

Saint Thecla on Coptic wall Paintings

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The Wall Paintings Significance:

The wall paintings have great importance. The painting occupies large surface on the wall, which draws the attention of the visitors to scenes and to scenes and prayers to link between the spiritual meaning and the themes of the scenes. Such scenes of wall painting used to narrate biblical events, and venerate the religious characters.

The mural paintings played essential roles inside the Coptic architecture; first the functional role. In this sense some scenes were used to be represented inside certain parts of the church, like chapel and choirs “apocalyptic visions”, monastic fortresses. The second role is the decorative role where scenes were employed to be comfortable vision for prayers and visitors.

The monastery churches were extensively decorated. They have undergone various alterations and restorations, so that paintings were superimposed several times around the historical period, only the most recent stages are now visible.¹The paintings are located in the same buildings inside the monasteries: such as the churches (the main church of the monastery or the fortress church) common chambers, the refectory, monks’ cells, oratory, and dwelling room (where monks live).²

The wall decoration is divided into two registers: the lower register: about (one meter) high, painted geometric and floral motifs and framed with lines or dots such as those at Bawit, Saqqara, and Kellia. At the same time as the upper register: portrays figures, such as Jesus Christ, St. Mary, monks, hermits, founders of monasteries, saints, and biblical scenes (Old Testament, New Testament)³

The wall painting includes the apses decoration inside the shrines, ceiling, and walls of khurus and nave inside the churches beside the dooms, ceiling, and columns.⁴Most of wall paintings which were widespread in Egypt were in tempera technique⁵, the tempera technique is a painting applied to dry plaster. It is unlike the fresco technique of applying paint to wet plaster, which was common in western wall mural.⁶

The wall painting entails three main elements; support, painting ground, and paint layer, the support represents the building wall and ceiling, which was probably made out of limestone, sandstone or mud brick.⁷And the painting ground consists of two coats; a rough coat which directly covered the support surface, and an outer coat of plaster ready to receive the pigments and the paint layer. Furthermore in tempera technique, they added above this element another preventive layer of wax.⁸

Although the remains of early Christian church architecture in Egypt are all of rather late date, and no examples survive from Alexandria, there are nonetheless some outstanding

¹Atiya, A. S., *the Coptic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, New York, 1991, p. 1659.

²Zaloscer, H., *Die Kunst im Christlichen Agypten*, Austria, 1974, pp. 131-135.

³Atiya, *the Coptic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 1659.

⁴Albenda, p., *Creative Painting with Tempra*, New York, 1970, p. 8.

⁵El Goresy, A., *Ancient Pigments in Wall Painting of Egyptian Tombs and Temples*, Munchen, 1986, p.3.

⁶Bolman, E. S., *Monastic Vision, Wall Painting the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, Cairo, 2002, p. 31.

⁷*Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, Vol.8, New York, 1989, p. 327.

⁸عبد المعز شاهين, ترميم وصيانة المباني الأثرية والتاريخية, المجلس الأعلى للآثار, القاهرة, 1994, ص. 82.

examples that demonstrate their own unique architectural character while at the same time being fully in accord with general Imperial trends.¹The scenes of wall paintings used to narrate biblical events, venerate the religious character and to link between the spiritual meanings and the themes of the scenes with the visitors.²

The mural paintings played elementary two roles inside the Coptic architecture; first the decorative role where scenes were employed to be comfortable vision for visitors, the second role is the functional role in which the scenes were used to be represented inside especial parts of the Coptic architecture like monastic fortress “protector angel”, the chapel and choirs “apocalyptic visions”.³

Egypt was one of the Byzantine states inhabited by several nationalities scattered in all Egypt with concentration in Alexandria and big cities. All this cultures Greek, Roman, Jewish, and others, lived side by side with the Egyptian culture and their fingerprint on Egyptian people (Copts). This influence varied relatively, according to how people are far from the civilization centers. Thus, Coptic woman was affected by the Hellenic culture relatively, as women in upper Egypt maintained the same traditions of their ancestors in Pharaonic period, while women of Alexandria was much affected by Hellenic culture.⁴

Woman throughout all periods of history was ready to sacrifice money and effort to deck herself and to satisfy her coquetry. In ancient Egypt, women gave great concern to their appearance, gave consideration to the fashion of their clothes, using cosmetics for best look, they wore jewelry and other accessories, apparently from wall painting and female representations on walls of temples and tombs. With coming of Christianity in Egypt, and under the new concepts of the new religion, one would ask if the new teachings had their effect on people’s concept of self-embellishment and if the answer is yes then, their effect was to what extent.

Coptic woman affected by many factors that controlled her appearance including civil costume. Christian teachings had its influence on Coptic woman’s clothes. The holy bible treated the ornamenting of men and women, especially women, virtually.

¹Lowire, W., *Christian Art and Archaeology*, London, 1901, p. 27.

² Atalla, N. S., *Coptic Art / l’Art Copte, Wall- Paintings / Peintures Murals*, Cairo, 1993, p. 40.

³Gabra, G., *Coptic Monasteries Egypt’s Monastic Art and Architecture*, Cairo, New York, 2002, p. 68.

⁴ Rowlandson, J., *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt*, Cambridge University press, London, 1998, p. 328-329

However, Christianity didn't forbidden women ornamenting, but within some limits not to over step them. Clement of Alexandria¹commented on female adornment by associating female virtue and avoidance of excessive luxury and bodily adornment.²

The Saint Thecla

With the early of the first century AD, the Christian religion appeared. The evangelization with the new religion began during the first centuries in all of Roman Empire, by the normal case, the convert to the new religion begun in confidentiality; as it was met by refuse and the severe persecution since the Empire Nero period, as who was discovered his affair, he was exposed to the difficult kind of torture and martyrdom.

The early Christians who called for that religion, suffered from a lot of difficulties in spreading the religion. A lot of them were martyred on the hand of Roman Empires who punished those who converted to Christianity. The religious precaution movement and the Christians stability were accompanied by stories that made of their durability an incentive to a lot of them to clutch with their new religion and to have the stability on it.

The Coptic artist in Egypt was influenced by the early Saints and Saints biographies who martyred in the defense for the Christians belief in its early period. Those biographies weren't only a reminder memory for the saints and their sufferings, but also an educational massage in which represented through it models for the abstract right faith, for upholding the affair of Christian religion and defending on it against the pagan thought.

The biography of the Saint Thecla, was considered an obvious model for the conflict between the Christian thought and the Paganism in the early Christianity stages and in the middle of the first century AD.³

Saint Thecla lived during the period of the Apostle Paul. She came from a rich Roman family from Iconomium city in the east of Italy on Alacrity Sea. She converted to Christianity on the hand of the Saint Paul and detracted to be married of a rich person and preferred the virginity life.

For the great position of her family in the city, it was judged on the Saint Paul by the exile from the city because he called for the new Christian religion and it was judged on Thecla by burning until death, but the God rescued her as a storm blew and made fire smother. By then she decided to escape with the Saint Paul to Antakya to evangelize with the Christian religion.

¹ Atiya, A., *the Coptic Encyclopedia*, Macmillan publishing company, Vol. II, New York, 1991, p. 562-563.

² Rowlandson, *Women and Society*, p. 328-329.

³ Delaney J., *Dictionary of Saints*, New York, 1980, P. 543.

As she had a good deal of beauty so the governor of the city admired her and wanted to marry her but she refused so he ordered to throw her to the lions. She remained with the lions for two days but she was not hurt. Those lions bowed to her due to her faith (the God was beside her) as it came in her story.¹

Thecla survived for another time, which made from her a famous religious story, but the governor didn't settle with that. He ordered to tie her between two wolves and to be dragged on the city street but again she survived which made the governor release her. It was mentioned in the story that Paul accompanied her as she disguised in a man costume to the Mira city in Likia province in Asia Minor, as she helped him in the evangelization to the new religion. Then she transferred for a short time to Iconia city to evangelize with the Christian religion there.²

After that she settled in one of the caves of Maria Milk region in Sloukia in Asia Minor. She remained calling for the new religion for more than half century as she had a good reputation during this period and she became from Miracle's makers until she died there and this place became as a known Sanctuary, then a church was established in that city in the five century AD to commemorating her name.³

So immediate the interest and the Sanctification for her spread as she was considered a model for the first virgin martyr Saint in the Christian religion. She had a good reputation by the advent of the end of five century AD in the Mediterranean Sea's cities and a lot of regions including Egypt, which formed a fertilized land to sanctify the Saint Thecla in early period of the Four century.

The Sanctification of the Saint Thecla became a part of inside life in Egypt and the around areas. Her name became familiar to the Egyptian writers and artists, as she was mentioned in a various range of Papyrus and the Greek and the Coptic scripts. She also appeared in a lot of artistic forms including a wall painting, parts of textile, combs, lamps, vials of the pilgrims and the tombstones.

This archeological evidence was stamped in Egypt from Alexandria and its outskirts which became an active center to sanctify the saint Thecla and the cities of the Nile basins.⁴

It was remarkable to note that there was a writing work to the apostle Paul with the Saint Thecla called "Acts of St. Paul and St. Thecla" through the biography of the Saint Thecla, we

¹ Farmer, D. H., *the Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Oxford, 1978, p. 369.

² Delaney, *Dictionary of Saints*, P. 544; Farmer, *the Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 369.

³ Krautheimer, R., *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 1965, p. 82.

⁴ إيمان إبراهيم، طرز الملابس النسائية في الفن القبطي من القرن الرابع وحتى القرن السابع الميلادي، رسالة ماجستير، كلية الآداب، جامعة الإسكندرية، 2011، ص. 75.

could extract some events in her life such as her torture with the fire, throwing her to the lions, being dragged with the wolves and her story with the Apostle Paul.¹

The Scene of Torturing the Saint Thecla in Fire on the Dome of the Exodus Sanctuary

This scene represented a unique view inside the Sanctuary of exodus dome in el-Bagwat graves in el-Kharga Oasis by Fresco style to the Saint within the multiple of religious scenes inside this dome. This wall painting in that grave was considered from the oldest paintings which were found in Egypt.

In front of the shepherd who looking after white five sheep (fig 1) there is a bleakness tree that's other side St. Thecla. She seems to have been held in great reverence in Kharga, her martyrdom is represented in this chapel, in the chapel of Peace and most probably in chapel no. 25. Her martyrdom is celebrated in the Coptic Church on the 9th of Kyahk.²

The saint appeared in an empty space in a supplication position in the middle of a flame of fire which was around her as she was recumbent by her body to the back standing on her legs, supplicant to " the God" by raising her hand to the sky which according with the calm which surrounded the scene (Fig. 2).³

Although the scene was in a bad case of preservation, but traces of her name in Greek language appeared at the back of her head. She wears a short wide tunic, with decorative sleeves with two decorated piping; it was probably that this tunic was decorated from the front with two long decorative clavi from the shoulders to the end of the tunic.⁴

The artist represented her by the side painting style in front of the tree which separated her from the rest of the scene. Effectively the supplication scene was from the known scene in all of the arts. by comparing this scene with a similar scene on the same dome located in the right side under the Thecla scene for Sara standing to supplicate to Allah for saving her son from the massacre extended her hand to the sky so we found that the style of the artist was one style of the two scenes exception the Saint Thecla who appeared in a triple sitting while Sara appeared standing and the tree scene connected between them which appeared under Sara and in front of

¹ Livingstone E. A., *the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University, USA, 1977, p.386.

² Fakhry, A., *the Egyptian Deserts, the Necropolis of El-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis*, Cairo, 1951, p. 64.

³ Wilkinson, C. K., *Early Christian Paintings in the Oasis of Kharga*, in: Bulletin of Metropolitan Museum of Art, XXIII, 1928, p. 29.

⁴ إيمان إبراهيم، طرز الملابس النسائية، ص. 74.

Thecla above, which confirmed the religious importance to the views of inside the dome in the Sanctuary exodus.

For the technical style in that sanctuary, we found a very modest, and expressed to the transition stage from the representation characters of Hellenistic and Roman arts to the Coptic art stage. it was spread in that period (the third and the fourth centuries) the extempore types, modulating styles, symbolic and the planning styles, which expressed with the less lines of the event, non-exaggeration in the decoration, and far from the Roman styles. That made this sanctuary from the oldest sanctuary in the Necropolis of El-Bagwat, as it presented a vive image to the Christian tomb.¹

The artist followed a new style as he was far from the nature imitation and he went towards the symbolic and abstraction as this style suited to the Asceticism and Austerity case which arrived to it the convert of the new religion after a series of religious persecution. So that the Saint Thecla scenes goes back to the first half of the fourth century AD with the beginning of the Coptic art appearance in el-Bagwat area.²

The Scene of the Saint Thecla and Saint Paul on el-Salam Dome

El-Salam sanctuary in el-Bagwat is characterized by the existence of religious paintings inside the dome which was painted in Fresco style. Among those multiple scenes inside the dome is a scene for the Saint Paul sitting and directing his speech the Saint Thecla as it was separated between them forms of sparse flowers on the cross form (Fig. 3) The date of this chapel is open to discussion but it is safe to say that it can date from any time not earlier than the Vth century and not later than the VIth.³

As we found that she was represented also in el-Salam Sanctuary with the apostle Saint Paul as they were sitting facing each other on folding chairs with a support and crossed legs. Their names were written above them.⁴

The Saint Paul holds in his right a pen and in his left hand there is an object which might be the ink-pot, he tried to write on a book held by the two hands of Saint Thecla. Saint Paul wears a white tunic and has a shawl put over his head and dangling until the beginning of the chair. The cloak is passing above the left arm of Paul in a beautiful artistic image.⁵

¹ محمد عبد الفتاح السيد، التصوير الجدارى (الفريسك) فى الفن القبطى، رسالة ماجستير، كلية الآداب، جامعة الإسكندرية، 1994، ص، 129-130، 287-285.

² سعاد ماهر، الفن القبطى، القاهرة، 1977، ص. 21-22.

³ Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 78.

⁴ Wilkinson, *Early Christian Paintings*, p. 29-30.

⁵ Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 78.

For the Saint Thecla, she is sitting on a red pillow and wears a green tunic reached to her feet, whose folds are drawn in either dark green or red lines, with sleeves. The tunic is decorated from the front with two long clavi extended from the shoulders until the seam of the cloth; with two decorated piping on the end of the sleeves.¹ Here she was represented without aheadscarf, as her blond hair falls in curls over her shoulders; as a sign for her foreign origin. The white long veil is put over her head and falls at the sides.²

The two Saints sit facing each other. Each one is sitting with one leg over the other, and they are depicted as whispering to each other. Unfortunately the facial features of Saint Paul are mostly damaged.

Saint Paul is raising his hand towards Saint Thecla as if he is directing a speech to her. Saint Thecla is shown holding a book in her hands. Thecla is shown as if she listening to the speech of Saint Paul and writes what he is saying. The artist decorated her green costume which reached to her feet with red and dark green lines, while her body and tunic are covered by white colour. The names of the two Saints are written above them.

Comparing this scene with the torture scene of Saint Thecla in fire, we find that the artist tried to show the differences between the two Saint in the style of cloth, facial features, and the colours of the bodies. The artist characterized the Saint Thecla with the yellow hair which referring to her foreign origin and which also show the Byzantine influences. The artist tried to show the two saints in a real way or according to the rules of the realistic school of art, where each saint is represented with a leg above the other.³

The scene of Saints Paul and Thecla is almost over the entrance to the tomb and closes the circle because at Thecla's side stands Eve with whom we have begun our description.⁴

The artist also obliged with the reality movements in the position of the legs above each other which accorded with the sitting and the writing position and it was from the rare scene in wall painting and also the shape of the chair as the X character.⁵

The artist showed the aesthetic spirit through his choice of the colors of the clothes. Superficiality, symbolism and simplicity are the most important characteristics of this period to which belongs this scene.

¹ إيمان إبراهيم، طرز الملابس النسائية، ص. 74.

² Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 78.

³ Rice, D. T., *Art of the Byzantine Era*, London, 1981, p. 21.

⁴ Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 78.

⁵ Gough, M., *the Origin of Christian, Art*, London, 1973, p. 169.

The Remains of the Saints Paul and Thecla Scene in the Sanctuary no. 25 at el-Bagawat Necropolis in el-Kharga Oasis

The subject of Thecla and Paul is the only favourite local subject in the scenes of the chapels of Kharga. In the chapel of the Exodus (no. 30) we find Thecla in the fire, and in the chapel of Peace (no. 80) we find her again together with Paul as we mentioned before. Apparently these saints were greatly honoured among the Christians of Kharga at that period.¹

On the western side of the northern wall of Sanctuary No.25 in the necropolis of el-Bagawat, there is a scene for Saints Thecla and Paul. The scene is mostly damaged and only traces of the scene are still there. The two saints are shown sitting on two chairs richly dressed and facing each other; between the two figures are the remains of a cross on a large Ankh sign (Fig. 4).

Thecla is shown on the right side sitting on a chair with a back support and two legs. The legs of the chair are drawn in the shape of rings above each other. She wears a dress reaching to her feet. It seems that she is holding something in her hand which looks like a book. The rest of the figure of Saint Thecla is mostly damaged. On the left Saint Paul is shown sitting and only traces of figure are still there. A cloak is shown dangling on his shoulders. Above Saint Paul the cross on Ankh sign is shown. This sign of the cross with the Ankh sign might refer to the religious atmosphere which gathered the two saints. At the back of Thecla is a painting showing a building a perhaps to be for a monastery appeared in it some el-Qalili.²

This scene gathered between the lateral and realistic paintings for the saint Thecla. So this scene approached a lot in its type and technical style of the previous scene in el-Salam Sanctuary which made us to date back that scene to the end of the fifth century and the beginning of Sixth century AD.³

Saint Thecla is represented in supplication pose, in a very primitive way in Tal Atrib cave in the west of Sohag (Fig. 5).

The saint wears a long tunic under which appears another dress as evident from the straps on her shoulders. There is a piece of cloth tied around her waist and which looks like a belt. Some scholars think that this scene belongs to Daniel in lion's den, but the two lions lapping under her feet reinforce the suggestion that this scene refers to Saint Thecla. Behind the saint is

¹ Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 87.

² Wilkinson, *Early Christian Paintings*, p. 32-33.

³ Kaufmann, C. M., *Ein Altchristliches Pompeji in der Libyschen Wüste, die Nekropolis der Grossen Oase*, Vol. I, Mainz, 1902, p. 71.

another small figure of a lady clad in the same dress like Thecla. This lady might represent the one of the followers of Saint Thecla.¹

Figures



Fig. 1- the Shepherd

(After, Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 64, Fig. 55)

¹ إيمان إبراهيم، طرز الملابس النسائية، ص. 76-77.



Fig. 2A

Saint Thecla Torturing in the Fire, on the Dome of the Exodus sanctuary, Bagawat, at el-Kharga Oasis. It dates back to half 4th C.



Fig. 2B

(After, Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 87, p. 64, Fig. 56)



Fig. 3A.

Saints Thecla and Paul, Peace Chapel, Bagawat, at el-Kharga Oasis. It dates back to 4th - 5th C.



Fig. 3B.

Saints Thecla and Paul.

(After Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 78, Fig. 71)



Fig. 4

Remains Saints Thecla and Paul, Bagawat, at el-Kharga Oasis. It dates back to 5th -6th C.
(After, Fakhry, *the Necropolis of El-Bagawat*, p. 87, Fig. 74)



Fig. 5

Saint Thecla's Torturing, at Tal Atrib Cave, in the west of Sohag. It dates back to the end of 6th C.
(After, Davis, J., *the Cult*, Fig. 24.)

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