



The Revival of St Menas's Veneration in Twentieth-Century Egypt

Hiroko Miyokawa¹

Abstract: In antiquity, St Menas was highly revered throughout the Christian world and attracted large numbers of pilgrims to the pilgrimage centre of Abū Mīnā. In twentieth-century Egypt, however, this saint became a figure of limited recognition in the Coptic Orthodox community. The revival of St Menas's veneration, promoted by the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Cyril VI, made the saint very popular in contemporary Coptic society. In this article, I argue that the resurgence of St Menas's veneration stemmed not only from Cyril VI's dissemination efforts based on religious motivations, but also from Coptic cultural nationalist motivations, led by the Coptic laity. The miraculous story that emerged during the Second World War among the Greek soldiers, and the nationalist response of a dozen Coptic lay youth in Alexandria, played an important role in the campaign to re-evaluate the Coptic past symbolised by St Menas and his pilgrim centre of Abū Mīnā.

Keywords: St Menas; modern Egypt; Coptic saint veneration; cultural nationalism; the Second World War; Greek Orthodox Church; Patriarch Cyril VI

Saint (St) Menas the Wonderworker (in Arabic, *Mār Mīnā al- 'Ajā 'ibī*) is now such a popular saint that his image is almost ubiquitous in contemporary Coptic Orthodox society. Because of this current popularity, one might assume that the saint has been venerated in Egypt for centuries. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, St Menas was a minor figure, whom Copts revered in some places as a local saint.

The situation changed when Patriarch Cyril VI (1902-1971, r. 1959-1971) promoted the revival of St Menas's veneration by building a monastery dedicated to this saint near the original site of the ancient pilgrimage centre of Abū Mīnā in Maryut, and by praying for his intercession whenever an occasion arose. Cyril VI had a family custom of celebrating the feast of St Menas², and after becoming a monk and then

¹ Dr Hiroko Miyokawa, Associate Professor, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan; e-mail: miyokawa.hiroko.3d@kyoto-u.ac.jp; ORCID: 0000-0002-5421-7251.

² D. Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch: Kyrillos VI (1902-1971) Life and Legacy*, New York 2019, p. 22-23.

the patriarch, he maintained spiritual ties to this saint and worked to disseminate the veneration throughout the Coptic society. Cyril VI played a pivotal role in the revival of St Menas's veneration, and the Copts still commemorate this saint alongside Cyril VI, as evidenced by several churches in Egypt and abroad dedicated to St Menas and Cyril VI together³. The story of St Menas and Cyril VI features in numerous newspaper articles and in social media such as YouTube channels⁴.

However, it was not only Cyril VI's efforts that contributed to St Menas's current popularity. The miraculous story of St Menas during the Second World War stimulated the nationalist feelings of the Coptic lay youth in Alexandria, and this led to activities to raise Coptic interest in St Menas, who earned a reputation of an Egyptian national saint.

In this article, I would like to clarify how these two trends interacted with each other to revive St Menas's veneration in mid-twentieth century. In doing so, I would like to shed light on the development of Egyptian cultural nationalism among the Coptic laity, and the role archaeology played in this phenomenon. The revival of St Menas's veneration was both a religious movement and a struggle over historical and cultural heritage symbolised by St Menas and his Abū Mīnā pilgrimage centre. Its underlying objective was to restore the Egyptians' authority to interpret the Egyptian history and manage Egyptian religious and cultural heritage.

1. St Menas the Wonderworker and the Abū Mīnā pilgrimage centre

St Menas the Wonderworker, also known as St Menas of Egypt, lived around the end of the third century, and according to some sources,

³ According to the online church directory of St Takla Haymanout Coptic Orthodox Website, eight churches bear both saints' names in Egypt; see Mawqī' al-'Anbā Taklā Hīmānūt al-Qibṭī al-Urthudhukṣī, in: <https://st-takla.org/Coptic-History/places/africa/egypt/name/mina.html> (accessed 01.12.2024). Following Patriarch Cyril VI's canonisation in June 2013, St Menas and Cyril VI are both considered saints.

⁴ To name a few, Mesat, the official YouTube channel for Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church Cathedral, hosts a video entitled "Documentary Video about the Monastery of St Menas the Wonderworker in Maryūt"; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SazKEybUzko> (accessed 01.06.2025). Another YouTube channel, run by Kyrillos Sidarous, hosts many videos about Patriarch Cyril VI and St Menas; see <https://www.youtube.com/@kyrillossidarous> (accessed 01.06.2025).

until the beginning of the fourth century⁵. Many versions of St Menas's hagiography exist in various languages because his veneration began even before the Council of Chalcedon (451), which caused the schism of the modern-day Coptic Orthodox Church. Beside this Church, many other denominations, including Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches, consider St Menas a saint.

Despite the differences, one can provide the following summary of St Menas's hagiography currently in circulation in the Coptic Orthodox community: Born into a wealthy and influential Christian family in Nikiou, a town in what is now the Minūfiyya Governorate, Egypt, St Menas became a Roman soldier after his parents' death. When the Roman Emperor Diocletian (r. 284-305) began to persecute Christians, St Menas left the Roman army and retired to the desert to live an ascetic life. After five years, he saw a vision of martyrs and presented himself to the Roman authorities, declaring his Christian faith; this resulted in his arrest, torture, and finally martyrdom, probably at a young age. His martyrdom receives commemoration on 15 Hātūr in the Coptic calendar, which corresponds to 24 November in the Gregorian calendar. He was buried in a desert southwest of Alexandria, near Lake Maryut, where the camel carrying his body mysteriously stopped and refused to move. After his burial, there were reports of healing miracles taking place around his tomb. As word of the miracles spread, the tomb began to attract pilgrims and eventually became a major pilgrimage site⁶.

The ancient name of St Menas's pilgrimage site is unknown; the current name, Abū Mīnā, derives from the way the local Bedouins called it around the time of its discovery by the excavations conducted between 1905-1907, led by Carl Maria Kaufmann. The Martyr Church, built over St Menas's tomb, is the most important building in Abū Mīnā, and archaeological research shows that the first Martyr Church was built

⁵ According to one of the most referenced contemporary Coptic hagiographies, St Menas was martyred in 309 at the age of 24. See *Siyar al-Qiddīsīn wa al-Shuhadā' fī al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya al-Urthūdhuksiyya*, in: https://st-takla.org/Saints/Coptic-Orthodox-Saints-Biography/Coptic-Saints-Story_1773.html (accessed 10.06.2025).

⁶ See al-Qummuṣ Ṭādrus Ya'qūb Malaṭī, *Mīnā al-'Ajā'ib al-Shahīd, Qāmūs Ābā' al-Kanīsa wa Qiddīsī-hā Ma'a Ba'd al-Shakhṣiyyāt al-Kunsiyya* (d-m), n.d., and Saint Mena Coptic Orthodox Monastery, *The Great Egyptian and Coptic Martyr the Miraculous Saint Mena*, Maryut 2005, p. 6-21.

around the end of the fourth century⁷. The main building phases of Abū Mīnā took place during the reigns of the emperors Zeno (r. 474-491) and Justinian (r. 527-565), and the pilgrimage centre developed into a large city with three interconnected churches – the Great Basilica, the Martyr Church, and the Baptistry – and accommodation for pilgrims⁸. The latter came from all over the Christian world of the day, and the clay flasks they brought back with them, engraved with St Menas's name and image, have emerged in various places around the Mediterranean and Europe.

After the Council of Chalcedon, the administration of the pilgrimage centre remained in the hands of the Melkites⁹, who are now Greek Orthodox. The seventh century saw the destruction of the Great Basilica, and other buildings in the centre also suffered fire, probably during the Persian invasion in 619. With the Arab conquest of Egypt in 639-641, the pilgrimage centre came into the hands of the Coptic Church¹⁰.

After the Arab conquest of Egypt, it became difficult for pilgrims to arrive from the Byzantine Empire and beyond, and the number of pilgrims dropped significantly. However, the city itself continued to function for several centuries since then, as mentioned in various sources. According to *History of the Patriarchs*¹¹, during the reign of Coptic Patriarch Khā'īl (r. 743-767), Melkite Patriarch Cosmas claimed ownership of the Church of St Menas in Maryut and its endowments and appealed to the Arab ruler, which resulted in vain. Around the end of the eleventh century, a Muslim pilgrim returning from Mecca stopped off in Abū Mīnā and described the building and pictures of the church, mentioning that the lamps burned day and night, that there was a mosque for Muslims in a part of the church, and that the surrounding areas were full of fruit trees¹². The last mention of St Menas's tomb and church in Maryut appe-

⁷ P. Grossmann, *Abu Mina*, in: *Coptic Encyclopedia*, v. 1, ed. A. Atiya, New York 1991, p. 24-29.

⁸ N. Litinas, *General Introduction: Abu Mina*, in: *Greek Ostraca from Abu Mina (O.AbuMina)*, ed. N. Litinas, Berlin 2008, p. IX.

⁹ Litinas, *General Introduction: Abu Mina*, p. IX.

¹⁰ P. Grossmann, *Abu Mina*.

¹¹ Sāwīrus bin al-Muqaffā', *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria III Agathon to Michael I (766)*, ed. and tr. B. Evetts, PO 5, Paris 1910, p. 119-132 (373-386).

¹² A.O. El-Bekri, tr. M.G. de Slane, *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale*, "Le Journal Asiatique" cinquième série 12 (Octobre-Novembre 1858) p. 416-417. There is also an interpretation that Abū Mīnā had already stood abandoned, referring to the same part of the same reference. However, that does not explain who maintained the lamps

ars in Abū al-Makārim's *History of Churches and Monasteries*, written around the end of the twelfth century, which states that St Menas's relics lie in the church in Maryūt¹³. In the first half of the thirteenth century, following Abū Mīnā's destruction, St Menas's relics were unearthed from the rubble and transferred to St Menas's Church in Fum al-Khalīj, Cairo, during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Mu'izz 'Izz al-Dīn 'Aybak (r. 1250-1257)¹⁴.

In the following centuries, there are fewer records of St Menas, and one of the earliest modern publications on St Menas mentions the following story: In 1873, St Menas appeared as an elderly man with grey hair in a dream of Hegumen Tādrus Mīnā, the abbot of St Menas's Monastery in Fum al-Khalīj, and asked him to find his lost relics, which resulted in their discovery inside the church as St Menas indicated¹⁵.

According to a Coptic studies scholar, Jirjis Fīlūthā'ws 'Awaḍ (1867-1954), St Menas's image shared in the Coptic community in the nineteenth century and until mid-twentieth century was that of an elderly man with grey hair in the Greek Orthodox style¹⁶. Also, the number of churches dedicated to St Menas in Egypt in 1957 was sixteen, including two newly built churches in the 1940s and 1950s, compared to the twenty churches mentioned by Abū al-Makārim at the end of the twelfth century¹⁷. Although venerated locally in the churches dedicated to him, by

and the fruit trees. See B. Voile, *Chapitre VII. Cyrille VI (1902-1971): l'homme du siècle et le saint*, in: B. Voile, *Les coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser: Sainteté, miracles, apparitions*, Paris 2004, paragraph 12.

¹³ Abū al-Makārim, *Tārīkh Abū al-Makārim: Tārīkh al-Kanā'is wa al-'Adyura fī al-Qarn al-Thānī 'Ashara bil-Wajh al-Bahrī*, v. 1, ed. al-'Anbā Ṣamū'īl 'Usqf Shibīn al-Qanāṭir wa Tawābī'-hā, Cairo 1999, p. 145-146.

¹⁴ Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ibī bi-Mariyūt, *al-Qiddīs al-'Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ibī*, Maryūt 1996, p. 148. According to the manuscript that the author refers to, the relics' delivery from Abū Mīnā took place during the reign of "al-Mu'izz", whom the author identifies as Aybak, not the Fatimid al-Mu'izz.

¹⁵ al-Jam'iyyat al-Qibṭiyyat al-Khayriyyat al-Urthūdhuksiyya, *Tārīkh Hayāt al-Shahīd al-'Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, Cairo 1906, p. 180-183, cited in Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ibī bi-Mariyūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 162-163.

¹⁶ Hegumen Yūhannā al-Subky al-'Antūnī, supervised by Jirjis Fīlūthā'ws 'Awaḍ, *Maymar al-Shahīd al-'Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, [n.p.] 1948, p. 15, referred to in Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ibī bi-Mariyūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 163. Contemporary Coptic icons show him as a young man dressed in the uniform of a Roman soldier or in a suit of armour with two camels.

¹⁷ M. Shukrī, *Kanīsa Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī 'ala Marr al-'Usūr*, in: Jam'iyyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Muqtaṭafāt min Tārīkh*

the twentieth century, St Menas had become a little-known saint among ordinary Copts¹⁸.

2. Patriarch Cyril VI (Father Mīnā al-Barāmūsī) and the rebuilding of Abū Mīnā

‘Āzir Yūsif ‘Aṭṭā, who later became Patriarch Cyril VI, was born in Damanhūr, in the western Nile Delta, in 1902. While living in Ṭūkh al-Naṣārā in 1907-1910, ‘Āzir’s family would travel to St Menas’s Church and Monastery in Ibyār, Gharbiyya, also in the western Nile Delta, on a five-and-a-half-hour journey on foot to celebrate the *mawlid* of St Menas in late November. *Mawlid*, which literally means birthday, commemorates the death or martyrdom of a saint and entails a week-long open-air celebration. According to Daniel Fanous, the author of a detailed and extensive biography of Cyril VI, the pilgrimage to the *mawlid* introduced the young ‘Āzir to St Menas. For unknown reasons, he felt fascinated by the little-known saint, and the spiritual relationship lasted for the rest of ‘Āzir’s life¹⁹. On 25 February 1928²⁰, at the age of twenty-five, ‘Āzir took monastic vows at the Barāmūs Monastery, and the monks present at the ritual named the new monk Mīnā, after the saint of the day in the *Synaxarion*, St Menas the Monk²¹, rather than St Menas the Wonder-

al-Kanīsa al-Miṣriyya, Alexandria 1995, p. 222-224. This part appeared in 1957 and the volume contains its reprint. For some reason, Shukrī did not include St Menas’s Church in Old Cairo built in 1947, so the total number should be seventeen.

¹⁸ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 29. Winifred Blackman points out that “Māri Mīna al-‘Agayebi is a very popular Coptic saint, and he is venerated not only by the Christians, but also by many of the Muslims” (W.S. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, London 1927, p. 249). However, Blackman describes the situation in the area of the church dedicated to St Menas, which we cannot generalise to concern the whole Upper Egypt. Given the number of churches dedicated to St Menas in the middle of the twentieth century, it is more reasonable to think of him as a locally venerated minor saint.

¹⁹ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 26.

²⁰ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 84-86 and notes 85 and 88. There is some confusion concerning the date of tonsure, but Fanous refers to the newly discovered autobiographical fragments written by Cyril VI himself and thus more reliable. As Fanous shows throughout his work, there are many ambiguities, contradictions, and confusions in Cyril VI’s biographies, although he lived in the twentieth century.

²¹ Also known as Menas of Ashmunayn, commemorated on 17 Amshīr in the Coptic calendar. See De Lacy O’Leary, *The Saints of Egypt*, London 1937, p. 199.

worker, commemorated on 24 November. 'Āzir became Father (Fr) Mīnā al-Barāmūsī, and received priesthood three years later.

Fr Mīnā felt attracted to live in monastic solitude in the desert, which was exceedingly rare at the time and therefore very much discouraged²². Nevertheless, in 1934, he managed to obtain a permission to live in a desert near the Barāmūs Monastery in Wādī al-Naṭrūn as a hermit. In 1936, he began living in an abandoned windmill southeast of Cairo, where he became known to the residents of Old Cairo as a holy man with many healings, prophecies, visions, and other unusual divine events²³.

Fr Mīnā's affinity with St Menas continued, and his almost obsessive concern for the construction of a monastery dedicated to this saint in Maryut bore fruit after several attempts over two decades. In January 1937²⁴, Fr Mīnā read an article in *Risāla al-Maḥabba* published by the Friends of the Holy Bible Association (Jam'īyya 'Aṣḍiqā' al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas), reporting on the trip to Abū Mīnā organised by this association to hold a prayer and celebration of St Menas there, and lamenting the destruction of Abū Mīnā. Fr Mīnā wrote a letter to Maḥrūs Murjān, a lawyer who authored the article, expressing his admiration and joy about the trip²⁵ and asking the association to mediate on his behalf with Patriarch John XIX (r. 1928-1942) regarding the rebuilding of St Menas's Monastery in Maryut, but their requests faced rejection and sarcasm²⁶.

Later, during the Second World War, before Patriarch John XIX's repose in June 1942, Fr Mīnā obtained a permission from the patriarch to inhabit and rebuild the ruins of Abū Mīnā, but the British commander in

²² Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 121.

²³ Voile, *Chapitre VII*, in: *Les Coptes*, paragraph 26.

²⁴ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 170-171. As Fanous notes, most English sources, including the English abridged version of al-Masri's Arabic work (I.H. el Masri, *The Story of the Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt*, v. 2, Newberry Springs 1982, p. 434), point out that Fr Mīnā chose to live in the windmill in Cairo because he was not allowed to live in solitude in the Abū Mīnā ruins, which means that Fr Mīnā's first attempt to rebuild the Abū Mīnā ruins took place in 1936. However, Fanous remarks that Fr Mīnā's request to the patriarch regarding the windmill came in after he had deliberately obtained permission to live in the windmill from the Ministry of Arabic Antiquity, which was responsible for the area. Therefore, it seems unlikely that he requested the rebuilding of the Abū Mīnā ruins in 1936.

²⁵ M.B. 'Abd al-Malik, *al-Rāhib al-Qibṭī Alladhī Ḥaḥiḥa Āthār Mār Mīnā lil-Kanīsat al-Qibṭīyya*, "Waṭani" 22 June 2022.

²⁶ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 170.

charge of the area categorically rejected the request²⁷. Fr Mīnā continued his efforts, and he managed to obtain a letter of introduction from Marqus Simayka Pasha, a notable Coptic layman and the founder and director of the Coptic Museum, to gain permission from the Antiquities Service, the responsible agency of the Egyptian government²⁸. Then, in mid-1943, he travelled to Alexandria, where he visited the Graeco-Roman Museum to meet archaeologist Bānūb Ḥabashī (1913-1956), the museum's inspector, and presented the idea of praying and living in the ruins of Abū Mīnā. Ḥabashī was very pleased and helped him secure permission from the Antiquities Service. Fr Mīnā's appeal led to the establishment of the Association of St Menas the Wonderworker (AMW) in 1945²⁹. While in Alexandria, Fr Mīnā also met with Prince 'Umar Ṭūsūn (1872-1944), known for his deep interest in archaeology, and the prince encouraged the idea should the patriarchate agree. With no patriarch on the throne between 1942 and 1944, the director of Arab Antiquities gave Fr Mīnā permission to perform religious rituals at Abū Mīnā, pending formal approval. Fr Mīnā wrote a letter to Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī, a prominent figure in the Community Council, composed of notable Coptic laypeople who manage the affairs of the Coptic community, to obtain the Council's permission. However, with the death of the prince and the chaotic situation in the Coptic community following the enthronement of the next patriarch in 1944, Fr Mīnā's project to rebuild Abū Mīnā faded³⁰.

The reason why Fr Mīnā was so keen to rebuild the ruins of St Menas's Church is ultimately unknown, but judging from his biographies, it seems reasonable to assume religious causes; as Fanous notes, "The saint chose him"³¹. During the Second World War, both the Cairo windmill and Abū Mīnā were important military zones for the British Army, which evicted Fr Mīnā from the windmill in 1945³² for fear of his being a spy, but it is difficult to find any evidence of political activity, let alone espio-

²⁷ I.H. al-Maṣrī, *Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsat al-Qibṭiyya 1956–1971*, v. 7, Cairo 1988, p. 24. al-Maṣrī does not mention the date of this event, but she notes that Patriarch John XIX commissioned her father Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī to write him a letter of endorsement.

²⁸ Jam'iyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Qirā'āt fī Tārīkh al-Kanīsat al-Miṣriyya*, Alexandria 1993, p. 5.

²⁹ Jam'iyat Mār Mīnā, *Qirā'āt*, p. 21.

³⁰ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 353.

³¹ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 353.

³² Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 196. According to 'Aṭṭā, the British commander meant to protect the monk. See Ḥ.Y. 'Aṭṭā, al-Qiss Rāfā'īl 'Afā Mīnā, *Mudhdhakkirāt 'an Ḥayāt al-Bābā Kirillus al-Sādis*, Cairo 1972, p. 42.

nage, on his part. Fanous points out that the reason why Fr Mīnā sought to rebuild and inhabit the ruins of Abū Mīnā in 1943 was perhaps that he needed a suitable place to live as a hermit, because he could not live in neither his monastery nor the windmill at the time³³.

In 1947, with donations and cooperation from the community, Fr Mīnā built a monastery and a church dedicated to St Menas in Old Cairo, where he lived until his election as Patriarch in April 1959; this solved the problem of securing a place to live as a hermit. Still, Fr Mīnā continued to make a request to the patriarch and related ministers every few years to settle permanently in Abū Mīnā. In 1948, the Ministry of Arab Antiquities granted him formal permission to celebrate liturgical services on feasts at Maryut³⁴.

Finally, on 5 March 1958, during the confusion of the patriarchal elections and his own nomination, Fr Mīnā received news from the representatives of the Community Council and the patriarchate that they had decided to restore the altar of St Menas's Church in Maryut, which overwhelmed him with joy. Unable to sleep, he rushed at midnight to write to Munīr Shukrī (1908-1990), the director of AMW in Alexandria, with the news³⁵.

In April 1959, Fr Mīnā was elected the 116th Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. At his ordination, he opted for the name Cyril VI as his patriarchal title, not Mina III, contrary to the expectations of many. This decision stemmed from a vision of Patriarch Cyril V (r. 1874-1927) that Fr Mīnā experienced following the election³⁶. In June 1959, Patriarch Cyril VI, accompanied by members of the Patriarchate of Cairo and members of AMW, travelled to Maryut to perform religious rituals at the archaeological site. He returned to Abū Mīnā on 27 November 1959 to celebrate an open-air liturgy on an altar erected over St Menas's tomb, attended by about 500 people. He then went to a nearby site where he had bought land from the Desert Reconstruction Agency, next to the archaeological site, and laid the foundation stone for what would eventually become St Menas's Monastery in Maryut. For the construction of this new monastery, Patriarch Cyril VI obtained a permission from the Archaeological Service to use the stones from Abū Mīnā which had little archaeological

³³ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 211.

³⁴ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 353-354.

³⁵ Jam'īyyat Mār Mīnā, *Qirā'āt*, pp. 18-19. It came with the approval of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, see "Rhakoti" 2(2) May 2005, p. 2.

³⁶ al-Maṣrī, *Qiṣṣat al-kanīsa*, v. 7, p. 28.

value³⁷. The efforts to rebuild the monastery at Maryut, a decades-old dream of Cyril VI, met with criticism, especially from the Community Council, regarding the waste of expenditure and effort on an “unnecessary” monastery³⁸. Despite the criticism and the difficulties of construction work in the middle of the desert with no water, the monastery buildings did emerge. Their inhabitants were first the monks brought from other monasteries and then those ordained at St Menas’s Monastery in Maryut. The new site developed into a large monastery with many monks and pilgrims coming from all over the world, and the monastery complex includes several churches and a huge guesthouse to accommodate large numbers of pilgrims³⁹.

Patriarch Cyril VI often visited and stayed in this new monastery in Maryut, where he made critical decisions and received important news⁴⁰. After his repose in 1971, the new cathedral in the Abbasiyya district of Cairo received his coffin first, but in his will, he had expressed his wish for a burial in St Menas’s Monastery in Maryut. His successor, Patriarch Shenouda III (r. 1971-2012), therefore decided to follow the will and had his coffin placed in the monastery in Maryut. Following Cyril VI’s canonisation in 2013, his tomb in the monastery has become a shrine (*mazār*) where pilgrims come to pray for intercessions.

3. Archaeology, Egyptian territorial nationalism, and the Copts

As we have seen, Cyril VI venerated St Menas as his patron saint, and he worked hard to rebuild Abū Mīnā and revive St Menas’s veneration, eventually building a new monastery next to the ancient pilgrim centre of Abū Mīnā. However, it was not only Cyril VI’s efforts that led to the revival of St Menas’s veneration; the activities of laypeople’s associations also played an important role. In contrast to Cyril VI, their interest in St Menas was not only religious, as it also had a nationalist tendency.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, as the idea of nationalism gradually spread, the Egyptians’ perception of their own history changed significantly, and the same was true

³⁷ ‘Atṭā *et al.*, *Mudhdhakkirātī*, p. 145-146.

³⁸ Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 357.

³⁹ Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-‘Ajā’ib bi-Maryūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 342-349.

⁴⁰ ‘Atṭā *et al.*, *Mudhdhakkirātī*, p. 148-149.

of the Copts. In search for a new, modern identity, they transformed their perception of history in relation to Egyptian nationalism.

After Jean-François Champollion deciphered hieroglyphs in 1822, European archaeologists began excavations in Egypt, which resulted in many important discoveries concerning the ancient history of Egypt. For Egyptian intellectuals of the early nineteenth century, ancient Egypt was, according to the conventional Islamic view of history, "the time of Jāhiliyya" or the age of ignorance before Islam. The statues of the ancient gods and pharaohs were the best evidence that they were polytheists and idolaters, so there was almost no interest in ancient history, let alone the preservation of ancient ruins. Similarly, for the Copts, ancient Egypt was a distant past that they did not recognise as part of their own history, which began with the arrival of St Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria and functioned as a church history.

However, throughout the nineteenth century, with modernisation and the spread of the notion of territorial nationalism, the Egyptian national narrative under construction gradually incorporated ancient Egypt. Rifāʿa al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873), an intellectual of the Nahḍa (Arabic renaissance) era who stayed in Paris in the 1820s and familiarised himself with ancient Egypt and Egyptology there, waged a campaign to interest his compatriots in ancient Egypt. In 1868, he published his history of ancient Egypt, *Anwār Tawfīq al-Jalīl fī Akhbār Miṣr wa Tawthīq Banī ʿIsmāʿīl*, using evidence from European archaeology and philology⁴¹. As a result, Egyptians began to take an interest in ancient Egypt, and Egyptian Egyptologists such as Aḥmad Kamāl (1851-1923) started working in a professional capacity related to Egyptology in the 1880s. However, Egyptology and archaeology were overwhelmingly Western disciplines, relegating Egyptians to support positions with no real opportunity to make a serious contribution to the field⁴².

Between 1882 and 1922, Egypt was subject to British rule. As the independence movement intensified, Egyptian territorial nationalism garnered significant support from intellectuals and political activists. The advent of this nationalism transformed the history of ancient Egypt into a glorious past that all Egyptians could take pride in and that the rest of the world should admire.

⁴¹ D.M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Cairo 2002, p.108-109.

⁴² Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, p. 188-189.

Copts, too, sought to establish a golden age as the foundation for their modern identity, and they could draw inspiration either from their spiritual leaders from the Roman-Byzantine times, a period characterised by persecution, or from ancient Egypt. In the Roman-Byzantine era, the Copts never held dominion over Egypt, and thus had only martyrs or ascetics as prominent historical figures to celebrate. By contrast, Pharaonic history offered a rich and illustrious ancestry⁴³. Therefore, in the early twentieth century, Coptic lay intellectuals linked Coptic religious culture to ancient Egypt, ardently asserting their intertwined Coptic-Egyptian identity⁴⁴. Si-mayka Pasha, who helped Fr Mīnā obtain permission to live in Abū Mīnā, famously remarked, “All Egyptians are Copts, some are Muslim Copts, and others, Christian Copts, but all are descendants of the ancient Egyptians”⁴⁵. He also established the Coptic Museum in 1910, nationalised in 1931 as he intended from the onset.

Coptic ecclesiastical leaders derived their legitimacy from the apostolic succession from St Mark the Evangelist and from their piety and asceticism, just like Cyril VI, so they did not need to seek a glorious past in ancient Egypt. It was the Coptic upper-class laity who felt more inclined to define their identity in secular Egyptian nationalist terms and were active in the reassessment of their history by connecting Coptic culture to ancient Egypt and the preservation of historical and archaeological artefacts⁴⁶.

In turn, the Coptic laity from the educated middle class focused more on the religious revival movement within the Coptic Orthodox community. This movement bears the common name of the Sunday School movement, founded by Archdeacon Ḥabīb Girgis⁴⁷ (1876-1951) in 1918 to promote religious revival and social reform. The movement had a revivalist and fundamentalist intellectual outlook, which aimed to restore religious

⁴³ Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, p. 280-281.

⁴⁴ See examples of such Coptic nationalist claims in: H. Miyokawa, *The Struggle over Egyptianness: A Case Study of the Egyptian Nayruz Festival*, in: *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives*, ed. L. Robson, Syracuse 2016, p. 122-139, and H. Miyokawa, *The Revival of the Coptic Language and the Formation of Coptic Ethnoreligious Identity in Modern Egypt*, in: *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. N. van Doorn-Harder, Columbia 2017, p. 151-156.

⁴⁵ Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, p. 282.

⁴⁶ Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, p. 281.

⁴⁷ The Coptic Orthodox Church canonised Ḥabīb Girgis for his efforts to lead the Sunday School movement, and his canonisation took place at the same time as Patriarch Cyril VI's in 2013.

tradition and to return to the original church of the first centuries. Still, they dedicated their activities to fighting poverty, ignorance, disease, and crime, and organised social and cultural activities for Coptic youth, such as excursions to historical sites and summer camps⁴⁸. The Sunday School movement attracted numerous university students and urban young professionals and developed into an influential movement in the Coptic society.

In the 1950s, some of the first pioneers of the Sunday School movement became priests and monks. This new generation of clergy found a mentor in Fr Mīnā, who later ordained these young, educated monks with a background in the Sunday School movement as bishops during his tenure as Cyril VI⁴⁹. Bishop Anṭūniyūs, one of those bishops, later became Patriarch Shenouda III (r. 1971-2012), who led the Coptic Orthodox community with his strong leadership for over four decades.

In addition to the Sunday School movement, the religious revivalist movement of the Coptic middle class took the form of religious and cultural associations. The activities of the AMW, which I discuss below, fit within this trend. Compared to the more secular Coptic Egyptian nationalism described above, which sought to link Coptic religious culture with ancient Egypt, this religious revival movement among the middle class focused on the early Christian era. It aimed to rediscover and utilise the forgotten elements of the Coptic religious and cultural heritage, to create a more vibrant and more authentic religious life⁵⁰. However, these movements observed no clear division according to whether they were secular or religious, or whether their focus was on ancient Egypt or early Christianity. Sometimes they overlapped, as did their relationship to Egyptian nationalism.

Regarding the overall trend of Egyptian nationalism, it was in 1922 that ancient Egypt became the focus of the Egyptian nationalist movement. That year, the British unilaterally declared Egypt's independence in February in response to the increasingly fierce independence movement. This preceded the November discovery and opening of Tut Ankh Amen's tomb, a moment that brought archaeology and politics together in an unprecedented way⁵¹. As we know, the discovery of Tut Ankh Amen's tomb in 1922 led to a pharaonic boom in Egyptian society for

⁴⁸ S. Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, Oxford 2014, p. 42-45.

⁴⁹ Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, p. 45.

⁵¹ Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt*, p. 293.

about a decade. As a result, the mausoleum of the nationalist leader and prime minister Saʿd Zaghlūl (1859-1927) was built in a style modelled on pharaonic temples⁵².

This “independence”, unilaterally declared in 1922, was largely nominal, allowing the Egyptians limited political freedom, and the British army remained stationed in Egypt until the 1950s. However, regarding the management of cultural property and antiquities, the Egyptian authorities proved able to exercise greater control. The Egyptian government preserved the entire contents of Tut Ankh Amen’s tomb, banning their transport from Egypt, and imposed much stricter controls on exporting antiquities. In addition, the government began the Egyptianisation of museums and the Antiquities Service, emphasised pharaonic history in schools, founded a state university, and opened programmes in educational institutions to train Egyptian specialists in Egyptology and related fields⁵³.

4. The miraculous story of St Menas during the Second World War

As seen above, the 1920s were a period when archaeology, politics, and Egyptian identity intertwined very closely in Egypt. Perhaps because of this atmosphere, in August 1929, in a fiery speech denouncing the British presence in Egypt, Muslim nationalist leader Aḥmad Ḥusayn (1911-1982) referred to St Menas as the very example of a national hero who had resisted an invader’s oppression⁵⁴. This was probably an exceptional case, and his speech would have had little impact on his Egyptian compatriots, given the low level of this saint’s public recognition. Moreover, Ḥusayn was still a law student in 1929, and even after he founded Young Egypt in 1933, it never attracted a mass support for its extreme anti-British Egyptian nationalism.

In fact, St Menas and Abū Mīnā ruins seemingly attracted little attention from Egyptian nationalists, including the Coptic cultural nationalists mentioned above, who made no particularly notable comments or

⁵² R.M. Coury, *The Politics of the Funeral: The Tomb of Saad Zaghlul*, “Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt” 29 (1992) p. 191-200.

⁵³ Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, p. 293.

⁵⁴ Voile, *Chapitre VII*, In “Les coptes”, paragraph 14. As mentioned, in the contemporary Coptic hagiography, St Menas did not rise against the Roman rule and bravely fight as a soldier, but rather left the army and lived a reclusive life in the desert.

activities about them, although they were a perfect material for combining Egyptianness and Christianity. One of the rare references is the aforementioned trip to the ruins of Abū Mīnā, organised sometime before January 1937 by the Friends of the Holy Bible Association, headed by Simayka Pasha, the director of the Coptic Museum. It was the Greeks and the Second World War that awakened the interest of some Alexandrian Coptic youth in St Menas and Abū Mīnā ruins in a most unexpected and mysterious context.

Like other Europeans, the Greeks began to settle in Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century under the encouragement and protection of the Egyptian ruler Muḥammad 'Alī (r. 1805-1848), who aimed to modernise and industrialise the country. In the 1860s, the Egyptian cotton industry experienced a significant surge, leading to a further influx of immigrants from Europe. In 1907-1937, the Greeks constituted the largest foreign community in Egypt, followed by the Italians and the British⁵⁵. As a port city, Alexandria hosted the largest number of foreign residents. They received extraterritorial rights under the terms of the Capitulations, a centuries-old system that originated from Egypt's Ottoman past and remained in force until as late as 1937⁵⁶. Alexander Kitroeff clarifies that the Greek community consisted of diverse groups with different social classes, economic interests, political leanings, places of origin, and nationalities, but the Greek Orthodox faith was an important core that brought them together in ethnic and religious terms⁵⁷. The Greek Orthodox tradition has widely venerated St Menas, considering him the patron saint of several Greek cities, and his feast day is 11 November in the Greek Orthodox *Synaxarion*.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, another important factor that changed St Menas's position, Britain anticipated that Egypt would declare war on Germany. However, the Egyptian government maintained its neutrality in the face of the ambiguities of the war and sought to balance military protection from Britain with nationalist claims against Britain⁵⁸. In some cases, the Egyptian army engaged in combat operations, but doubts persisted in the British authorities' minds concerning

⁵⁵ A. Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt, 1919-1937: Ethnicity and Class*, Oxford 1989, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt, 1919-1937*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt, 1919-1937*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ M. Kolinsky, *Britain's War in the Middle East: Strategy and Diplomacy 1936-1942*, New York 1999, p. 123-124.

the willingness of the Egyptian army to fight. Therefore, it mainly served internal security purposes, in particular the protection of public utilities and communications infrastructure⁵⁹.

In 1940, the Italian army invaded Greece, and in the following year, the Germany-led Axis powers occupied the country. In May 1941, Greece's king George II and his government fled to exile in Egypt, followed by a number of Greek soldiers and officers. After a month, the king and the government left for South Africa and ended up in London, but some ministers and the Greek army remained in Egypt. The latter became established as the Royal Greek Army of the Middle East under British command. In December 1941, with the Egyptian authorities' permission, the Greek government in exile summoned the Greeks of Egypt into the army, with a total of about 7,000 men enlisting⁶⁰.

The summer of 1942 was the war's climax for Egypt, when the Axis army of Italy and Germany led by General Erwin Rommel, advancing from Libya, reached its farthest point in El Alamein in July, some 110 km southwest of Alexandria. The Second Battle of El Alamein, which took place from 23 October to 4 November 1942, resulted in a decisive victory for the Allied forces under the command of British General Bernard Law Montgomery. The victory marked a major turning point in the Second World War, which led to the Allied forces launching an offensive and overwhelming the Axis forces.

At the beginning of this battle in October, the Greek soldiers in El Alamein reported the apparition of St Menas⁶¹. In midnight on the day before the Second Battle of El Alamein began, the Greek soldiers fighting within the Allied forces allegedly witnessed St Menas coming out from his Abū Mīnā ruins and leading camels into the German camp⁶². According to this miraculous story, St Menas's apparition terrified the German

⁵⁹ Kolinsky, *Britain's War in the Middle East*, p. 131, 175.

⁶⁰ A. Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration 1937-1962*, New York 2017, p. 41.

⁶¹ For an Arabic report of this story see Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ib bi-Maryūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 397-400, and for an English version see Saint Mena Coptic Orthodox Monastery, *The Great Egyptian and Coptic Martyr*, p. 52-57. Both sources are publications by St Menas's Monastery in Maryut and refer to the same Greek reference (C. Vasilopoulos, *O Agios Menas*, Athens 1973, p. 49-52).

⁶² For reference, the ruins of Abū Mīnā and El Alamein lie about fifty to sixty kilometres apart. Some sources, especially the Greek ones, attribute the etymology of El Alamein to St Menas, but El Alamein literally means "the two flags" in Arabic, and the last part, "ein", is the suffix for the dual form of nouns. It is therefore unlikely that

soldiers and significantly undermined their morale, leading to their defeat in the battlefield. The same source points out that the English Protestants recognised St Menas's miracle and gave that area⁶³ to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch to rebuild the church dedicated to St Menas and to record the names of those who lost their lives in the battle.

On 10 November 1942, the English-language newspaper *The Egyptian Gazette*⁶⁴ reported this miraculous story, noting that the Greeks in Egypt hailed St Menas as the one who had saved Alexandria from the Axis invasion. It also reported that the saint's Greek Orthodox feast saw celebrations with due solemnity at St Sabas's Cathedral in Alexandria, in the presence of Patriarch Christopher II. Many devout Greeks were reportedly speaking of subscribing to the building of a church to St Menas somewhere near the site of the old monastery.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Christopher II, actually collected donations from the congregation to purchase the land around the old monastery of Abū Mīnā from the Egyptian government, but the Greeks failed to reach the necessary agreement due to a historical dispute with the Copts over the ownership of Abū Mīnā⁶⁵.

St Menas's miracle at El Alamein spread among the Greeks, arousing great joy, and received commemoration in the form of a mural fresco depicting St Menas chasing away the German soldiers in the Great Lavra Monastery, the oldest and largest among the monasteries of Mount Athos in Greece, the spiritual centre of Eastern Orthodoxy. Also, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria still commemorates the miracle every year on St Menas's feast day⁶⁶.

Interestingly, St Menas's miracle at El Alamein is almost completely unknown to the Copts. Even the comprehensive volume that provides a thorough overview of all aspects related to St Menas, published by the Monastery of St Menas in Maryut, built by Cyril VI in 1959, mentions St Menas's miracle at El Alamein with a reference to Greek literature⁶⁷.

El Alamein has its roots in St Menas. See Saint Mena Coptic Orthodox Monastery, *The Great Egyptian and Coptic Martyr*, p. 52-53.

⁶³ It probably refers to the Abū Mīnā ruins.

⁶⁴ "The Egyptian Gazette", 10 November 1942.

⁶⁵ J. Šafwat, *Šūra wa Ta'liq. Kayfa Zahara al-Qiddīs Mār Mīnā fī al-Ḥarb al-'Ālamiyya al-Thāniya?*, "al-Dustūr" 13 November 2023, in: <https://www.dostor.org/4551743> (accessed 30.12.2024).

⁶⁶ Šafwat, *Šūra wa Ta'liq*.

⁶⁷ See note 61.

This information gap presumably stems from the fact that the Egyptian army did not directly participate in the Battle of El Alamein. Moreover, the wartime martial law imposed strict censorship, probably even more so for Arabic-language periodicals. In addition, the saint's low profile at the time, in contrast to the prominent status he would later enjoy among the Copts, and the inaccessibility of the ruins due to their location in the desert may have contributed to this enigmatic situation. Thus, it seems that the issue of ownership of the Abū Mīnā site, whose existence was poorly known, did not attract much attention in the Coptic community in the face of other pressing issues such as electing a new patriarch.

Cyril VI, or Fr Mīnā, who had endeavoured to obtain permission to live in the ruins of Abū Mīnā since 1937, seems to have taken interest in Abū Mīnā for spiritual reasons that had nothing in common with the war or the Greeks, at least at the onset. He presumably wanted to live as a hermit in the desert ruins, as he had done at the Barāmūs Monastery. However, he is most likely the first, and perhaps the only, person to realise that the Greek Orthodox Church intended to construct a church on the site of Abū Mīnā, and to attempt to address the issue.

In June 1943, eight months after the miracle of El Alamein, Fr Mīnā went to Alexandria and met with Bānūb Ḥabashī of the Graeco-Roman Museum. According to Munīr Shukrī, one of the AMW's founding members and its second director after Ḥabashī, at this meeting with Ḥabashī, Fr Mīnā expressed his surprise that the Copts were not even aware that St Menas had an archaeological site that still bore his name, or that one of the Christian denominations calling for building a church in that area had raised ten thousand Egyptian pounds in a single meeting⁶⁸. Shukrī notes that he interpreted Fr Mīnā's efforts to build a cell there as an attempt to preserve the Copts' right to and ownership of Abū Mīnā, and to draw Coptic attention to the site⁶⁹.

Moreover, when, as mentioned, Fr Mīnā wrote to al-Maṣrī in June 1943 in the context of asking the Community Council's permission for practicing religious rituals in the Abū Mīnā ruins, he stated, "before someone else precedes us and does it; especially as the martyr is an Egyptian, and his monuments should be under our hands and not anyone else's"⁷⁰. The response from the Community Council at the time is unknown, but

⁶⁸ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), *Letter to Habib Pasha el-Masri, June 28, 1943*, as cited and translated in: Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 353.

the Antiquities Service rejected the idea, stating, "We have no responsibility to protect you in this place"⁷¹. It is not clear how the Greek Orthodox Church approached the issue of Abū Mīnā at the time, but the war situation would not have allowed them to build a monastery either.

In June 1945, getting inspiration from Fr Mīnā's plea, Ḥabashī and a dozen of like-minded Alexandrian Coptic youth established the AMW. They had first organised a group under the name of the "Committee for the Commemoration of the Heroes of Christianity and the Church", but they later changed the name and officially registered as an association on 24 November 1945, the feast of St Menas⁷².

As stated in the founding declaration, the AMW's aim was to commemorate Coptic martyrs and heroes by speeches and writings, to publish Coptic studies articles written in an accessible way for the general public, and to prepare trips to archaeological sites of interest to every Copt⁷³. In other words, its aim was to disseminate the knowledge of Coptic history and culture with a special focus on St Menas. According to an essay commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the AMW's activities, the Copts at the time knew nothing about St Menas except for his name, and they knew nothing about his archaeological site⁷⁴.

The AMW's first major activity was to organise a trip to Abū Mīnā. Due to poorly developed roads and a route prone to confusion and misdirection, the journey took seven hours each way, even though the distance between Alexandria and Abū Mīnā was roughly sixty kilometres⁷⁵. The first trip was to Abū Mīnā ruins, the second to the monasteries of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, and the third to the St Menas's Church in Ibyar, which Cyril VI had visited as a child with his family, all in 1946. Then, for thirty years since 1950, the AMW organised regular trips to Abū Mīnā twice a year, the first on 22 June, the feast of the consecration of St Menas's Church in Maryut⁷⁶, and the other on 24 November, the feast of

⁷¹ K. Faraj Allāh, *Mā Lā Ta 'rif-hu 'an al-Shahīd al-'Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, "Waṭanī" 24 November 2024.

⁷² Jam'iyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Muqataṭafāt*, p. 11.

⁷³ Jam'iyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Muqataṭafāt*, p. 5-6; Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Jam'iyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Muqataṭafāt*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ "Rhakoti" 2(2) May 2005, p. 18-19, a reprint of an article that appeared in "Ākhir Sā'a" 18 April 1962.

⁷⁶ This feast refers to the consecration of the ancient church.

St Menas's martyrdom. Since 1947, the AMW published books and magazines on Coptic history and culture, such as monasticism, the Coptic language, and the Nayruz festival, and prominent Coptic studies scholars such as Aziz Suryal Atiya, the editor-in-chief of *Coptic Encyclopedia*, contributed their articles.

One of the AMW's most interesting activities was bringing ancient marble columns to St Menas's Church in Fleming, Alexandria. When the Community Council decided to build a church in Fleming, they presented proposals for the interior decoration, the most important of which was a plan to bring four marble columns, including the decorated base and the capital, from the archaeological site of Abū Mīnā and place them around the altar as in the ancient church. The AMW laid the cornerstone of the church in 1946, and the Ministry of Education, then responsible for antiquities, gave its approval – secured with the help of Togo Mina (1906-1949)⁷⁷, the second director of the Coptic Museum. Thus, the Church of the Great Martyr St Menas opened in 1948 with its four ancient marble columns⁷⁸.

According to Shukrī, who led this column project, this symbolic movement and Fr Mīnā's efforts resonated with other groups and individuals and led to publication of important literature on St Menas⁷⁹. Shukrī gives the following examples⁸⁰: James Drescher, *Apa Mena: A Selection of Coptic Texts Relating to St. Menas*, Cairo, 1946, printed at the expense of Société d'Archéologie Copte, an association for Coptic studies established by a Coptic notable Mirrit Buṭrus Ghālī in 1933; and Hegumen Yūḥannā al-Subky al-'Anṭūnī, *Maymar al-Shahīd al-'Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, n.p. 1948. Along with the AWM's own publications, these publishing activities that emerged after the Second World War gradually led to an increase in the Coptic awareness of St Menas.

There was some resonance from monks as well; in August 1945, the author of the aforementioned book *Maymar*, al-'Anṭūnī – a Coptic monk – attempted to live in Abū Mīnā, but the wartime situation again prevented him from doing so. This is one of the earliest expressions of

⁷⁷ He was a lay Copt, so his name "Mina" was not an ecclesiastical name but his grandfather's name.

⁷⁸ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 26, Jam'iyyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Muqatafaṭ*, p. 14, Shukrī, *Isḥrūna 'Āman fī Khidma al-Tārīkh al-Qawmī wal-Kanīsa*, "Majalla Madāris al-'Aḥad" September 1967 (7) p. 29.

⁷⁹ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 71.

⁸⁰ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 26.

interest in the Abū Mīnā ruins by Coptic monks other than Fr Mīnā. Coptic Patriarch Joseph II (r. 1946-1956) visited the ruins of Abū Mīnā accompanied by archons – leading members of the Coptic laity – sometime during his office. Then, on 24 November 1957, the abbot of the Suryānī Monastery, Thāwfilus, accompanied by nine monks from the same monastery, including the future Patriarch Shenouda III, organised a trip to Abū Mīnā to hold a liturgy there, which became a regular event held twice annually – on 22 June and 24 November⁸¹.

Fr Mīnā's obsession with St Menas was religious in nature, but the dispute with the Greek Orthodox Church over the ownership of Abū Mīnā seems to have accelerated his enthusiasm for building a monastery there. In March 1958, Fr Mīnā wrote letters to Shukrī and to Ḥannā Yūsuf 'Aṭṭā, Fr Mīnā's own brother. In the former, as mentioned above, Fr Mīnā wrote that he was sleepless and overwhelmed with joy upon learning about the decision to restore the altar. He was so happy to receive this news, for the revival of the Greek Orthodox interest in Abū Mīnā took place at that very time. In the latter, he hoped that his brother would be able to personally discuss with Shukrī the reconstruction of St Menas's Monastery in Maryut. He wrote, "My intention is even to write everything in the name of St Menas' Monastery, because the ambitions of other parties have become evident"⁸². The letter mentions that two bishops, namely Bishop Murquṣ the Metropolitan of Abū Tīg and Bishop 'Antūniyūs the Metropolitan of Sūhāj, were supervising the matter⁸³.

In June 1958, in another letter to Ḥannā, Fr Mīnā outlined a concrete plan for constructing the monastery in Abū Mīnā. He wrote,

First, we will build a hermitage or two outside the monastery near the rest house which is there. Then we will start to restore the altar through the director of the Coptic Museum⁸⁴, because he is responsible for this operation. Once

⁸¹ Faraj Allāh, *Mā Lā Ta'rif-hu*, Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-'Ajā'ibī bi-Maryūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 202.

⁸² Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), *Letter to Hanna Youssef Atta, March 5, 1958*, as cited in: Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 355. The Arabic version of the letter also appears in Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 27. For this part, the translation from Arabic is mine but based on Fanous's.

⁸³ Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 27.

⁸⁴ The director at the time was Pahor Labib (1905-1994), the son of 'Iqlawdiyūs Labīb, who tried to revive Coptic as a daily spoken language. The Coptic Museum began to excavate the Abū Mīnā ruins in 1950.

we put our feet there, be sure that the Lord will work with us. It is very important to care and meet Dr Munīr Shukrī, and whoever has anything to do with this matter⁸⁵.

This letter suggests that Shukrī was a key figure, deeply involved in the Abū Mīnā issue.

In February 1959, a few months before Fr Mīnā became patriarch, he sent a letter to Shukrī, informing him that the Greek Orthodox Church was going to buy the land of St Menas's Monastery in Abū Mīnā to build a monastery there. This news seems to have disturbed Shukrī very much, and he hoped that the AMW would endeavour to buy this land, and he wanted to put all his money into this project, even the price of his gallabiya⁸⁶. It is highly likely that Cyril VI rushed to the construction of a monastery in Abū Mīnā soon after his ordination because of this background.

Although the AMW was aware of the Greek Orthodox interest in Abū Mīnā from the onset, it did not directly criticise the Greeks. Instead, they emphasised the saint's Egyptianness and mentioned the issue of historical ownership in their publications, asserting the Coptic ownership of Abū Mīnā. There was no particular social tension between the Copts and the Greeks in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s, and by late 1950s, the Greeks were already leaving the country after the Suez Crisis, so their presence was in decline⁸⁷. Therefore, the issue of Abū Mīnā ownership received such a circumlocutory treatment.

In an article published on 22 June 1959, Shukrī calls St Menas "the patron saint of the Christians of Egypt" (*shaft' masīhīyī Miṣr*) and describes St Menas's Church in Abū Mīnā as the greatest and the most famous Egyptian church, which attracted pilgrims from all over the Christian world at the time⁸⁸. He remembers to mention the ownership controversy with "the Melkites" that happened during the reign of Coptic Patriarch Khā'il in the eighth century and confirms that Bishop Khā'il proved the Coptic ownership of this church. He also mentions the theft of marble

⁸⁵ Hegumen Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), *Letter to Hanna Youssef Atta, June 23, 1958*, qtd. and trans. in: Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch*, p. 377, n. 196. The Arabic version of the letter also appears in Shukrī, *Qirā'āt*, p. 27-28. For this part, the translation from Arabic is mine but based on Fanous's.

⁸⁶ Kanīsa Mār Jirjis bi-Isburting, *al-Shahīd al-Miṣrī Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, Alexandria 1974, p. 52. *Gallabiya* is a traditional, long, loose-fitting garment.

⁸⁷ Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus*, p. 305.

⁸⁸ Shukrī, *Kanīsa Mār Mīnā*, p. 220.

by the Melkites in the ninth century and that the perpetrator later regretted what he had done and sent money to repair the church he had destroyed⁸⁹.

It was not only the Greek Orthodox interest in Abū Mīnā but also the Coptic cultural nationalism that had already emerged in the first half of the twentieth century that led some Copts to imagine Saint Menas as an Egyptian saint and Abū Mīnā as the great past of Egypt. In September 1967, a few months after Egypt suffered an unexpected crushing defeat in the war against Israel, looking back on the AMW's activities over the past 20 years, Shukrī claimed,

“Isn't the history of the Copts part of the history of this beloved country? Isn't the heritage of the Copts part of the heritage of all Egypt? I see our duty towards these studies as an integral part of our national duty towards the homeland, science and history”⁹⁰.

The article states that its contribution serves to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the AMW's founding, but in reality, Shukrī may be reflecting on the AMW's activities to confirm the greatness of the Coptic/Egyptian past and regain his pride as an Egyptian in the shock of defeat. Coptic past is Egyptian past, and the Abū Mīnā ruins, whose profile the AMW was laboriously raising, are the symbol of prosperous Christian Egypt. The tendency to emphasise St Menas's Egyptianness also appears in the claim that the name Menas has its roots in the ancient Egyptian language, meaning “to remain, to be permanent”, and that it was also the name of the first king of Egypt, Narmer⁹¹, which leaves no room for the Greeks.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, Cyril VI's efforts contributed to the revival of St Menas's veneration and his current popularity in Egypt. However, the AMW's efforts also contributed to the revival. The miraculous story of St Menas during the Second World War and the Greek Orthodox interest in St Menas and the Abū Mīnā ruins stimulated the nationalist feelings of some of the Coptic laity in Alexandria, and this led to the establishment of

⁸⁹ Shukrī, *Kanīsa Mār Mīnā*, p. 220-221.

⁹⁰ Shukrī, *ʿIshrūna ʿĀman*, p. 29.

⁹¹ Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-ʿAjāʾib bi-Maryūt, *al-Qiddīs*, p. 19-20.

the AMW and its activities to raise the Coptic interest in St Menas. Thus, St Menas and the Abū Mīnā ruins gained their reputation as the symbols of prosperous Christian Egypt in line with the prevailing trend of Coptic cultural nationalism.

Considering that Cyril VI himself retrieved the relics of St Mark the Evangelist, the founder of the Church of Alexandria, from Venice in 1968⁹², Cyril VI's interest in St Menas may not have been as purely religious as scholars generally believe. He may have been aware of the importance of owning historically and religiously significant objects and places to support the legitimacy and authenticity of the Coptic Orthodox community. The Coptic Orthodox tradition has carefully preserved relics of saints and holy places as tangible evidence of the authenticity of the Coptic religious identity. In some cases, they have also played a role in shaping the Coptic national identity.

The revival of St Menas's veneration in mid-twentieth century may have been a space where Coptic cultural nationalism and religious revival intersected. The fact that the two influenced each other in reconstructing the Coptic identity shows that this was an important turning point in the Coptic community, from cultural nationalism led by the laity to a religious revival led by religious leaders.

Bibliography

Sources

- Abū al-Makārim, *Tārīkh Abū al-Makārim: Tārīkh al-Kanā'is wa al-'Adyura fi al-Qarn al-Thānī 'Ashara bil-Wajh al-Baḥrī*, v. 1, ed. al-'Anbā Ṣamū'īl 'Usqf Shibīn al-Qanāṭir wa Tawābi'-hā, Cairo 1999.
- Abou Obeid El-Bekri, *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale*, tr. M.G. de Slane, "Le Journal Asiatique" cinquième série 12 (Octobre-Novembre 1858).
- Hegumen Yūḥannā al-Subky al-'Anṭūnī, with supervision by Jirjis Fīlūthā'ws 'Awad, *Maymar al-Shahīd al-'Azīm Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, s. 1. 1948.
- Sāwīrus bin al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria III Agathon to Michael I (766)*, ed. and tr. B. Evetts, PO 5, Paris 1910, p. 3-215 (258-469).

⁹² 'Atṭā et al., *Mudhdhakkirātī*, p. 115-117.

Periodicals

- ‘Abd al-Malik M. B., *al-Rāhib al-Qibṭī Alladhī Ḥafīza Āthār Mār Mīnā lil-Kanīsat al-Qibṭiyya*, “Waṭanī” 22 June 2022.
- Faraj Allāh K., *Mā Lā Ta’rif-hu ‘an al-Shahīd al-‘Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-‘Ajāyibī*, “Waṭanī” 24 November 2024.
- Şafwat J., *Şūra wa Ta’līq. Kayfa Zahara al-Qiddīs Mār Mīnā fī al-Ḥarb al-‘Ālamiyya al-Thāniya?* “al-Dustūr”, 13 November 2023, in: <https://www.dostor.org/4551743>.
- Shukrī, M., *‘Ishrūna ‘Āman fī Khidma al-Tārīkh al-Qawmī wal-Kanīsa*, “Majalla Madāris al-‘Aḥad” (7) September 1967.
- “Ākhir Sā’a” 18 April 1962.
- “Rhakoti” 2 (2) May 2005.
- “The Egyptian Gazette”, 10 November 1942

Letters

- Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), Letter to Habib Pasha el-Masri, June 28, 1943.
- Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), Letter to Hanna Youssef Atta, March 5, 1958.
- Hegumen Mina the Recluse (Cyril VI), Letter to Hanna Youssef Atta, June 23, 1958.

Online sources

- Mawqī‘ al-‘Anbā Taklā Hīmānūt al-Qibṭī al-Urthudhuksī, in: <https://st-takla.org/Coptic-History/places/africa/egypt/name/mina.html> (accessed 01.12.2024).

Studies

- al-Jam‘iyyat al-Qibṭiyyat al-Khayriyyat al-Urthudhuksiyya, *Tārīkh Ḥayāt al-Shahīd al-‘Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-‘Ajāyibī*, Cairo 1906.
- al-Maṣrī I.H., *Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsat al-Qibṭiyya 1956-1971*, v. 7, Cairo 1988.
- al-Qummuṣ Tādrus Ya‘qūb Malaṭī, *Mīnā al-‘Ajā’ibī al-Shahīd*, “Qāmūs Ābā’ al-Kanīsa wa Qiddīsī-hā Ma‘a Ba‘ḍ al-Shakhṣiyyāt al-Kunsiyya (ḍ-m)” s. l., [n.d].
- ‘Aṭṭā Ḥ.Y., al-Qiss Rāfā’īl ‘Afā Mīnā, *Mudhdhakkirātī ‘an Ḥayāt al-Bābā Kīrillus al-Sādis*, Cairo 1972.
- Blackman W.S., *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, London 1927.
- Coury R.M., *The Politics of the Funeral: The Tomb of Saad Zaghlul*, “Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt” 29 (1992) p. 191-200.
- Dalachanis A., *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration 1937-1962*, New York 2017.
- Dayr al-Shahīd Mār Mīnā al-‘Ajā’ibī bi-Maryūt, *al-Qiddīs al-‘Aẓīm Mār Mīnā al-‘Ajā’ibī*, Maryūt 1996.

- el Masri I.H., *The Story of The Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt*, v. 2, Newberry Springs 1982.
- Elsässer S., *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, Oxford 2014.
- Fanous D., *A Silent Patriarch: Kyrillos VI (1902-1971) Life and Legacy*, New York 2019.
- Grossmann P., *Abu Mina*, in: *Coptic Encyclopedia*, v. 1, ed. A. Atiya, New York 1991, p. 24-29.
- Jam'yyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, *Qirā'āt fī Tārīkh al-Kanīsa al-Miṣriyya*, Alexandria 1993.
- Kanīsa Mār Jirjis bi-Isburting, *al-Shahīd al-Miṣrī Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī*, Alexandria 1974.
- Kitroeff A., *The Greeks in Egypt, 1919-1937: Ethnicity and Class*, Oxford 1989.
- Kolinsky M., *Britain's War in the Middle East: Strategy and Diplomacy 1936-1942*, New York 1999.
- Litinas N., *General Introduction: Abu Mina*, in: *Greek Ostraca from Abu Mina (O.Abu-Mina)*, ed. N. Litinas, Berlin 2008, p. IX-XI.
- Meinardus O.F.A., *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Desert*, Cairo 1961.
- Miyokawa H., *The Struggle over Egyptianness: A Case Study of the Egyptian Nayruz Festival*, in: *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives*, ed. L. Robson, Syracuse 2016, p. 122-139.
- Miyokawa H., *The Revival of the Coptic Language and the Formation of Coptic Ethnoreligious Identity in Modern Egypt*, in: *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. N. van Doorn-Harder, Columbia 2017, p. 151-156.
- O'Leary De L., *The Saints of Egypt*, London 1937.
- Reid D.M., *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Cairo 2002.
- Reid D.M., *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, Cairo 2015.
- Saint Mena Coptic Orthodox Monastery, *The Great Egyptian and Coptic Martyr the Miraculous Saint Mena*, Maryut 2005.
- Shukrī M., *Kanīsa Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī 'ala Marr al-'Usūr*, in: *Muqataṭafāt min Tārīkh al-Kanīsa al-Miṣriyya*, ed. Jam'yyat Mār Mīnā al-'Ajāyibī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qibṭiyya bil-Iskandariyya, Alexandria 1995.
- Vasilopoulos C., *O Agios Menas*, Athens 1973.
- Voile B., *Les coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser: Sainteté, miracles, apparitions*, Paris 2004.