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## South Cairo Church Offers Insight into Egypt's Christian History

Many of the Hanging Church's original artefacts have been removed and are on display at the nearby Coptic Museum.



The courtyard of the Hanging Church with its twin towers.

By Hassan Abdel Zaher

Saint Virgin Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church better known as Al Muallaqa (the Hanging Church- has no foundations to hold the structure, it is a miracle by itself), it is located in southern Cairo is considered the jewel of the historical treasures of Egypt's Coptic Christian community.

Dating to the third century, the church has been of interest of visitors for years and is a piece of art that implies meaning, faith and historical depth. The church, probably the oldest in Egypt, derives its popular name from its location atop the southern gatehouse of a Babylonian fortress. The church's nave hangs above a passageway. Visitors climb several steps to the church's iron gates in an ascent that probably represents spiritual elevation. The gates are under a pointed stone arch that creates an inspiring demarcation between the church's interior and the outside world.

After passing the iron gates, visitors can admire the sanctuary's beautiful twin bell towers that date to the 19th century as well as the front of the building. The towers stand proudly behind a narrow courtyard that leads into the outer porch that was built in the 11th century. The church's fascinating past makes it one of the bastions of the Coptic Christian church in Egypt. It has been rebuilt several times since the seventh century, with the most extensive restoration taking place during the tenth century.

"Deep under each part of this church there is an inter-

esting story of the evolution of Christianity in this country," said Bishop Julius Ava Mina, the general supervisor of southern Cairo churches. "This is what makes this place unique and important for the history of the Christians in Egypt."

In 1047, the Hanging Church was designated the official residence of the Coptic Orthodox pope when the Egyptian capital was moved from Alexandria to Cairo under the Muslim conquest. Around the same time, Pope Christodolos caused controversy within the Coptic Church by choosing to be consecrated at the Hanging Church. His decision set a precedent, and thereafter several patriarchs chose to be elected, enthroned and even buried at the Hanging Church. Today, the seat of the Christian pope is in a north-western Cairo church where Pope Tawadros II has his office. The Hanging Church was probably the first to be constructed in Egypt in the basilican style, which originated in ancient Rome. It looks totally new today thanks to the many restorations it underwent, the last of which was completed in 2011.

The church is perhaps most famous for its icons, of which 110 are displayed within its walls. Many of the icons decorate sanctuary screens and were painted between the eighth and 18th centuries. The oldest and most sacred icon, known as a "Coptic Mona Lisa," depicts the Virgin Mary. The main altar screen is made of ebony out of which ivory

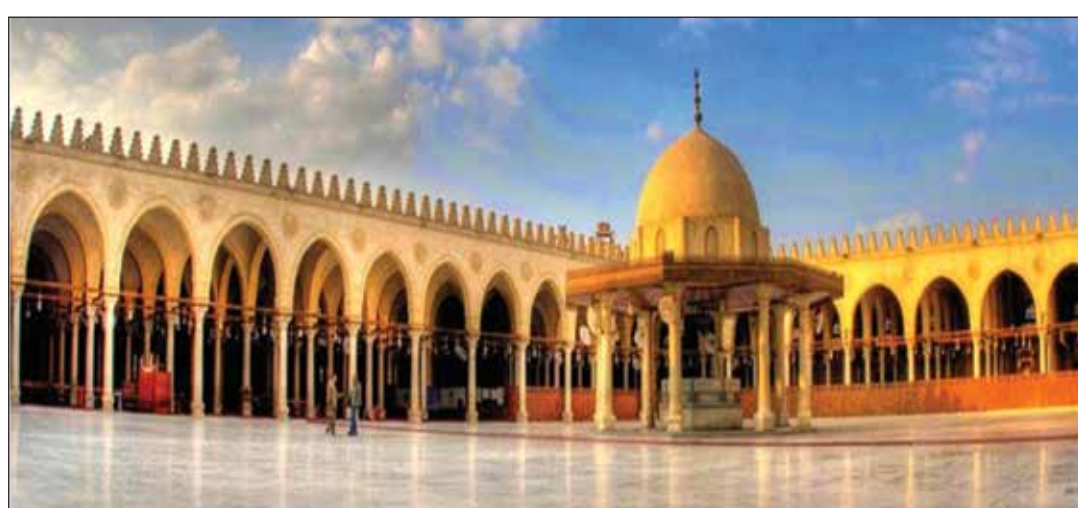
rests to show Coptic Cross designs that date to the 12th and 13th centuries. Many of the Hanging Church's original artefacts have been removed and are on display at the nearby Coptic Museum, which contains hundreds of pieces from the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman eras. The Coptic Museum was founded by a Christian politician Marcus Simaika Pasha. Many artefacts showcased at the museum were also donated by Egypt's Christian community. A few metres from the Coptic quarter stands Egypt's and Africa's oldest Islamic house of worship, Amr Ibn al-As Mosque. The huge mosque was built in 642 on the site where Amr Ibn al-As, the commander of the Muslim army that conquered Egypt that year, is believed to have erected his tent.

**The mosque and the church confer unmatched spirituality on the area. They offer a historical record of Egypt, which experienced Christianity, then Islam and continues to harbour adherents of both religions.**

"The two houses of Christian and Islamic worship are a reflection of Egypt, a country that in the most part functions as a melting pot of faiths," said Ehab Hamdi, a tour guide. "They confer cultural, tourist and religious riches to the place that can be hardly matched elsewhere."

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## The Oldest Mosque In Egypt



Mosque of Amr ibn al-As

The Mosque of Amr ibn al-As (Arabic: جامع عمرو بن العاص) also called the Mosque of Amr, was originally built in 641-642 AD, as the center of the newly founded capital of Egypt, Fustat. The original structure was the first mosque ever built in Egypt and Africa. The location for the mosque was the site of the commander of the Muslim army, general Amr ibn al-As. One corner of the mosque contains the tomb of his son, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'As. Due to extensive reconstruction over the centuries, nothing of the original building remains, but the rebuilt Mosque is a prominent landmark, and can be seen in what today is known as "Old Cairo". It is an active mosque with a devout congregation, and when prayers are not taking place, it is also open to visitors and tourists. According to tradition, the original location was chosen by a bird. Amr ibn al-As, by order of Caliph Umar, was the Arab general that liberated Egypt from the Romans.

The original layout was a simple rectangle, 29 meters in length by 17 meters wide. It was a low shed with columns made from split palm tree trunks, stones and mud bricks, covered by a roof of wood and palm leaves. The floor was of gravel. Inside the building the orientation toward Mecca was not noted by a concave niche like it would be in all later mosques. Instead four columns were used to point out the direction of Mecca, and were inserted on the qibla wall. It was large enough to provide prayer space for Amr's army, but had no other adornments, and no minarets.

It was completely rebuilt in 673 by the governor Maslama ibn Mukhallad al-Ansari, who added four minarets, one at each of the mosque's corners, and doubled its area in size. The addition of these minarets allowed the call to

prayer to be heard from every corner, and taken up by other nearby mosques. Governor Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan added an extension to the mosque in 698 and once again doubled the mosque's area. In 711 a concave prayer niche was added to replace the flat one. In 827, it had seven new aisles built, parallel to the wall of the qibla, the direction that Muslims were to face during prayer. Each aisle had an arcade of columns, with the last column in each row attached to the wall by means of a wooden architrave carved with a frieze.

In 827, governor Abd Allah ibn Tahir made more additions to the mosque. It was enlarged to its present size, and the southern wall of the present day mosque was built. In the 9th century, the mosque was extended by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun, who added a new area on the southwest side, increasing the mosque's dimensions to 120m x 112m.

At a point during the Fatimid era, the mosque had five minarets. There were four, with one at each corner, and one at the entrance. However, all five are now gone. The current Minarets were built by Mourad Bey in 1800. Also, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir added a silver belt to the prayer niche which was eventually removed by Saladin when the mosque was restored after the fire in Fustat.

In 1169, the city of Fustat and the mosque were destroyed by a fire that was ordered by Egypt's own vizier Shawar, who had ordered its destruction to prevent the city from being captured by the

Crusaders. After the Crusaders were expelled, and the area had been conquered by Nur al-Din's army, Saladin took power, and had the mosque rebuilt in 1179. During this time Saladin had a belvedere built below a minaret.

In the 14th, century Burhan al-Din Ibrahim al-Mahalli paid the costs of restoring the mosque. In 1303, Amir Salar restored the mosque after an earthquake. He also added a stucco prayer niche for the outer wall of the mosque, which is now gone.

In the 18th century one of the Egyptian Mamluk leaders, Mourad Bey, destroyed the mosque because of dilapidation then ordered the rebuilding of it in 1796, before the arrival of Napoleon's French Expedition to Egypt. At Mourad's era, the builders decreased the number of rows of columns from seven to six, and changed the orientation of the aisles to make them perpendicular to the qibla wall. It was also probably at this time that the current remaining minarets were added. In 1875, the mosque was again rebuilt. In the 20th century, during the reign of Egypt's Abbas Helmi II, the mosque underwent another restoration. Parts of the entrance were reconstructed in the 1980s.

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