(CE:24a-29a)

ABU MINA, a pilgrimage center in the Libyan desert where the tomb of Saint MENAS THE MIRACLE MAKER was venerated from the fourth century on. It was about 28 miles (46 km) southwest of Alexandria, near Lake Mareotis. The settlement consisted of a civil area and an ecclesiastical area, which included Menas' tomb, a market and accommodations for pilgrims, and a great tripartite complex—the Martyr Church, the Great Basilica, and the baptistery. There were also the North Basilica and, nearby, the East Church in a group of hermits' dwellings. These structures, now in ruins, are described below.

The ancient name of the site has not come down to us. Despite its considerable area, which is partially surrounded by a fortification wall that was once quite high, it was not a municipality in the legal sense. No bishop was ever in residence there. According to legends and literary sources, which go back only to the seventh century and attribute too early a date to everything that took place, the body of Menas, the martyr who died in the persecution, under DIOCLETIAN, was buried in an insignificant site in the Libyan desert. The tomb itself was forgotten; it was first rediscovered decades later through a number of miraculous incidents. The rediscovery prompted the setting up of a small memorial structure that is said to have had the form of a tetrapylon.

The first pilgrim church, as the legends tell, was established under the emperor Jovian about 363. In the time of his successor, Valens, the transfer of the bones of Menas to the crypt was carried out. At the request of THEOPHILUS, patriarch of Alexandria, a second church was built by the emperor Arcadius in the early fifth century. It expanded upon the old church, but the work was delayed to such an extent that the building was completed only under TIMOTHY II AELURUS, patriarch of Alexandria in the late fifth century.

Under the emperor Zeno, a start was made on extending the settlement. He provided the necessary land, erected hostels for pilgrims, and established a garrison. Furthermore, he is reputed to have completed the pilgrim's way from Lake MAREOTIS. All these

assumptions, however, are based on very weak grounds and are without archaeological confirmation.

The Tomb of the Martyr

Beneath the Martyr Church, which constitutes the principal sanctuary of Abu Mina, lies an ancient hypogeum (underground burial chamber) whose most important (though not oldest) tomb forms an arcosolium (arched cell) venerated as the burial place of Saint Menas. Leading from the hypogeum are two galleries with several lateral burial chambers, unfortunately robbed of all their original artifacts. The original entrance consisted of a shaft situated to the north of the tomb in the area of a small dome-shaped hall that was built later. An incomplete extension of the same shaft was found in a slightly displaced position immediately beneath the tomb of Menas. These shafts fell out of use when the formal veneration of Menas was established in the hypogeum. A proper staircase was cut with horizontal corridors. At the same time the entrances to the older galleries were moved. Later, new tomb chambers were established along the corridors, two of which have been preserved in the southeast corner of what is now the eastern staircase.

The cult of Menas was first practiced in the hypogeum. In the first half of the sixth century, when the ground level of the Martyr Church took its final shape above the tomb, the below-ground area of the cult was once more thoroughly reorganized, at the expense of the neighboring tombs, which were now rendered inaccessible. The level of the remaining area was lowered about 4 feet (1.2 m), and a small domed chamber (*confessio*) for the pilgrims' use and occasional liturgies was arranged in front of the tomb of Menas. To cope with the flow of pilgrims, it was further necessary to separate the entrance from the exit by building another staircase, which made it possible to circumambulate the tomb.

The Settlement

It may be considered certain that the hypogeum under the Martyr Church belonged to an older settlement. Several more tombs were

located in the area of the baptistery. The precise site of this older settlement, however, has not yet been identified. Nevertheless, in the course of investigations in the Great Basilica, several sections of older houses were discovered that might have belonged to the marginal quarters of this early settlement. The settlement developed considerably as the cult of Menas grew and contributed substantially to the prosperity of the region. The most conspicuous part of the settlement is a partially walled ecclesiastical area containing a large, rectangular pilgrim's court in the center, near which are set the Martyr Church on the south side and the *xenodochia* (guests' houses) on the north side. The access to this pilgrim's court consists of a long processional way flanked on both sides with colonnades behind which lay shops, storerooms, and public buildings such as two public bathhouses and a large building with a peristyle. A covered market was situated in the western region. At the south side of the church is a semicircular court surrounded by a colonnade, which gave access to a number of rooms. Since the rooms are nearly equidistant from the crypt with the tomb of the saint, they probably served as rest chambers for sick visitors.

The civil and residential parts of the settlement are situated outside the ecclesiastical area and for the most part consist of ordinary mud-brick houses. Occasionally, however, the houses are impressively large. When the processional way was extended to the north, it passed through the northern part of this area, and a number of stone buildings were erected on both sides of the street.

At the end of the sixth century measures were taken to surround the whole settlement with a fortification wall. A long section of this wall with several towers and two gates was found in the north and northwest parts of the settlement. It seems, however, that the wall was never completed. There is no evidence of monastery buildings within the settlement, nor are there even rudimentary accommodations for monks. Traces of a small group of hermits were found in the neighborhood of the East Church.

The Martyr Church

The Martyr Church erected over the tomb of Menas is the most important building of the pilgrim center. Here the cult began in earnest, and here the last great church was built after many destructions in the ninth century. Archaeologically, it is possible to distinguish five phases of construction indicated by drastic alterations.

The first building was a very small rectangular structure of undressed stones put up about the end of the fourth century. It was no larger than a walled sarcophagus and was probably intended as a cenotaph.

At the beginning of the fifth century this structure was enclosed in a small building made of mud brick that allowed freedom of access on three sides. Only the west wall lay directly in front of the cenotaph. Unfortunately, only a few sections of the west wall and the extension of the south wall of this mud-brick building have been preserved. Everything else was destroyed by later construction on the same site.

In a third phase that cannot be fixed before the second quarter of the fifth century, the two structures were replaced by a new building in the form of a basilica with a nave and two aisles. It had the customary tripartite division of the sanctuary, or transept, on the east an apse and adjoining rooms on both sides. However, it had no return aisle along the western end. A little later it seems that a baptistery was added to this building. As further extensions on the other sides indicate, this basilica was in operation for a comparatively lengthy period. It appears that later it was changed into a basilica with a nave and four aisles. During further extensions to the martyr's crypt, an annex with a nave and two aisles and an apse was attached, in whose northeast corner the older entry to the crypt was accommodated.

Near the end of the fifth century the decision was made to transform anew the whole structure of the building and to add new buildings, a process that lasted several decades. Everything was to be on a much larger scale than before. The Great Basilica was erected first. Then in the sixth century the baptistery in the Martyr

Church was renovated. After the completion of the Great Basilica and the baptistery, the reconstruction of the Martyr Church started at the time of Justinian, after 528. In this fourth phase the earlier basilica with its annexes was replaced by a large tetraconch construction (having a semicircular room on each side) with a slightly elongated ground plan and a rectangular outer form. It was openly joined to the narthex (entrance area) of the Great Basilica. Its interior was richly decorated with mosaics and polychrome marble incrustation on the walls. This fine church was destroyed sometime during the seventh century, probably during the Persian invasion in 619. It would appear from archaeological finds that the church as well as all the other buildings in Abu Mina suffered mostly by fire. After this only very provisional repairs were made.

With the Arab conquest in 639-641 the whole pilgrimage center came into the hands of the Coptic church, and apparently the majority of the population emigrated from the site. The rebuilding of the church, however, took place only in the eighth century and is mentioned for the first time in the life of Patriarch MICHAEL I (Sawirus, 1910, pp. 119-32). It represents the last really large church, not only of Abu Mina but of the whole of Egypt. It was built as a basilica with a nave and four aisles and a compartmented narthex, all fitted between the outer walls of the old tetraconch church. The *khurus* (room between the sanctuary and the rest of the church) customary for that period occupied the area of the narthex of the Great Basilica, while in the broad opening to the nave of the Great Basilica a relatively small apse was placed. Special features are the open compartments of the outer side sections of the *khurus.* They have separate access from the outer aisles.

The Great Basilica

The Great Basilica was founded when the cult of Saint Menas was already flourishing. Begun about the end of the fifth century, it formed the first part of a richly designed renovation of the whole church complex of the site. It was east of the Martyr Church, attached directly to the still functioning east annex of that church in its basilica stage, and it had the shape of a transept basilica. Two

phases of building can be recognized. In the first it had a nave and three aisles and a one-aisled transept.

During the second phase, the single-aisled transept was transformed into one with three aisles. In this transformation the foundations of the outer walls were used as stylobates (flat pavements) for the new rows of columns. The apse jutted out farther to the east at this time. The rooms adjacent to the apse, which constitute a regular feature of Egyptian church building, were first added during the second stage of construction and covered the whole length of the transept. Likewise, in the west of the church a narthex was added later, probably in association with the construction of the tetraconch phase of the Martyr Church. On each of the two narrow sides (east and west) the church was provided with a conch, or semicircular exedra (room), with columns. The western front consisted of a row of columns that merged with the columns in the east conch of the Martyr Church. Other structures--courtyards, additional devotional rooms, storehouses, and shops--were attached at the south side of the Great Basilica, although they are no longer immediately connected to it.

The Baptistery

The baptistery, the third and last part of the great tripartite church complex at Abu Mina, is situated west of the Martyr Church. It appears to have been rebuilt several times. In its first phase it consisted of a rather narrow annex of the Martyr Church in its small-basilica phase. In connection with the lateral extensions on all sides of the latter, a spacious, multiroomed baptistery was erected lying on the same axis that already included the lateral extensions of the basilica. Its main constituent was a square room with a piscina (pool) in the center, in addition to an area that may be called a narthex. The function of the remaining rooms is uncertain. Even before the Martyr Church entered into its tetraconch phase, the baptistery was rebuilt again, and extensions were made to the south and west. The square central room was replaced by an octagon covered with a dome that enclosed semicircular niches in the diagonal corners. A second apsidal room, also containing a piscina

and thus sharing a function similar to that of the octagon, was added to the west side. On the extended south side, a small courtyard took the place of the original rooms. The last building activity in the area of the baptistery falls within the period of the eighth century, when extensive protective measures were carried out on the cupola of the octagon, which threatened to collapse. Extra small rooms were erected on the north side.

Other Buildings

The North Basilica, whose construction is defined with extraordinary clarity, is situated in the north of the settlement beyond the walled ecclesiastical area. It has a ground plan with a nave and two aisles, the traditional tripartite sanctuary, and a return aisle on the west. The staircase at the southern end of the return aisle originally extended as a rectangular component part outside to the south of the body of the church. Later the church was furnished with additional outbuildings, some of which belonged to the original project, although they were constructed only later. The most important of these is the atrium in the west, which is more of a residential courtyard bordered by rooms on both sides with a small triclinium (dining room) in the northeast corner. To the newer buildings not contained in the original plan of the church belong the baptistery on the south side and a devotional room with three apses in the east. On the basis of pottery finds, the North Basilica can be dated to the first half of the sixth century.

The East Church is situated about 1 mile (1.6 km) from Abu Mina and belongs, like the Martyr Church in its later stage, to the tetraconch type. In contrast to the Martyr Church, however, the fourfold form was also carried out in the external walls. Curiously enough, the rooms in the corners have an irregular angular shape with no recognizable symmetry. The church has a baptistery in the northeast corner and an atrium in the west, to which is connected a large, formerly paved courtyard to the north. This church may date from the middle of the sixth century. Prior to this date the church was a small basilica with a return aisle in the west and a narrow apse in the east but without adjacent apsidal rooms. These were added

only later in the form of one single rectangular room surrounding the apse on three sides. In the neighborhood of the East Church are spread a great many little buildings that reveal the same simple two-room ground plan. Apparently they were hermitages. The East Church may thus be regarded as the center of an extensive settlement of hermits.

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PETER GROSSMANN