

III.2 The Coptic Monasteries of St. Paul and St. Anthony

St. Anthony's Monastery (Deir Mar Antonios), and its neighbour St. Paul's (Deir Mar Bolos), are both Coptic Christian and the oldest inhabited monasteries in Egypt. The two monasteries have always been associated with each other through the lives of their founders, and until the early eighteenth century, St. Paul's was a dependency of the larger and richer monastery of St. Anthony. Hidden deep in the Galala Qibliya Plateau, and still relying, at least in part, on springs for their water supply, both still observe rituals that have hardly changed in 16 centuries. The monasteries in Egypt are all Coptic, apart from St. Catherine's in Sinai, which is a Greek orthodox monastery.

The monasteries are accessible by special tours from Cairo, Suez or Hurgada, and a stay in either monastery can be arranged in advance. The monastery of St. Anthony is only 25 km away from St. Paul's to the northwest, however both are separated by the South Galala Plateau. It is actually possible to hike from one monastery to the other along a trail across the mountainous Galala Plateau, though this is quite an arduous walk.

The monasteries are a key element in the cultural heritage of the northern region of the eastern desert. Built over many centuries, forts and churches of these two great monasteries present great examples of the evolution of Egypt's architectural heritage.

III.2.1 The Monastery of St. Paul, the Hermit.

The monastery is located in the Galala El Quibliya Plateau, approximately 160 km south-east of Cairo and about 100 km south of the Palm Hills site. The Cave Church of St. Paul marks the spot where St. Anthony, "the Father of Monasticism," and St. Paul, "the First Hermit," are believed to have met. It is a sacred place representing the very beginning of Christian monasticism.

According to Church tradition, St. Paul of Thebes (also known as St. Paul of Alexandria, St. Paul the Hermit, and St. Paul the Anchorite) for whom the monastery is named, lived a solitary ascetic life in a cave between about the years 251 and 341. St. Paul is honoured as the patron saint of hermits. His life, richly embroidered with legend, was written by St.

Jerome (347-420) in his "Vita Pauli primi eremite" (Life of St. Paul), and is depicted in numerous icons.

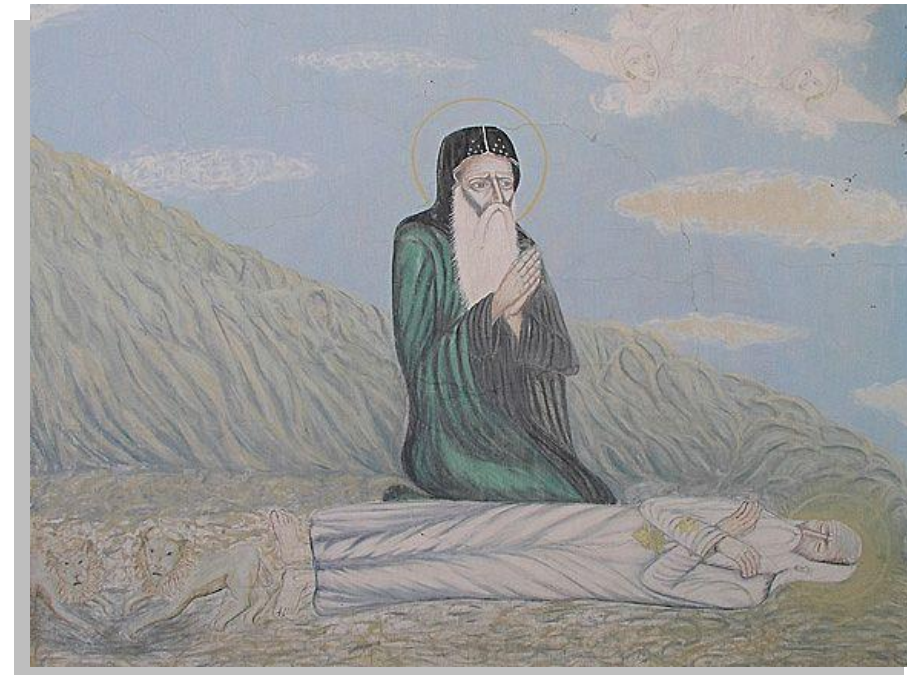


Figure 88: St. Anthony burying St. Paul, painting from St. Paul monastery



Figure 89: Locations of the St. Anthony and St. Paul Monasteries in relation to the PHD site.