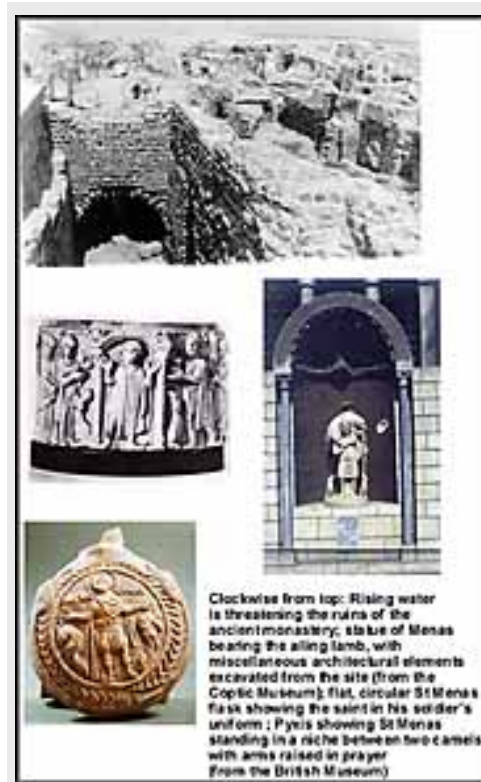


## Saint Menas's sacred overflow

The ruins of the fabled city of St Menas were placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979 as one of the five most historically important sites in Egypt. Today they are threatened by serious water seepage, writes **Jill Kamil**

Archaeology is a destructive discipline. It unearths monuments, and then exposes them to the elements. The Monastery of St Menas (better known as Deir Abu Mina), so painstakingly excavated over the last decades, is one of those being undermined and, ironically, by the very water on which its reputation was built. Some say the subsoil water which is causing the damage comes from agricultural expansion, while others suggest the possibility of an ancient water course sloping towards the site. Either way, unless the danger is curbed, the ruins of the city, which in the fifth and sixth centuries was the greatest pilgrimage centre in the Christian world, will be removed from the World Heritage List.



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The city was thought to be legendary until 1905 when German archaeologist Carl Maria Kaufmann, travelling from Athens to North Africa through Alexandria and Maryut, made a scientific investigation of early Christian monasteries that had earlier been investigated only superficially, or not at all. The city -- described in glowing terms by the Arab geographer Al-Bakri in the early 11th century, and in accounts by numerous mediaeval historians and pilgrims who spoke of superb buildings decorated with statues and mosaics, situated in a fertile region with vineyards -- had totally disappeared. It was even thought to be a figment of the imagination.

When Kaufmann came upon extensive ruins near Maryut (formerly Lake Mareotis) southwest of Alexandria he was certain that he had discovered the famous place to which thousands of pilgrims reputedly flocked from all over the Christian world. Discovery of the actual tomb of St Menas dispelled all doubt. Thirty marble stairs led down to a crypt, and the tomb of the patron saint lay some 10 metres beneath the high altar of the ruins of a basilica constructed in the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine by Bishop Athanasius the Great.

Here was a place of healing, like Lourdes from the 19th century until today. Kaufmann found baths and tiny pottery ampullae shaped like a flat, two-handled jar stamped with the figure of the saint between two camels. These the pilgrims filled with sacred water and took home as curative souvenirs.

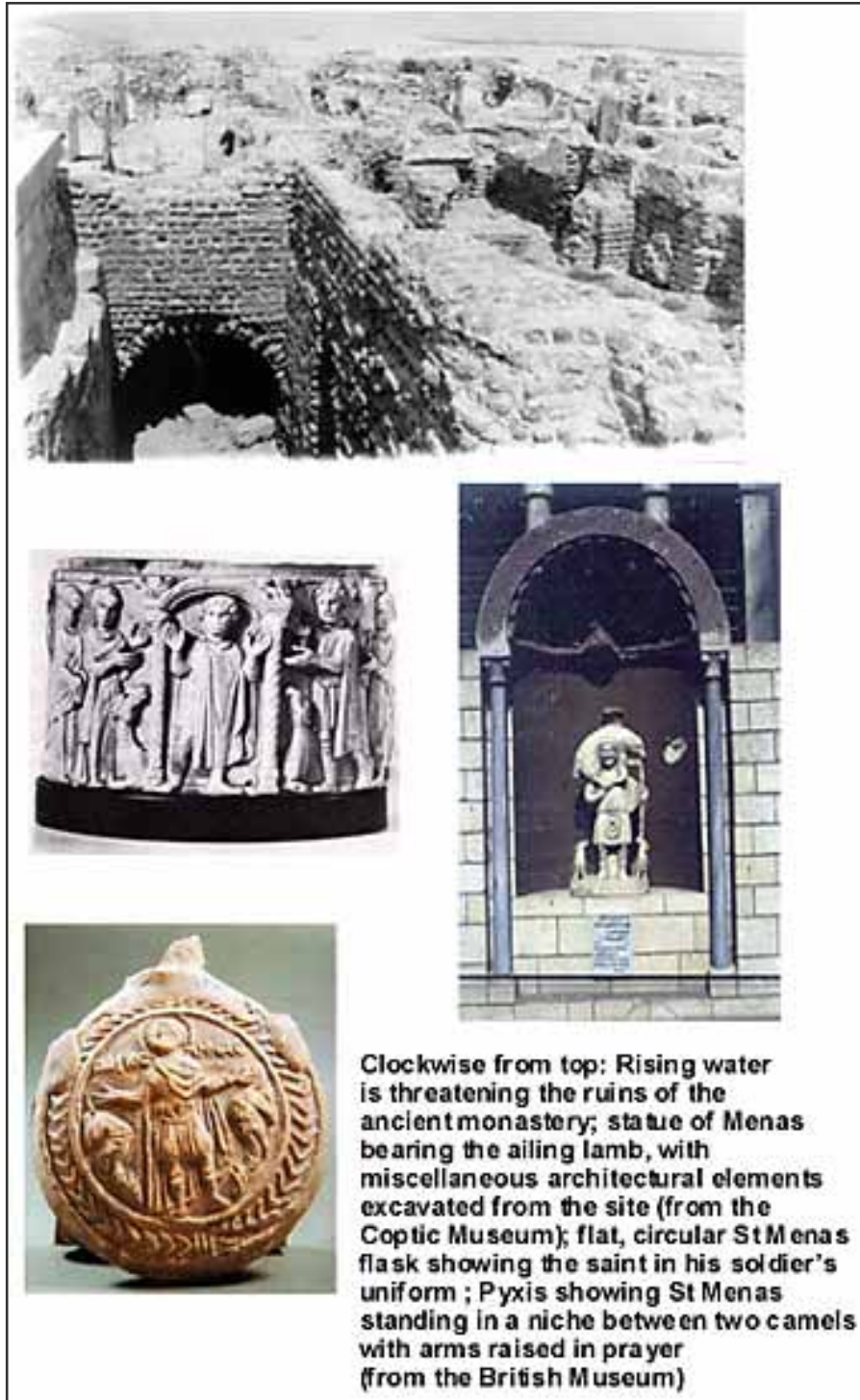
No further excavations were carried out until 1951, when a team from the Coptic Museum found souvenir shops and evidence of glass and pottery manufacturing. Ten years later, in 1961, the German Archaeological Institute began serious excavation of the site under the direction of Peter Grossman, which continues until today.

Over successive seasons the ancient religious community came to life. The team found a transept or T-shaped basilica with a domed roof supported by 56 marble columns, the sockets of which could still be seen, with the pillar drums scattered around. The basilica, built of limestone, was 34.7 metres long and 20 wide. Above the saint's grave on the east side was the altar. On one aisle was a deep shaft leading down to the well where the sick were purportedly healed. In the tomb itself was found an icon of the saint, exactly as described by Al-Bakri. The mission also located a potter's workshop where souvenir objects including jugs, lamps and flasks had been fired some 1,500 years earlier for sale to pilgrims.

St Menas was one of the few Egyptian martyrs with an international reputation. The original church built over his grave soon became too small to accommodate the number of pilgrims, and the Emperor Arcadius (395- 408) built another, to which the saint's relics were transferred. Subsequent Roman emperors erected the Great Basilica, to which thousands of pilgrims made the pilgrimage from as far afield as England, France, Germany, Spain and Turkey. Cures were attributed to the therapeutic effects of the water which came from springs in the limestone rocks, which have since dried up. Baths were built beside the church after Constantine's only daughter, who suffered from leprosy, was reputedly healed there. The number of little flasks stamped with the saint's image and filled with healing water became an industry to cater to the needs of the worshippers and have been found around

the world. Indeed, they are familiar objects in many museums.

The German team also found evidence that shops and workshops lined a colonnaded route leading to the Church of the Martyr, which was rebuilt during the reign of Justinian (528-565). As excavations progressed, it was possible to deduce that pilgrims gathered in a great square where a semi-circular structure may have been a resting place for the sick. Discoveries included a double Roman bath for men and



women, two hospitals and a building which may have been used for church administrators. Surrounding the square were hostels on the north, where the monks took care of the sick, bath houses and wells. Surrounding the labyrinthine ruins were cells and refectories.

This great place of pilgrimage, so threatened today from another cause, was destroyed on three earlier occasions. The first was during the Persian invasion in 619 when countless Christian churches and shrines were ravaged

along the northern coast. The second was in 628 when the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius overthrew the Persians and himself destroyed religious buildings belonging to the Egyptian Church (later the Coptic Orthodox Church) who did not adhere to the dogma as laid down at the Council of Chalcedon in 451; and the third was after the Arab conquest when, following the withdrawal of the Melkite Patriarch from Alexandria, the monastery of St Menas became subject to dispute between the Greek Orthodox and the Coptic Orthodox churches on the question of jurisdiction. By the eighth century, when the government decreed that the shrine belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church, the site had been ravaged by Bedouins. Stones had been usurped, including valuable marble, for reuse elsewhere. Bedouin attacks continued for 30 years, and earthquakes added to the final devastation. Yet so great was the religious community that even as late as the year 1000 Al-Bakry described lights burning in the shrine of the saint night and day and "the beautiful water of St Menas that drives away pain".

The aim of archaeology is to reconstruct the past, and excavations continue. "We have found a building with an underground chamber with painted walls," Grossman told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "They were largely destroyed, but the 1,000 or more pieces that are being collected and restored are of high quality. We have also located a larger building, a complex, west of the northern part of the monastery, which has an inner court and a small garden. It may have been an apartment building."

Asked how serious was the danger to the site from underground water, Grossman said it was "approaching a catastrophe".

Mohamed Abdel-Aziz of Alexandria University, who is in charge of a study into the cause of the water problem, described what was happening. "Before 1986 the ground was dry to a depth of 26 metres and there was no threat to the excavated monuments. Then water started to rise, and we advised the British company carrying out an irrigation project in the area to dig a drain around the site, which they did. But then water returned to the whole area, and was rising quickly. Deepening the drain makes no difference because irrigation is not the main problem. The water is rising from below."

"A geologist from Alexandria University, Dr El-Ganeni, is carrying out a study in an attempt to identify the cause of the problem," Abdel-Aziz continued. "He is digging shafts and investigating the lie of the land. Perhaps the seepage comes from an ancient water course sloping towards the site. If that proves to be so, it is open to question whether it can be curbed."

So the web of information is slowly being unravelled, and archaeologists

theorise on how many priests and monks might have been attached to the sacred area in its heyday in the fifth and sixth centuries; whether tens, hundreds, or even thousands of traders and workmen lived in the vicinity; and how many monks resided in other urban areas on the coast or round the lake rather than in the holy city itself.

Meanwhile, the forces of nature are at work. UNESCO has threatened to remove the Monastery of St Menas from the World Heritage List unless radical steps are taken to protect the site. But at this stage it is difficult to visualise what can be done to curb the danger. This is an archaeological site below ground level, and the danger is coming from lower down. Water is seeping into the site, bringing salts to the surface and the existing ruins are crumbling.

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CONTRADICTIONARY stories about the birth and martyrdom of St Menas have merged into a complex myth. According to Coptic sources, the saint was born in Maryut (Mareotis), joined the Roman army when his parents died, refused to take part in the required imperial sacrifices, and deserted and declared himself a Christian. He was killed and buried at Maryut, where his grave was eventually lost beneath the sand. According to this legend, a shepherd observed that a sick lamb that crossed a certain spot in the desert immediately became well and subsequent digging revealed the relics of the saint. A church was built on the site and the relics placed beneath an altar.

Another version of the myth has Menas as a soldier-saint born to wealthy parents in western Asia, widely respected for his piety and miracles. In 196 he suffered terrible torture at the hands of the Romans: the soles of his feet were torn off, his eyes gouged, and his tongue torn out by the roots. But despite these terrible mutilations he was yet able to stand and address his spectators. Finally the emperor drew his sword and slew him. His body was supposed to be burnt but his colleagues managed to set his coffin adrift on the Mediterranean. It was cast ashore in Egypt, where some nomads found it, loaded it onto a camel and proceeded with it into the desert. At a certain point the camel refused to move further, and there the relics of the saint were buried.

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