

# Stone Coptic Inscription; New Archeological Discovery

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**Abstract:** *This Coptic inscription was Discovered at The area of Al- Bahnasa at Minia Governorate in Upper Egypt, and this pattern is a piece of limestone ,not only very large but also it is the largest ever in the history of Coptic art private and Christian arts in public , it has a round shape and engraved by high relief in one hand only by a decoration of early Christian motifs ,, it has been discovered in one of the important archaeological sites of the city of Al- Bahnasa ..... This masterpiece Has been deposited in the archaeological store at Al- Ashmonin - Mallawi - Minya Governorate , forms and decoration of this masterpiece of stone considerably magnificent varied, as they also vary among themselves in terms of the type of decoration, and this research will be studying the circumstances of the excavation of such important archaeological masterpiece as well as the shape of the piece and is described by a description of technically accurate, as well as of decoration varied, and symbolic of these motifs are Search also concerned with the search for similar to this masterpiece in Egypt or abroad .. And this research will explain also the uses of this masterpiece, as well as pieces similar in shape and size and also tries to find the date of this rare Coptic inscription.*

**Keywords:** *Stone, Stone, Inscription, Archeological.,*

## 1. Introduction

Some important archaeological excavation carried out in Egypt during the period prior to the revolution of January 25, 2011 , but the area of middle Egypt , which including our site Al-Bahnasa the site of discovering , share by poor ones , but this poor archaeological excavation resulted some Important discoveries which has a great antique value , but unfortunately did not received their share of multitude study and research , one of this discovered artifacts and which have Not been studied before , that is a masterpiece of huge stone , round in shape filled with plant, geometrical and cross decoration in wonderful adorable tune , it is unprcedented in form and magnitude of its size as well as in decoration also , This research will spots , for the first time , a highlights on this masterpiece in an attempt to get a knowledge to recognize its artifact importance, also to reach to the purpose which it was designed for , as well as to getting a specific date .....

## 2. Al-Bahnasa the Site of Discovering

Before talking about this in detail, let me first introduce you to the place where this huge majestic masterpiece discovered, This important and ancient city is located to the north-west of Al- Minya city in Upper Egypt <sup>[i]</sup>, To the west of the city of Beni Mazar that away from Al-Bahnasa about ( 16 km ) (, Fig. – 1 : 2) , many Reports by Arab historians books <sup>[ii]</sup> , And archaeological excavations proved that Bahnasa contained Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Coptic and Islamic antiquities.... , it was known during the Islamic era <sup>[iii]</sup> by textile industry and furniture of all kinds as Ibn Hawqal <sup>[iv]</sup> This is also What is indicated and confirmed by archaeological excavations , and earlier archaeological excavations - carried out in this city - is also give the world a large quantities of Greek papyri that is not existed in any other place , also Many shrines of holy Muslims remained.



Fig. 1: Map shows the Arab Republic of Egypt and the site Bahnasa Bahnasa



Fig. 2: The Bahnasa site (Google earth )

Also it has been reported that Jesus , and his holy mother Mary , came to this city and stay sometime during his flight to Egypt , what Perhaps explains Multiplicity of what churches in this city, which vanished as for her now , and what we know through archaeological excavation work only( Plate 1, 2).



Plate 1: Excavation site at Bahnasa



Plate 2: Excavation site at Bahnasa

Not only the importance of Bahnasa - known to the Greeks as " Oxyrhynchus "<sup>[v]</sup> And defined by the Copts as ' Pemdje ' As a place visited by Jesus Christ, but also projected to become the birth place of many saints and position of the martyrdom of many of them during the period of persecution that culminated in the reign of Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century<sup>[vi]</sup> , It has also become the seat of the Bishop as Coptic Synaxarium , which increased the value of this important historical city until Bahnasa become , since then , an attractive site for the monks of men and women ,even said that their number had reached ten thousand monks and twenty thousand nun<sup>[viii]</sup> , numerous monasteries and churches<sup>[viii]</sup> was established even become Bahnasa as if it were a city of monasteries. and the seat of the monks.

### 3. Technical Description of the Piece

From the first sight. This is of course, Christian antiquities no doubt... But why? Of course for the presence of the sign of the cross...(see plate 3 :4). This artistic sandstone massive piece, it is the largest ever, is Found segmented into two integral parts during the operation of the archaeological excavations took place between (1993: 1994) by the Egyptian Antiquities Authority, Minya inspection, where the researcher worked there for nearly seven years in the south-eastern part of the old city of Bahnasa searching for Pharaonic Antiquities, and also for a Basilica church has been detected in this site also.



Plate 3: Coptic Inscription of Stone



Plate 4: Coptic Inscription of Stone

After the disclosure of this masterpiece The restoration Department of middle Egypt repair and restored its damage in (2001 A.D.) Then offered in the park museum attached to the antiquities store at Al-Ashmunein until the outbreak of the youth revolution (25 January 2011) Where deposited again in the same store at Minya since that date until now.

### 4. Artistic Description;

This piece of stone carved in a circular form, its edges has some damages as a result of weather and environmental factors.(Plate 3:8)



Plate 5: Coptic Inscription of Stone - Edgewise



Plate 6: Coptic Inscription of Stone From behind

The diameter of this massive stone masterpiece is (115 cm), And no more than (40 cm thick), And all the decoration carried out in high relief on one side only and the sculptor leave the rest of the parts free of illustration or decoration, and there is a huge Cross with double lines more than thirty centimeters long in the center, There is a small circle in the cross center and another four circles in its arms probably diagnosed grapes beads (pills), and dug between arms a grape leaves with six Petals one of them is in the center,

This central cross is contained within a square more than (45 cm), This square is the most prominent and

higher among decorations of this masterpiece , which is included as well as within another square slightly larger and lower than its predecessor in the level of carving , and the spaces between them is decorated by four angles in the corners of the first square including round granules each two of them separates form the rest by a cylindrical shape bulging in the middle, similar to beads and disks decorative. (Bead & Fillet)

Another large square - with double lines , But with discipline -contains The two former squares , this last square arising triangles was decorated with pair of laurel branches occupying this triangle Figure base, while its head decorated with bunch of grapes consists of six pills only distributed so that one tablet of the highest at the head of the triangle , two then and three in the bottom, to form in its entirety triangle shape also, and perhaps an indication of the importance of triangle shape in Coptic art and symbolism of Copts , perhaps the triangle symbolizes to Holy Trinity <sup>[ix]</sup> , which has the head is the father The base fulcrum tip the Son and the other Holy Spirit. Grapes bunches hanging from the head of the triangle and the vine leaves between cross arms -that seem to grow from the cross arms - may be refer to Christ and his sacrifice for the redemption of humankind as Gabra , G<sup>[x]</sup>.



Plate 7: Coptic Inscription of Stone - From behind



Plate 8: Coptic Inscription of Stone - Edgewise

Sculptor Filled vacuum , or space , created between this last squares and final form of the rounded masterpiece with a pair of the same plant Previous branches of laurel , but this time above each other , so I can trustily say that ; The broad format of this masterpiece is quite exceptional.

Finally there is part of the other third one , but incomplete, and should be noted absence one of the parties this masterpiece of such decorations is the bottom by painting displayed We do not know if this part - of the original - leave empty of decoration or to natural and environmental factors have eaten and wasted decoration?

## 5. Analytical Study

Although this masterpiece did not contain any non-traditional motifs but it still unique in shape , carved style , large size and round Shape , and decoration mainly based on Masterpiece center that contain a cross , this cross has great importance to all Christians of different sects ..Perhaps... there is a disagreement among themselves in many things, but they do not differ at all in cross importance and position, The crosses symbolize to Christianity and also symbolizes to the Christ himself and remember also crucifixion accident ..... , but when it appeared and at any time began careful painted on buildings and on the arts? <sup>[xi]</sup>.

The cross Have emerged in Coptic ornament and art since the early period of the history of Christianity in Egypt, and it has overshadowed fee any other sign or symbol , Cross, exists in every positioning in the church and every throw to consider, things and devote it is not permissible to eat or washing with baptism water or access to any place only after this Cross Fee.( Plate - 10:12) <sup>[xii]</sup>

In the area of decoration the Coptic artist draw the cross in the overall geometric or vegetable or both together , but It is difficult to determine the date of the first appearance of the cross on the buildings or on the arts, but that shape who early popularized in Egypt is the cross of equal parties which Greek cross inspired , as not popularized <sup>[xiii]</sup> .

According to most opinions - Cross, which takes the form of ancient Egyptian ankh, sign of eternal life, which symbolizes life in ancient Egyptian art.( Plate - 10:12), it is in the form of a cross upper end tip circle ( a cross with loop above cross bar ). Known as looped cross



Plate 9: Laurel branches - Coptic museum



Plate 10: Vine motifs & Ankh in the form of a cross- Coptic museum

There is no doubt that the emergence of these two crosses no later than the fourth century AD, while the latter continued until the middle of the seventh century AD

Crosses Has numerous and varied forms, until spreading about four hundred almost, some type has a special uses , And according to Al- Maqrizi <sup>[xiv]</sup> who tell us about a story<sup>[xv]</sup> , there is no time to mention in details , that Constantine and his mother St. Helena are the first has been associated of the Holy Cross and that was at the beginning of the third century AD<sup>[xvi]</sup> .

About The bunches of grape and leaves decoration ( vine motifs ) it has a large common predominantly prevalence than other foliate decorations .( Plate - 9,:10)

Grapes Used sometimes , like ear of corn ,in signing - with bread - to the Eucharist, grapes like wine communion, symbolized by the blood of Christ, and to work in the production of grapes indicates sometimes the work of righteous Christians in vine of the Lord, and used grape wine as a symbol of the Savior, who is the real wine , <sup>[xvii]</sup> .( Plate - 9,:10)

In regarding to the branches of laurel here perhaps remember us with other reliefs attributed to Ahnas (Coptic museum in Cairo, no.7061 ,4th ; 5th Century) <sup>[xviii]</sup>

## 6. Use

An attempt to identify a specific use and function to such masterpiece is very difficult , but it is not too bad to ask a set of assumptions and suggestions that may help us in putting an access to the role and function of this masterpiece , and it is difficult in any case to saying that such Masterpiece has a ritual role Inside the church or in monastery like placing inside the sanctuary or front of the " Apse ". " or on the surface of the altar, or even as a tomb stone ( stela ) it is difficult likelihood ....

But is it possible putting this masterpiece inside the church away from the sanctuary like ; in Choir, Nave, or Narthex,? the answer: Absolutely not, due to the magnitude and difficulty of transfer within the floors of churches gradual elevations and different, so ... if it was placed outside the church closer to the right suggestion of placed it inside.



Plate 11: Early sign of Coptic cross - Coptic museum



Plate 12: Early sign of Coptic cross- Coptic museum

Sculptor Perhaps make the form of this masterpiece round to moving it easily without bare or difficult from one place to another, and perhaps the realization that this masterpiece was probably play festival role when it was placed in front of certain places at certain times, so must move from here to there, and perhaps were placed at the entrances of large and famous monasteries , as well as churches in the memorable holidays and churches feasts, to let the laity enjoy with cross and bunches of grapes ..... and remember what such things means and sign in the spiritual meanings becoming more and faith energy and spiritual transcends their thoughts becoming hard, and remind them perhaps to ancient periods when they can not carve like this Cross - that indicates their faith immediately - but they just can not only the symbol has other similar signs ,but not Inviolability , like ankh sign..

## 7. Dating

The multiplicity of forms and different designs for Cross over the centuries make a pairing every form of time-specific is easy going, as dominated equilateral cross -Like the cross between our hands - The form and decoration of the cross on a number of buildings and artifacts since the fourth century AD and until the seventh century, and some researchers extends this period to the third century AD , With decorative elements and techniques characterize every Cross of what followed.

The vine form that has multiple forms and diverse, we know from our certainty through that when the number of grapes beads (or pills ) was great whenever the artwork was from early date and the less number and increased in size whenever the work of late time, and whenever foliar within striking distance of its natural form Whenever the artwork from early time ,, and whenever hit by abstract and distortion then the work from lateral time .

Perhaps one of the things that should be observed as well as the absence of Alpha and Omega of this masterpiece -The two letters much founded with the Cross in many antiques with different materials - Perhaps this is a new evidence delayed the date of this masterpiece from the sixth century AD , a period which popularized put those letters on both sides of the cross , identifies period between the fourth and sixth centuries.

A masterpiece contains such a form of the Cross is the largest ever in the field of Coptic Fine Arts must Previously, after that introduced and presented , return to the period in which the Christianity spread and prevailed in the length and breadth of Egypt, a period that extends between the sixth and seventh centuries , what Is also confirmed by plant motifs carved next to the Cross. Especially when we look at the grapes bunches that are not more than six pills in each bunches, from our point of view this masterpiece back to a late era of the seventh century.

## 8. Conclusion

This scientific study of this new archaeological discovery performed many results and also many questions and inquiries as well , it is proved also that this masterpiece of huge Coptic stone is distinct in form , size and decoration elements also, a research found to characterize precise technical elements , thus to Compare and analyze with their counterparts on the Coptic arts and other stone carvings , and then became easy to get an approximate date for this masterpiece , which the study dated it to the end of the seventh century some question was set also by this research about the nature of the use of this masterpiece , that contributed to the inventory of its using outside churches not inside , precisely accurate at the entrances of grand and huge monasteries .

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