Maurice Martin

Monastères et sites monastiques d’Égypte [Bibliothèque d’études coptes 23]. Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, Cairo 2015, xxii + 191 pp. ISBN 9782724706611. €34.

The mapping of Christian Egypt has been a laborious process. Attempts to do so have been made for many hundreds of years, not only by Christians, such as Abu Salih the Armenian writing in the fourteenth century, but also by a Muslim—the early fifteenth-century Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi. The attempts, however, tended to be isolated and underwent long interruptions, and it was not until the twentieth century that the movement gained momentum. One of the most rewarding results was Otto Meinardus’s Christian Egypt Ancient and Modern which first appeared in 1965. Meinardus covered an impressive amount of ground. His object was to study all the Christian churches represented in Egypt, but he paid particular attention to the Copts, giving a broad survey of their calendar, feast days, rites, ceremonies, and other traditions, as well as an extensive list of the monasteries and churches whose traces could still be found. In Monastères et sites monastiques d’Égypte the late Father Maurice Martin, who died in 2004 at the age of 89, has gone considerably further where the monasteries are concerned.

Martin combined his occupation as teacher of philosophy at the Jesuit colleges in Cairo in the 1950s with a series of field trips which enabled him to reconstruct sites that had long been entirely abandoned. Thanks to years of experience together with an exceptional intelligence and a powerful imagination, he managed to go far beyond his predecessors, assessing the density of the monastic communities in countless localities in the Nile Valley, the Eastern and Western Deserts, and parts of the Delta. In addition to his many articles on Coptic society and modern Egypt, he published studies of individual localities and edited the writings of one of his most illustrious predecessors, the Jesuit Claude Sicard who explored Egypt in the first decades of the
eighteenth century. This new posthumous publication contains the results of
his investigations.

*Monastères et sites monastiques d’Égypte*, edited and introduced by Christian
Décobert who accompanied Martin on so many of his expeditions, provides
an all but complete list of monasteries in the greater part of Egypt—Martin
has avoided the Sinai peninsula and the much studied Wadi Natrun—grouped
according to the area and with each group preceded by a map. After brief but
highly informative introductions, the monasteries are listed and discussed one
by one. The discussion is followed by a thorough bibliography containing both
the earliest sources to mention the monasteries and later studies up to the
year of Martin’s death. Although some readers might regret the absence of an
index at the end of the book, there is, at the beginning, an excellent table of
contents giving the names of all the monasteries treated. Martin’s fascinating
photographs, moreover, can be seen on the website of the IFAO: http://www
.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/bec23/

Martin’s own archaeological discoveries in the area of Ashmunayn, Asyut,
and elsewhere are of the utmost importance, and nearly all his remarks about
the monasteries are based on personal observation. But an interesting feature
also emerges from the bibliographies and discussions of early sources. Abu
Salih and al-Maqrizi come to occupy a highly significant position, and it would
seem to have been the discovery of the two chroniclers which contributed to
the earliest discoveries made by European visitors. Although Edward Pococke
had referred to al-Maqrizi in his *Specimen historiae Arabum* of 1650, the first
European to make a systematic use of them was the German Johann Michael
Wansleben when he visited Egypt for the second time in 1672 and, under
the gallicized name of Vansleb, collected manuscripts and antiquities for the
French king. An accomplished Arabist—he had already visited Egypt in 1664
when the Duke of Saxe-Gotha had intended him to travel to Ethiopia—he
acquired a manuscript of Abu Salih’s history and a two-volume manuscript of
al-Maqrizi’s main work, the *Khitat*. These he consulted not only for his general
description of Egypt, the *Nouvelle relation en forme de Journal d’un voyage fait
en Égypte* (of which Martin has used both the printed French version and the
hitherto unpublished Italian manuscript version at the Bibliothèque nationale
in Paris), but also for his exploration of Christian Egypt. Admittedly Wansleben
could count on the help and advice of the Coptic friends he had met on his
earlier visit, but his many references to al-Maqrizi show that he remained
one of his most important intellectual guides, while he described the work
of Abu Salih as “un libro di gran importanza per la mia istoria” (by which he
meant his great *Histoire de l’Église d’Alexandrie* of 1677). The manuscripts of
the two chroniclers were subsequently sent to Paris and would prove important