

## A COPTIC LITURGICAL BOOK FROM QASR EL-WIZZ IN NUBIA

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The Oriental Institute's last obligation in Egypt arising from the emergency created by the building of the High Dam at As-suan and the consequent flooding of Nubia was discharged in October–November, 1965, with the excavation of the Christian monastery of Qasr el-Wizz under the direction of Dr. George Scanlon.

This small monastery, about 11 miles south of the great Abu Simbel temple and half a mile north of the Egyptian-Sudanese border, was all that remained to be investigated in the large concession so successfully excavated by Professor Keith C. Seele. In fact, Dr. Seele had already cleared a portion of the monastery in the spring of 1964 at the close of his last full-scale season.

The monastery itself, dating to the eighth to twelfth centuries A.D., is well preserved and interesting in its constructional features and yielded some fine decorated pottery, an example of which is pictured herewith. But the most dramatic find was a small parchment book found in a monk's cell.

The book is carefully written and almost perfectly preserved even to the elaborate crosses in red, green, and black ink on the cover-leaf and on the back of the last page. The text in Coptic, the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language written with the Greek alphabet, covers only 31 pages but consists of two separate compositions. Strangely enough, the ancient book-binder got one sheet or signature out of place toward the end of the book, and one wonders whether the users of the precious missal ever noticed that something was wrong.

The first composition is embellished with marginal illustrations in colored inks. They are whimsical but neither illustrative of anything in the adjacent text nor in keeping with the solemnity of the subject matter. On two pages egret-like birds peck at bunches of grapes the stems of which are tails of initial letters of lines of the text. Another margin contains an open-mouthed crocodile with four closely bunched tiny bird feet. On another page a human face, which is drawn just like one of the commonest of



*Pottery decorated with swallows from the Christian monastery of Qasr el-Wizz*

hieroglyphs of earlier centuries, is apparently present solely to wear as a headpiece the Coptic form of the letter A which happens to be the initial letter of one of the lines of the text (see cover).

The central theme of both compositions in the book is the cross of Christ, and the setting for both is the same. Jesus was seated

one day on the Mount of Olives with his apostles about him. In the first composition Jesus was asked by Peter to reveal the “mystery of the cross,” and he replied that he would bring the cross with him on the day of the last judgment and that it would stand at his right hand. When the judgment was completed, it would again ascend into heaven and all the righteous would ascend with it. In the second composition Jesus sang for the apostles a succession of short hymns to the cross. These lines from one hymn are characteristic:

Rise up, arise, O holy Cross,  
And lift me up, O Cross.

He asked the apostles to respond with “Amen” after each hymn, and when the text was liturgically read—perhaps on Good Friday—the worshipers no doubt responded in the same way.

The contents of the book *per se* are not very significant, for they are pious inventions, but this genre of text is unknown among the vast quantities of Coptic and Greek texts of the Egyptian church. However, there has been in the Berlin Museum since the last century a parchment book in the Nubian language of this area, and it begins with precisely the same text as the first composition in our Coptic book. The Nubian book was dedicated in A.D. 973 to the church at Serra East, a site just above the Egyptian-Sudanese border, less than 15 miles south of Qasr el-Wizz. Our Coptic book can also be dated by the style of writing and other features to the tenth century.

The second part of the Berlin Nubian text is not the same as the second composition in our Coptic book, but during the Oriental Institute’s excavations at Serra East in 1963–64 another tenth-century parchment book in the Nubian language was found. It contains a text of the same genre as the Berlin book, but the two texts are far from being duplicates. They are eulogies of the cross cast in a long series of short similes such as:

The Cross is the staff of the lame.  
The Cross is the leader of the blind.

One would expect that these three texts centered about the cross, two in Nubian and one in Coptic, would be translations of originals composed in Greek, as is commonly the case with

Coptic church texts. However, no such Greek text is known. This may be an accident of preservation, but one wonders whether the compositions were not originally in Coptic and translated into the local Nubian. In any case, it is a curious fact that these texts of a genre otherwise unknown should have been the property of two churches or monasteries a few miles apart some distance up the Nile in relatively inaccessible Nubia.