The Iconography of St. Menas in the Coptic Art

*Nader Alfy Zekry

*Tourism Guidance Department
Faculty of Tourism and Hotels - University of Sadat City

Abstract

St. Menas was only son of wealthy Christian parents from Egypt in 3rd Century A.D., his father was a high official in the Roman government service, his family moved to Phrygia (Asia Minor), but his parents soon died. He entered the military service and became an officer. A short time later an imperial decree that was demanded that all inhabitant of the country worship idols. Nevertheless St. Menas refused to deny his Christian faith and actually he tortured and martyred. The Account of St. Menas was recorded in several Languages: such as Coptic, Greek, Latin, Ethiopic, Nubian, and Arabic. St. Menas paintings may not spread in diverse places in south and north of Egypt compared to others saints, but diversified and spread his depictions between main topics. The research will deal with the different depictions of St. Menas, who is represented as a soldier or martyr during the history of Coptic art. The research will study the foremost representations of St. Menas on diverse materials like Ivory, pottery, wall paintings, and wooden icons.

Key words: Iconography, St. Menas, Coptic Art, Egypt.

Introduction

St. Menas was only son of wealthy Christian parents from Egypt in 3rd Century A.D. His father was a high official in the Roman government service. His family moved to Phrygia (Asia Minor) where his parents soon died (Winlock and Crum, 1926, p. 205). He entered the military service and became an officer. A short time later an imperial decree demanded that all inhabitant of the country worship idols. Nevertheless St. Menas refused to deny his Christian faith and was tortured and martyred (Devos, 1960, p. 154 – 160).

Nevertheless, his body was saved from destruction by fire by some Christian soldiers. Then the commander of these soldiers who was Christian was then ordered to Egypt to carry on military operations, and he took the body of St. Menas along as protection against his enemies in the war during the sea journey to Egypt. According to the legend, animals with long necks similar to heads of camels attacked the boat but were driven away by flames that saint’s issued from his body (Drescher, 1946).

-37-
The boat then safely reached and the campaign was protected by St. Menas's body. When the commander was ready to return to Phrygia (Asia Minor), he carried the body of St. Menas on a camel, but the animal refused to move which he was considered a reflection of the divine will (Malek, 1981, p. 99-106). Subsequently, St. Menas’s body was placed in wooden casket and buried on the spot in Mariot. After various miracles of St. Menas, a tomb and a church were build and extended to outline Abu Mina pilgrimage center (Krumbacher, 1907, p. 31-43).

Saint Menas is well-known as well by the name Abu Mena, which may have been deflected form of his name from the words Ava Mina. He is one of the famous martyrs in the history of Coptic Church, St Menas witnessed the persecution period during the era of Empror Diocletian, according to historical sources that bear his miracles. The city which carries his name "Abu Mina City," was centered on his tomb and church due to his fame (Kaufmann, 1910).

The Coptic Church celebrates the Martyrdom of St. Menas on the 15th of Hatur (Basset 1922: p. 344-347; The Coptic Synaxarium, 1995, p. 98-100, p. 390) and the consecration of his church on the 15th Ba'ounah (Atiya, 1991: p.1528-1533). The variations in these literary accounts of St. Menas were recorded in several languages through the historical sources, such as the following examples:

The Coptic Manuscripts were published by (H.E.Winlock and W.E. Crum, 1926, p. 205; Paul Devos, 1960, p. 154 – 160; James Drescher, 1946; Pierpont Morgan's Library, 590, 585 &575).

While the Greek Manuscripts were published by (Moscow Synodal Library, Ms 379, 1900, p. 1256-6; Analecta Bollandiana, 3, 1884, p. 258-270; Acta Sanctorum (Propylaeum), Col. 211; Krumbacher, 1907, p. 31-43), in addition to the Latin Manuscripts that were published by (L. Surius, 1618, VI, p. 245-6) As well the Ethiopic Manuscripts which were published by (A. d’Abbadie, p.48-49; W. E. Crum, 1905, p. 157; Paul Devos, 1959, 77, 78 :p. 451-463, 154-160; Devos, Paul. 1960: p. 335–343; Manuscripts: British Museum’s Library, London, 689, 660, oriental), also the Nubian Manuscripts published by (E. A. W. Budge, 1905, p. 157; Paul Devos, 1960, p. 154 – 160; Browne, Gerald M., 1989; Browne, Gerald M., 1994; Chaine, 1910, p. 33-45).

And finally, the Arabic Manuscripts that preserved in Coptic Patriarchate's Library in Cairo (Now in St. Menas Monastery at Mariotte), Egypt, 48, 59, 60 (History) 18th Century AD., and Coptic Museum's Library, Old Cairo, Egypt: 472, 471, 469 (History), behind the Arabic Mss of St. Menas preserved in Los Angeles (ML.MS.166), and they presented summary of 17 miracles of St. Menas. Los Anglos Manuscripts similar to the Arabic approaches which were published by Yohanna Al-Sobky (يوحنا السبكي، ١٩٤٨م) as well as the Ethiopic Ms 135, fols. 22-82 that was published by (A. d’Abbadie, Catalogue, MS179, Fols. 139-52), they are summarized in (Kaufmann, Ikonographie, p.48-49).
The media that carry the depictions of St. Menas varied between ivory artifacts, pottery, marble, murals, and icons. Therefore, I will briefly present some examples below.

**Ivory:**

Ivory is one of the most common materials used since the early periods of Coptic art till the late antiquity (Cameron, 1993: 19, 107, 126, 128). There are many examples of ivory artifacts that depicted scenes from daily life and Greek and Roman legends. Upon the official recognition of Christian religion by the Byzantine Empire during the fourth century AD, artists began to represent various religious themes and representations of famous saints and martyrs. This type of ivory plaques is supposed to have been once used as inlays large wooden church doors.

St. Menas was one of the most common saints represented on ivory pieces, such as an ivory Pyxis (Weitzmann, 1978; Buckton, 1994); oval, which was cut from the solid ivory. It has provision for a hinge and lock and sides carved in relief with scenes representing the martyrdom and sanctuary of St Menas; on one side there is a Roman official who is seated as a judge on a stool, his feet are on a footstool; one hand raised, in the other there is a staff. Behind St. Menas there is an armed guard, and beyond a basket; before him a table with inkpot, behind which a man holds a diptych; behind the soldier is a veiled doorway; before the table St Menas, with hands bound behind his back, has fallen on one knee; an executioner grasps him by the hair while brandishing a sword; behind him (St. Menas) an angel flies. On the other side, St Menas stands beneath an arch, hands raised in the attitude of an orans, and with nimbus. On each side of the sanctuary there is the head of a recumbent camel; from each direction two worshippers approach.
Pl. 1C - St. Menas, has fallen on one knee; an executioner grasps him

Pl. 1D - St. Menas stands beneath an arch, hands raised in the attitude of an orans

Pl. 1 - Ivory Pyxis, 6th century AD, Probably made in Alexandria, British Museum, 1879.1220.1

After (The British Museum Catalogue of the Ivory Carvings of the Christian Era, p. II, pl. vii; a panel from the Bishop's throne at Grado, now in Milan Museum, Cabrol, Dictionnaire, vol.I, 1114, fig. 270). The original use of these fourteen ivory pieces of the so called Grado Chair with scenes from the life of Christ and depictions of saints, was as a part of a liturgical throne given by Emperor Heraclius (610–641 A.D.) to Grado, Italy, after his re-conquest of Egypt.

Inscribed in Greek "Saint Menas," this ivory shows the Egyptian saint with the camels that carried him after his death. The hanging lamps at his side are similar to Islamic mosque lamps.

Pl. 2 - Ivory plate of St. Menas, Milano Museum, Saint Menas with Flanking Camels (made in Eastern Mediterranean or Egypt, 8th Cent., It was discovered 1910 AD

-40-
Marble

The Marble relief of St. Menas represents him standing in supplication between two parched camels, wearing the Roman soldier's costume and a cloak on his shoulders.

Pl. 3 - St. Menas, Alexandria Greco-Roman Museum, Reg. No. 22273, Marble panel showing St. Menas in relief, standing between two camels, 6th Century AD.

Pottery

Pilgrimage ampullae of St. Menas, are made of rough pottery (Kiss, 1973, pp. 137–154), stamped in relief with figures of St. Menas, dressed roman military costume (a tunic and cloak. With a nimbusa round his head, he is standing facing forward praying between two crouching camels. His figure is accompanied by Coptic inscription as "St. Menas". The other side is decorated by a cross inside the garland of laural as the victory symbol (Kaufmann, 1910; Kiss, 1989; Davis, 2001, p.120-125). These pottery ampullae (small holy-water flasks brought from pilgrimage places as a souvenir, and mass-produced in Early Byzantine times) come from Abu Mena, near Alexandria in Egypt.

Pl. 4 - Pottery pilgrim bottle of St. Menas flask with St. Menas between two camels probably made at Mariot-Alexanderia, Egypt, 6th-7th century. (Louvre Museum)

Pl. 5 - Pottery pilgrim bottle, for storing water from the spring of St. Menas, From Alexandria, Egypt. The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pl. 6 - Pottery pilgrim bottle of Saint Menas, late 500s–mid-700s, Probably made at Abu Menas, near Alexandria, Walters Art Museum, Reg.no. 48.2541</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pl. 7 - Pottery pilgrim bottle of Saint Menas, late 500s–mid-700s, Probably made at Abu Menas, near Alexandria, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wall paintings**

On two partly damaged murals from Kellia and Kom Abu Garga, St. Menas was depicted in a confrontation form praying between two crouching camels. His figure was accompanied by a Coptic inscription as "St. Menas" $\aleph$ $\gamma$ $\nu$ $\omicron$ $\omicron$ $\kappa$ $\omicron$ $\alpha$.

From the same period, there is a wall painting from the Monastery of Abu Maqar in Wadi Al-Natron, carrying the representation of St. Menas standing in prayer attitude behind Jesus Christ standing under arched columns with haloed head holding the Gospel in his left hand. He is wearing a mantle over a tunic.

Another type of mural portrays St. Menas in series of scenes from Habu temple dated to 8th Century AD.; they are started by his stereotypical style in prayer attitude behind his tomb church and basilica church in Mariot, Alexandria, and then St. Minas gives a golden brick to the camel-herd as in return for those of mud which he had given in honor of the saint. Also St. Menas depicted as an equesterian saint above the horse, finally the people and worshipers visited his church to seek his blessing. (Donald N. Wilber 1940. 86-103)

Pilgrims often traveled to Abu Menas, located about forty-five kilometers southwest of Alexandria, at the intersection of caravan routes. Originally the site of a pagan shrine, Abu Menas was transformed into a Christian landmark, with hostels, baths, and a massive baptistery (Grossman, 1998, p. 281).
Pl. 8 - St. Menas, wall painting Kellia Monastery, Kom 219, cell XXXIV, west wall. Louver Museum, E 26822 Seventh-eighth centuries AD

Pl. 9 - St. Menas, wall painting from Kom Abu Garga, preserved in Greaco-Roman Museum, Seventh-eighth centuries AD

Pl. 10 - St. Menas, wall painting from Abu Maqar Monastery, wadi Al-Natron, Seventh-eighth centuries AD

Fig. 1 - Series of St. Menas scenes on wall paintings at Habu Temple, Luxor, 8th Century AD., after (Donald N. Wilber 1940. 86-103)
St. Menas was represented as a soldier in the Roman army who fled to the desert upon hearing an imperial order to worship the pagan gods. Beneath the horse's feet, a man stands whipping a camel. There is a domed structure to the right of the scene, with a cross on the roof, an open door and hanging lamp, represent the shrine that was subsequently built to house the saint's body after a series of miracles.

This scene is based on the story that tells of an owner of a barren camel who prayed St. Menas to render his wife fertile, promising to consecrate the first born to St. Menas. The prayer is answered but the man fails to keep his vow until he is punished by St. Menas then the camel-herd came at the shrine of St. Menas. This iconography is found in the monastery of St. Antony, in the Red Sea and dates to 13th Century AD (Bolman, 2002). It is similar to another scene in the dome of monastery of St. Paul in Red Sae, but in different style of painting. The later one dates to the 18th Century AD. (Van Moorsel, 2002; Meinardus, 1958).

The style and technique of 18th Century painting of the monastery of St. Paul in the Red Sea is considered unprofessional and similar to the folk art who desired to paint a group of saints in the same method of iconography in near monastery of Saint Antony.
St. Menas during the Modern and Contemporarory Murals:

St. Menas depicted on the modern wall painting in two styles, firstly by presenting his life and martyrdom, and the second style as an equesterian among the other saints.

Pl. 14. A modern painting relating St. Menas biography at Church of St. Mina in Shubra, Cairo, the scene included his birth and the divine choice of his name. Amin which is became Mina, 20th Century AD.

Pl. 15. Modern wall painting, St. Menas among four equesterians saints, 1986, painted by Isaac Fanous, Church of St. George, Sporting- Alexanderia.

Icons

St. Mina was represented between two camels under the horse, which halt at the site where a shrine should be built for his miraculous relics (Skalova, 2003, p. 184 - 186). One of the oldest tempera icons in the church of St. Mercurius (Abu Sefan) at Old Cairo, it dated to 1st half of 7th A.H./ 2nd half of-13th Century A.D., St. Menas was represented with six Equestrian Martyr Saints, while he riding his horse as a young man, and under the horse there are two camels referring to the transfer of his body and burial in Mariout (منير شكري، 2011).
In 18th Century, in the icons of Youhanna al-Arman and Ibrahim al-Nasekh, St. Menas was represented while riding his horse as an old man according to the Greek accounts and manuscripts, which indicates that, St. Mina remained isolated in the desert for a huge period and returned at the age of fifty years of age (صبيُخ انجهتبخٍ، 5221 و 5231). The painter in some icons depicted animal or snake as symbols of the devil under the horse, while st. Menas stabs the devil or evil.

Another group of icons shows two figures of the Christian man and Jewish in the background, according to a common story about the Jewish who deposited money with a Christian friend who later refused to return it denying having received it. The Jewish invokes the aid of st. Menas. After the money is returned, the Jewish converted to the Christianity. (YOUSSEF Youhanna Nessim, 2006, p. 94-99.). The story was mentioned in the following manuscripts, "Patriarchate Library, No. 648 Hist 48 -1730 AD. Patriarchate Library, No. 654Hist 59-1741 AD".

Occasionally, in the background of the scene, some architectural elements symbolize the tomb of St. Mina and his church in Maryout. Sometimes the painter had shown the flying angel who St. Menas the garland of laurel as a sign of his victory upon the evil. (مينا بدبيع، 9002، ص 201-253).

Pl. 17 -.Beam icon of six equesterians included St. Menas with two camels under his horse, St. Mercurius Church, Old Cairo. 13th Century, A.D.

Pl. 18 -.Icon of St. Menas, Two figures of the Christian man and Jewish in the background, according to the common stories of St. Menas. Coptic Museum, Reg. No. 3368, 18th century AD, painted by Youhanna al-Armani.
Pl. 19 - Icon of St. Menas, Two figures of the Christian man and Jewish in the background, according to the common stories of St. Menas. Mari Mina Church Fum al-Khalig, 18th century AD, painted by Youhanna al-Armani.

Pl. 20 - Icon of St. Menas, Two figures of the Christian man and Jewish in the background, according to the common stories of St. Menas. Mari Mina Church Fum al-Khalig, 18th century AD, painted by Ibrahim al-Nashekh.

Pl. 21 - Icon of St. Menas, The symbolic devil under the horse. Mari Mina Church Fum al-Khalig, 18th century AD, painted by Ibrahim al-Nashekh.

Pl. 22 - Icon of St. Menas, church of St. Mary, Kom Ashfeen Al-Qalyoubeia, 18th Century AD
Conclusion

-Most depictions of St. Menas represented him as a soldier.

-The representations of St. Menas in the Coptic art are divided into four categories,

1- As a beheaded martyr: This little scene appeared on a slab of ivory in the British Museum during the early Christian art, and was reproduced in modern and contemporary paintings.

2- St. Menas stands in between two Camels or “two Monsters?”

3- Equestrian Saint (upon his horse) during medieval icons and wall painting.

4- The miracles of St. Menas are depicted in the background of scenes.

- Some scenes were not common in Alexandria or in Lower Egypt but were actually found in Habu temple (8th Cent.) It is most probably because of the locality of miracles in this site that were not known in another location in the north of Egypt.

In the icons of 19th century AD, St. Menas was depicted as old man with white beard, while the angel gives him the garland of laurel but without any details in the background.

In the Modern Icons of St. Menas, the artists keeps his prototype image as a Soldier in the middle of two Camels.

The Coptic painter added in the background some modern elements like the new Cathedral in Mariot, Pope Cyril VI, and sometime the modern painter draw St. Menas in the same scale of Pope Cyril VI according to his role in reviving the area of Abu Mina.

-48-
The List of Bibliography

The Coptic Synaxarium, by the Coptic Orthodox Church, (Chicago, 1995)


EVEETTS and BUTLER (eds.) The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt ... attributed to Abû Sâlih, the Armenian, ed., p. 103.


BOLMAN, E. S. Monastic Visions. Wall Painting the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea, (Cairo, 2002).


CHAIN, Zur Ikonographie der Minas Ampoulen, (Cairo, 1910).


DRESCHER, J. ‘St. Menas's Camels once more’, Bulletin de la Société Copte VII,1941, 19–32

FALLS, J.C.E. Three Years in the Libyan Desert: Travels, Discoveries, and Excavations of the Menas Expedition (London, 1913)

GROSSMAN, P. "The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ", in D. Frankfurter (ed.), Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt (Leiden, 1998), 281-302.

KAUFMANN, K.M. Zur Ikonographie der Menasampullen, (Cairo, 1910).


KRUMBACHER, Miscellen zu Romanos, (Munich, 1907).


SKALOVA, Z. GABRA, G. Icons of the Nile Valley, (Cairo, 2003).


SURIUS, L. De Probatis Sanctorum vitis, VI, (Cologne, 1618).


Van Moorsel, P. Les Peintures du Monastère de Saint-Paul près de la Mer Rouge (Cairo, 2002).

WINLOCK, H.E.; CRUM, the Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes, I, (New York, 1926).


The Manuscripts:
- Mokhtooot Ramm 48 Tarnax 09.080, 678 30018 34621.
- Mokhtooot Ramm 65 Tarnax 09.080, 62423 34621 34621.
- Mokhtooot Ramm 48 Tarnax 09.080, 678 30018 34622.
- The sun is rising.
- Coptic Manuscript (Pierpont Morgan's Library, New York, 590, 585 &755)
- Moscow Synodal Library, Ms 379, Published by N. Pomjalovsky, Bibliotheca Hagiographica graeca, 1900.
- Bibliothque Nationale Ethiopic MS
- Manuscripts: British Museum's Library, London, 689, 660 (oriental)
- Coptic Patriarchate's Library in Cairo (Now in St. Menas Monastery at Mariotte), Egypt, 48, 59, 60 (History) 18th Century AD.
- Coptic Museum's Library, Old Cairo, Egypt: 472, 471, 469 (History).
- Arabic miracles of St. Menas by Hany Takla in unpublished Mss in Los Angeles (ML.MS.166), 17 miracles.
وصلت إلينا سيرة القديس مارمينا مدونة في عدة لغات؛ يونانية وقبطية وحبشية وعربية ولاتينية ونوبية. والقديس مارمينا مصري المولد ينتمي لأسرة مسيحية ثرية عاشت خلال منتصف القرن الثالث الميلادي، وكان والده مسؤولاً كبيراً في الحكومة الرومانية، ومن الأرجح أن عائلته قد أنتقلت إلى مدينة فريجيا (آسيا الصغرى)، ولكن والديه توفيا وترك له ممتلكات وثروة طائلة، ثم وقد أنتمت عائلته إلى الجيش الروماني، وفي السنة الثانية من حكم الإمبراطورين دقلدانيوس ومكسيمانوس صدر مرسومًا يُلزم كل رعايا الإمبراطورية الرومانية بعبادة المعبودات الرومانية الشهيرة، ومن ثم وضع سومعذبة عذابات حتى الموت، وعندما وصل المرسوم الإمبراطوري إلى فريجيا، قرر مارمينا أن يعتزل الحياة العسكرية والمدنية ويجه إلى الصحراو، ولكن بعد فترة قليلة قرر الرجوع إلى مدينته وأعلن إيمانه وديانته أمام الولاة الرومانيين، والذين أمروا بتوفيه وقتلته، وقد أنتشر تصوير القديس مارمينا في شمال مصر وخاصة في منطقة مروى، حيث تقع أشهر كنائس القرن الرابع الميلادي والتي تم تشريدها على قبر القديس مارمينا، والذي أصبح مقصداً للحج الديني للمسيحيين المصريين والأجانب على حد سواء، لذلك سوف يتطرق هذا البحث تصوير مناظر القديس مارمينا كجندي أو كشهيد في تاريخ الفن القبطي، والذي ظهر على خامات مختلفة من عاج وفخار وورسوم جدارية وأيقونات خشبية.