work on *The Fellahin* by Henry Habib-Ayrout, Cairo : R. Schindler, 1943, does not give any direct references to the mûlid, though « a note on mourning customs », which are typical at the Coptic mûlid, is added to the book. Moreover, my study on *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, Cairo : The American University at Cairo Press, 1961, refers to the mûlid of the Holy Virgin at the Dair al-Muharraq as well as the mûlid of St. Dimiana. In both instances I offer brief descriptions.

Among the mediaeval writers, both, the 13th century topographer Abû 'l-Makarim, *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*, ed. B.T.A. Evetts, Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1895, and the 15th century Islamic historian al-Maqrîzî in his concluding sections of the *Khitat* refer to numerous celebrations of the Copts in honour of their saints.

Certainly, there are more accounts of Coptic mawâlid, especially in the literature of the pilgrims and voyageurs. To assemble those data and references, however, does not fall within the scope of the present study.

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Wherever we discover a certain transcendentalization of the Divine, wherever a group of believers worships God or the gods as the wholly and totally Other, man has ever sought the help of intermediaries for

spiritual communication. These, on the one hand, reveal the will and purpose of God, and, on the other hand, are capable of listening sympathetically to the needs of the believers. These intermediaries may take the form of angels, as, for example, in post-exilic Judaism, or they may take the form of historical or mythological personages who may be saints, martyrs or confessors of the community of the believers. This divine transcendentalism is in many, if not in most instances, one of the theological phenomena which I shall call the « official religion ».

In our case, the religion under discussion is that of Coptic Orthodox Christianity, the « official religion » of which has its theological foundations in the Canon of the Holy Scriptures, the decisions of the first three Oecumenical Councils and the teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. On the other hand, the « popular religion » with its less sophisticated forms of expression has from ancient times centered around more tangible objects of veneration and worship. This means, that in the Nile Delta and Valley, as well as everywhere else, we can discover two types of Christian belief and practices. The « official belief » is set forth in the accepted doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church and is published in the handbooks on dogmatics, in theological treatises or in the catechism. This type of belief is a predominantly intellectual encounter with the teachings of the Church, and as such, the appeal of the « official religion » is by its very nature limited to the more sophisticated and the educated. The masses, therefore, who are unable to comprehend and understand the revealed truths which are couched in abstract thought-forms and patterns, have no other choice but to follow the more primitive religious patterns of their ancestors. In response to direct evangelization and social pressure, these patterns then become christianized, yet within their ancestral frame of reference, a process which both from a theological as well as from a sociological point of view should never be ignored.

The religion of the masses, *i.e.* the « popular religion », has expressed itself in many instances in sub-Christian forms, maintaining tenuously the cultus and the institutions of the past. Thus we discover, that often one or two centuries after the process of Christianization, the old forms and patterns were filled with new religious content, which was borrowed

from certain aspects of the « official religion » of the new cultus. Thus, for example, the *crux ansata*, the Pharaonic *signum vitae* was not employed in its definite Christian context, *i.e.* representing the « official religion » of salvation through the vicarious death of the Christ, before the 5th or 6th century, or one or two centuries subsequent to the Christianization of the Nile Valley. In this context, O'Leary's observation is quite correct when he says that « it is tempting to suppose that deity, martyr and sheikh are the same person under changed names and titles » ⁽¹⁾.

Indeed, in some instances it has been well illustrated that the Christian saint, martyr or confessor occupied the place of a Pharaonic deity, and that his place is now taken by a Muslim shaikh. P.D. Scott-Moncrieff had pointed out, *e.g.* that there is much likelihood of seeing in the Egyptian Horus spearing the crocodile not only the prototype of St. George spearing the dragon, but also of many of the warrior-saints, like St. Mercurius, St. Theodore and St. Menas, all of whom are so popular among the Copts ⁽²⁾. Thus, the Pharaonic deity, retaining even its cultus characteristics, merely adopted a Hellenistic-Christian garb. The fact that this process of cult transference continued well into the Islamic era is illustrated by the transformation of certain Christian cults into Islamic ones. In Luxor, for example, there are three mosques built on the sites of former Christian shrines. The Shrine of St. Shanazhoum, a saint who is commemorated by the Copts on the 20th of Hâtûr, was transformed into the Mosque of Sheikh al-Meqasqiche, which also enclosed the tomb of the venerated shaikh. St. Dalacina, co-martyr of St. Shanazhoum of the Diocletian persecution, became the « Bint al-Kaisar » who married the highly venerated Shaikh Abû'l-Haggag, whose mosque is situated within the Temple dedicated to the Theban Triad, Amûn, Mût and Khons. St. Sophronius, a soldier of al-Hifa near Luxor, and decapitated by Arianus the Governor is no one else but Shaikh Ouachi, whose modest tomb is situated in the garden of the Luxor Hotel. About 20 km. north-west of Cairo is situated the

⁽¹⁾ O'LEARY, *The Saints of Egypt*. London, 1937, 13.

⁽²⁾ SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt*. Cambridge, 1913, 137-140.

small village of Ausîm, in the 9th century an important episcopal See. *The History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* mentions the famous bishop of Ausîm, Anbâ Mûsâ, who suffered persecution and torture during the reign of Marwân II (744-750 A.D.)⁽¹⁾, and who was buried in Ausîm. Over the centuries, the tomb of the bishop was transformed into the tomb of a Muslim shaikh, known as Sidi Mûsâ. Still Christians and Muslims venerate the shrine alike. A similar transformation also occurred with regard to the episcopal Cathedral of St. George in Ausîm, which nowadays is the Great Mosque. The large red granite and marble columns which are used as thresholds of the principal entrance to the mosque are silent witnesses to an even more ancient construction, probably a Pharaonic temple, which at one time occupied this site. Both Christians and Muslims believe that the water of the well in the north-west portion of the mosque has therapeutic qualities, a belief, which no doubt can be traced back to the days when the site was occupied by a church. Similar transformations have occurred throughout Egypt, thus we find, *e.g.* that the Mosque of al-Lamati, in the southern part of Minya, used to be at one time the Church of St. George al-Malati, and the Mosque of Sitt Nimelah in the old section of Minya is said to have been the Church of Sitt Dimianah. In all these instances, the cultus locality was retained, though a new content was given to the religious practices on account of the spread of Islâm in the respective environment.

With the advent of Christianity in the Nile Delta and Valley, the cult of the Pharaonic deities was soon replaced by the masses with historical or fictitious accounts of saints and martyrs, many of whom belonged to the Alexandrian-Hellenistic rather than to the Egyptian world. Historical and legendary personages and events which could be locally identified in either the Nile Valley or the Delta became increasingly objects of veneration and worship. Thus, the *vita* of a saint, related to the town or village of a certain community, and pregnant with the miraculous, provided a significantly more tangible object of religious identification than the abstract dogmas of the « official religion ». That

⁽¹⁾ Hist. Patr., *Patrologia Orientalis* V, Michael I (743-767).

this practice was very widespread in the 5th and 6th century, about two centuries following the evangelization of the Nile Valley, can be clearly seen from the outspoken and harsh words of rebuke and condemnation by St. Shenute (Anbâ Shanûdah), who severely criticized the Christian villagers for inventing patron-saints and erecting shrines for the bones discovered and assumed to be relics of martyrs ⁽¹⁾.

In this respect, St. Shenute falls into the classical sociological type of the « reformer » ⁽²⁾ who sees in the « popular religion » an illegitimate deviation of the « official religion ». Indeed, Coptic Orthodox Christianity with its monophysitic exaltation of the Christ and subsequent dehumanization of the so-called historical Jesus, provided *ipso facto* a most fruitful soil for the emergence of a widespread « popular religion ».

At one time, almost every settlement in the Nile Delta and Valley had its local shrine or shrines to which the believers made their annual or semi-annual pilgrimages. These pilgrimages were made in commemoration of the « birthday » of a saint or some other historical event related to the particular locality. With regards to the birthday, *i.e.* mûlid of the saint, it is important for us to remember that the religious attitudes of the Copts were and still are fundamentally eschatologically directed, a factor, which no doubt was instrumental in the ready acceptance of an eschatologically accentuated religion like Christiannity. Therefore, the Coptic Church, like her sister churches throughout the ancient world, saw in the martyrdom of one of her saints his birthday, the *natalitia* or *genethlion*, and it was only in the 4th century or even later, that the idea of the martyrdom was transformed into that of the *depositio* or burial. For that matter, the Copts still interpret the mawâlid of their saints as the « second birth », the birth into the Life Everlasting ⁽³⁾. In this respect, the commemoration of the Coptic mûlid differs from that of the Islamic mûlid, which is held in honour of the natural birth of the shaikh.

⁽¹⁾ LEIPOLDT, J., *Schenute von Atripe und die Entstehung des national-ägyptischen Christentums*. Leipzig, 1903.

⁽²⁾ WACH, J., *Sociology of Religion*. Chicago, 1944.

⁽³⁾ MEINARDUS, O., « A Comparative Study of the Coptic Synaxarium », *Bull. Soc. d'Arch. Copte*, XVII, 1964, 111-112.

To-day, the dates for the Coptic mawâlid are generally determined by the Coptic Synaxarium. No doubt, the synaxarium or martyrology had its origin in local martyrologies which may date back to the 4th or 5th centuries. The celebration of the birthday of a certain saint in an influential community, which may have replaced a pre-Christian feast, may thus have determined the establishment of a definite date for this saint and its subsequent introduction into the local and general synaxarium.

With regard to the historical events, which are celebrated by the community, their determination of date and origin is more difficult to establish. In this connection, one may mention the numerous mawâlid in honour of the Coming of the Holy Family into Egypt, an event which is celebrated in many places, especially in the Nile Valley on the 25th of Bashons. In each case I was told, that it was on this particular day that the Holy Family lodged among the villagers, and that the Christ blessed the waters of the village-well while the Holy Virgin rested under a certain palm-tree. It seems, that the date of the Feast of the Coming of the Holy Family into Egypt is somehow related to a forecast of the annual inundation of the Nile, which means, that this feast may be a survival of a pre-Christian fertility celebration. Thus, for example, Maqrîzî, the 15th century Islamic historian, informs us that on the night of the 25th of Bashons the people would assemble in the Monastery of Jesus near Ishnîn an-Nasârah to remove the stone-cover from the well, when they would discover that the water within had risen and began to sink again ⁽¹⁾. This observation would help them to determine how high the Nile would rise that year. A similar practice at the same locality is recorded by de Maillet, the French Consul-General, who visited this village in 1703 and observed how the Copts foretold the height of the annual inundation. A cotton cord, marked at regular intervals by threads of white and blue, was let down into the well, so that the end touched the water. Then a table was placed over the mouth of the well, and the bishop celebrated the Divine Liturgy.

⁽¹⁾ EVETTS, B.T.A., *Account of the Monasteries and Churches of the Christians of Egypt*. Oxford 1895, 131.

When the Liturgy was finished, the table was removed and the cord was examined. According to Coptic belief, the height to which the water had penetrated the cord marked the expected height of the inundation of the Nile⁽¹⁾. Doubtless we have here a reference to an ancient form of a Nilometer, the function of which was to forecast the probable financial gain or loss on account of the expected height of the Nile.

A similar relationship between the inundation of the Nile and a mythological-religious event is well illustrated by Siegfried Morenz⁽²⁾. Commenting on a 5th century Coptic manuscript on the history of Joseph the Carpenter, the husband of the Holy Virgin Mary, Morenz comes to the conclusion that Joseph had taken the place of Osiris, who used to be worshipped as a Nile deity. Thus, for example, the legendary details of the death of Joseph appear analogous to those of the death of Osiris. At the death of Joseph, Jesus sits at his head, while Mary sits at his feet, whereas in the case of Osiris, Horus stands at the head and Isis at the feet of the deceased deity. Indeed, « the myth of the destiny of Osiris in the circle of his own has been transferred to Joseph and the Holy Family ». Moreover, the 26th of Apip, the day of an ancient Nile-feast commemorating the inundation of the Nile in Lower Egypt was absorbed in the Coptic Synaxarium as the Feast commemorating St. Joseph. Though the feast used to be celebrated every year near the Nilometer in Cairo, upon inquiry among the Copts in Cairo, I was unable to obtain any confirmation as to its present practice. Nevertheless, this study shows very clearly the process of transformation from nature-bound ancient Egyptian religious motives to their mythological substitutes of the Christian era.

Among the essential characteristics of the Coptic mûlid are certain miraculous manifestations which are to assure the pilgrims of the supernatural character of the feast. These phenomena have had a long history and are expected to occur annually. They are regarded as a proof of

⁽¹⁾ MEINARDUS, O., *In the Steps of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Upper Egypt*. Cairo, 1963, 39.

⁽²⁾ MORENZ, S., *Die Geschichte von Joseph dem Zimmermann*. Berlin, 1951.

divine approval of the feast, and as such they are considered to be of greatest importance. Generally speaking, these miraculous displays can be divided into two categories, *i.e.* those pertaining to individual pilgrims, for example, therapies, exorcisms, the granting of fertility to barren women or the restoration of lost or stolen objects to the owner, and those which are shared by all and which are of an impersonal nature.

Commencing with the second category, the most frequent expectation is the annual apparition of the saint at the time of the mûlid. Many pilgrims, both educated and illiterate, to the Churches of St. George at Mît Damsîs in the Nile Delta and at Bibah in the Nile Valley on the 23rd of Barmûdah have testified to have seen visions of St. George riding on his horse. Leeder mentions the mûlid of Barsûm al-Arîân which is attended by many people who make the pilgrimage in the hope to see the shadow of the saint pass across the wall of the church. A detailed account of these apparitions is given by Leeder ⁽¹⁾. Visitors and pilgrims to the mûlid of Sitt Dimîânah on the 12th of Bashons have testified to the apparitions of the patron-saint in a small window of the dome of the church. In this connection, I shall quote the 17th century priest and traveller Johann Michael Wansleben who visited the shrine in 1672, and after carefully watching the apparitions, concluded that they were merely shadows of passing objects ⁽²⁾. These apparitions at the mûlid of St. Dimiana were also exposed by Dr. Gulian Lansing (1863) ⁽³⁾. Yet, in spite of the exposures by travellers and emancipated Copts, the masses of the pilgrims still adhere to the preconceived notion that no mûlid can be successful without the occurrence of some sensational manifestation. This is true throughout Egypt. Legrain, for example, mentions, that St. Mercurius appears every year in the night of the 25th of Abîb, the Feast of the Consecration of the Church of Abû-s-Saifain, to the pilgrims who attend the mûlid of Abû-s-Saifain at Qamûla, where the tomb of the warrior-saint is venerated ⁽⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁾ LEEDER, S.H., *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs*. London, 1914, 137-140.

⁽²⁾ Cf. WANSLEBEN, J.M., *Nouvelle Relation en forme de Journal d'un voyage fait en Egypte...*, Paris, 1677.

⁽³⁾ Cf. LANSING, G., *Egypt's Princes*. Philadelphia, 1864.

⁽⁴⁾ LEGRAIN, G., « Abou Seifein et les fous », *La Revue Egyptienne*, I, 9, 257 f.

At the Monastery of St. George west of Dimuqrat near Asfûn I was told by the local priests that every year at the time of the mûlid a large number of pigeons fly in the form of the cross over the monastery and that this phenomenon is regarded as proof of the divine pleasure for the celebration and festivities of the pilgrims. At the famous Church of the Holy Virgin at Gebel 't-Tair many accounts of supernatural and sensational events are related by the pilgrims. That this mûlid goes back to the early Middle Ages is attested by the reference in the 13th century account of Abû 'l-Makarim who states, that « a festival is kept here on the 21st of Tûbah, the day of the Falling Asleep of the Holy Virgin, when a large congregation assembles » ⁽¹⁾. Nowadays, at the time of this mûlid, pilgrims from as far as Asyût and Cairo attend the celebrations, and over 10.000 pilgrims are estimated to come to this feast ⁽²⁾. The pilgrims say that on the day of the mûlid, the church is lit up without anyone switching on the electric light, a sign, that God wants the church to appear in all its splendour. The miraculous appearance of light is a typical manifestation among the Copts. In his account of the Church of St. Victor at Gizeh, Abû 'l-Makarim mentions that « a light was seen to proceed from the picture of the Lady in the apse of the church on several occasions, and this thing became celebrated and was talked of by many of the faithful » ⁽³⁾. In the *History of the Patriarchs* it is related that the priest of Dahshûr cut off the top of the wick of the icon-lamp of St. George and while waiting for the sacristan to bring him a lamp in order that he might light it there descended upon the church a white light in three places, and the light lightened the wick ⁽⁴⁾. I have heard the monks of the Dair Anbâ Antûnûs relate numerous stories of the miraculous lighting of the candles in the Church of St. Mark within the monastery. The light, no doubt, is identified with the Christ, « Who is the Light » (St. John VIII, 12), and Who therefore is considered to be the master over the times and places to be illuminated by the light.

⁽¹⁾ EVETTS, B.T.A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*. Oxford, 1895, 218.

⁽²⁾ MEINARDUS, O., *op. cit.*, 45.

⁽³⁾ EVETTS, B.T.A., *op. cit.*, 174.

⁽⁴⁾ *Hist. Patr.* II, III, 358.

The display of the extraordinary, the sensational, the miraculous, as it is experienced by the majority, if not by all pilgrims, is an essential characteristic of the Coptic mûlid.

In addition, the Coptic mawâlid attract every year large numbers of psychoneurotics, epileptics, hysteria-paralytics and mentally disturbed pilgrims, who come to the feasts expecting to be healed. It is believed that on account of the merits acquired by the saints, God will accept their intercessions and restore the sick. True, the intercessory functions of the Coptic saints are divided, though one should not compare these divisions to be as exact or detailed as in the Latin or Byzantine Churches. Generally speaking, the Copts refer to St. George or to any other of the warrior-saints to cast out evil spirits, whereas they refer to the Holy Virgin or St. Dimiana to grant fruitfulness to barren women and blessings upon children. St. Dimiana is also believed to be able to prevent thieves from stealing and to restore stolen goods to the rightful owners. In this context it should be remembered that the Copts depend for their actual religious life upon very few saints. The Holy Virgin and St. George are implored throughout Egypt from Alexandria to Aswân. Indeed, the devotion to the Holy Virgin is very marked among the Copts with thirty-two feasts in her honour and an office known as the Theotokia, of which there is a special one for each day of the week, although it is now used only in the month of Kîhak⁽¹⁾. Moreover, the dedication of churches to the Holy Virgin was⁽²⁾ and still is more frequent in Egypt than any other dedication. Next in popularity is St. George. To show the extent of the veneration of St. George throughout the country, Sidawy has enumerated 418 Coptic churches in the Nile Valley, 83 of which were dedicated to St. George; and from 129 Coptic churches in the Nile Delta and in Cairo, 30 churches were dedicated to St. George⁽³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ KABES, J., « La dévotion à la Sainte Vierge dans l'Eglise Copte ». *Les Cahiers Coptes* II (1952) 4-7.

⁽²⁾ More than 55 churches of the Holy Virgin are mentioned by Abû 'l-Makarim (13th cent).

⁽³⁾ SIDAWY, E., « Le mouled d'Abou-Guerg », *Revue du monde Egyptien* I, (1921), 225-234.

Since most pilgrims ascribe their diseases to various forms of demon-possession, St. George and the warrior-saints St. Mercurius and St. Menas are most frequently implored for purposes of exorcism. What actually happens, using psychoanalytical terminology, is that by means of individual and mass suggestion the «id», *i.e.* the «demon» is confronted with the help of the symbol, in this case the Saint, with the «super-ego» of the so-called possessed. The factors of individual and mass expectation and suggestion, as well as the utter confidence in the therapeutic power of the symbol are obviously essential criteria for these exorcisms. With regard to the results, indeed, there is no question, that in some cases certain therapeutic effects have been achieved.

In this context it is important for us to realize that the «popular religion», which underlies the celebrations, healings and exorcisms at the mûlid, regards demons and angels, blessings and curses as being of a tangible nature. In this sense, the «popular religion» as displayed at the Coptic mawâlid reflects many New Testament accounts, for references to demon-possession are deeply imbedded in both the Gospel of St. Mark and Q, the two oldest documents. True, it is difficult for the emancipated person to appreciate the tangible nature of barakeh (blessing or healing virtue), yet, both in the New Testament (*St. Mark* I : 23-26, V : 1-15, VIII : 24-30, IX : 17-27, *Acts* XVI : 16-18) as well as at Coptic mawâlid the blessings which are received are considered as tangible additions to the personality, while he who grants the blessings feels the loss of the same (*St. Mark* V : 30). A Coptic priest, who claimed to have the power to exorcise, told me that whenever he had cast out demons or laid his hands upon the sick, he felt an acute need to «re-charge» by celebrating the Divine Liturgy or by withdrawing to the mountain, *i.e.* the desert.

Because of the supposed tangibility of the demons and evil spirits, some provision for their exit is frequently made. In some instances, the demons are supposed to depart through the toes or some other part of the body, leaving some spots of blood on the white robe of the pilgrim. Often, these spots take on the form of a cross ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ MEINARDUS, O., *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*. Cairo, 1961, 373.

The practice of casting out demons was and still is a reputable profession, the origin of which is deeply imbedded in Middle Eastern culture.

Furthermore, the mawâlid afford an occasion for certain rites and ceremonies, which are part of the « official religion ». Thus, the pilgrims take their infants to the mawâlid for the purpose of baptism and chrismation, which according to the doctrines of the Coptic Church are sacraments of regeneration and sanctification. At the mûlid of the Holy Virgin on the 21st of Baûnah at the Dair al-Muharraq ⁽¹⁾, over three-hundred infants were recently baptized.

A common sight at the Coptic mûlid is the village barber, whose function is to circumcise the boys prior to baptism. The Copts strongly prohibit the circumcision to be performed after baptism, except in the case of girls who are circumcised before the age of twelve. For that matter, I have heard it being said, that the sacrament of baptism would actually be annulled by the operation. The practice of circumcision prior to baptism is canonically laid down in the 11th century Canons of Cyril II, the 67th Patriarch of Alexandria ⁽²⁾. In some instances, the Coptic priest officiates as barber.

Before circumcision, the hands and feet of the boy are dyed with henna, and on the day before the ceremony, the barber or the Coptic priest cuts the boy's hair in a particular way, known as the *mukarras*. The tufts of the boy's hair are then dedicated to the saint, in whose honour the mûlid is celebrated ⁽³⁾. On the day of the circumcision, the boy is dressed in his finest clothes and often a beautifully embroidered cap is placed upon his head. After the ceremony, a service is being conducted in the church. Then, sacrifices in the form of pigeons, goats and lambs are offered, the meat of which is distributed among friends and the poor.

An important aspect of the Coptic mûlid is the presentation of certain votive-offerings by the pilgrims which are attached to the principal

⁽¹⁾ In commemoration of the building of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Philippi.

⁽²⁾ BURMESTER, O.H.E. KHS-, *Le Muséon* XLIX (1936), 245-288.

⁽³⁾ BLACKMAN, W.S., « An Ancient Egyptian custom illustrated by a modern survival », *Man* 25 : 38, (May 1925), 65-67.

object of veneration, either to the tomb of the saint, or to the most venerated icon. These votive-offerings may consist of a piece of cloth, a handkerchief, a tie or any other small patch of cloth. In some cases, also the first-fruits of the fields, bracelets, rings or jewelry are offered. These objects then are hung up in gratitude for the fulfilment of certain prayers. Thus, particularly women will adorn sacred sites and icons with votive offerings in gratitude for healings or the restoration or stolen or lost objects. Often candles are used as votive-offerings and at some mawâlid, one can see large numbers of candles burning in front of the icon of the patron-saint or in the caves which were blessed by the Christ and the Holy Family on Their Flight into Egypt, *e.g.* in the Church of the Holy Virgin at Musturud or the Church of St. Sergius in Old Cairo.

The relics of the saint, in whose honour the mûlid is celebrated, are highly venerated by the pilgrims. These relics, which consist in most instances of the bones of the patron-saint, are normally kept in long cylindrical wooden boxes covered with silk. Almost always, these bolsters are found in a niche built into the wall underneath the principal icon of the saint. At the occasion of the mûlid, predominantly women pilgrims touch and carry these bolsters in the hope and expectation of having their longings realized and fulfilled. Unfortunately, there exists a great deal of ignorance and confusion concerning the identity of these relics, for the relics of St. George, St. Mercurius, St. Dimiana and St. Theodore are claimed by a large number of Coptic churches in Cairo, the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley. — In this connection, it should be remembered that the veneration of relics is an ancient practice, and the Old Testament refers to the cult of relics as seen in the religious character of the burial of saintly persons (*e.g.* *Genesis* XXXV : 19, 20 ; *Exodus* XIII : 19), in the miraculous power of Elias' mantle (*II Kings* II : 13, 14), and the bones of Elisha (*II Kings* XIII : 21). St. John Chrysostom refers frequently to the relics of the martyrs as sources of divine blessings⁽¹⁾, and, indeed, all the great doctors of the early Church extolled the veneration of the relics of the saints.

⁽¹⁾ Eulogy of St. Eustathius, Migne, *Patr. Graec.*, L, 600 ; Homily on the Martyrs, *ibid.*, 648, 649 ; Eulogy of St. Julian, *ibid.*, 670-672.

Wherever the site of the mûlid is in the vicinity of a cemetery, and this happens to be the case in many instances of mawâlid in the country, the women use this occasion to repair to the tombs of their ancestors. This visit, which is referred to as *at-tala'*, is part of the celebrations. These cemeteries, which are just outside of the church or the abandoned monastery on the edge of the desert, become literally places of mass-lamentations at the time of the mûlid. Women with their faces and hands streaked with blue dye address their dead relatives. Often, other women will join those mourning in their lamentations. Offerings are made, and the blood of the animals is smeared over the tombs, whereas the meat is distributed among the poor. «Happy are the dead who are remembered, and happier still those for whom prayers are said».

At the Dair al-Muharraq I have seen several hundred women among the tombs mourning and lamenting, while the men and the children participated in the more joyful aspects of the mûlid. The uncontrolled expressions of grief by the Coptic women at the time of death as well as at the occasions of the mawâlid have their origin in ancient Pharaonic Egypt. Reliefs in the tomb-chapel at Sakkârah and elsewhere portray wailing women in much the same attitude as the Coptic peasant women at the time of a mûlid ⁽¹⁾. The wailing mother, who is seen so often at the mûlid, is beautifully portrayed in the tomb-chapel of Amenemhet at Thebes ⁽²⁾.

One of the interesting observations pertaining to the «popular religion» is its highly inclusive nature with regards to the so-called schismatic Christians and Muslims. Whereas the «official religion» carefully specifies that only the right believers, *i.e.* the orthodox, are eligible to participate in the «official cultus», the «popular religion» knows of no excluding criteria. On the contrary, the «popular religion» is highly inclusive. In this sense also, it may reflect even more correctly than the «official religion» the spirit of the Gospel of St. Mark and Q. Indeed, nowadays,

⁽¹⁾ For an extensive bibliography of ancient Egyptian analogies of present mourning practices, cf. BLACKMAN, *op. cit.*, 294.

⁽²⁾ NIÑA DE GARÍS DAVIES and A.H. GARDINER, *The Tomb of Amenemhet*. London, 1915, pl. XXIV.

many a Coptic mûlid is attended by as many Muslims as Copts. This is especially true in the Nile Delta at the mûlid of St. Dimiana near Bilqas and the mûlid of St. George at Mît Damsîs, but it is also true of the mawâlid in the Nile Valley. Leeder mentions that at the mûlid of St. Dimiana, « Moslems as well as Copts, living in that part, respect this saint considerably, and believe that she is the means of granting them most important benefits, when they address themselves to her, Moslems are usually heard singing to her name, calling her : Ya Sitt ya bint al-wali » ⁽¹⁾. The mûlid in honour of St. Barsum the Naked at al-Ma'sara, which is celebrated on the 18th of Tût, is attended annually by large numbers of Muslims who even refer to their patron as Sidi Muhammad al-Barsûmî ⁽²⁾. Lord Curzon, the famous 19th century voyageur, called Sanutius (St. Shenute) a Muslim saint. Butler points out in this context, that the mistake arose from the fact that the Copts may have manufactured a Sheikh Abû Shanûd for the benefit of the superstitious Muslims, and thus to secure the protection and reverence of their shrine ⁽³⁾. Lady Duff Gordon tells a story of her visit to Biba where she found a mason at work on repairs. He told her with pride that he was a faithful Muslim of Cairo, where for three consecutive nights he had been visited by St. George who ordered him to leave his work in Cairo and proceed to Biba to restore his church. The mason told her how he obeyed the saint's order which was in answer to the prayers of the priest of the Church of St. George in Biba ⁽⁴⁾. While attending the famous mûlid of Mârî Girgis at Mît Damsîs (in August 1963), I noticed a new altar-curtain in front of the central haikal of the old Church of St. George. On this curtain was embroidered the name of Muhammad Abbas Ibrahim, a merchant of the Muski, 1962. This Muslim pilgrim had donated the altar-curtain in gratitude for his cure at the time of the mûlid 1962. Upon request, the priest of the church

⁽¹⁾ LEEDER, S.H., *op. cit.*, 145.

⁽²⁾ MCPHERSON, J.W., *op. cit.*, 173.

⁽³⁾ BUTLER, A., *The Ancient Coptic Churches*. Oxford, 1884, I, 552 n.

⁽⁴⁾ LEEDER, S.H., *op. cit.*, 137. Also, MEYER-RANKE, P., « Auch die Moslems Kommen zum ' Mulid ' der Christen », *Die Welt*, Sept. 16, 1963.

showed me several altar-curtains which were offered to the church by Muslim pilgrims to the Shrine of St. George.

A significant number of the patients, dressed in their white galabiyahs and robes, who had camped for several days in the old Church of St. George, were Muslims from Cairo and Alexandria expecting to be healed. Indeed, on the level of the « popular religion » there exists a great deal of social interaction between Muslims and Christians, and only those cults of the « official religion », *i.e.* the sacraments, which are celebrated at the mûlid separate the orthodox from the schismatics and Muslims.

The following list enumerates the more important Coptic mawâlid. The sites are arranged from north to south. I am aware, that this account is not complete, yet this list constitutes an attempt to give the dates and places of the principal Coptic feasts.

May 20.	Bashons 12.	St. Dimiana at Dair Sitt Dimlânah, Bilqas, Mansûra.
August 22.	Masrî 16.	St. George at Church of St. George, Mît Damsîs, Mît Ghamr.
September 17.	Tût 7.	St. Rebecca (Sitt Rifaka) Sumbât, Mît Ghamr.
August 22.	Masrî 16.	Holy Virgin at Church of al-Adhrâ, Musturud, Heliopolis.
September 28.	Tût 18.	St. Barsum at Church of Barsûm al-Arian, Ma'sara, Helwan.
Ascensiontide.		St. George at Mari Girgis, Sidmint, Fayyûm.
April 30.	Barmûdah 22.	St. Isaac at Dair Naqlûn, Fayyûm.
August 22.	Masrî 16.	Holy Virgin, at Church of al-Adhrâ, Bayad an-Nasâra, Beni Suef.
Ascensiontide.		St. George at Church of St. George, Biba, Beni Suef.
June 1.	Bashons 24.	The Coming of the Holy Family to Egypt, Dair al-Ganûs.
Ascensiontide.		St. Theodore at Dair as-Sanquriyah, Beni Mazar.
Ascensiontide.		St. Iskhirûn at Bayahû, Samâlût.
January 29.	Tûbah 21.	Holy Virgin at Church of al-Adhrâ, Gebel 't-Tair, Minya.
August 22.	Masrî 16.	Holy Virgin at Church of al-Adhrâ, Gebel 't-Tair, Minya.
July 19.	Abîb 12.	St. Hor at Dair Apa Hor, Sawada.
June 28.	Bâûnah 21.	Holy Virgin, at Dair al-Muharraq.

August 22.	Masri 16.	Holy Virgin at Church of al-Adhrâ, Drunka, Asyût.
Ascensiontide.		St. George at Dair al-Hadid, Akhmîm.
November 16.	Hâtûr 7.	St. George at Dair al-Hadid, Akhmîm.
July 14.	Abîb 7.	St. Shenute at Dair Anbâ Shanûdah, Sohag.
February 1.	Tûbah 24.	St. Bisada at Dair Apa Bisada, al-Manshiah.
February 7.	Tûbah 30.	St. Balamon at Dair Anbâ Balamûn, Kasr as-Sayad.
August 1.	Abîb 25.	St. Mercurius at Dair Abû 's-Saifain, Qamûlah.
January 20.	Tûbah 12.	St. Theodore at Dair Shahid Tadros al-Mahareb, Medinet Habu.
November 16.	Hâtûr 7.	St. George at Dair Mari Girgis, Dimuqrât, Asfûn.
December 23.	Kîhak 14.	St. Ammonius at Dair Manaos wa Shuhada, Esna.

Certain Coptic mawâlid, which were celebrated in the 13th century as reported by Abû 'l-Makarim, no longer take place. In many instances, this is due to the destruction of the churches or monasteries as in the cases of the mûlid in honour of St. Arsenius on the 13th of Bashons at Gebel Tura or the mûlid of SS. Mary and Martha on the 30th of Bâûnah at the Monastery of Nahyâ. In other instances, the interference by the church authorities led to the cessation of the celebration as *e.g.* in the case of the Church of St. George in the Hârat ar-Rûm. This church had derived certain sanctity from the possession of the relics of St. Theodore which were held in great veneration by both Copts and Muslims. The virtues of the relics in casting out devils were publicly and solemnly put to test on Wednesday of every week, when Coptic and Muslim women resorted in great numbers to the shrine. Strange stories were told of the therapies wrought upon the believers. In 1873, however, the practices were abolished by order of the Patriarchate ⁽¹⁾.

In conclusion it should be stated that the purely phenomenological descriptions of many interesting aspects of the Coptic mûlid have been omitted, largely because this material is found in some of the above mentioned literature. Therefore, I am quite aware of the limitations of this paper which are due to its purpose, and main theme as well as the desire to avoid unnecessary repetitions.

It goes without saying, that it would be of great sociological interest to study the various kinds of amusements and games at the Coptic mûlid.

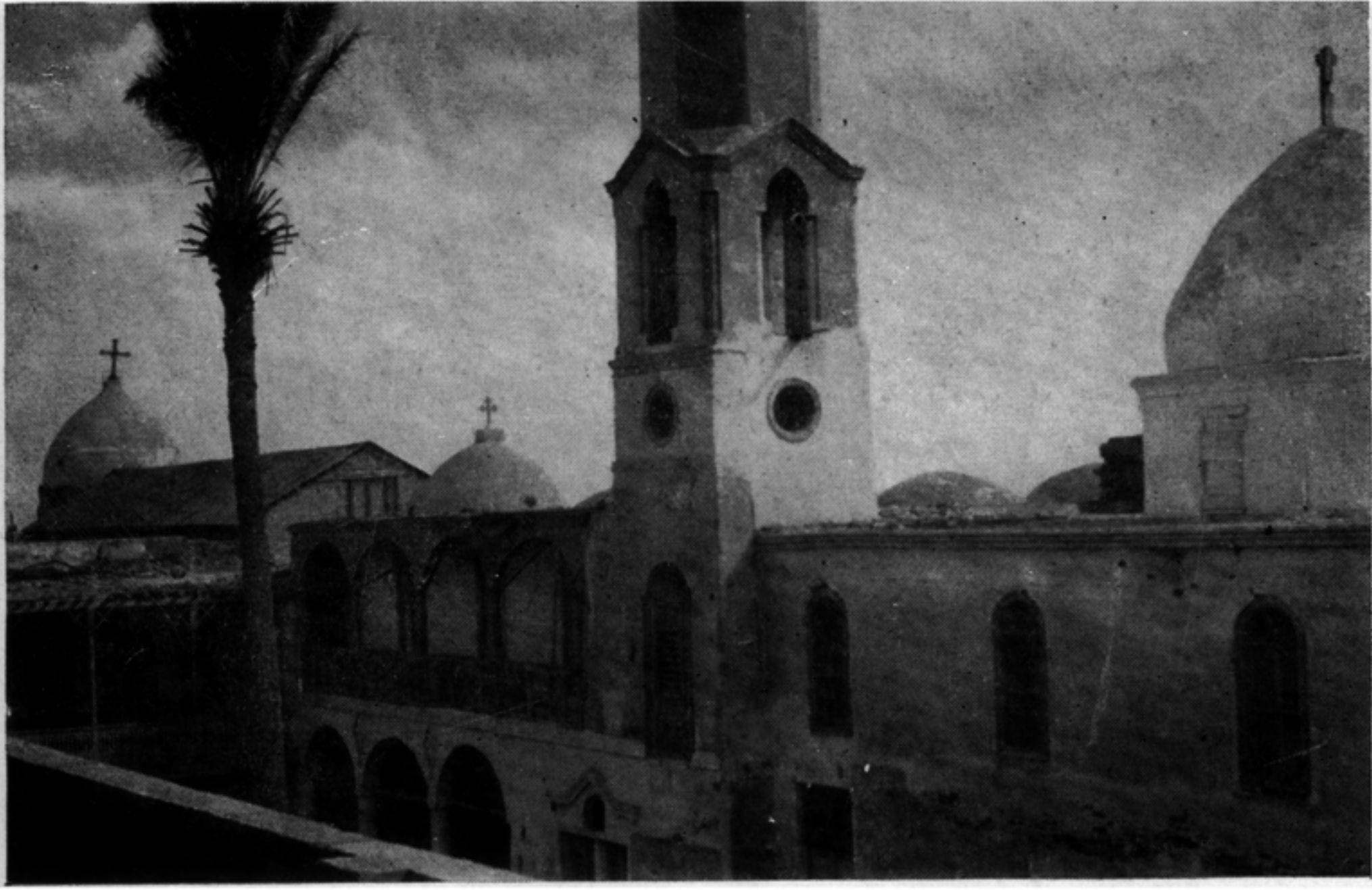
⁽¹⁾ BUTLER, A., *The Ancient Coptic Churches*, Oxford, 1884. I, 281, 282.

Indeed, one could portray a most picturesque scene by describing the distribution and sale of the *higábs*, the small charms and amulets, at the entrance of the churches, the performances of the hawi or magicians, the « Punch and Judy » shows, etc. In this connection, it might be interesting to mention that many Copts identify Punch with Pontius Pilate and Judy with Judas Iscariot, who, presumably betrayed his sex as did his master, Toby, being no other than that very attractive boy, Tobias ⁽¹⁾.

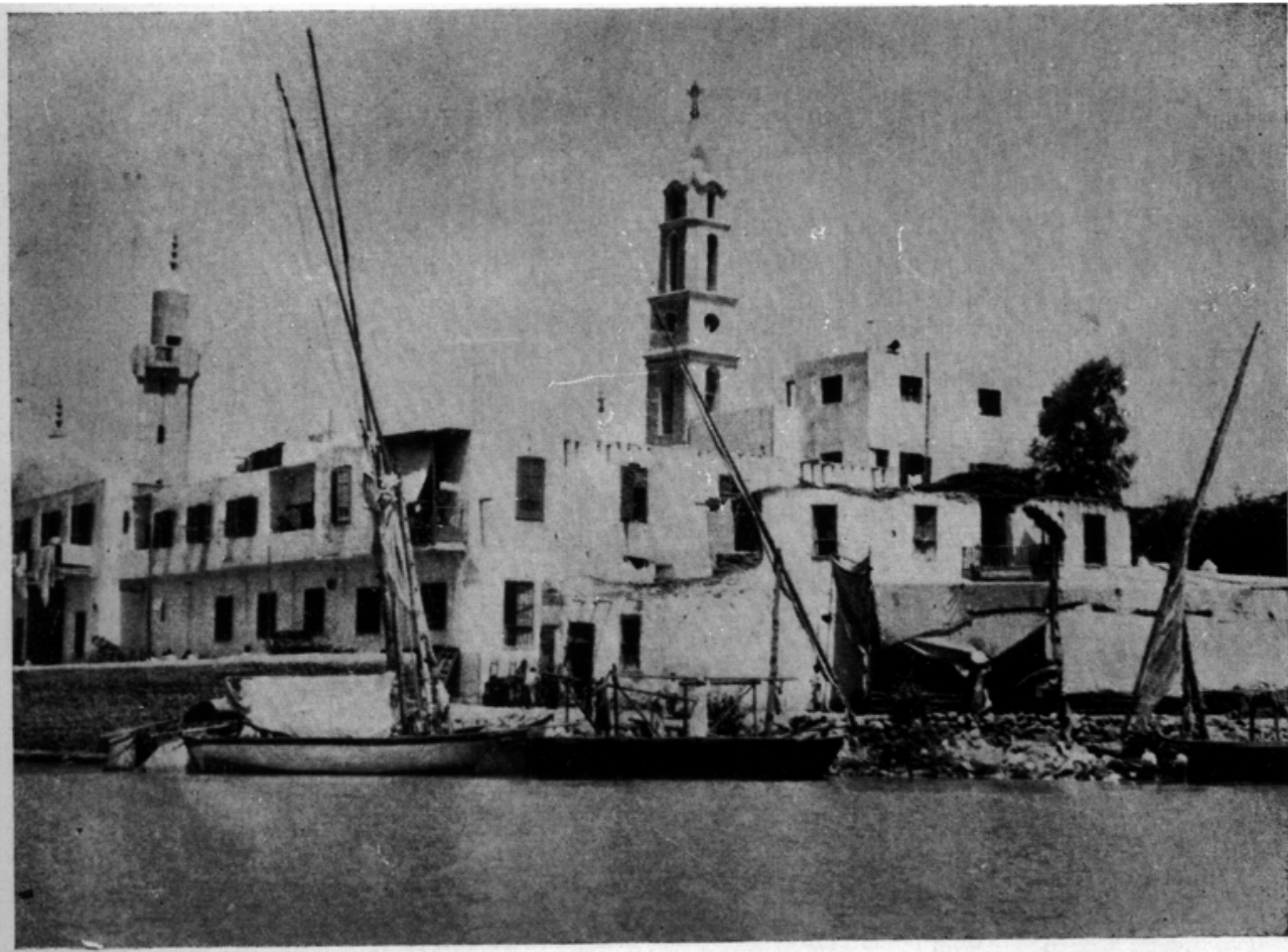
These aspects, which are so delightful, and which constitute such an integral of the Coptic *mûlid*, provide a wealth of material to the student of cultural anthropology and folk-lore.

⁽¹⁾ McPHERSON, J.W., *op. cit.*, 81.

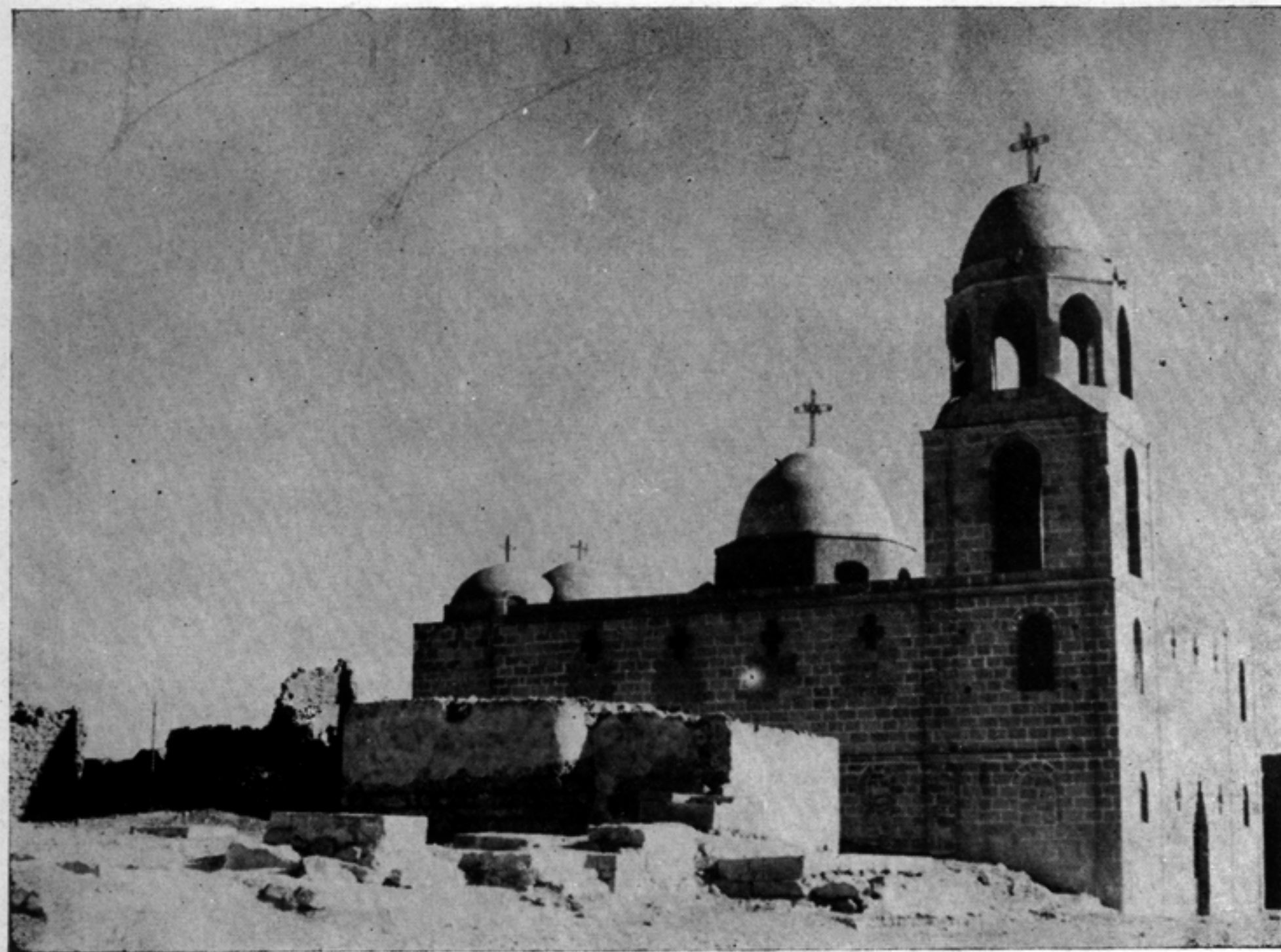
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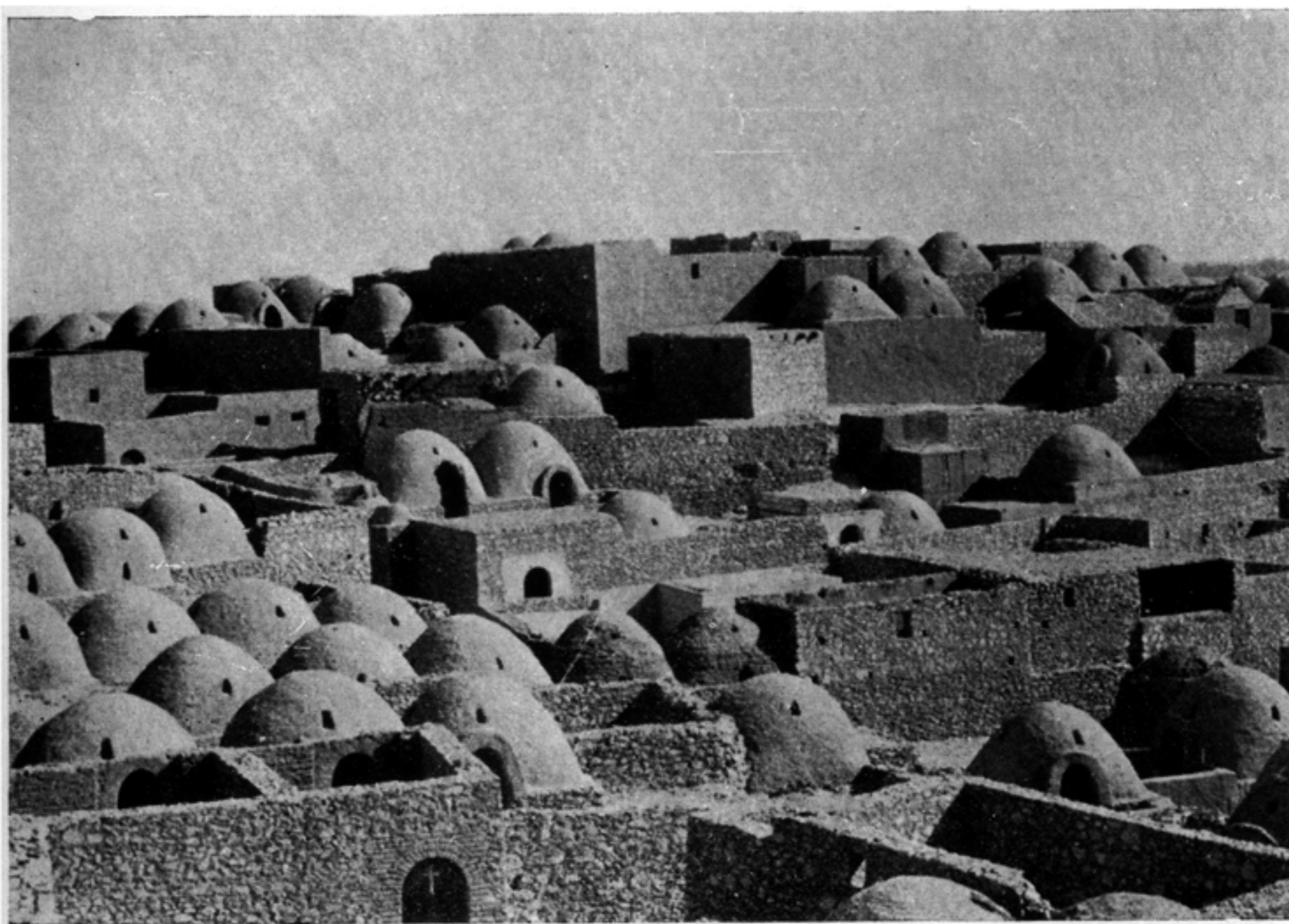
A.— The Shrine of St. Dimianah at Bilqâs.



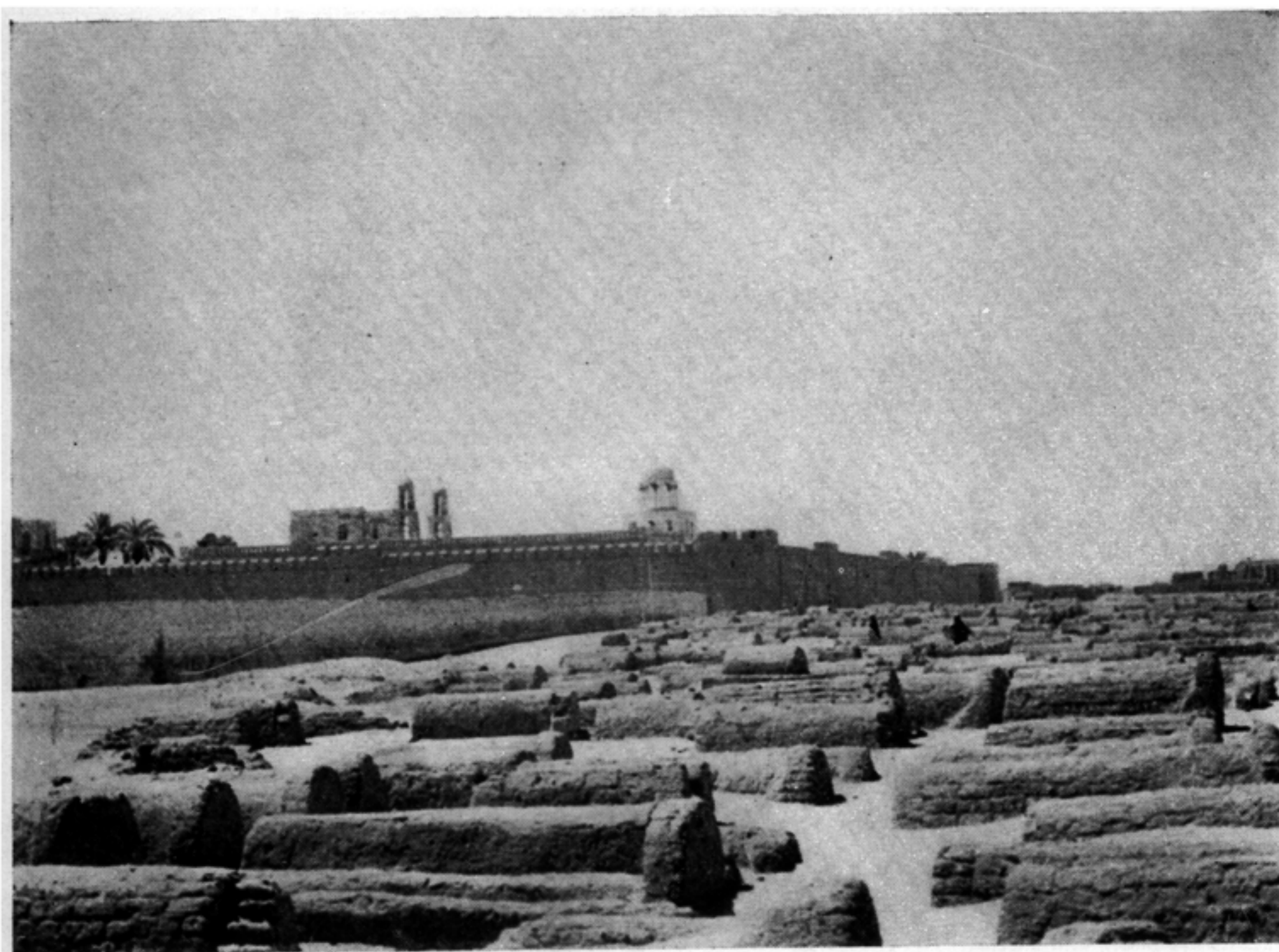
B.— The Shrine of St. George at Mît Damsîs.



A.— The Church of the Holy Virgin at Gebel 't-Tair.



B.— The Christian necropolis at Dair Apa Hor.



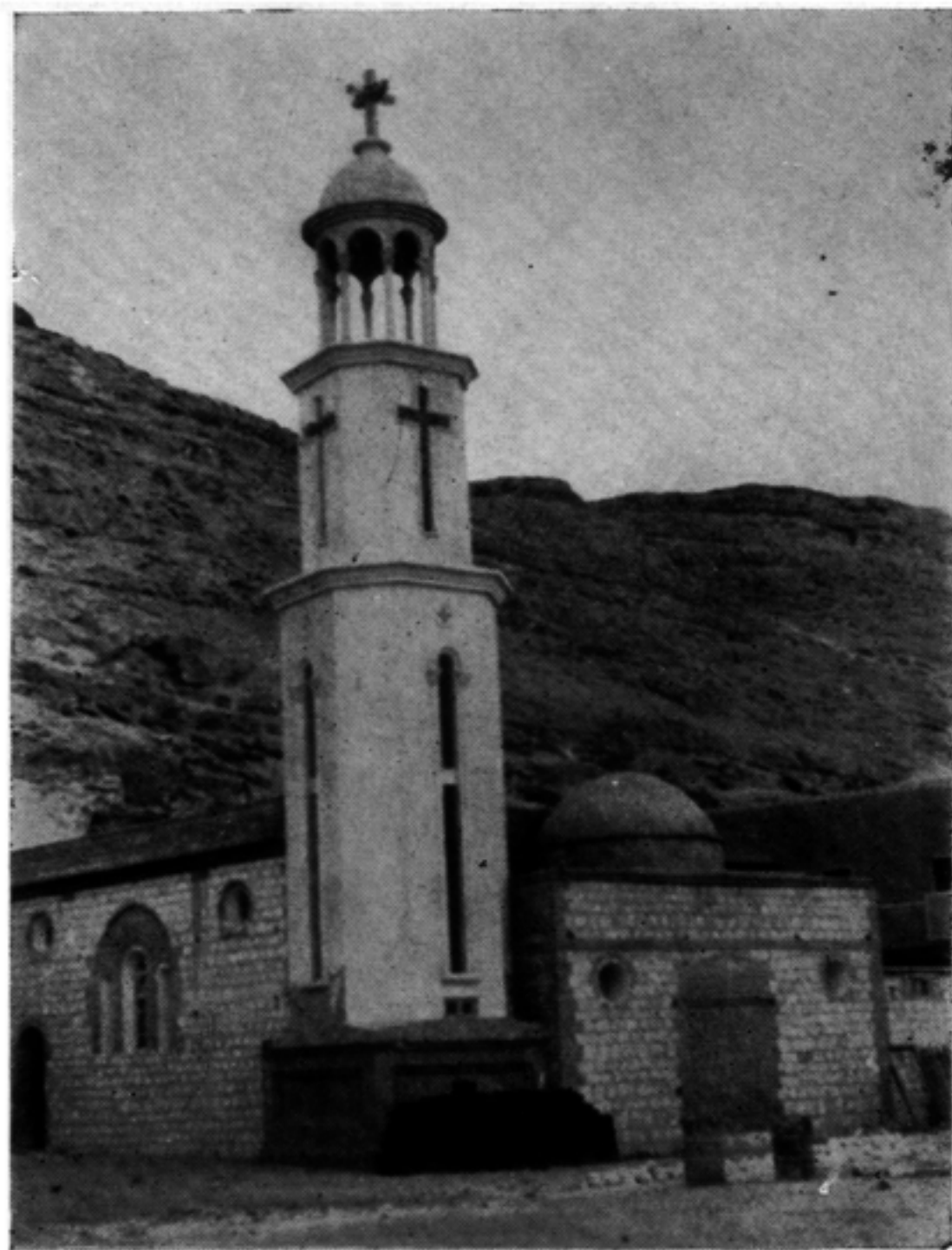
A.— The Monastery of the Holy Virgin (Dair al-Muharraq).



B.— The main gate, Dair al-Muharraq.



A.— The Village of Dair Durunka, south of Asyût.



B.— Bell Tower of Church of the Holy Virgin, Istabl 'Antar, Dair Durunka.