

# Symbolism in Coptic Architecture: The Power of 'Meaning' in Architectural Expression

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## **Abstract**

*New trends in architecture tend to pursue to duplicate the positive, pleasant effects of historical buildings, away from direct copying from their form or their style. By addressing human cognition to try to decode their meanings, symbols, which were traditionally seen as a sacred language, were used in religious buildings to establish a visual discourse with the worshippers. This paper aims at analyzing the patterns symbolic language in Coptic architecture, where symbols acted as the vocabulary underpinning a certain visual/spiritual discourse. In this, it explores the hypothesis that Coptic churches' design, with their modest, yet impressive structures, depended on a specific symbolic system that addresses humans' spiritual cognition through its related metaphysics to create spiritual, agreeable effect. It reaches a conclusion that the symbolic concept in these churches was not about randomly scattered symbols here or there, but rather worked according to a carefully designed system, in which each part of the building had its own message.*

**Keywords:** *Coptic architecture, Coptic symbols, symbolism, sacred language, architectural language*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Architecture is the art and science of building that was described by Le Corbusier as '...a thing of art, a phenomenon of the emotions, lying outside questions of construction and beyond them. The purpose of construction is to make things hold together; of architecture to move us'<sup>[1]</sup>. In this statement Le Corbusier hints at an important aspect of architecture, which is that without 'art', 'emotional effect', and 'meaning' architecture is missing an important aspect of its identity.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's also defines architecture as 'play, symbol, and festival'<sup>[2]</sup>, while H. E. Read describes it as 'a representation of a meaning in a mode of symbolic discourse'. He adds: 'where

there is no discourse, there is no architecture', emphasizing the importance of 'meaning' and 'discourse' in architecture. In sacred spaces these aspects have even more significance than in secular spaces, where the ecclesiastical features of the former depends on shedding the heavenly nature on them to give them the quality of a 'temple that manifests the Kingdom of God in people's lives', and make it capable of 'preparing the inner hearts to be thrones of God'<sup>[3]</sup>, where people can experience both the earthly level and the heavenly level at the same time.

Coptic architecture is a term used to refer to the architecture of Egypt in the early Christian era. The very word *Copt* and accompanying adjective *Coptic* originate

from the Greek term for referring to the people of Egypt: *Agyptos* or *Aiguptoi*.

Due to the fact that Coptic Christianity has regularly been in religious opposition to the faith of Egypt's rulers, Coptic architecture have rarely enjoyed the benefit of imperial or royal patronage, and therefore lack the monumental grandeur of the ancient Egyptian temples or the mosques of medieval Cairo. However, their unique structures have what Howard Middleton-Jones calls 'a dignity and beauty of their own, so reflecting the faith and tenacity of the Coptic community'<sup>[4]</sup>, in addition to its own qualities that A. Butler described as 'its own independent character that had very little to do with its contemporary Basilican or Byzantine styles'<sup>[5]</sup>.

The goal of this study is, therefore, to come to a better understanding of one of the distinctive aspect of Coptic churches, which gives it this uniqueness. It investigates the concept of symbolism in these churches and tries to understand its principles and patterns. In this, it provides an in-depth description of the construction of 'meaning' in Coptic Churches and comes to a conclusion about the design patterns of the symbolic plan in these churches, which is hoped to inspire contemporary architects with an already-examined approach to insert their own legacy and metaphors into their designs.

Reaching this, the study depended on a descriptive qualitative method accomplished within analytical framework to identify, appraise, and synthesize theoretical research evidence so as to seek support for the research hypotheses. It also depended on direct observation by the author in 53 different sites of Coptic churches all over Egypt<sup>[6]</sup>.

The paper is organized into five parts; introductory part; historical background of the cultural origins of Coptic architecture;

an overview outlining the main features of Coptic symbols; analytical study for the symbolic system in Coptic churches; and finally conclusion.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Greek word for Church, '*Ecclesia*' does not refer to a certain building type, but rather to '*assembly*' or a location, where people gather for liturgical celebration<sup>[4]</sup>.

The Community of Alexandria, the capital of Egypt at the 1<sup>st</sup> century, was divided into three groups with three distinguishing cultures and life styles: Egyptians, Greeks, and Jews. Christianity confined mainly among non-Egyptians until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when it had started to expand between native inhabitants. Within 100 years, the concept of worshiping had changed from individual worship into clerical domination. In due course, a specific organization for churches' interiors had become a must<sup>[7]</sup>. At first, Ancient Egyptian edifices or parts of them were adapted and furnished with the trappings for Christian worship. But then, building new churches had become an insistent need. The art and architecture of these churches, although was the crop of the native group, was also induced by the spirit of the other two cultural groups<sup>[8]</sup>. When the Copts began to erect their own churches, it was normal for their architects to copy architectural elements from the existing models of both Hellenistic and Ancient Egyptian legacy; at least those that seemed to fulfill the requirement of the new faith. Patterns, structures, and symbols of both Greek and Egyptian mythology were altered to fit Christian beliefs.

This cultural mix was unparallel in the other parts of Byzantine Empire. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of originality in Coptic churches, away from Byzantine influences, as Grossman affirms, was already found. Yet, a clear identity could

not come into view<sup>[9]</sup>.

After the split from the rest of the Byzantine Church, as a result of Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, the Coptic congregations were shunned and often persecuted by their Byzantine rulers. Coptic architecture therefore lacked the lavish patronage of rulers and courts. Their buildings were therefore small, conservative in design, and closer to vernacular styles. This tendency had grown even more evidently after the Arab conquest in 639<sup>[10]</sup>.

During the period between 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century the primary Coptic cultural centers were at *Ihnasiya Al Madinah* in Fayyum, *Antinoe* in Middle Egypt, and *Akhmim* in Upper Egypt. This was the most prosperous period of Coptic architecture in which the greatest Coptic edifices, like the two convents of Suhag, Dandarah basilica etc., were erected. In these building, ancient Egyptian architectural features are very obvious in the exteriors, where elements of Hellenistic decoration dominated the interiors.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt was conquered by the Arab armies. The Coptic Church was almost cut off from the rest of Christendom and Coptic architects started to develop their own style. In developing this style, they drew inspiration from the plethora of sources that they found around them including: the forms and motifs of ancient Egypt, classical, Hellenistic, and Near Eastern art. And although it was mainly linked with Christianity, but many motifs and designs of Coptic architecture were characteristically non-Christian, such as *Dionysiac* scenes, bucolic compositions inspired by classical poetry, and groups of *Nereids* and *maenads*<sup>[11]</sup>. Hamilton affirms that Coptic churches of this period were to be categorized as a distinct entity, i.e. the

‘Coptic Architecture’, the character of which was dictated by its liturgical and ecclesiastical traditions, and its structure bears the mark of its ‘national feelings’<sup>[12]</sup>.

### COPTIC SYMBOLS

Symbolism is one of the most important characteristics of the Coptic architecture that denotes its deep locality, as it was not a liturgical imposition, but rather a cultural issue. In the following is an overview, outlining some of the most prominent Coptic symbols, the cultural background of each of them, and the context in which they appeared.

#### Local Features

The local spirit of ancient Egyptian society appears clearly in some symbolic features that were peculiar of early Coptic architecture and did not come into view in any other part of the Byzantine Empire. Examples of these features include:

#### Magical Symbols

Although magic does not cope with Christian teachings, the Copts had inherited some magical symbols that were used by their predecessors, such as the drawing of ‘*Alabsaderia*’ (a devilish woman used to refer to evil souls) and ‘*Aberzelia*’ (the charm against the magic of the evil woman), both appeared in St. Apollo’s convent in Bawit<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### The Ship

Symbols were widely used in funeral ceremonies of ancient Egyptians; a very common symbol was the ‘*Sokhis Ship*’ that transports the good souls to the other life. Coptic churches are most commonly built in the form of a ship that symbolizes *Noah’s Ark*; as those in *Noah’s Ark* were saved from the flood, likewise the Church of God alone has the ability to save men. In this, St. Cyprian says, ‘No salvation can

be achieved for anybody outside the church'<sup>[13]</sup>.

### Coptic Faces

A common opinion between historians of iconography is that icons have been originated in Egypt. It is believed that they had developed from the ancient Egyptian tradition of adorning mummy cases with portraits of the dead<sup>[14]</sup>. Fayum mummy portraits, or the so-called *Faces of El Fayum* (Figure 1), from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, are believed to be the origins of iconography in Egypt. They show some Greco-Roman influence, but with distinctive ancient Egyptian characteristics, displaying enlarged heads with eyes and ears larger in proportion than the rest of the face and a smaller mouth. These features are not due to lack of artistic sense or talent, but rather were meant to signify the spiritual relationship with God and the devotion to prayer<sup>[15]</sup>.



**Fig. 1:** Fayum Mummy Portrait (125-150 AD) from the Egyptian National Museum in Cairo.

### Subjects

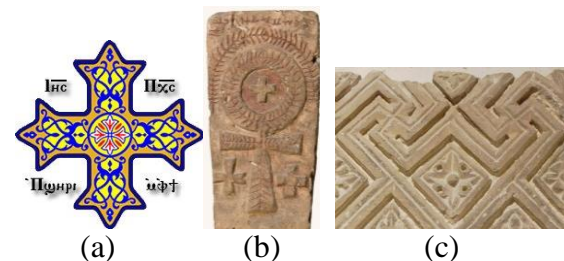
Some subjects that were common in Ancient Egyptian tombs, such as fishing, had frequently occurred in early Coptic art<sup>[13]</sup>. Fishing was also a biblical symbol of new people joining the faith. Coptic artists also used the figure of the frog (a symbol of resurrection in Ancient Egyptian civilization) as a common form of lighting units<sup>[14]</sup>.

It is remarkable that harsh paintings like the 'Last Judgment' or 'Heaven and Hell', were so common in churches all over the world except for in Egypt, where these subjects were treated in a suplemanner similar to that of Ancient Egyptian figures

of 'Soul Weighing' and similar mythological legends<sup>[16]</sup>.

### Coptic Crosses

Primarily, the cross is symbolic of the Church being under the authority of the Crucified Lord. The most common type of cross in Coptic churches is the Trefoil (also called Coptic) Cross, which was a local development of the short Greek cross. Coptic crosses often incorporate a circle at the middle that represents the eternal and everlasting love of God, as shown through Christ's crucifixion, Christ's halo, and resurrection (Figure 2a)



**Fig. 2:** (a) Coptic Trefoil Cross<sup>[17]</sup>, (b) Coptic Relief of the Coptic Crux Ansata from El-Badary, Assiut, 6th Century (Coptic Museum in Cairo), and (c) Door Panel from Anba Apollo Monastery in Bawit, 9th Century (Coptic Museum in Cairo).

Coptic *crux ansata* is another common form<sup>[18]</sup>, where the Copts availed themselves of the resemblance between the Egyptian *Ankh* – the sign of 'life' in hieroglyphics (A cross shape with a loop above the cross bar, which was the Egyptian sign of eternal life) and the cross, replacing the upper part of the cross by the crown worn by Roman victors. Sometimes it is also flanked by Greek crosses and sometimes another cross is set inside the loop, which is surrounded by palm branches that symbolize victory, peace, and paradise (Figure 2b)<sup>[19]</sup>.

Swastika cross (a.k.a. Indian cross) was ancient symbol that has been used for over 400 years and has been the symbol for the sun, the four cardinal directions, and world

wheel. Its origins in Egypt is unknown but it appeared in some Coptic relief (Figure 2c) and was used in reference to the eternally changing world around a fixed, unchanging center or God<sup>[20]</sup>.

### Hellenistic Features

Another group of Coptic symbols had their origins in Greco-Roman symbolism, where their connotations were altered to reflect Christian cosmological/liturgical views. The most important symbols of this category are:

#### *Alpha and Omega*

α and ω are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They were related to the cosmos, the signs of the zodiac, and the twenty-four hours of the day. In Egyptian alchemy, they are linked to the good genius, *Agathodaimon*. During the Greco-Roman period, these letters were transferred to Christianity to symbolize Christ as the beginning and end of life (The Book of Revelation (1:8; 21:6; 22:13). They enjoyed an exceptional diffusion in nearly every medium but were particularly significant in funerary objects, such as funerary stelae. The most consistent groups of stelae (exhibited in the British Museum) bearing an engraved alpha and omega come from Armant and Akhmim. They show different shapes of these symbols combined with a chrismon (the Greek letters chi and rho (✠), forming the monogram of Christ) and the ancient Egyptian figure of *Ankh*<sup>[21]</sup>. E. Breccia also records the presence of these letters flanking an *Ankha* on some Coptic apses<sup>[22]</sup>. A wooden lintel from Anba Apollo monastery at Bawit shows these letters on an *aedicula* (shrine) that encloses a cross in a shell<sup>[23]</sup>.

#### *Dolphins*

Having but little concern with the sea, pharaonic Egypt did not portray the

dolphin. It was Greco-Roman iconography that brought it to the country as a symbol of the savior of the shipwrecked. It appeared in Coptic bas-reliefs, such as the ones in limestone in the Coptic Museum, Cairo, setting the motif in a Christian context, where the dolphin symbolizes salvation from sin or refers to innocent, faithful souls<sup>[24]</sup>.

#### *Eagle*

The eagle played a very small role in ancient Egyptian art and religion. Its importance began with the influence of Hellenistic and Roman art and grew in the Coptic period. The symbolic interpretations given to the eagle, especially in funerary art, are various and controversial. It was considered as a symbol of Christ or of Christ's resurrection<sup>[25]</sup>. It was seen as capable of rejuvenation (Psalm 102:5) and its wings offer protection (Deuteronomy 31:11). Further, the eagle is related to archangels and clericals (Papyrus 9, Pierpont Morgan Library). The eagle's ability to soar high enables it in popular imagination to be a messenger between earth and heaven<sup>[26]</sup>. These protective qualities made the Copts choose its figure for their funerary stelae<sup>[27]</sup>; a group of stelea from Armant represents the eagle with a cross in a wreath over its up-stretched wings; a group from Isna places eagles, sometimes more than one, in aediculae or under round arches<sup>[28]</sup>.

In the chapels of Anba Apollo monastery, eagles are depicted several times<sup>[29]</sup>, while in Nubia they appear in the apses of Faras and Qasr Ibrim churches<sup>[30]</sup>. They appear also on keystones, doors, and lintels as exhibited in the Coptic Museum, Cairo<sup>[31]</sup>.

Further Greek and Hellenistic symbols that were widely used in Coptic churches included: the shell for new birth; olive for

peace; tree for the cross; ox for power and patient; and dove for free soul that has peace and purity, or for the Holy Ghost<sup>[31]</sup>.

### Byzantine Features

Further shapes and symbols appeared in Coptic art and architecture during the early Coptic period and were not related to the ancient Egyptian or Hellenistic cultural background, but were common Christian symbols of this era. The most important symbols of this category include:

#### The Fish

The fish was an esteemed theme in Egypt ever since the predynastic era. Linked with the Nile and with the legend of Osiris, it also symbolized regeneration. But, its appearance grew more strongly in early Christian iconography and passed readily into Coptic art, where fishes appear in abundance. The fish used as a symbol of Christianity during the time of Roman persecution<sup>[20]</sup>; one fish refers to Christ and many fishes refers to the Christians. The word fish in Greek language 'ΙΧΘΥΣ' also refers to Jesus (Figure 3a), consisting of the first letter of the phrase 'Jesus, God's Son, the Savior' or 'ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙΟΣ ΣΩΤΗΡ'<sup>[13]</sup>.

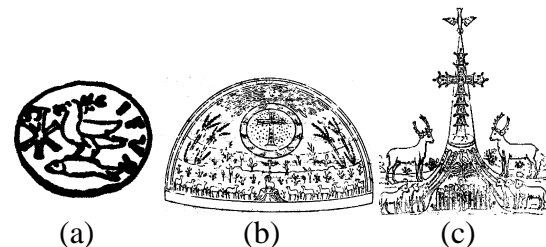
#### Halo or Nimbus

A circle of light surrounding the head of Christ, the Virgin, the angels, and the saints is a well-known iconographical feature throughout Christian art. It originated in the luminous crown of certain pagan divinities -- particularly solar gods, and signifies holiness.

#### Ostrich Eggs

Butler described the custom of ostrich eggs pendants as: 'In all Christian lands eggs are associated with Easter-time, some think that the egg was regarded as emblematic of the Resurrection.' He adds: 'The ostrich egg is a curious but common ornament in the religious buildings of the Copts, the Greeks, and the Muslims alike..... it usually hangs before the altar

screen; but at Abu-s-Sifain, it is suspended also from the point of the arches of the baldachin<sup>[5]</sup>. Another explanation for this custom is that ostrich is proverbially vigilant; therefore its egg is seen as a symbol of watchfulness<sup>[6, 32]</sup>.



**Fig. 3:** (a) A Diagram for a Carving on Precious Stone (British Museum): Symbolize Jesus Christ as a Fish with the Monogram of His Greek Name 'ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ'; (b) The Twelve Apostles Illustrated as Twelve Lambs and the Lamb on a Raised Step with Aureole Around the Head Refers to Jesus Christ (Based on a Figure in The Church of St. Felix, Nula); and (c) the Lateran Cross<sup>[6]</sup>.

Further early Christian and Byzantine symbols that were used in Coptic churches also included:

- The twelve apostles were sometimes illustrated as twelve lambs. A lamb on a raised step with aureole around the head refers to Jesus Christ (Figure 3b).
- The Ram was used to refer to sacrifice<sup>[20]</sup>.
- The lion refers to St. Mark; the human face to St. Matthew; the taurus to St. Luke; and the falcon to St. John, while St. Peter always appears with keys in his hand referring to his being the guard of the heavens<sup>[33]</sup>.
- The cross that is raised on three steps refers to faith, hope and love as means for reaching the heaven. The cross with a ring or a circle refers to the everlasting life and the cross with a triangle refers to the Holy Trinity<sup>[13]</sup>.
- Lateran cross (Figure 3c) is an illustration that is full of symbols; it consists of a stepped cross, which refers to the growth of Christianity, upon

which is a dove that refers to the Holy Ghost. The town refers to the everlasting Jerusalem and the four rivers to baptism. The several lambs at the base refer to Christians<sup>[13]</sup>.

## THE SYMBOLIC SYSTEM OF COPTIC CHURCHES

Christian groups in early epoch used the symbols to identify each other. They formed a special silent language, which expresses facts that cannot be reasoned out or expressed by normal languages. The systematic use of symbols in Coptic churches started to come into vogue since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but symbols were already in use as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century. At this time they used to refer to Jesus Christ as a shepherd or a fish or by the monogram of His Greek name ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ – the letters (✠)<sup>[13]</sup>.

The design of the church itself was influenced by this symbolic trend. Each part of the church had certain connotation or hidden meaning included in its design as will be round up in the following:

### Sanctuaries

Three eastern chapels are often located in the sanctuary area of the Coptic Church – the 'Haikail', in a reference to the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or the Holy Christian family of Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus.

In Coptic Church, the choir is raised three steps higher than the nave. This refers to its position in higher level than the rest of the world. The next and final step above the choir is the sanctuary, which represents the heavenly Jerusalem. The altar is usually set on the same level as the sanctuary, following the commandment of not going up steps to God's altar (Ex. 20:26). An exception of this rule is found

only in monastic churches, where the altar is usually set on a step or a platform above the floor of the sanctuary<sup>[5]</sup>.

Each element of the sanctuary had its own symbolic connotation as in the following:

### Iconostasis or Sanctuary Screen:

This screen, which separates the sanctuary from the main body of the church, is one of the main and peculiar features of any Coptic church. The icons and the elements of this screen are arranged according to a certain tradition as illustrated in (Figure 4). It contains three entrances in reference to the Holy Trinity; the Royal door, which is the entrance to the main sanctuary; and two side-doors for the side sanctuaries. The ever-lit light in front of the main entrance refers to the leading star at the night of Jesus birth. No pendent light is used for the Icon of Jesus Christ because He is the light of the world.

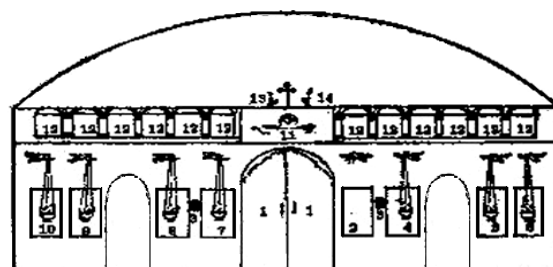


Fig. 4: The Arrangement of Icons on the Iconostasis.

(1- The Royal Gate; 2- Jesus Christ Icon; 3- Window; 4- St. John the Baptist Icon; 5- The Church's Saint Icon; 6- Icon of a Bible's Story; 7- St. Mary Icon; 8- The Gospel Icon; 9- The Angle Michel Icon; 10- St Mark Icon; 11- The Last Supper Icon; 12- The Apostles' Icons; 13- The Icon of St Mary at the Cross; 14- The Icon of St John at the Cross).

### Apse

The apse is a symbol for the opened arms of God that hold all his worshipers and invites them to His in arming. Another

ever-lit lamp is usually hung in front of the icon of Jesus Christ inside the apse in reference to the leading star. A single window is always found upon the apse, symbolizing Jesus Christ as the only source of light into the lives of His worshipers.

A typical feature of the apse is the Thronous. In its normal structure, it is a tier of curving steps following the curve of the apse, at the top of which a bench runs round the wall, divided at the center by a raised seat or throne. The throne is for the bishop, while the bench is for the twelve presbyters or elders of the church. The position of the Thronous behind the altar means that the clergy get their position from the altar and the Eucharist<sup>[13]</sup>. The seven steps for the Thronous refer to the perfection of the bishop, as the number seven refers to perfection. These steps, as well as seven windows in the dome, refer also to the seven secrets of the church.

In some cases there are no Thronous, but only three steps inside the niche leading to the icon of Christ on his throne in reference to the Holy Trinity.

### **Altar**

The altar is the most important element in the sanctuary and in the whole church. Unlike Byzantine altars, Coptic altars take the shape of a tomb in reference to the tomb of Jesus Christ. The materials used for altars are also symbols of particular meanings; gold for faith, copper to patient, silver to missionaries, linen to virginal ... etc.<sup>[13]</sup>

Coptic altars are usually surmounted by a domed canopy (baldachin) that symbolizes the highest heaven, where Christ sits enthroned in glory and surrounded by angles. The four pillars on which this dome is upheld typify the four corners of the universe and the four Evangelists<sup>[5]</sup>. The icons of the four evangelists are painted on these pillars, as if the four

corners of the universe are blessed by the word of the Gospel. The eight rafters between the columns and the base of the baldachin symbolize the eight writers of the New Testament<sup>[20]</sup>. On top of the dome is a large cross, with four crosses on the corners, symbolizing the five wounds of the Lord<sup>[32]</sup>.

### **Nave**

The nave gets its name from the Latin 'naives', meaning a ship. The ship, as a symbol of sailing in fearful surroundings, was the most common model for churches; it represents the Lord's ship voyaging towards heaven. It also refers to Noah Ark, which typifies new life and survival<sup>[13]</sup>.

The symbolic system of the nave includes also the following elements:

### **Columns**

The twelve columns defining the nave refer to the twelve apostles, who link earth with heaven, whom St. Paul in (Galatians 2:9) calls 'the pillars', and to whom (Revelation 3:12) refers as the 'pillar in the temple of God'. The number twelve also typifies the authorization of the Holy Trinity on the four corners of the universe<sup>[13]</sup>.

In old Coptic churches, the shafts of the columns were usually different from each other. This is due to two reasons; the first is that they are usually brought from old buildings, so it is hard to find similar columns; the second reason is to indicate the different work of each of them<sup>[34]</sup>. Although usually of Ionic or Corinthian styles, it is also rare to find two capitals (crowns) that are the same. This symbolizes that each one of those, who will be crowned, will receive his own crown<sup>[32]</sup>.

Small chapels that are not large enough to sustain twelve pillars have four pillars that represent the four evangelists.



### **Roofing**

The roofing of the nave also has its own symbolism. A roof of one dome or one vault refers to god; the three domes refer to the Holy Trinity; five domes to Jesus Christ and the four Evangelists. The Main central dome was usually painted with an icon of Jesus Christ accompanied by angels and saints on a light blue background decorated with stars. This resembles Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church, who is seated in heavens; the premise being that the dome reflects and confirms the building as an earthly heaven and a heavenly earth<sup>[35]</sup>.

The number of openings in these domes also had certain meanings: the numerous openings symbolize the stars of the sky; the four openings symbolize the cross; the three openings symbolize the Holy Trinity; and the seven openings symbolize the seven secrets of the church<sup>[34]</sup>.

### **Ambon**

An ambon usually rests on one of the twelve columns of the nave. It is a high pulpit, on which the bishop or priest stands for preaching. It refers to the stone of the Lord's tomb on which the angel sat on and talked to the women.

The Ambon is raised in reference to that the preaching coming from it is coming from heaven. It is usually supported by ten columns in reference to the Ten Commandments. But, some pulpits are supported on fifteen columns that represent Jesus, his twelve apostles and the two evangelists Saints Mark and St. Luke. One column is usually black to represent Judas<sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Towers**

Coptic churches usually have one or two towers. The one tower refers to the ship's mast, or a arrow to heaven, from where the

message of the church comes. The two towers refer to the ship's watchtowers. The church towers include a belfry that refers to the trumpets of the Old Testament. The uplifted cross on the tower refers to the Lord's last advent (Matthew 24:30). So, it could be said that the cross, which surmounts the church tower or the church dome, is the church's voice that calls everyone to prepare for God's advent<sup>[32]</sup>.

The horizontal direction of the church building refers to the earth, while the vertical direction of the tower refers to the heaven, which means that the church assembles earth with heaven<sup>[13]</sup>.

### **Narthex**

The major element in the narthex is the baptistery font, which is considered as the Church's womb that keeps bringing 'new' Christians<sup>[32]</sup>.

The different forms of baptisteries are all of certain significance, symbolizing the theological concept of baptism. The quadrilateral baptistery refers to the grave of Jesus Christ; the hexagonal shape to the 6<sup>th</sup> day in which Jesus Christ was crucified and buried, referring to that baptism is a death and burial with Christ as in (Romans 6:3-4) and (Col 2:12); the octagonal shape refers to the 8<sup>th</sup> day in which Jesus Christ had resurrected, in reference to the co-resurrection with Christ in baptism; the circular shape is a reminder of eternity, in which the baptized enjoys an everlasting life beyond all boundaries; and the cruciform type refers to joining the crucifixion of Jesus through the baptistery<sup>[13]</sup>.

According the Didascalia, the baptistery should be built at the northwestern side of the church (left side of entrance), where the passage from the world of darkness (represented by the west), to the world of

light (represented by the east), was accomplished, and to pass from the left side (north) of the rejected goats to join the accepted flock on the right (south) side. It should have two doorways; entrance to the west, and exit to the east, so that the baptized do not have to go back from light (east) to darkness (west)<sup>[13]</sup>.

Locating the baptistery in the far west of the church and the altar in the far-east means that the baptistery is the gate to the Christian life and the sanctuaries are its target.

The baptistery is usually surmounted by a dome or included in a conch, the latter sometimes takes the shape of a shell, which is an ancient Greek symbol of 'Rising From the Sea' that used to refer to eternity and rebirth<sup>[36]</sup>, while the former above the baptized person is meant to refer to heaven.

### Icons and Figures

One arrangement that the designers of early Coptic churches appear to have borrowed from their ancestors is the triple division of the building (the part behind the iconostasis of Coptic churches corresponds to the ancient Egyptian sanctuary, where priests alone were admitted. The central part of the church was reserved for baptized Christians as was the hypostyle hall of Egyptian temple for the royal family and priests, while the narthex was left open for the un-baptized Catechumens as was the open court in ancient Egyptian temple opened to the public on festival day) where each section was meant to incorporate its own visual discourse and symbolic expression<sup>[4]</sup>. Icons were used in early Coptic churches not as pieces of art, but rather as kind of preaching with lines<sup>[10]</sup>. They were distributed along the three divisions of the church according to a certain plan that has a highly symbolic significance. This plan was categorized by C. Walters as the following:

- The eastern part, in which sanctuaries and choir are located, has the most important subjects, such as the Pantocrator, the crucifix, and the life of Jesus Christ.
- In the nave, most of the icons represent saints and monks. This transition from the divine nature (Jesus Christ) into human nature (monks and saints) is meant to express the transition from the secret part that represents heaven into the earthly part that represents the world.
- In the western part most of the icons represents the fighting saints, especially the two solidier saints George and Theodore. Placing these figures in this area refers to the role of those fighting saints in protecting the church and their readiness to defend its beliefs<sup>[10]</sup>. This arrangement has some roots in the Byzantine tradition as described by Diehl<sup>[37]</sup>, which give it even more credibility.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper develops an understanding of the concept of symbolism in Coptic architecture as one that places special emphasis on spiritual dimension of architectural space. It also highlighted the role of the inherited values and the cultural heritage to inspire and support the unique being of architectural spaces. The paper emphasizes on the role of both the continuity of values and the articulation of the setting in creating an innovative, original setting for architectural expression.

The paper shows that symbolic expression in Coptic churches was not through a random use of symbols all over the building, but it was governed by a specific system that was almost universal in all Coptic churches with slight diachronic differences. The visual discourse between these churches and the worshipers was set through two conceptual approaches that worked in parallel to each other: the first is

through artistic, figurative expression by means of figures and shapes that has certain connotation and references in the bible or in the cultural heritage of the worshipers; the second is through the architectural design of the church itself, in which both numerical and geometrical symbolic connotations were used to reflect and refer to the inclusive 'meaning' or the spiritual values related to each architectural element/division in the church. In this, the paper shows that Coptic architects did not try to impose 'false meaning' through additional artificial objects enforced around the buildings, but tried to impart the meaning with the worshipers through extending it into the very own formal and structural design of the building.

By reviewing the symbolic system as outlined in part IV (the part behind the iconostasis of Coptic churches corresponds to the ancient Egyptian sanctuary, where priests alone were admitted. The central part of the church was reserved for baptized Christians as was the hypostyle hall of Egyptian temple for the royal family and priests, while the narthex was left open for the un-baptized Catechumens as was the open court in ancient Egyptian temple opened to the public on festival days), it is to realize that a classification governed the employment of the symbol within the church; the symbols in the sanctuary part mainly concerned God himself and the Holy Trinity; the symbols in the nave were more about the community of the church and saints and apostles as the leaders of this community; while the symbols of the narthex-area addressed the transition from old to new life. Yet, it shows that this symbolic plan did not work as a unified whole, so as to typify one certain metaphor, but rather each part of the three divisions of the church had its own symbols and messages

that are directly related to its functions/users.

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