NOTE TO THE 1970 IMPRESSION

While this reprint was in production, the author's annotated copies of the first edition became available. Appendixes containing transcripts of Butler's notes and corrections will be found on pp. 372–374 of vol. I and p. 405 of vol. II.

THE

Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt

A Coptic Painting.

THE

Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt

BY

ALFRED J. BUTLER

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

New Introduction by
Karel Innemée

GORGIAS PRESS
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INTRODUCTION TO THE REPRINT

BY KAREL INNEMÉE

Alfred Butler's *The Ancient Coptic Church of Egypt* appeared in 1884 for the first time and was reprinted in 1970. It seems justified to wonder why a second reprint of a publication of more than 120 years old is useful, except for reasons of sentiment.

Alfred Joshua Butler was born at Loughborough, Leicestershire, on September 21, 1850. He was educated at Trinity College, Oxford where he took his B.A in 1874. He was elected fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1877, and was appointed bursar four years later. After being assistant master at Winchester from 1874 to 1879, was private tutor to Prince Tawfik in 1880-81. During a seven-month period in this time, he did the field-work and collected the information the he used to write his book on the Coptic Church. He visited most of the old churches and monasteries in and around Cairo and traveled to the Wadi al-Natrun, the monasteries of the Red Sea and a number of churches in Upper Egypt. This has apparently been his only visit to Egypt. After his return to England it took him three years to turn his documentation material into the book that was published in 1884. He has kept an interest for Egypt till the end of his life. This is also evident from the books he published afterwards: *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* and *Court Life in Egypt* (London, 1887) is partly based on his own experiences. Together with B.T.A. Evetts he published *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and some neighbouring Countries attributed to Abu Salih, the Armenian* (1895, Gorgias Press reprint 2001). In 1902 he published *The Arab Conquest of Egypt.*

The last decades of the 19th century was a period of reform for the Coptic Church. For a long time the level of education of its clergy had gradually declined. The French, when they occupied Egypt in 1898, had deliberately chosen not to make the Egyptian

Christians their allies, since they were hated by the Muslim majority and were not interesting as potential partners. The British, when they occupied Egypt in 1882, the year after Butler had returned to England, took a more or less comparable position. The Coptic Church was in an isolated position and was considered as backward by many Europeans. Protestant missionaries, especially those of the English Church Missionary Society tried to 'modernise' Christianity in Egypt by converting Coptic Orthodox to a Coptic version of Protestantism. These efforts were justified by portraying the Copts as underdeveloped and superstitious and had little interest for their material and immaterial cultural heritage. When in the second half of the 19th century a reform and urge for modernisation started from within the Coptic Church, it was for a large part at the initiative of laymen. These circumstances were certainly not favourable for the preservation of Coptic material culture and we should appreciate Butler's positive attitude. He never writes in a condescending or negative way about the Copts and their traditions, on the contrary. His attitude is that of the historian who describes and documents without judging. Meanwhile he occasionally warns for the loss of precious objects or simply witnesses their poor state of preservation.

In many respects a book like Butler's study on the Arab conquest is a more thorough study than *The Ancient Coptic Churches*. Apart from this an important difference is the fact the *Arab Conquest* is a study based on written sources, while much of the information for the Ancient Coptic Churches was collected in the field. A historian by training, Butler was clearly more experienced in doing research in libraries and at his desk. In his Preface to the book he states that he is aware of his limitations and excuses himself in advance for the shortcomings. And we can indeed recognize a number of shortcomings. For instance, at points where he tries to date or interpret his material during his work in the field, he is often wrong or misled. For instance, in the chapter on the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun, he mentions the wooden doors in the Church of the Holy Virgin and in spite of the Syriac inscription on the doorframe, dating the doors to 926/27 AD he estimates their date between 700 and 800 AD. Many other conclusions and pieces of information are incorrect or are outdated meanwhile. It would be easy to criticize the book in this way, but in that case we would overlook its main value. Apart from these

imperfections the book has had and still has a value for the scholar in the field of Coptic culture.

First of all we should realise that he undertook his fieldwork in a period when the interest for traditional Christian culture in the Near East was still extremely limited and in many respects he has been doing pioneering work. The book has been an important stimulus for others to continue more detailed studies in this field and it figures in numerous bibliographies of publications on Coptic subjects. It was not until several decades after Butler's fieldwork in churches and monasteries that academic expeditions started exploring the Coptic monasteries. In 1910/11 W.J. Palmer Jones made a graphic and photographic documentation of the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun for the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which was published with the texts of H. Evelyn White, who did his fieldwork in this region in 1920/21. The monasteries near the Red Sea were investigated and documented in a scholarly way not earlier than 1930/31, when T. Whitmore and A. Piankoff worked here for the Byzantine Institute of America. These and other similar projects have been the result of an increased interest in Coptic antiquities, something to which Butler's book has certainly contributed.

The book can also be considered an important document for the condition and situation of Coptic churches and monasteries in its time.

In the first volume of the book Butler describes and discusses a number of churches and monasteries, mainly those of Cairo, its surroundings, and the desert monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun and the Red Sea area. After discussing the churches and monasteries of Cairo, Butler remarks:

> "All the ancient churches of the two Cairos have now been passed in review; and if I have lingered too long among them, it is because they are almost daily losing something from willful destruction or destructive renovation. Moreover, even where the churches are spared, they are fast falling out of harmony with their surroundings; as in place of the old Arab houses and gardens vast and unsightly cubes of modern buildings are arising. Hence every detail seems worth recording,

in the fear that soon it may have no other record left." [1]

These words were written down more than 120 years ago, but they could have been written yesterday. A quick glance at the churches of Old Cairo and the neighbouring areas shows how much these buildings are still suffering, both from the environment (pollution, both in the air and by a high and polluted ground-water table) and from well-intended but often destructive restoration work.

And indeed, if we compare the situation of the monuments described by Butler in 1880/81 and the present situation, we can only come to the conclusion that he was right. Most of the churches of Old Cairo have been restored is recent years is such a rigorous way that they have become more or less replicas in modern building materials of the buildings they used to be. Liturgical objects and other works of art have been damaged or disappeared altogether. A striking case of the disappearance of an important work of art is the passage in which the author describes his visit to the Hanging Church in Old Cairo, where he inquires after the famous wooden doors with theirs sculptured panels (volume I, p.209). The priest merely answers that the doors were not there and it was only much later that Butler discovered that they had come into the hands of a private collector in Paris and later on in the British Museum. In this case the object is still to be located, but in many other cases works of art have disappeared without a trace.

The area south of Old Cairo is nowadays a slum like many others at the outskirts of the town. The well-informed and prepared visitor will be able to locate three small monasteries here, hidden between the shabby tenement buildings. At the end of the 19th century they were still lying in the open desert and this is the situation that Butler describes. In the sanctuary of the church of one of them, the monastery of the Virgin *al-Darag* (at the steps) Butler has seen a number of 'fine mural paintings' that he describes (p. 254): The archangels Michael and Gabriel of the northern and eastern walls, Christ between two evangelists in the apse. It seems that Butler has been the first and last one who gives a description of these paintings in a publication. The modern visitor will find only blank walls and there no saying when the paintings have been

[1] Vol. I, p. 286

destroyed. Similarly, in his description of the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun, Butler mentions paintings in the refectory of Deir al-Surian (I, p. 325/6). According to him they are rude and in bad condition, which may be the reason why he gives no further details about them. Thirty years later, when Hugh Evelyn White visited the monastery, the paintings had disappeared[2]. We can regret the fact that Butler did not make a more elaborate documentation of these now lost paintings, but on the other hand we should be grateful for the fact that we know at least of their former existence.

In a number of cases, Butler had apparently photographs made of objects and buildings (I, p. 261). None of these photographs occur in the publication; the only illustrations consist of line-drawings and considering the loss of a number of objects and paintings it would be worthwhile to investigate whether any of these photographs have survived.

In the second volume Butler presents an overview of the rituals of the Coptic Church and the objects, furniture and vestments that are essential to them. And also in this part of the book his descriptions and observations are very instructive, while his conclusions can not always be entirely relied upon. Especially the subject of the liturgical costume receives ample attention: two entire chapters are dedicated to this subject. Also here the author does not avoid the risks of venturing into *terra incognita* : Various writers who have ventured to treat of Coptic ecclesiastical vestments have admitted the difficulty of reaching any conclusion at once lucid and final and have for the most part unconsciously as well as consciously exemplified and intensified the obscurity with which the subject is beclouded (I, p. 97). And in spite of the fact that he does not succeed in clarifying a number of matters, his study has been a stimulus for later authors to continue investigations, for instance into the problem of the Coptic pontifical costume[3].

Butler must have followed later publications in the field of Coptic studies. In his personal copy of the first edition he has made notes in the margin that have been included as appendices in the

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[2] H. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wâdi 'n Natrûn* III, New York 1932, p.211

[3] For instance O.H.E. Burmester, *The Rite of Consecration of the Patriarch of Alexandria*, Cairo 1960 and K.C. Innemée, *Ecclesiatical Dress in the Medieval Near East*, Leiden 1992

1970 reprint as well as in the 2004 Gorgias Press reprint. In one of them for instance, in the appendix to volume II, he refers to Evelyn White's *Monasteries of the Wâdi 'n Natrûn* (vol. II, p. 398, n. 4), where White disagrees with Butler on the subject of the liturgical fans. The volume was published in 1932, showing that Butler kept his interest in the subject until a high age.

The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt is a book that cannot easily be put into a certain category. It is neither a historical, anthropological nor archaeological survey. The author describes without inhibition or prejudice the monuments, rituals and objects of art that he encounters, in spite of his limited knowledge in the field of philology, art-history and other disciplines that would have been necessary for a more thorough approach. Nevertheless the book should not be underestimated. It is an important document for its time and an early and influential example of unprejudiced scholarly interest for the culture of the Coptic Church.

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CHAPTER I.

Of the Coptic Altar.

Altar.—Portable Altar.—Fittings of the Altar.—Coverings of the Altar.

ETYMOLOGICALLY the Coptic term for altar seems to correspond very closely with the Greek. For ⲙⲡⲉⲣϣⲟϣⲓ, which is the ordinary word, means 'place of making sacrifice': nor is the significance of this etymology lessened by the fact that the remote root in ancient Egyptian, from which the Coptic ϣⲟϣⲓ is derived, has rather the meaning of 'placing' or 'leaving' than of sacrifice. In point of usage ϣⲟϣⲓ conveyed the idea of sacrifice to the Copts and no other. Accordingly we find the corresponding Arabic word used in the liturgies and in common speech is مذبح (maḍbaḥ) derived from ذبح which means to slaughter, so that the idea is clearly that of a sacrificial structure like the *θυσιαστήριον* of the Greek Church. The same word maḍbaḥ is used now by the Nestorians[1]. The Greeks often call the altar the holy

[1] G. P. Badger, The Nestorians and their Rituals, vol. i. p. 228 (London, 1852).

table (ἁγία τράπεζα), and in Latin the term 'mensa' or 'sancta mensa' is sometimes used for 'altare.' Thus in a letter of Pope Nicholas I. 'mensa efficitur:' and Fortunatus[1] says the name is given 'quod est mensa Domini, in qua convivabatur cum discipulis.' But the Copts are not apparently conscious of any such symbolism, nor do they commonly if ever speak of the altar as a table; although they do regard it under two other symbolical aspects, as representing the tomb of Christ and the throne of God. The manner in which these types are figured in the ritual and decoration of the altar will appear in the sequel.

Every altar in a Coptic church is invariably detached, and stands clear in the middle of its chapel or sanctuary. Though the haikal and the side-chapels are usually raised one step above the choir, the altar is never raised further on other steps, but stands on the level of the floor; yet an exception to this rule is found in the desert churches, where the altar is elevated on a step or platform above the floor of the haikal. The custom of attaching the lesser altars to the wall in western churches is doubtless very ancient; but originally the high altar always stood clear, so that the celebrant might move around it. This is proved by the words of the Sarum Rite[2], 'thurificando altare circueat,' and again 'principale altare circumquaque aspergat.' So too in the Ecgbert Pontifical[3] we read 'in circuitu ipsius altaris.' Gradually, however, the altar was moved up to the eastern wall, and became attached and fixed there, which, of course, was the usual though not

[1] De Ecclesiae Officiis, tom. iii. p. 21.

[2] C. 25 and 28. [3] P. 40.

invariable arrangement in our churches before the reformation. In the seventeenth century, after the destruction of the ancient altars, in many places a detached communion-table was placed in the chancel with benches against the wall all round it. This arrangement was distinctively Puritan in character: it still survives in one or two churches, such as the interesting little Saxon church of Deerhurst near Tewkesbury, and the chapel of Langley, Salop. The Puritans were probably not aware of their reversion to primitive practice: and their thoughts, of course, were very far removed from processions and incense.

The Coptic altar is a four-sided mass of brickwork or stonework, sometimes hollow, sometimes nearly solid throughout, and covered with plaster. It approaches more nearly to a cubical shape than the altars of the western churches. It is never built of wood[1] (though very curiously the high altar at Abu-'s-Sifain is cased in wood), nor upheld on pillars. As a rule the structure of the top does not differ from that of the side walls, but contains an oblong rectangular sinking about an inch deep, in which is loosely fitted the altar-board—a plain piece of wood carved with the device of a cross in a roundel in the centre, Α above and Ω below this, and the sacred letters of Sanutius ΙΗ ΧΡ ΥC ΘC at the four corners. This arrangement, by which the chalice and paten stand at the mass upon a wooden base, while the fabric of

[1] I have heard a traveller speak of a wooden altar at Girgah in the form of a table. In remote places such violations of right and custom may occur through indolence, ignorance, or indifference. But the evidence is not very weighty. Vide Arch. Journ. vol. xxix. p. 123 n.

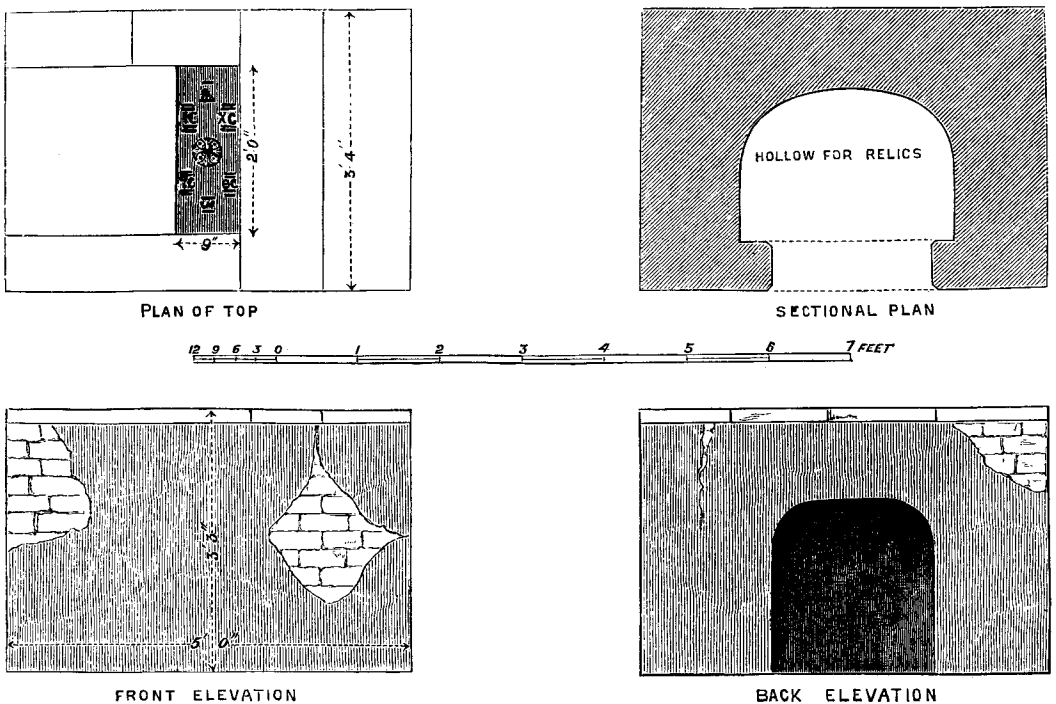

Fig. 1.

COPTIC ALTAR

the altar is of stonework, presents a complete and singular reversal of the Latin practice: for the Roman rubric enjoins that, even where wood is the main material of the altar, a tablet of marble or stone must be placed for the sacred elements to rest upon at consecration.

On the eastward side in every altar, level with the ground, is a small open doorway showing an interior recess or cavity. Whether or not this doorway was originally closed by a moveable stone or board is uncertain: but there is in no case any sign of the opening ever having been blocked or closed, and no door-stone or the like exists in any church to-day. The cavity is of varying size; but very often it is nearly co-extensive with the altar, which in that case consists merely of four walls and a top of masonry. Where the masonry is more solid, the recess is still large enough to denote a usage rather different from that of the corresponding recess in western altars, e.g. in the sixth-century altar at the church of Enserune and Joncels in Hérault. These have openings in the back or eastward face, but high up under the slab and of small dimensions. The nearest approach in structure to the Coptic altar occurs at Parenzo in the altar of St. Euphrasius ascribed to the sixth century[1].

In the Latin Church the altar was generally a solid structure, and the top, at least in all historic times, was required to be of stone or marble as an essential condition of consecration. The top too had to be a single slab projecting on all sides and forming a shelf. The Greek Church to the present day retains its

[1] La Messe, vol. i. pl. xxvii and xxxiv.

ancient, more ordinary custom of supporting the altar-top on four pillars. This top is of stone. Goar states that the Greek altar was invariably a table, open underneath and resting on four columns. But in the office of dedication as given by the same author[1], it is expressly provided that the substructure may be solid, consisting either of a single block of stone, or of smaller stones in courses. But from the earliest times the table-like form seems to have been far more common. Thus Paul the Silentiary, in his description of St. Sophia, says the altar of Constantine was made of gold and silver and costly woods, and adorned with pearls and jewels. It was raised on steps, and stood on golden columns resting upon foundations of gold. The 'costly woods' were doubtless used for some kind of inlaying or outer embellishment, and cannot be taken to imply any sanction of an entirely wooden altar, which does not seem to have been canonical in any part of the Christian world after the fourth century. Up to that date wood was doubtless a common material in Africa. Thus a wooden table is mentioned by Athanasius and by Optatus bishop of Milevis c. 370 A.D.

Asseman states[2] that the altars of the Syrian Jacobites and Maronites in the East were sometimes of wood, sometimes of stone. So too in Gaul the earliest altars were wooden. Yet stone altars were used as early as the fourth century, and in more historical times stone was the sole material recognized. Thus among the Nestorians wooden altars are plainly prohibited by the canons: those of John, fifty-seventh patriarch, in the tenth century ordain that the altar must be fixed and made of stone in

[1] Euchol. p. 832.

[2] Bibl. Orient. iii. 238.

settled abodes and times of peace[1]. So too one of the canonical judgments of Abu Isa is to the effect that, where men are dwelling in a city free from persecution and peril, there the altar may never be made of wood: but if they are in some place where a stone altar is impossible, then a wooden altar may be used by force of necessity. But a bishop may always destroy an altar, if he think well[2]. The wooden altars mentioned by Mr. Warren[3], as used in the early Irish church of St. Bridget and elsewhere, were probably only an accident of the time when the whole fabric of the church building was merely of wood: and in the Anglo-Saxon ritual it was expressly forbidden to consecrate a wooden altar. Both in the Greek and Latin ordinances it was prescribed that the altar-top should project beyond the sides or pillars of the altar; but there is only one instance of such a projection in the altars of the Copts. With them too the top is rarely formed of a single slab. Commonly it is a mere plastered surface, like the sides, with an altar-board[4] as described. Where a stone slab is used, it is hollowed to a depth of two inches, leaving a border or fillet all round, and usually inserted thus in the masonry so that the fillet is flush with the altar-top. These slabs, though common in the desert, are so rare in Cairo that I have only seen four in all the churches there, three

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[1] J. A. Asseman, De Catholicis seu Patriarchis Chaldaeorum et Nestorianorum Commentarius, p. 112. Rome, 1775.

[2] Id. p. 118, n. 1. [3] Celtic Church, p. 91.

[4] The Arabic term for this altar-board is merely اللوح, 'the slab.' A similar slab is prescribed as necessary in the constitutions of the Church of Antioch by the patriarch Kyriakos; see Renaudot, Lit. Or. tom. i. p. 165.

being at Al Mu'allaḳah, and one at Abu-'s-Sifain. Of the four, two are horseshoe shaped, one circular, and one is rectangular, pierced with a hole in the centre. They occupy the greater part of the top surface, but not the whole summit of the altar, with the possible exception of the rectangular slab, which I only saw dismounted after the altar had been dismantled. There are however three other small rectangular slabs, which ought perhaps to be added to the number, namely those on the floor of the re-

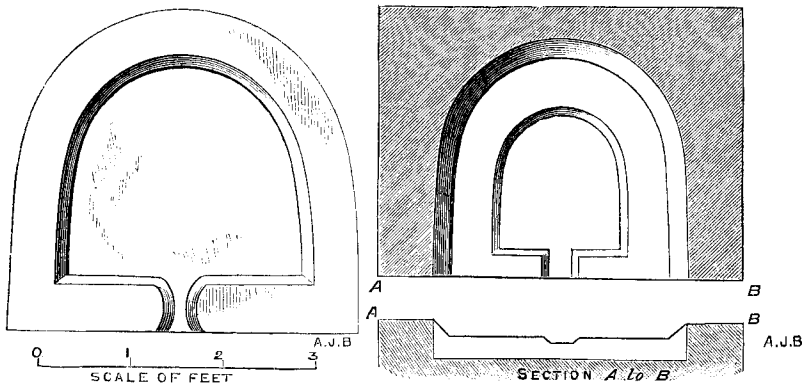

Fig. 2. (i) Marble Altar-slab. (ii) Altar-top showing marble slab inlet.

cesses or arcosolia in the crypt of Abu Sargah. From the position of two of the recesses in the north and south walls instead of the east, it might be doubtful whether these slabs were designed for altars, or for some other purpose: but I think the analogy with Roman arcosolia, and a comparison of these stones with other stones described above, will tell in favour of the belief that all the slabs in the crypt denote altars. The design is at once so rare and so marked that, wherever it is found, it may fairly be assumed that the purpose is identical. In that case the num-

ber of Cairene altar-slabs of marble with raised fillet will amount to seven: a very small proportion.

On the other hand the monastic churches of the western desert abound in altars with slabs of this description,—which are, in fact, as normal there as they are exceptional in the churches of the two Cairos. It is not easy to understand this remarkable difference between the altars of the desert and the capital: nor can one see why the examples in Cairo are furnished by the three main altars at Al Mu'allaḳah, by

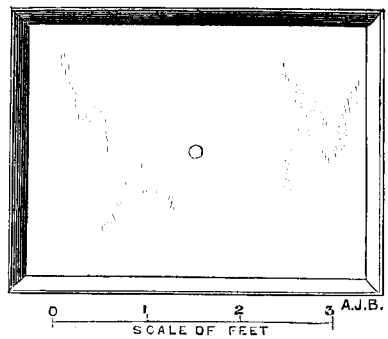

Fig. 3.—Marble Altar-slab pierced with drain.

the altars of the crypt at Abu Sargah, and by a single altar in a small exterior chapel at Abu-'s-Sifain. Of course where the altar-top is formed of a marble slab in this manner, the ordinary loose rectangular plank of wood graven with the sacred monogram—the altar-board as I have called it—does not occur. That the marble slab was designed with special reference to the ancient ceremony of washing the altar, cannot I think be doubted: for it is proved by the presence of the raised moulding,

by the break in the border generally found on the western side of the slab to let off the water, and in one example by a drain in the centre of the slab. The case is further strengthened by the hitherto unremarked but very striking coincidence of western usage. At the church of Sta. Pudentiana in Rome there is a rectangular slab, about 4 ft. 6 in. by 4 ft. 2 in., dating from the fourth century: it is surrounded by a raised moulding and pierced with two drains, one of which is in the centre[1]. Slabs unpierced and surrounded with unbroken mouldings are of very frequent occurrence from the earliest times in Europe. The fifth-century altar of St. Victor at Marseilles, and the sixth-century slab of the Auriol altar, may be cited among very early examples[2]. The Society of Antiquaries of the West of France possesses a very interesting slab of this kind, found in the church of Vouneuil-sous-Biard[3], and ascribed to the sixth century: a seventh-century example is preserved in the museum at Valognes[4]: the altar of S. Angelo at Perusia, built in the tenth century, of Vaucluse in the eleventh, and at Toulouse in the twelfth, show how continuous in the West was the design of altar-slabs framed with a raised moulding.

Nor are we altogether without a western parallel for the curious horseshoe or semicircular slabs of the Coptic altar. In the museum at Vienna is a marble

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[1] La Messe, pl. xliv. On p. 112 M. de Fleury observes: 'Les trous qu'on remarque sur la surface doivent provenir d'un autre usage qui n'a rien de commun avec son origine, ou *servaient au lavage de l'autel.*' The italics are mine: I think the Coptic examples settle the point.

[2] La Messe, vol. i. pl. xlvi, xlvii.

[3] Id. ib. pl. xliv. p. 147.

[4] Id. ib. pl. xlv.

slab, said to be of Merovingian origin, dating from the sixth or seventh century: it is semicircular in form with three sinkings of different levels, the outermost being six-lobed, the other two semicircular; but all three have a broken angular line across the chord, singularly resembling the Coptic model[1]. Another semicircular altar-slab is to be seen in the museum of Clermont. I have no doubt that this particular form arose from the desire of imitating the table of the Last Supper, which in Coptic art is sometimes figured in the same shape. A glance at the Abu Sargah carving of the eighth century[2] almost decides the matter. There our Lord is sitting with his disciples at a table of almost exactly the same form as the Coptic horseshoe slabs, and the table has a border or moulding round it: moreover the intention is rendered quite unambiguous by the canopy above the table and the altar-curtains which are looped round the pillars. Western art furnished abundant examples of the same idea: thus the semicircular table is depicted in the catacombs of St. Calixtus, the mosaics of St. Apollinare at Ravenna, on the columns of the ciborium at St. Mark's, and in a miniature at Cambridge[3].

As in the western so in the Coptic Church, there seem to have been no fixed dimensions for the altar. English altars varied from 8 ft. to 14 ft. 6 in. in length, but were usually 3 ft. 6 in. high. The Coptic altar is smaller: that for instance at St. Mark's chapel in Al Mu'allaḳah is 3 ft. 11 in. long by 3 ft. 3 in. broad: the principal altar at Abu Sargah

[1] La Messe, vol. i. pl. lii.

[2] See vol. i. p. 191.

[3] La Messe, vol. ii. p. 164.

is 4 ft. 5½ in. by 3 ft. 3 in.: at Abu-'s-Sifain the principal altar is 7 ft. 1 in. by 4 ft. 3 in. The height too varies considerably: thus the chief altar at Abu Sargah is only 2 ft. 10¼ in. high, and that at Abu-'s-Sifain is 3 ft. 4 in.

The cavity, which has been mentioned as opening eastward in the altar, has doubtless a symbolical reference to the martyr-souls seen under the altar in the apocalyptic vision[1]. In the early ages of the church, in reminiscence of this vision, it was customary to bury the bodies of saints or martyrs underneath the altar, either in a vault or crypt beneath the floor of the sanctuary, or else actually within the fabric of the altar. One of the most notable instances of this practice was at the ancient patriarchal church of Alexandria, where rested the body of St. Mark the Evangelist, before the church was plundered and the sacred remains carried over sea by the Venetians in the early middle ages. And to this day the high altar of St. Mark's at Venice encloses the body of the Evangelist, and bears the inscription 'Sepulcrum Marci.' In more tranquil times and places, when a new church was built, and no famous martyr's body was ready to hallow the sanctuary, the usage still prevailed of placing within the altar relics of some saint or anchorite. There is nothing to show that the cavity in the Coptic altar was meant to be sealed up, once the relics were deposited. On the contrary, the probability seems that they were merely enclosed in some kind of coffer, and then laid under the altar, so as to be easily removable in case they were required for healing the sick, carrying in procession,

[1] Rev. vi. 9.

or other ritual purposes. At the present day every Coptic church possesses its relics, which are enclosed in a sort of bolster covered with silk brocade and kept in a locker beneath the picture of the patron saint. At Al Mu'allaḳah, it will be remembered, there is a special wooden reliquary containing four such cases besides a marble grill in the south aisle-chapel: and some of the desert churches have reliquaries enclosing entire bodies. But there can be little doubt that the practice of keeping relics in lockers or aumbries is of mediaeval origin, and that originally their right place was in the cavity under the altar. Two or three examples of Coptic subterranean altars have been cited in the foregoing chapters of this work: but probably the clearest instance of a confessionary crypt is at Abu Sargah, though there is no direct evidence to show that it is regarded as the tomb of any martyr. Still, inasmuch as tradition marks this under-chapel as the resting-place of the Holy Family, and therefore consecrated in a special manner by a holy presence, the building of the high altar of Abu Sargah above it gives a close enough analogy to the western practice. Moreover the eastern niche in the crypt bears a very singular resemblance to the arcosolium in the tomb of St. Gaudiosus at Naples[1], dating from about 460 A.D., and to other arcosolia of the fourth and fifth centuries at Rome, some of which undoubtedly served as altars: nor are the other recesses of the crypt very different. The whole plan is singularly like that of the crypt of St. Gervais at Rouen[2].

[1] See La Messe, vol. i. pp. 106–7, and pl. xxiv; also Roma Sotteranea, vol. iii. p. 44.

[2] La Messe, vol. ii. p. 118.

At present, as far as I can ascertain, the chief if not the sole use of the altar-cavity among the Copts is on Good Friday, when a picture of the cross is buried in rose leaves within it, to be uncovered on Easter morning.

In the Latin Church the use of relics for the consecration of an altar, and the association—confusion one might almost say—between the ideas of sacrifice and sepulture, reach back to the remotest antiquity. Thus Jerome remarks[1], 'Romanus Episcopus . . . super mortuorum hominum Petri et Pauli secundum nos ossa veneranda . . . offert Domino sacrificia et tumulos eorum Christi arbitratur altaria.' The place where the relics were laid was called technically the sepulcrum, and in England the sepulchre was always *in front* or on the westward side of the altar: the idea being that the congregation in the nave, and not as in the Coptic arrangement the elders round the apse, should be thus reminded of the 'souls under the altar.' In the crypt under the south chancel aisle at Grantham Abbey the cavity is 3 ft. 2 in. long by 2 ft. 4 in. broad. The cavity was always closed by a sealed slab engraved with five crosses, such as may still be seen in the cathedrals of Norwich and St. David's. A very early instance, dating probably from the fourth century, occurs in the church of San Giacomo Scossacavallo at Rome[2], where the cavity is in the middle of the altar-top, which legend says was once upon the altar of presentation in the temple of Jerusalem. This same altar at S. Giacomo has a second sepulcrum or confessio below, with an arched doorway very like

[1] Tom. ii. adv. Vigilant. p. 153, quoted by Gibbon.

[2] La Messe, vol. i. pl. xxiv.

the Coptic arrangement. Other examples are furnished by an altar at the church of Esquelmes in Belgium, All Saints' chapel at Ratisbonne, and the altar in the north transept of Jervaulx Abbey, where the sealed slab was only $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. by $7\frac{1}{2}$ in. Though the confessio or crypt below the altar is quite distinct from the sepulcrum, yet the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Thus in the Ecgbert Pontifical[1] at the consecration of an altar the bishop is directed to make a cross with chrism in the middle and at the four corners of the 'confessio,' where the slab of the 'sepulcrum' is clearly intended. So too in the Ordo Romanus exactly the same form is prescribed in the words 'ponat crisma in confessionem per angulos quattuor in crucem . . . tunc ponat tabulam super relliquias.' The true confessionary or crypt seems to have been introduced into England by the Roman missionaries, and is in fact essentially Latin[2]. It does not occur in any Saxon churches, except such as were built under the influence of Italian models, and is quite unknown in Ireland. Eadmer, c. 1000 A.D., describes that at Canterbury as made expressly in imitation of the crypt under the original basilican church of St. Peter at Rome. In the high altar was buried the body of Wilfrid of York, and in the Jesus altar the head of St. Swithin: while in the confessionary were the head of St. Furseus and the tomb of St. Dunstan. At Canterbury and elsewhere there was a flight of steps leading from the choir to the presbytery, the stone floor of which was thus raised four or five feet above the choir floor: underneath it was the subter-

[1] P. 45.

[2] Hist. Eng. Ch. Arch. p. 47, &c.

ranean chapel with its own altar and shrine[1]. The name is clearly given in the Ceremoniale Episcoporum[2]: '*locum qui in plerisque ecclesiis sub altari majori esse solet ubi et martyrum corpora requiescunt qui martyrium seu confessio appellatur.*' The crypt too was sometimes called *confessorium*, and Du Cange quotes from the 'Laudes Papiae apud Muratorem' as follows: 'Fifteen churches are found having very large crypts with vaulted roofs upheld on marble columns: these are called confessoria, and in them bodies of saints rest within marble coffers.' Richard, prior of Hexham, says of St. Wilfrid's church there, about 1180 A.D., that there were many chapels below the several altars throughout the building. Mr. Scott gives instances of Saxon crypts at Brixworth, Wing, and Repton: and of later crypts at York, Old St. Paul's, Winchester, Gloucester and elsewhere. I may add that a very good instance of a confessionary occurs in the church of St. Clement at Hastings. But essential as the presence of relics was considered in the early ages of the church, in later times, despite the miraculous power of multiplying possessed by martyrs' bones, there seems to have been a dearth of such remains, and altars were consecrated without them. In a MS. of the fifteenth century, now in the British Museum[3], may be found a rubric providing that the practice of placing relics inside the altar 'raro fiat... propter relliquiarum paucitatem.' This ordinance, hitherto unnoticed, was pointed out to me by Mr. Middleton.

Corresponding to the altar-cavity of the Coptic

[1] See Rock, Church of our Fathers, vol. i. p. 219.

[2] Lib. i. c. 12.

[3] Lansdowne, 451, fol. 137 a.

Church and the sepulcrum of the Latin, there was always a place beneath the Greek altar (sub altari locum excavatum [1]), called the sea, *θάλασσα* or *θαλασσίδιον*. Here were thrown away the rinsings from the priests' hands and the water used for washing the sacred vessels; and here were laid the ashes of holy things, such as vestments or corporals, that were burnt by fire by reason of their decay. These uses give some colour to the derivation of the term propounded by Ligaridius, who says that the idea comes from the lustral service of the sea, because in the words of Euripides *θάλασσα πάντα κλύζει*. The thalassa no doubt was pierced with a drain to carry off the rinsings, and so far corresponded with the western piscina. Moreover, in early times the piscina in English churches was a drain at the foot of the altar on the westward side. This is proved for instance by the words of the Ecgbert Pontifical, according to which the holy water that is left over after sprinkling a church at dedication is poured 'at the base of the altar.' There is also a symbolical reason assignable; for as the altar figures the throne in heaven of St. John's vision, so this thalassa figures the sea by the throne. Besides the uses above given the thalassa had a further purpose as a receptacle for vestments on the eve of a festival, for which they were specially hallowed by being placed under the altar [2]. In the thalassa too, as in the sepulcrum, relics were sometimes though rarely placed: usually they were kept in separate chests or coffers, as became the later practice in the Latin and the Coptic churches alike. Evagrius for

[1] Goar, Euchol. p. 15.

[2] Id. p. 518.

example[1] speaks of a 'finely wrought shrine of silver' used as a reliquary. Goar, after asserting that the altar was merely a table on four columns, states that the relics, which by the Greek canons were absolutely essential to the dedication of a church, were placed either inside the slab or else inside the pillars. But I have already shown part of this statement to be erroneous, inasmuch as the rubric for dedication allows the altar to be built up as a solid structure. When moreover we read of the thalassa being the place in which the relics sometimes though rarely were deposited; the right conclusion doubtless is, that where the rarer, i.e. the solid form of altar prevailed, there the thalassa, being walled all round like the Coptic cavity, served to give the relics a shelter and security which they would not receive under the open table-altar. The hollow form of the Greek altar is expressly mentioned in early times. Thus Ardon, Abbé of Aniane, who died in 821 A.D., writes: 'Altare illud forinsecus est solidum, ab intus autem cavum, retrorsum habens ostiolum, quo privatis diebus inclusae tenentur capsae cum diversis relliquiis Patrum[2].' And of vestments we read: 'vespera praecedente, sanctum habitum suscepturi vestimenta ad sanctum altare asportantur et in sanctae mensae gremio seu mari (ἐν τῷ θαλασσιδίῳ τῆς ἁγίας τραπέζης) reponuntur[3].' Conversely, altars supported on columns are sometimes found in Latin churches. An altar on four pillars is depicted in the mosaics of the baptistery at S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna; similar is the altar of St. Rusticus at Minerve in

[1] Hist. lib. ii. c. 3.

[2] Thiers, Les Principaux Autels des Eglises, p. 20. Paris, 1688.

[3] Id. ib. p. 33.

Hérault, dated 457 A.D.[1] The slab in the Vienna museum rested on three supports: as did a slab in the church of SS. Vincent and Anastasius at Rome. A single central pillar is found in the case of an altar of the seventh century at Cavaillon, and another at Six-Fours[2].

There seems to have been nothing in the structure of Greek churches corresponding to the confessionary. Neither in the description of St. Sophia nor in any other record, as far as I know, is any indication of it: and this fact, taken in connexion with the many analogies existing between Greek and Coptic usage, so far bears out the idea that the arrangement of the crypt at Abu Sargah is accidental, and is not a martyr's shrine placed intentionally beneath the high altar. It will be remembered too that the only other example of a subterranean chapel in a Cairo church, the chapel of Barsûm al 'Ariân at Abu-'s-Sifain, is not merely not under the high altar but is outside the main church altogether: while in regard to the examples in Upper Egypt information is wanting. The church of Anba Bishôi in the Natrun valley has a curious cavity showing under the patriarchal throne in the tribune, which may possibly have been designed for relics.

One further point remains. In western Christendom the altar was nearly always marked with five crosses incised on the slab, one in the centre, and one at each of the four corners. These are called consecration crosses, and are sculptured in the places where the bishop at dedication signed the sign of the cross with chrism, and burnt over each spot a

[1] La Messe, vol. i. pl. xliii.

[2] Id. ib. pl. lvi and lxxv.

little heap of incense and two crossed tapers. In England most of the original altar-slabs were thrown down at the reformation or in Puritan times, and used as paving-stones or tombstones. Some few remain in situ, such as on the high altar at Peterchurch in Hereford; in the parish church at Forthampton, Gloucester; the collegiate choir at Arundel; the chapels of St. Mary Magdalene and of Maison Dieu at Ripon. A very good example was the splendid slab on the high altar at Tewkesbury Abbey (re-discovered and replaced by Mr. Middleton), but unfortunately the crosses have been almost obliterated by a process of repolishing. A slab used as a tombstone may be seen in the north aisle of St. Mary's, West Ham, Pevensey, and examples are not uncommon elsewhere.

The Greek rite does not differ materially from the English, except that the cross is marked in three places instead of five on the slab—and of the three crosses one is in the centre, one at each side. The crosses, however, are rather larger; for the chrism is poured out in the form of a cross, as at baptism. Though the corners of the slab are not marked, yet each of the four pillars upholding it is signed by the pontiff with three crosses of chrism; and it is probable that on all the places thus anointed the figure of a cross was afterwards incised in the stone. On the whole altar, therefore, there would be fifteen consecration crosses.

The Coptic altar bears no incised crosses other than those which are cut upon the slab of wood; and where this slab is wanting, the marble top does not generally show the symbol of consecration, though there is a single large cross sculptured on

two of the three slabs in the crypt at Abu Sargah. But the Egyptian custom is said to tally with the Greek, three crosses of chrism being anointed on the altar at its dedication in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost respectively[1]. The use of chrism for the consecration of the altar is particularly mentioned by Renaudot, who, speaking of the church of St. Macarius in the Natrun valley, says, 'ecclesiae consecratio facta est episcoporum et

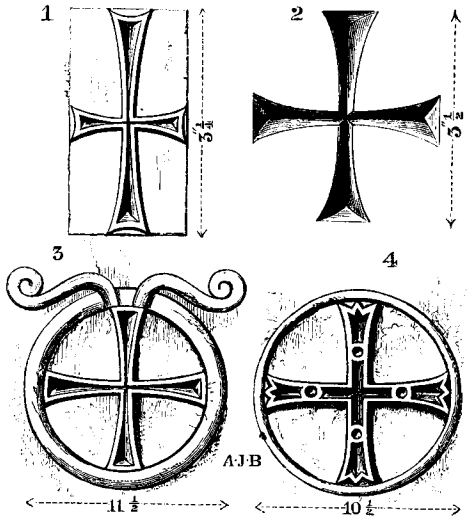

Fig. 4.—Consecration Crosses.
1. On the columns of Al 'Aḍra, Hârat-az-Zuailah. 2. On the columns at Abu Sargah.
3 and 4. On the slabs in the recesses of the crypt at Abu Sargah.

ipsius patriarchae ministerio, chrismatis tam ad altare quam ad parietes consignationibus factis[2].' This was in the time of Benjamin, thirty-eighth patriarch, or about 620 A.D. Even though Renaudot is some-

[1] See Vansleb, Histoire de l'Eglise d'Alexandrie, p. 220 (Paris, 1677).

[2] Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum, p. 166

what fond of assuming the existence of Coptic rites on the analogy of the Latin, there is on this point every reason for believing his testimony. For, apart from more direct evidence, since it is unquestionable that consecration crosses were made on the walls and columns, just as in the Greek and western rituals; it is scarcely possible that the chrism should have been used to anoint the fabric of the building, and not used to anoint its most sacred part, the altar. The rubric for the re-consecration of a defiled altar in Gabriel's Pontifical[1] speaks of *five* crosses, apparently one on the top and one on each of the sides. But where exactly the crosses were made is uncertain. There is, as was mentioned, a central cross carved on the altar-board, which fits into an oblong depression on all such altars as have not a marble top. Probably one cross of chrism at least was marked by the bishop upon the wooden slab, though this would be against the western practice, which disallows the use of chrism upon wood. Indeed that the Copts did not scruple to use chrism on a wooden surface seems proved by another passage in Gabriel's Pontifical, headed in Renaudot 'Consecratio tabulae ut altare fiat.' Subsequently the words 'benedic huic tabulae ligneae, ut fiat altare sanctum et mensa sancta pro altari excelso et lapide exstructo,' seem to point to the tabula decisively as a portable altar, although possibly the word may denote the wooden slab, which is the common appurtenance of the stone altar. In any case the rubric runs: 'tunc accipiet chrisma sanctum et ex eo signabit tabulam in modum crucis in quattuor

[1] Lit. Or. tom. i. p. 56. 'Quinquies mensam et ejus quattuor latera cruce signabit.'

ipsius lateribus;' though here again the points anointed with the holy oil are not clearly defined.

Nevertheless, even though the slab be used on occasion as a portable altar, the very fact that it is detached from the stone structure and easily removeable makes it unlikely that the symbols of dedication should have been confined to that part. We must imagine then that the chrism was anointed on the top or walls of the altar itself, in places of which no sculptured record is preserved.

It has been already mentioned that a Coptic church always possesses three altars in contradistinction to the single altar of the Greek ritual The side altars are, however, used only on the occasion of the great festivals, namely, Easter, Christmas, Palm Sunday, and the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross[1]. On these days more than a single celebration is required; and the result is obtained without violating the Coptic canons, which forbid a second celebration on the same altar within the day. The altar, like the communicant, must be 'fasting,' as the Copts phrase it; and the same expression is applied to vestments and vessels which are used in the ceremonial of the mass.

So many points of resemblance may be noted between Coptic and Armenian practice, that it is not surprising to find the Armenian Church upholding the same canon, and consequently requiring three as the normal number of altars[2]; there is, however, this difference, that the side-altars in the sacred buildings of the Armenians stand *before* the

[1] Abu Ḍaḳn omits Easter, but seems wrong. See his History, tr. by Sir E. Sadleir (London, 1693), p. 13.

[2] Fortescue's Armenian Church, p. 177.

sanctuary or in some other place, and not in a line with the high altar and behind one continuous screen, as usual in the Coptic arrangement. Yet the Armenian church at Urfa is described as having 'three aisles,' i.e., nave and two aisles, 'and an altar at the end of each aisle'[1]; the bishop's throne is in the north-east corner of the choir, and faces east.

Several altars seem to be allowed in the ritual of the Syrian Jacobites, of the Nestorians, and of the Maronites. Thus at Urfa a Syrian church of modern date has a long narrow platform at the east end with 'several altars,' and before each a step for the celebrant. The Nestorian church at Kochanes has 'three tables or altars in the nave,' two of which are called the 'altar of prayers' and 'altar of the gospel' respectively, besides a small stone altar at the east end. It is open to question, however, whether any but the last-named are really eucharistic altars. At Aleppo the Maronite church is described as having five altars[2], and a throne against the east wall facing west, according to the proper arrangement.

Quite enough then has been here written to show the fallacy of Neale's generalization to the effect that 'throughout the whole East one church contains but one altar[3].' Neale is very positive about the matter, and adds 'nor is this peculiar to the church of Constantinople: the rule is also observed in Ethiopia, Egypt, Syria, Malabar, by Nestorians and Jacobites, in short over the whole East:' though with curious

[1] Christians under the Crescent in Asia, by Rev. E. L. Cutts; London S. P. C. K. (n. d.), p. 83.

[2] Id. ib. pp. 84, 217, 48. The author is not very clear in his evidence on the subject.

[3] History of the Holy Eastern Church, Gen. Introd. vol. i. p. 182.

inconsistency he admits, almost in the next sentence, that examples of churches with several altars are not wanting from the earliest times. However the question is one of rule, to be settled by rule. And, so regarding it, one need only remark that the law of three altars is not merely universal in Egypt at the present time, but there is not a single religious building of the Copts, however ancient its foundation, which does not bear the clearest structural proofs of having been designed with a view to precisely the same ritual arrangement. And though there is no express evidence for Abyssinia, yet considering the historical and actual dependence of the Church of Ethiopia on that of Alexandria, one can scarcely question that the same rule holds good there also. The practice in Armenia is clear in upholding the same custom: and if the practice in the Syrian and Nestorian Churches is not quite clearly established as identical with that of the Egyptian, Ethiopian and Armenian, yet obviously the truth lies rather in the complete reversal of Neale's canon, and must rather be expressed by saying that nowhere in the whole East does a single church contain only a single altar, with the exception of buildings belonging to the see of Constantinople. The Greek Church recognises one altar: all other Churches recognise a plurality of altars.

Portable Altars[1].

The Coptic clergy rarely make use of portable altars, not from any canonical objection to them, but

[1] Renaudot is quite wrong in his remarks about the Coptic altar. He says (Lit. Or. tom. i. p. 164): 'consuetudo a multis seculis

merely because the necessity for their employment seldom arises. Both in the capital and in most other towns of Egypt churches are thickly scattered, and the Christians have a way of clinging round them. Being thus always within easy reach of a church, those who are hale can resort to the celebration, while the sick receive a portion of the korbân which is carried from the church by a priest. The rule of to-day is that the korbân must always be consecrated within the sacred building; although in places where there happens to be no church, in case of emergency the priest is allowed to consecrate as he judges necessary. I have found but one notice of such an altar in Coptic history. When Zacharias, king of Nubia, about 850 A.D. sent his son and heir George to Egypt to settle a question of tribute money, the royal envoy paid a visit to the patriarch

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invaluit ut *tabulas solas sive mensas haberent*, quibus insternebatur mappa benedictionibus episcopalibus consecrata, aut tabula ad ipsius altaris longitudinem, *aut tandem altaria ut apud nostros vocantur portatilia:* laminae scilicet aut segmenta ex marmore quae facile afferri et removeri possint .... Ita non modo Graecorum sed etiam Latinorum disciplinae de sacris altaribus convenire deprehenditur Orientalis disciplina.' It is this perpetual assumption by analogy which vitiates so much of Renaudot's information. 'Graecae Ecclesiae, cui aliae in Oriente similes sunt' (p. 166) is his maxim in all cases of doubt. So he says that for the most part there is but a single altar in one church, a conclusion reached as follows: 'Cum autem insignes olim ecclesiae multae in Aegypto essent, jam omnino paucae supersunt, in quibus primaevae antiquitatis obscura vestigia agnosci possint .... nihil ex antiquis Christianis aedificiis residuum est unde conjectura de ecclesiarum aut altarium forma capi queat; nihilque vero propius quam ut illorum forma ex Graecarum (sic) lineamentis intelligatur; *eadem enim erat utrarumque dispositio.*' The dangers of such a method are obvious.