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THE DESERT CITY OF EL MUNA

Readers of the description of the journey from Egypt to the West of Abû'Ubeyd 'Abd Alla Ibn Abd El 'Aziz Abî Mus'ab, otherwise known as El Bekri, of Cordova, must have wondered where was the desert city of El Mûna. (1).

Writing sometime between 1050 and 1068 El Bekri says : « From Terrana one comes to El Mûna a locality containing three abandoned towns with buildings still standing. There may be seen several fine castles (? castle-like buildings) situated in a sandy desert, where the caravans risk being attacked by the nomad Arabs (lying in wait among the ruins). These buildings are solidly constructed with very lofty walls built over vaulted colonnades. Some are inhabited by Christian monks. El Mûna possesses several wells which furnish fresh water in small quantities ».

Students have been put off the trail more than once by modern investigators mistaking El Mûna or El Mena for Abû Mena (Aboumna or St. Menas) (2). Both El Bekri and the Arab geographer Yakûbi (3) two

(1) See « *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale par el-Bekri* » ; translated by Baron MacGuckin de Slane, 2nd Edition, Algiers, 1913.

(2) El Mûna is variously written El Mona (Brit. Mus. MS), El Mithna (Escorial M S), El Mini, El Mina, El Mena (Bibliothèque Nationale and Algiers MS) and El Mun. H. E. C. WHITE. « *History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* », Page 26, points out why Kaufmann and Cauwenberg were incorrect in identifying El Mûna with Abu Mena.

(3) *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* ; Vol. VII, page 342.

centuries before him gave the first stages on the caravan route from Fûstat to the West as follows : Terrâna — El Mûna — Deir Abû Minâ— Dât el Humâm.

Now Terrâna (anciently Tarnût or Terenuthis) which still exists today near Kafr Dâwûd, was a regular crossing place on the Nile on this route and also on the road between the capital and Alexandria. Dr. A. J. Butler (1) wrote that El Mûna lay at the intersection of the ways from Alexandria to the Wâdi El Natrûn and from Terrâna to Barka ; The route followed from Alexandria to El Mûna was via Kom Turûga, once a port on Lake Mareotis (2) and important down to the end of the thirteenth century or later ; and according to Severus and others El Mûna lay between El Barnûgi (Pernoudj or Mount Nitria) and the monasteries of the Wâdi el Natrûn. (3).

The late H. C. Evelyn White in Part II of his monumental work on « *The Monasteries of the Wadi'n Natrun* » has learnedly argued that El Mûna and Cellia (τα κελλια) were probably one and the same place, the name Mûna being derived from the Coptic word for cell (ΜΟΝΗ). He places Cellia 16 to 19 kilometres South West of El Barnûgi on the road to Scetis (Wâdi el Natrûn) (4).

Rufinus gives the distance between Nitria and Cellia as 10 miles, and as a final indication of the position of El Mûna we have the journey of the Patriarch Benjamin I (641-660) when he set out to consecrate the new church of St. Macarius in the Wâdi Habîb (Natrûn). The journey from Alexandria took one day to Turûga where the Patriarch's party spent the night, and next day they arrived at El Mûna, « which is that of Abba Isaac, near the mountain of Barnûgi ; and the brethren who were

(1) *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* ; 1902, page 177.

(2) DARESSY « *Ménélaïs et l'embouchure de la branche Canopique* » in *Revue de l'Égypte Ancienne*, Paris 1929, Tome II ; and DE COSSON « *Mareotis* », London 1935, pages 55, 79 and 151.

(3) « *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* » ; translated by Evetts, page 241 f., and White, op. cit. page 25.

(4) WHITE, op. cit. pages 24 to 27. For Barnûgi see article « *El Barnugi* » by DE COSSON in *Bulletin de la Soc. Royale d'Archéologie d'Alexandrie*, No. 30, (1936).

there rejoiced greatly over us ». They left Mûna on the 5th of the Coptic month of Tûba and they did not arrive at Baramûs until the following day (1).

Studying all this evidence led me to place El Mûna at or near the site marked Qusûr el Rubaiyat on the 1 : 100000 Survey of Egypt sheet No. 88/54. This place lies between 18 and 19 kilometres south west of El Barnûgi ; It also stands midway between Terrâna and Abû Mena, on a direct line Terrâna and Turûga, and, finally, on a fairly direct line between El Barnûgi and Baramûs. (2).

In addition to this, modern travellers on the Misr Airways between El Dikhela and Cairo had frequently remarked the site of a large town buried under the sand, and Mr. Christopher Scaife after careful examination from the air on several occasions confirmed my hazard that this buried city was on the same spot as the Qusûr I suspected to be El Mûna.

A visit to the site at the Qûrban Bairam (March 1936) gave as positive a result as is possible without excavation, that round about Qusûr el Rubaiyat we have the remains of the «castles» of El Bekri and, perhaps, of Cellia. Here are over one hundred small *koms* or mounds, and in each mound can be traced the walls of buildings.

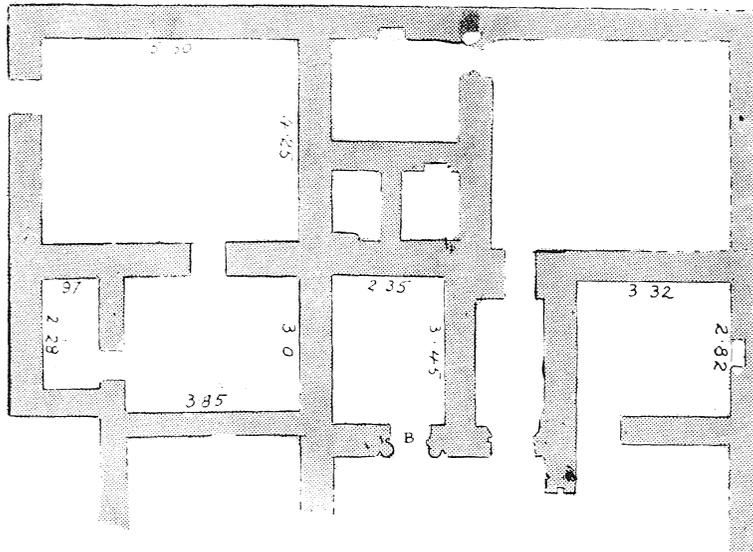
These buildings seem to consist of mud walls faced with excellent plaster on cement ; the plaster is sometimes white and sometimes red, and there are traces of decorations in red and ochre wash, but ninety-nine per cent of the walls are hidden below the sand.

We know from El Bekri that a few of the monks still remained at El Mûna as late as the mid eleventh century ; and later still, when the place was finally abandoned, the blown sand must have filled up the roofless cells and banked round the outer walls, forming in the process conical mounds ; the rain and the wind gradually making a hardened crust through which the tops of the plastered walls indicate faintly the outline of the buildings which stand below.

(1) WHITE, page 272.

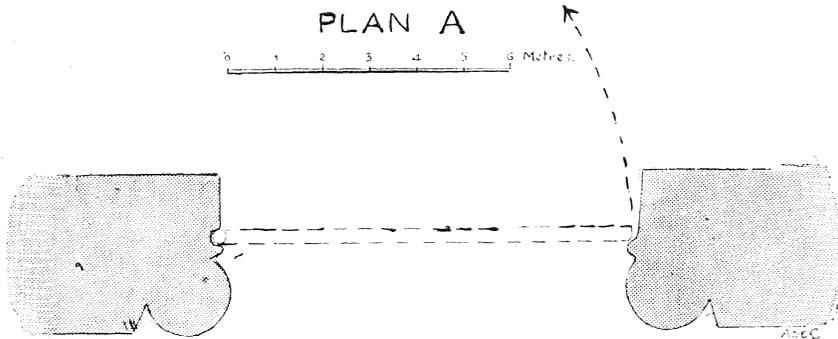
(2) See attached map which is taken from the 1934 1 : 500000 map of Egypt.

EL MUNA.



PLAN A

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Metres.



DETAIL OF DOOR B

Fig. A is a typical plan of one of these buildings imperfectly traced in the sand, and one can find the details of the plastered columns of the dorways, Fig. B.

Near many of the mounds are to be seen scattered heaps of broken burnt bricks (1) and mortar indicating, I think, that not long ago there

(1) These burnt bricks measure roughly $22 \times 9 \times 6$ centimetres and the mortar is of hard quality.

were standing above the ground the ruins of brick buildings — hence the Arab names hereabouts — Qusûr el Rubaiyat, Qasr Waheida, Qusûr El Izeila, Qusûr el Abd and Qusûr Isa. It would seem therefore that these brick qusûr were knocked down in order to use the bricks for building operations somewhere in the Western Beheira, as has so often happened elsewhere.

It is inside these numerous mounds, which stand 5 to 10 feet above the surrounding plain, that the past history of this site will be confirmed.

On the surface are quantities of potsherds, and in one place at least, are traces of glass making. The site occupies upwards of four square kilometres.

Since my visit to Qusûr el Rubaiyat, Dr. Achille Adriani, the keeper of the Greco-Roman Museum of Alexandria has kindly pointed out to me that his predecessor, Professor Breccia knew of this site and described it in his Report on the Museum for the years 1925-31. (1) Breccia's lucid description was written after a rapid examination of the place and he came to much the same conclusion as I have attempted to expose in this article — that we have here the remains of one of the monastic settlements known to have existed in this desert.

Although he suggested no exact identification Breccia wrote : « Ces ruines ne courent pour le moment aucun danger, mais je pense qu'il serait intéressant de consacrer prochainement une campagne de fouilles, d'une trentaine de jours, pour les explorer. Sans escompter la découverte de monuments d'une grande valeur artistique, on peut espérer mettre à jour des documents intéressants pour l'histoire et l'archéologie du christianisme égyptien ».

The foundation of Cellia in the first half of the fourth century: came about in this way: St. Antony being at the Mount of Nitria on a visit to St. Amûn, « Abba Amoun said to him : « Since through your prayers the brethren have multiplied, and some of them wish to build cells afar off in order that they may be at peace; at what distance from those which are here do you advise that cells should be built? » Antony answered: « Let us take food at the ninth hour and then go forth and pass through the desert and consider the place. » And when they had journeyed through

(1) EVARISTO BRECCIA, *Le Musée Gréco-Romain 1925-1931*, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, Bergamo, 1932, pages 54-56.

the desert until the sun began to go down, Abba Antonius said to him: « Let us pray, and raise up the cross in this place, that those who wish to do so may build here, and that the monks who come thence, when they visit the monks here, may eat their little morsel at the ninth hour and so visit them; and they who set out from here may do likewise and so remain undistracted while they visit one another. » Now the distance is twelve miles » (1).

Cellia was founded expressly as a home for anchorets, and by the end of the fourth century the Mount of Nitria had become a training school where monks were prepared for residence there ; « In a word, the Mount was semi-cenobitic in character, Cellia was anchoritic » (2).

The following description of Cellia is taken from *Historia Monachorum* (Latin version of Rufinus, Chapter XXII) :

« There is another place in the inner desert distant nearly ten miles from this (the Mount of Nitria) which has received the name of Cellia from the number of cells scattered about the desert there. Those who have been instructed there (at Nitria) and... wish to lead a more solitary life, retire to this place : for it is a desolate wilderness, and the cells are at such a distance, each from the other, as to be out of sight and out of sound of one another. They (the anchorets) dwell singly in these cells ; and there is profound silence and deep stillness among them. It is only on the Sabbath and on Sunday that they come together to the church and there behold each other as though transferred to Heaven »

But White pointed out that « the ideal of rigid solitude was breaking down, and giving place to a system of groups under the guidance of masters eminent for holiness or learning » (3). Such masters were Evagrius and Macarius, and between 391 and 399 when Palladius was living at Cellia there were probably 600 anchorets living there (4) and the cells naturally had become more adjacent to each other than when the place was first founded. Hence, perhaps, the numerous mounds we see today. The bread for this community was baked at the monastery of the Mount of Nitria ; and in addition to spending much time in solitary prayer

(1) WHITE, op. cit. page 49, quoting from *Apophthegmata patrum*, XXXIV.

(2) WHITE, page 169.

(3) WHITE, op. cit. pages 175-177.

(4) PALLADIUS, *Historia Lausiaca*, chapter VII.

and meditation, reading and writing, time was set aside for manual labour such as basket making.

To begin with there was a central church at Cellia, but a second church was built by the Schismatics after the Council of Chalcedon.

The early cells were of very simple plan though perhaps substantial ; they had windows, and cupboards in the walls for books. The cells may have had domed roofs and courtyards attached to them, with an outer door. The later constructions may have been more elaborate and White gives fuller details of the cells and their furniture. (1).

By the fifth century, White suggests, Nitria and Cellia had fallen from their old supremacy and those monks who desired to live in the utter desert now retired to Scetis.

El Mûna seems to have suffered during the Persian invasion about 619, and Nitria is mentioned (under its Copto-Arabic name, Gebel Barnûg) for the last time in the seventh century. The last historical fact known about El Mûna was the occasion when John Bishop of Saïs (Sa el Hagar) went « and baptized the monks there, after they had abjured their heresy ; and thus the Gaianites and the Barsanuphians, who were there, were led by him into communion with the orthodox » (2).

It is difficult to say what was the end of El Mûna — Christianity and monasticism gradually lost ground; there had been raids from the West by the Luwata Berbers ; the fourteenth century brought the terrible Black Death, plague and famine which led to a great decline of the neighbouring monasteries in the Wâdi el Natrûn, and these scourges might well have left El Mûna deserted for ever.

The wells have disappeared and the cutting of the adjacent Nubâriya Canal, and the El Asara before it, have not brought life to the place. Even today a triangle of the Western Desert, with its apex at El Barnûgi, still thrusts itself across the canal into the cultivated lands of the Delta.

A. F. C. DE COSSON.

(1) WHITE, pages 214-216.

(2) *History of the Patriarchs*, page 316.