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The Type of the Triconch Basilica.

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THE RED MONASTERY CHURCH
BEAUTY AND ASCETICISM IN UPPER EGYPT

AMERICAN RESEARCH CENTER IN EGYPT, INC.

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5.1 The triconch sanctuary.

Defined by its configuration of three apses or exedrae on two perpendicular axes (in plan resembling a shamrock), the triconch was a familiar form in all spheres of late antique architecture: funerary, residential, recreational, and public (fig. 5.1). This is not true of the triconch basilica, which was unusual, especially in the fifth century. Unlike the standard Christian basilica with a single apse at the end of the nave, the triconch basilica conjoined what were effectively two buildings, the basilican hall and the trefoil (see fig. 17). Rather than a simple visual termination of the nave, the triconch was a space apart, with its own formal and structural integrity and conceivably its own function. The reason for combining these independent forms and the meaning of the resulting architectural type have been debated for more than a century. The Sohag churches have always been prominent in this debate because the White Monastery church, dated 447–449, is one of the oldest known examples; according to some, it is the oldest example of a triconch basilica extant. Its reproduction in the “little congregation to the north” must have signaled the affiliation of the Red Monastery with the White one, but that is only one of the potential associations of this distinctive and fertile design.

Origins: The Debates of the Twentieth Century

The triconch basilica featured in one of the formative disputes of art history, the “Orient oder Rom” controversy generated at the beginning of the last century by Josef Strzygowski. Seeking Eastern rather than Roman sources of the art of western Europe, Strzygowski first traced the triconch basilica type to Alexandria, but with the publication of Bruno Schulz’s analysis of the unfinished palace called Mshatta (in Jordan), he thought he had found proof that the fountainhead of medieval decorative art and architecture was Mesopotamia (fig. 5.2). Strzygowski dated the palace to some time in the fourth through sixth centuries, traced its triconch-basilican throne room to the palace of Solomon, and identified the first Christian use of the form in Constantine’s basilica at Bethlehem. Opponents of his thesis argued for an origin of the Christian triconch in the realm of Greco-Roman architecture or in Constantinople. The arguments on both sides have been superseded by later discoveries. They were based on rudimentary archaeological study of the sites involved and failed consistently to distinguish the problem of the triconch from that of the triconch basilica.

Ugo Monneret de Villard (1881–1954) sought to put the discussion on a sounder footing. He identified a group of five “true basilicas with a nave and aisles and a trefoil sanctuary”: the Basilica of Saint Shenoute and the “nearly contemporary” church of the Red Monastery; the church at Dendera of the end of the fifth century; the Church of Saint Theodosios (Dayr Dosi) outside Jerusalem, circa 460–543; and the palace of Mshatta, ascribed to the sixth century. He concluded that this “Egypto-Palestinian” combination of longitudinal hall and triconch originated in the palace architecture of late antique Syria, and that the architect of both Sohag monasteries may have been Syrian. Only a few years later, K. A. C. Creswell published the conclusive arguments for an eighth-century (Umayyad) date for Mshatta, and he subsequently proposed that the influence had run the other way, from Christian Egypt to Muslim Syria. Creswell counted five basilicas with triconch endings dating to before the hall at Mshatta: the church built by Paulinus near the tomb of Saint Felix outside Nola, northeast of Naples, around 400; the two basilicas at Sohag;
were quickly conflated with churches for the Eucharistic liturgy, a development that was facilitated by the "theophanic martyria" in Palestine, which (like the Eucharist) marked sites of God's appearance rather than enshrining relics.\textsuperscript{15}

Also fostering the conflation was the practice of emulating Palestinian martyria elsewhere, as evidenced for Grabar by Shenoute's exhortation to "consider the grand monasteries that he founded at Sohag Jerusalem, just as sacred as the ancient city in Palestine" itself.\textsuperscript{16} Grabar stressed the composite nature of the triconch basilica, comprising the vaulted triconch martyrium and the wooden-roofed hall.\textsuperscript{17}

He surmised that the source of the triconch, as well as of its combination with the hall, was to be found in Palestine, citing Siyagha (Mount Nebo, in Jordan), where the addition of a nave to a triconch martyrium transformed the latter into a chœur tréflé (fig. 5.4). A derivation from such Palestinian models would explain why none of the Egyptian triconchs contained a tomb: the triconch was received in Egypt in its post-mortuorial manifestation, as the sanctuary of a normal basilica.\textsuperscript{18}

Grabar's grand theory was enormously influential even if many of its claims have not held up in the light of later research.\textsuperscript{19} In the case of triconchs, his argument was vitiated from the outset by a dearth of pagan examples and by information about the Christian ones that has since been disproved.\textsuperscript{20} The date of the basilican addition to the triconch on Siyagha, for example, is now held to be the second half of the sixth century, long after the Sohag churches were constructed; moreover, when the addition was made, the lateral conchs were walled off, so the basilica was effectively single-apsed (the walls are indicated by dotted lines in fig. 5.4).\textsuperscript{21} The enduring effect of Grabar's publication is due not to such specific arguments but to the general proposition that martyria constituted a functional category of architecture that was identified with particular architectural forms. His insistence on this identification and on the role of form as a signifier of functional genealogy led to an expanded interest in what Irving Lavin would later term "associative architecture."\textsuperscript{22}
Lavin’s study of 1962 was another milestone, which introduced a different point of reference for the triconch: the ceremonial dining rooms (triclinia) in the residences of the late antique ruling class. His analysis of the dates and geographical distribution of triconch triclinia indicated that there was a vogue for trefoil dining rooms in the western provinces of the Roman Empire in the early fifth century, before they appeared in the East in the later fifth and sixth centuries. Lavin went on to suggest that because of its “aulic” associations, the triconch played a role in the adoption of centralized forms for churches, thus undermining Grabar’s derivation of the same forms from martyria. Although Lavin was not concerned with triconch basilicas (except for the late example at Mshatta), his thesis affected subsequent discussion of the type by complicating its possible genealogy. Thus, in the 1980s Nenad Cambi averred that “trefoil plans were used in [the] later Roman period for triclinia and mausolea, then in the fourth century these forms were transposed into baptisteries and martyria. During the fifth and sixth century triconchs became popular for the eastern end of basilicas.” Applying Lavin’s findings to Sohag, Peter Grossmann reasoned that a direct derivation of the triconch sanctuary from triclinia is less likely than a descendence from funerary triconchs like those in Rome, which also housed Eucharistic services and were thus appropriate models for the design of a church.

In a much-cited article of 1996, Tomas Lehmann refocused attention on the question that once obsessed Strzygowski: When and where did the triconch basilica first appear? Against the prevailing opinion that the first datable Christian example is Paulinus’s church at Nola, Lehmann maintained that it should be excluded from consideration because its sanctuary is not a true triconch. His argument leaves the genealogy as well as the typology in disarray: “The question of the origin of the triconch basilica—East or West—is again open. Whether this architectural type arose first in Egypt (Sohag), Greece (Crete), or elsewhere (North Africa), and whether the triconch basilicas that came about through the addition of longitudinal extensions (Concordia, Betika) preceded or followed the architectural type will not be settled conclusively without new discoveries. Equally unknown is the derivation of the triconch basilica from the ‘sepulchral sphere’ or from villa and palace architecture.”

The implications of Lehmann’s position are still being worked out. Grossmann responded dubiously to the possibility that Shenoute’s basilica was the prototype of all triconch basilicas, noting its peripheral location and the fact that we know little or nothing of church architecture in the major cities of Egypt, where such inventions would more likely have occurred. At the same time he reiterated his suggestion that at Sohag, at least, sepulchral or palace buildings (or both) were the most probable source of the design. Yannis Varalís ignored Lehmann’s stricture and included Paulinus’s church among the earliest known examples of the triconch basilica, along with those at Knossos (Crete), Concordia (Veneto), Betika (Croatia), and Sohag. Varalís proposed that the architects of each of these basilicas modeled their sanctuaries on the cella trichora of Rome. Iris Stollmayer reviewed all late antique triconch churches known to date and concluded that there was no single architectural idea (Baukonzep) to which the triconch basilica corresponded; thus, the atypicality of Paulinus’s building was normal. According to her, triconch basilicas were regional constellations, each with its own prototype and development. They represent a “theme” whose material realizations had no standard form or function; “no common origin or genesis can be discerned.”

Origins: Outside Egypt
I tend to agree with Lehmann and Stollmayer that the quest for a single progenitor of the triconch basilica is fruitless, and with Stollmayer that the known examples are best explained as regional groups with separate histories. Nevertheless, it is useful to look more closely at the few cases that may have preceded Shenoute’s basilica. They constitute only a small
circle with a radius of 3.87 meters (12.7 feet) and two semi-circular conchae with radii of 2.22 meters (7.28 feet) and 2.08 meters (6.82 feet). Lit by three windows, the central apse is covered by a semidome that was extended as a barrel vault over the space of the altar and opened onto the nave with an arch resting on columns. The other apses are much lower, and they are framed by pairs of columns about three meters (ten feet) tall. The pavement was elevated above one meter (three feet) over that of the nave.

As Lehmann observed, the trichora is not a normal trefoil but is more accurately described as an apse on the plan of a stilted circle with absidioles in its lateral walls. The form is unique in ancient architecture. Paulinus called the little apses secretaria (sacristies) and described their functions. During the celebration of the Eucharist, one "offer[s] place to the priest when he makes the offer[ings] of jubilation and the other receiv[es] the praying congregation behind the priest in a spacious bend." Perhaps this odd arrangement, with the priest in the eastern absidiole and the congregation in the western one behind him, compensated for the position of the main apse at the north; it allowed everyone to pray facing east. When the trichora was not in liturgical use, the absidioles served the purposes of the later prothesis and diaconicon, the right one containing the reserved host and Eucharistic vessels and the left one housing holy books, which "anyone" was invited to read.

The Basilica Nova was a personal project of Paulinus. He paid handsomely to have the church constructed, designed its figurative decoration, and covered it with poetic inscriptions that provided literal or symbolic explanations of what he had wrought. The idiosyncratic design was probably his own, entrusted to builders rather than an architect to realize. The execution was "slipshod" in places, but its roughness was masked by lavish decoration, especially in the trichora, which had a splendid opus sectile pavement, marble mural revetments, and an elaborate figured mosaic in the vault of the central apse. The basilica and its absis trichora were known directly to the eminent visitors Paulinus received on the site and indirectly to the readers of his correspondence, which circulated widely in the Latin-speaking West.

The other triconch basilicas datable to before 450 are in Crete, northern Italy, and Istria. The Cretan example was discovered at Knossos in 1978 and quickly excavated before it disappeared under the new home of the university's Faculty of Medicine. Its rising walls and foundations were completely destroyed, but A. H. S. Megaw was able to reconstruct it on the basis of the foundation trenches (fig. 5.6). It was a large basilica, 44 meters (144 feet) long including fractional of the more than fifty triconch basilicas known today in the modern countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Israel/Palestine, Turkey, Armenia, Greece, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Italy, and France.

5.6
Basilica Nova of Paulinus of Nola, Cimitile (Nola), Italy, reconstructed section. Courtesy of Tomas Lehmann.

5.5
Triconch basilica, Knossos, Crete (Greece), early fifth century, plan. After Megaw 1984, fig. 2.
the narthex, and it had two aisles. The lateral apses of the triconch were tangent to the end walls of the aisles, and, unlike Paulinus’s conchulae, they were larger than the central apse. Megaw supposed that all three apses were covered by semidomes and posited a pyramidal wooden roof over the central space. The triconch was barred from the nave by a chancel, and traces of a solea were found in front of it. Remains of steps indicated that the pavement in the center of the triconch was higher than that in the nave, and the pavement of the axial apse was higher still. The basilica was richly decorated with marble columns and paving, marble and mother-of-pearl wall revetments, and figural mosaics. A coin or coins found at the bottom of the foundation trench at the juncture of the north colonnade and the north apse of the triconch established a terminus post quem of circa 400 for the construction. Megaw argued for a date close to that of Paulinus’s basilica, “early, rather than late, in the fifth century.”

The Knossos basilica stood in an ancient cemetery amid a small cluster of recent Christian tombs, none of which seems to have been “special”; it was a funerary basilica, not a martyrium. Megaw supposed that it might have been the gift of a single wealthy donor. He compared its design to that of the so-called Kruse Basilica at Chersonesos in Crimea—also mentioned by Monneret de Villard—which seemed to him to have a similar “experimental” quality, in contrast to the “fully integrated trefoil sanctuaries” at Sohag. More recent study of the Kruse Basilica has placed its construction in the years around 500, however, so it will not be considered here.

The triconch basilica at Iulia Concordia and the basilica at Betika in modern Croatia, not far from Pula, were both in the sphere of Aquileia and have similar histories. Both are composites of two phases. At Betika the phases were dated by the excavator to the early and mid-fifth century on the basis of the style of their mosaic pavements. The triconch was built first, perhaps by the lay donors Felicianus and Ingenua, whose inscription appears in the pavement in front of the southern apse (fig. 5.7, A). An altar stood in the center of the triconch over a large sunken tomb, which is taken to be the repository of the “blessed saints” mentioned in the donors’ inscription and an indication that the triconch was built as a martyrium. The structure was soon enlarged (presumably in response to the success of the cult) by the addition of a nave and aisles, the outer walls of which continued around the triconch to envelop it with an irregularly shaped space (fig. 5.7, B). The new building was close to the size of Paulinus’s basilica, but it had only seven columns on each side of the nave. The excavator suggested that the nave might have been unroofed. Its mosaic pavement was donated by multiple benefactors, including a presbyter named Dalmatius and at least two lay families.

At Iulia Concordia (Veneto) the triconch likewise had a sunken repository for relics in the center surmounted by an altar (fig. 5.8). Its east apse, which protruded into a preexisting cemetery, was larger than the others and its external wall was semi-octagonal (rather than semi-hexagonal as on the south); it also contained a masonry clergy bench and a raised cathedra, believed by some to be later additions. A marble slab in the pavement of the south apse could mark the site of a sarcophagus, while a door in the north apse communicated with an adjacent rectangular basilica, built at roughly the same time as the triconch. Subsequently the triconch was extended by a nave and two aisles. The extension is relatively small, 18.1 by 8.9 meters (59.4 by 29.2 feet), with colonnades of only four columns, each ending in L-shaped piers. Italo Furlan’s suggestion that the nave was unroofed may have influenced the similar proposal for Betika, but few others have accepted it. In a western "outer narthex" excavators found a sarcophagus inscribed
with the name of Maurentius, “lying at the threshold of the Apostles.” The inscription supports an identification of the triconch or the adjacent basilica (or both) as the Basilica Apostolorum, dedicated by Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia (388–407/408), with relics of two apostles, Andrew and Thomas, and other saints. The relics had been acquired by a citizen of Concordia who became its bishop upon the church’s dedication. It is easy to see the triconch, with its cruciform cavity for relics, as the apostles’ martyrium. If this identification is correct, the triconch would have been built toward the end of the fourth century; its basilican extension is generally ascribed to the first half of the fifth.

Three of these early fifth-century triconch basilicas were erected in cemeteries (Nola, Krossos, and Concordia). Two were martyria (Betika and Concordia); two had no tombs and were set up for normal Eucharistic services (Nola, Krossos). Three were foundations of lesser clergy or lay donors; one was episcopal (Concordia). Two originated as simple triconchs; two were designed as triconch basilicas. Despite the multiple overlapping characteristics, there is no evidence that any of these examples was directly connected with any other, and none offers a close precedent for the more complex plans and elevations at Sohag. All of them may have recalled funerary cellae trichorae, as Varalis maintained, but there is no compelling reason to trace them to particular models in Rome, even if at least two of the Roman triconchs housed venerated tombs.

The relationship between the triconch and the triconch basilica seems to have been more abstract. This is especially true of Paulinus’s basilica, whose sanctuary was, as Lehmann insists, trichora only in name.

**Origins: Within Egypt**

The few known triconch basilicas in Egypt are generally considered derivative of the White Monastery church and therefore of later date (fig. 5.9). Grossmann dubbed them a “school.” Only one, at Dendera in Upper Egypt, is comparable to the Sohag basilicas in complexity and quality of execution. Its remains stand within the precinct of the Temple of Hathor aligned with two birth houses (mammisis), one from the time of Nectanebo I (381–364 B.C.E.) and the other from the first and second centuries C.E. The builders of the church plundered the later mammisi to reuse its sandstone blocks, some of which are as much as 7.25 meters (23.8 feet) long. Like all Egyptian triconch basilicas, the Dendera church was enclosed by a high rectangular wall that surrounded the triconch and other subsidiary spaces (see fig. 5.9C). The dimensions of the rectangle are 36.33 by 17.86 meters (119.2 by 58.6 feet), smaller than the Red Monastery, but the size of the triconchs is identical. Generally speaking, the church resembled the Red Monastery basilica closely in its eastern part, less so in the nave and aisles, and not at all in the western block of ancillary spaces. The eastern end featured the same L-shaped rooms surrounding the triconch, but they were entered through passages on the axes of the lateral apses rather than through their eastern sides, as at Sohag. The apses were covered by sandstone semidomes, and both Grossmann and Ramez Boutros suppose that a full dome rose over the central space. Grossmann suggested that the altar stood under the dome. Clergy benches ran along the bases of all three apses. The central apse was adorned with niches, but—in a significant architectural difference from the Sohag triconchs—there was no colonnade and entablature against the wall. The western arch facing the nave was screened by chancels, which were part of an enclosure that stood on a raised platform occupying the entire east bay of the nave. An opening between the chancels led into the triconch, and passages in the western sides of the lateral apses connected the triconch to the outer parts of the platform.

The nave and aisles of the Dendera basilica were shorter and proportioned differently from those at Sohag, the colonnades consisting of only six columns. As at Sohag, there was a transverse aisle at the west. Pilaster responds occurred on the walls surrounding the colonnades, and handsome niches in the north and south walls are aligned with the second, fourth, and sixth intercolumniations.
Boutros proposed that the aisles were covered with flat ceilings and the nave with a pitched roof or wooden vault.\(^9\) The two-storied block of spaces at the west contained a long narthex and five square rooms. The uppermost rooms led visitors from the only entrances into the basilica, at the northwest and southwest corners, into the narthex and from there through three doors into the nave. The room adjoining the northern vestibule contained a staircase, which could be a sign that there were galleries over the aisles, but Grossmann noted that the columns in the nave seem too small to have supported an upper story, and Boutros did not find any capitals that might have come from a gallery colonnade.\(^90\)

The church at Dendera was elegantly designed and abundantly decorated with geometric, floral, and animal forms carved in sandstone. The style of these reliefs—on niche heads, lintels, cornices, and pilaster capitals—is unrelated to the sculpture of the Red Monastery. Judith McKenzie compared it convincingly to the decoration of the church outside the pylons of the Temple of Amun at Luxor, and Boutros cited the ornament of the nearby church at Tod (Ronian Taphium).\(^91\) The comparanda identify a regional style but do not establish the date of the building; Grossmann assigned it to the early sixth century.\(^92\)

The remaining Egyptian triconch basilicas are less impressive. One, Dayr Anba Bakhum, is geographically close to Sohag, on the other side of the Nile eight to twelve kilometers (five to seven miles) north of Akhmim (Panopolis).\(^93\) Dedicated to the martyrs Pachomios and Dalusham, it is in use as a church and difficult to study;\(^94\) Grossmann surveyed it in 1978 (see fig. 5.9F).\(^95\) Only the southeast corner of the late antique building survives, comprising the central and south apses of a triconch and part of the enclosing rectangular wall. The triconch was on the same scale as that of the Red Monastery basilica, but the rectangle was smaller and tangent to all three apses; thus, the spaces behind the apses were square rather than L-shaped.\(^96\) Both of the surviving apses have niches; Grossmann observed three in the east conch with alternating rectangular and semicircular bases, as at Sohag, and one rectangular niche in the center of the south conch.\(^97\) The niches are framed by rough versions of the composite pediments in the White and Red Monastery churches, and a pilaster capital under the arch of the south apse appears to be not only of the same type as the medium-sized capitals in the Red Monastery but very similar in execution (fig. 5.10). Without saying why, Grossmann proposed a seventh- or eighth-century date for Dayr Anba Bakhum, whereas Gillian Bowen, equally without explanation, puts it in the fifth century.\(^98\) The few remaining bits of sculpture would support the earlier date.

Bowen excavated the remains of another triconch basilica, Dayr Abu Matta in the Dakhla Oasis, about 350 kilometers (220 miles) west of Luxor.\(^99\) It is a reduced version of the Red Monastery/Dendera solution (see fig. 5.9E). The triconch measures 6 meters (19.7 feet) on its north-south axis and 5.7 meters (18.7 feet) east-west, with a central space 3.5 meters (11.5 feet) square.\(^100\) The walls are of mud brick covered with white plaster. There were semidomes over the apses, and Bowen posits a flat roof over the aisles. Perhaps because of the small scale of the triconch, there were no passages through the walls of the apses, nor were there niches; the L-shaped rooms were entered only from the aisles. The nave and aisles were separated by piers rather than columns. Although burials later accumulated around the church, Bowen did not find that it was built originally in a cemetery, nor is there evidence of a monastery; she associates the basilica with a “settlement” of which other buildings survive.\(^101\)

With respect to the Sohag churches, the most important result of Bowen’s excavation is the fifth-century date provided by a deposit of fourth- and fifth-century ceramics under the west wall of the basilica.\(^102\) This is the first good archaeological evidence for dating an Egyptian triconch basilica, and it suggests that Dayr Abu Matta predated the Red Monastery church and possibly the White one as well.

A fourth church considered to have been a triconch basilica, Dayr Abu Fana, was recently excluded from the category by Grossmann (see fig. 5.9D). Located in the ancient diocese of Hermopolis (Ashmunayn), 300 kilometers (186 miles) south of Cairo, this monastery church is in poor condition and has been extensively rebuilt; only the central apse and two rectangular exedrae survive from the earliest phase. The most recent excavator of the site, Hans Buschhausen, described it as “an imposing memorial church from the time around 450, of the size of the Church of Saint Katherine at Mount Sinai: nave and two aisles, an additional western aisle, six bays, … pitched roof, irregular triconch with a dome at the east.”\(^103\) The arches under the dome are pointed, however, and must be medieval (fig. 5.11). A cornice above the western arch exhibits patterns like those in the slit-mudollion cornices of the White Monastery, which initially led Grossmann to propose a sixth-century date for the original construction.\(^104\) He subsequently reconsidered, deciding that the two rectangular exedrae were not part of a notional triconch but are the ends of the transverse space characteristic of later Coptic churches, called a khurus. The khurus would indicate a date after the mid-seventh century, so the early cornice blocks must have been reused.\(^105\)

Whatever its original date, it is worth noting that Dayr Abu
The sanctuary of the church of Dayr Abu Fana, looking east.

Fana is the only Egyptian triconch except those at Sohag to have both niches and a framing order of columns, albeit only in the east apse. Grossmann described them as engaged columns carrying arches under an architrave comprising a vine scroll frieze and crowning cornice. 106

Also to be excluded from the list of Egyptian triconch basilicas, pending more definitive information, is the structure over the crypt on the grounds of the White Monastery recently identified as the tomb of Shenoute. The crypt seems to have been surmounted by a triconch, and in Warner’s conjectural reconstruction the triconch was preceded by a two-bay space divided by piers (see fig. 5.9G). Even if this reconstruction is correct, the anterior space was too small to be considered a basilica. 107

The Egyptian triconch basilicas form a small but more coherent group than the non-Egyptian basilicas reviewed in the previous section. Elements of a type can be discerned: rectangular enclosure, L-shaped rooms, niched apses, passages through the lateral apses leading to a sanctuary platform or the aisles. Not all elements occur in every example, or not in the same way, but in whatever combination these features more closely recall the Red Monastery church than the White (see fig. 5.9A–B). The resemblance is confirmed by size: two examples (Dendra and Dayr Anba Bakhum) have triconchs identical in size, or nearly so, to that of the Red Monastery. The triconch in Shenoute’s basilica is much larger and of a different form. It has been partially decomposed by the transversal elongation of the piers at the corners of the central space, which detaches the north and south conchs from the central one. The center space is rectangular rather than square. The rooms in the block surrounding the triconch are more numerous and diverse than those in the other examples, including a grand staircase and a niched round baptistery. The more compact and symmetrical plan of the Red Monastery triconch can be interpreted as a revision of its less unified predecessor. The early date assigned to Dayr Abu Matta suggests another possibility, namely, that the White Monastery triconch does not represent the origin of the type but is a modification of a preexisting pattern, which was adhered to more faithfully in the Red Monastery.

The Type and Its Associations

The Egyptian type of the triconch basilica is defined by form rather than function, unlike the non-Egyptian examples, which vary in form but seem to have a common association with the dead. This finding fits well with Stollmayer’s formulation: outside Egypt, the triconch basilica was a “theme” open to formal variations; within Egypt it was a Braukonzep, an architectural type. Did the theme precede the type or vice versa? Paulinus of Nola wrote as if his “trichoral apse” required explanation, so perhaps the theme did not yet exist around 400. The accidental triconch basilicas at Iulia Concordia and Betika, which came about when a nave and aisles were adjoined to an independent triconch, do not prove the existence of the theme because they were not planned as units. Only the basilica at Knossos, in which the integration of triconch and basilica seems to have been the original intention, suggests that the theme was available to architects before the type appeared at Sohag. Whether or not he invented it, Paulinus’s verbal image of the apsis trichora may have been one of the means by which the theme came into being.

Themes are abstract and can be verbally transmitted; architectural types are concrete and must be transmitted by physical or mechanical means. A theme is an idea; a type is a design. The design of the Sohag basilicas is unique, especially the elevations of the triconchs. Late antique triconchs were generally thin-walled buildings with superficial decoration—opus secile, painting, mosaic—adhering to cylindrical walls. The Sohag triconchs, by contrast, are highly three-dimensional, displaying two levels of pedimented niches separated by two orders of columns carrying entablatures (fig. 5.12). These elements constitute a “tabernacle facade,” a widespread feature of public architecture in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries. 108 The well-known symphion at Jerash (Gerasa, in Jordan), dated 190 or 191, is an especially relevant example.
5.12 Eastern and southern lobes of the triconch. Portions of the east lobe, level I, are not conserved. The floor installed in the 1980s is still in place.

(fig. 5.13). It was an apse like those of the triconchs, with a semidome over a curved wall. The wall contained two levels of alternately rectangular and half-round niches carrying broken pediments in the upper level. Framing these niches were two stories of freestanding columns with Corinthian capitals. Tabernacle facades were made for the display of luxurious materials and honorific statues and are an anomaly in Christian architecture. McKenzie implies that the Sohag elevations had precedents in Alexandria and represent continuity with the capital’s Ptolemaic past, but the evidence for this comes down to a few ornamental motifs. We must contend with the possibility that the tabernacle facade was appropriated for Christian architecture by the architect or planner of Shenoute’s basilica.

Measured by cost and scale, the White Monastery basilica was one of the most significant architectural commissions of the fifth century. An inscription scratched into a reused lintel over the inner face of the south entrance commemorates “Komes Kaisarios, son of Kandidianos, the founder” (see fig. 1.4). Although this graffito is a memorial and not a founder’s inscription, it is generally taken to mean that Kaisarios, attested in other sources as the military commander (comes et dux) of the Thebaid around the middle of the fifth century, provided the funds for the construction. Presumably he was an intermediary, and Ariel López has argued that the real donor was the emperor Theodosios II (r. 408–450). If López is right, we might imagine a scenario like that described in the Life of St. Porphyry of Gaza, in which the empress Aelia Eudoxia (d. 404)—the mother of Theodosios II—sent to Porphyry not only the precious materials for his new cathedral in Palestine but its plan. The plan showed a cross-shaped building: like the triconch, a
theme. It was realized by an Antiochene architect hired by the bishop.\textsuperscript{115} The elevation might have been determined largely by the materials provided (which included thirty-two "enormous columns"), but it was nonetheless the architect's interpretation of the theme.

The architect of the White Monastery basilica could have been chosen by Shenoute or Komes Kaisarios or someone else; this is unknown. López suggested that the church was built by the army—the only credible explanation of its rapid construction—and, if so, the architect may have been in the military.\textsuperscript{116} In any case he was not necessarily local, or from Alexandria, or even from Egypt. Military architects moved around. It is not impossible—as Monneret de Yéllard suggested long ago—that his interpretation of the theme assigned to him derived from his own experience of the tabernacle facades of Roman Syria; but it equally could have reflected a prototype closer to Sohag in time and space. This too is unknown, which complicates the problem of associations.

The associations of any building are coded in its plan, elevation, materials, decoration, and furnishing; they are decoded by memory, experience, and the expectations created by context. For late antiquity most of these factors are unrecoverable, and retrospective interpretations of associative meaning tend to be partial and reductive. Since elevations are rarely preserved our interpretations usually depend on the ground plan, but at Sohag we can see that the plan and elevation would have had different audiences and concomitantly different associations. The exquisite vision of the trefoil was available only from within the sanctuary, while those standing outside it could view the elevation, or part of it, through the western arch (see figs. 6.24, 6.25). Outsiders might not have shared the architect's knowledge of the prototype (if there was one) or recognized a "tabernacle facade." For them the elevation was what López describes as the backdrop for the spectacle of Shenoute's distribution of his monastery's miraculous abundance.\textsuperscript{117} Participants in this spectacle could have responded to the backdrop's generic qualities: monumentality, ornateness, Romanness. These qualities spoke of a certain political order and of wealth, thereby reproducing not just the form of the old tabernacle facades but the meanings associated with them: blessings, prosperity, energetism.\textsuperscript{118}

The trefoil is much more abstract (see fig. 25). It represents a number (three) and a shape (τρικόγχος), and it might evoke any or all of their connotations. Paulinus sought to limit the observer's associations by means of an inscription (Pleno corusat trinitas mysterio) and a mosaic depicting the Trinity in the central apse.\textsuperscript{119} The monks who formed the audience of the Sohag triconchs must have made the same association. For them the Trinity was colored by polemic. Cyril of Alexandria (patriarch 412–444) was a prominent voice in the empire-wide debates over the relation of two of its persons, Jesus and God the Father, and Shenoute insistently preached the Alexandrian position: "It is manifest that when we say 'Jesus,' we speak of the consubstantial Trinity."\textsuperscript{120} A triconch sanctuary symbolized this consubstantiality, whether or not the designer intended it to do so.

Not only the theme but the particulars of its realization were eminently suited to the context of the White Monastery, which tends to confirm the traditional view that the Egyptian type of the triconch basilica originated there. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 5, however, the elevation of the Red Monastery triconch is notably different: more crowded, muscular and three-dimensional, and closer in form and effect to the Roman tabernacle facade than its presumptive model. Either its architect revised the design of the White Monastery triconch or, as suggested earlier, he was more faithful to an unknown prototype. The triconch of the basilica at Dendera is simpler, with fewer niches and no columnar articulation, and could be a reduction of the Sohag paradigm or an independent variation on a common source. The lex parsimoniae favors the first alternative, but the conflicting evidence prohibits a firm conclusion. In any case it seems that the architect of the Red Monastery triconch saw through the imperfections of the White one to the forms behind it: the three contiguous lobes of a trefoil and the grandiose tabernacle facade. The monks of the "little congregation to the north" were privileged to enjoy the more satisfying realization of the type.
Paul Connerton has described this type of "habitual skilled remembering" as an "incorporating practice"; Connerton 1989, 72. The corporeal dimension of monastic worship is in fact attested in some of the Pachomian heremeneia (lists of scriptural passages organized by key word). "Two Coptic terms recur often in the rubrics: shito (Sahidic jū, to lie down) and blōmos (to sit down). The first must indicate a prostration; Clum 1939, 792b; Ubraniak-Walczaek 2004, 651. The second may be associated with the act of taking one's seat; Quecke 1983, 195; an analogy of function might be drawn to the kathisma in the Byzantine office. On the function of these terms, see Ubraniak-Walczaek 2004, 651.

71 In line with Connerton's analysis of social memory, the production of such liturgical texts may be described as a kind of "inscribing practice"; Connerton 1989, 73-74.
72 On this subject, see Brakmann 2004; Zanetti 1995; and for the Byzantine rite, Taft 2004.
73 See Brakmann 2004a, 168, with concrete examples on 169, 171.
75 Zanetti 2007b; Zanetti 2008, 203.
76 On writing considered as a form of Christian piety, see Krueger 2004.
77 For a historical discussion of the use of incense in churches, and the relationship between sanctity and appealing smells, see Harvey 2006, esp. 75-90, 99-100, 181.
78 Here we follow Niklas Luhmann’s call for a shift of attention “from the observation of what to the observation of how” (“von der Beobachtung des Wür zur Beobachtung des Wie”) (his emphasis); Luhmann 1990, 95; see also Luhmann 2001, 321. Along these same lines, James A. Francis emphasized “the dynamic nature of seeing and being seen, the variety of ways of seeing and the ability of images to convey multiple meanings”; Francis 2009, 285. See also Roland Barthes on “the variety of modes in which [an image] can be seen”; Barthes 1993, 12.
79 Lanne 1958, 292.
80 Lanne 1958, 292.
81 Lanne 1958, 320 (see Lanne 1958, 386, for a nearly identical prayer). A similar but elaborated litany appears in another (otherwise unknown) anaphora, beginning with "our holy fathers, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, the preachers, the proclaimers, the evangelists, and every righteous one (diakoi) who has been perfected in the orthodox faith" and concluding with "the holy Mother of God, Mary, St. John the Baptist the Forerunner of Christ, the virgin and martyr; and St. Stephen the archdeacon and protomartyr, and all the choir of saints"; Lanne 1958, 340-342.
11 Creswell 1932, 1:385; Creswell 1939, 38–42. Creswell 1989, 213. The dating of the trefoil remodeling of the Nativity Church in Bethleham is disputed; for a résumé see Weiland 1998. Ovadia 1970, 36, n. 1, cites evidence for two phases of the trefoil termination, both attributed to Justinian; Alchermes 2006, 358, follows Krautheimer 1986 ("perhaps as late as 600").
13 One of the many memorable phrases coined by Peter Brown; Brown 1981, 69–85.
14 Grabar 1943–1946, 1:110–115; Stollmayer 1999, 156–157, nn. 80, 81, 82. For more recent opinions see n. 80, below.
19 Ousterhout 2014.
22 Lavin 1962, 12. Richard Krautheimer's theory of an "iconography" of medieval architecture, published around the same time as Martyrium, was equally influential in this development; on the coincidence see Krautheimer 1969, 149.


Chromatius, Sermon 26; Chromatius 1974, 119–122; Chromatius 1971, 92–101. Flora 2001, 20–23, argues that the Basilica Apostolorum was the triconch; Cantino Wataghin 2008, 350–354, supposes that the basilica and the triconch were a unit.

On the relics see Thealmon 2011, 326–331.

Zavatto 1965, 28, and nearly unanimously since.

The terminus ante quem for the triconch would be the dedication of Aquileia cathedral in 394: Thalamon 2011, 325.

Paulinus counts as a clerical rather than an episcopal donor, as he did not become bishop of Nola until 413.

The triconchs in the cemetery of Callixtus once identified as chapels of Saint Soteris (d. 304) and Pope Sixtus II (r. 257–258) are now neutrally designated the "east" and "west" triconchs and dated to the late fourth century. The west triconch may have enclosed the shrine of Pope Zephyrinus (r. 199–217) and the martyr Tarcisius. Fasola 1980, 255–278; Spera 1999, 113–117; Spera 2004, 34–36, 40–41; Spera 2008a; Spera 2008b. The triconch basilchetta on the via Tiburtina is still recognized as the martyrion of Saint Symphorosa and her sons and is generally dated to the end of the third to mid-fourth century. Chiumiento and Bilancia 1979, 578–579; Moscetti 2008.

Grossmann 2002a, 120.


On the date of the northern mammisi, see Arnold 1999, 255–257.

Boutros 2010, 83.

For the overall measurements see Boutros 2010, 83.

Grossmann 2002a, 444; Boutros 2010, 89.

Grossmann 2002a, 444.

Grossmann 2002a, 444.

Boutros 2010, 89.

Grossmann 2002a, 445; Boutros 2010, 87.


Grossmann 2002a, 443.


I am grateful to Nicholas Warner for his effort to find and photograph the church in November 2013.

Grossmann 1980.

Warner calculated the diameter of the dome as 4.4 m (14.4 ft.).

Grossmann 1992a, 151; Grossmann 2002a, 540.

Grossmann 2002a, 541; but see Grossmann 1992b (second half of the sixth or seventh century); Bowen 2012, 449.

Grossmann 1992b (late sixth century); Stollmayer 1999, 146 No. 20.

Bowen 2012, 454. The overall dimensions are 24.0 x 10.35 m (78.7 x 34.0 ft.).

Bowen 2012, 448–449.

Bowen 2012, 439, 449.


Grossmann 1991a, 700.

Grossmann 2002a, 519.

Grossmann 2002a, 519.


Fisher 1938, 21.

"Flat grooved moulded cornices and... broken pediment niche heads"; McKenzie 2007, 261, 279–281; see Burrell 2006, 250; Grossmann 2007, 115.

Lefebvre 1920b, 472; Lefebvre 1920a: Αὐγήνα μνήμη τοῦ μεγάληπος (πεποιημένου) κόμετος Καβάριος, τοῦ οὗ Καβάριος, τοῦ κατοικετού (to the eternal memory of the most illustrious Komes Kavarios, son of Kandidianos, the founder).

Grossmann 2008.

López 2013, 66.


López 2013, 66.

López 2013, 49.


Paulinus, Epistula 32.10; Hartel 1894, 286; Goldschmidt 1940, 39.

Shenoute, "I Am Amazed," 803; Davis 2008, 284; see also 28–38, 77–79.

Chapter 6. Architectural Survey

1 See Warner and Meurice, Chapter 18 in this volume, for documentation of an enclosing wall, and see fig. 18.8.

2 For a more comprehensive account of the reconstruction of the church, see Warner forthcoming b.


4 See, for example, church plans illustrated in Grossmann 2002a, pls. 157, 158, 160, 162, 163, 164, 165, 172, 180.

Traces of earlier mud-brick walls passing under the enclosure have been observed by Michael Jones (personal communication 2013). The sanctuary of the church has mud-brick foundation courses, revealed during repaving work in 2013.


These are slightly smaller than the bricks used at the White Monastery church, which measure about 28 x 14 x 7 cm (11 x 5.5 x 2.75 in.).

Hans-George Severin observed that the brick exterior walls of the church were not original to the building, but had been constructed at a later date. He did not specify exactly when the new walls were built, however. Severin 1998b, 320–322.

For the architectural origins of the pointed arch and a chronology of its appearance in the Near East, see Creswell 1932, 227–280. For further detail see Warner forthcoming b.


Gayet 1902, 149, illustrates a small door in this location but must have been mistaken.

This practice is widely attested in Upper Egypt. See Blackman 2000, 199.


Clarke 1912, 167, refers to the entrance being "as dark as night."

Grossmann 1991b, 740.

Poggi 2008b, 25.

See Warner and Meurice, Chapter 19 in this volume, for further details.

The earlier form of the church is recorded in the 1962 survey of the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule.

See Bolman, Chapter 16 in this volume, for further details. See also Poggi 2008b, 25.

Grossmann 2002a, pl. 155, following Evers and Romero 1964, 179, pl. G.

Grossmann 2002a, pl. 155.

Cited by Bock 1961, 63. Thanks to Peter Sheehan and Mohammed Khalifa for undertaking the search.

For Hermopolis Magna, see Bailey 1991, 46.

Commencing with Monneret de Villard in 1925–1926.

Wace et al. 1939, 37.

For further details of alternative reconstructions of the nave, see Warner forthcoming b.

Severin 2008, 81; Kinney, Chapter 5 in this volume.

See Pyke 2013 for a detailed account of the exposed archaeology within the sanctuary and its associated spaces.