

A FORGOTTEN STORY



The telling of Africa's ancient Christian heritage has languished for many centuries. Though it needs telling, there is some reticence to think that anyone from the West is adequately equipped to tell it. Yet it is so important to the history of Africa and global Christianity that it needs to be told accurately and without unfounded conjectures.



WHO CAN TELL IT?

Some Westerners will turn away from even hearing of Africa's ancient Christian heritage because of seated prejudices about the assumed unimportance of Africa to world history. There are other impediments: Political barriers such as those prevailing in Libya, Algeria and Sudan have prevented much of the story to be told earlier. The revolutions, terrorism and repressions following the Algerian struggle of 1956 have shut down borders. I have twice been denied entrance into Libya, even with a government-stamped visa in hand.

The ensuing obstacles to international travel have given the impression that there is no magnificent Christian history in North Africa, or not much. There seems to be little archaeological or textual or art history evidence. But that perception is changing. Now the





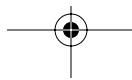
story can be retold based both on new evidence and the reexamination of old or neglected evidence.

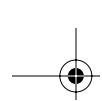
The story begs not only to be told but to be much further developed by research into its unexamined texts and artifacts, its economic, sociological, political and demographic features. It requires study by those who have expertise in the relevant languages of the historic texts, especially Arabic and Coptic and Ge'ez. Though Coptic and Orthodox Christians in the north of Africa will already have heard episodes of this story, most global Christians have only the sketchiest notion.

The name of the story is early African Christianity. It is not about Coptic Christianity alone or black Africa alone or Byzantine Greek Christianity alone or Latin Christianity alone or Nilotic Christianity alone, but all of these together. The best way of naming these varieties is by the ancient generic term *Africa*.

It especially needs to be retold in Africa by African parents to African children. Non-Africans are deeply moved by this story when it is straightforwardly told. How Africa shaped the Western mind is a story that belongs to the West as well as to Africa. Yet I have remained reticent until now to bear this responsibility, despite years of study of Africa's patristic texts, its archaeological remains, its art history and its current literature. The reticence is due to the withering question, Who are you to speak? Dr. Tite Tienou has advised: "Who are you? You are the one who has spent decades digging into the evidence. Don't hold it back."

So this attempt should be understood only as an early embryonic effort for others to nurture and improve upon. Its purpose is to encourage future generations of African scholarship to tell the story more adequately. But these new voices are still in preparation. The only advantage to hearing it in a Western accent is that it saves Afri-





can accents from the accusation that they are exaggerating.

Even with these ambivalences, there are justifiable reasons to proceed with this preliminary inquiry with the resources available. African Christians cannot further postpone the quest for lost roots. A wider database of information is needed, and needed soon. Primary texts written centuries ago need to be translated and made available. They have been too long buried. The age of digital communication gives new opportunities to make much more of it accessible.

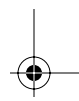
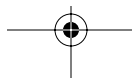
Why not just wait for those generations of scholarship to emerge? The main reason: Africa cannot wait to discover its own rich history. The struggle for identity is urgent and mounting. Every Christian and Muslim believer will be touched by that struggle. It will not permit delay. Both Muslims and Christians need to know much more than they now know about North African Christian and Muslim history in order to enter with realism into these hazardous times.

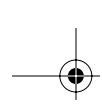
PILGRIMAGE SITES NEGLECTED

Sub-Saharan Africans await the delight of learning what happened long ago in the Nile and the Maghreb. At some point southern Africans are going to be traveling north to learn much more of their own African Christian roots. They need not go to Europe to discover those roots. There are an abundance of ancient Christian sites in Africa, some among the most ancient, the most impressive and beautiful.

The ancient pilgrimage sites of North African Christianity are currently poised for a massive increase of visitors from all over the world. New travelers will be welcomed to places like Hippo, Carthage, Wadi al-Natrun, Axum, Khartoum and Old Cairo—to parts of Africa that have not seemed all that welcoming previously.

Those who lack basic knowledge of early African Christianity will be missing some major pieces of the puzzle in the understanding of



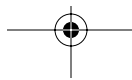
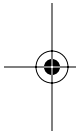


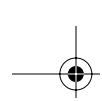
North Africa. They are likely to hear little from guides and government officials about the early centuries of Christian history that lie buried under the sand. They will not learn much about early African Christianity from the travel handbooks or tourist agencies or travel industries that still are heavily accountable to government interests. Church leaders will not learn this history by reading English sources, since most are not in English. Scholars educated in the best Western universities will miss a lot of it because it has already been discounted in these universities or dislodged by dubious preconceptions.

Early African Christianity has been long neglected even in Egypt, where vast sums have been spent on archaeology and where millions of Christians still live. The levels of disregard of some Christian sites in the Maghreb are even more shameful than in Egypt. Many of these ancient locations are unknown even to experienced historians, archaeologists, paleographers, travelers and explorers. We must look toward future generations of African scholarship to correct and improve the information systems and databases we now possess.

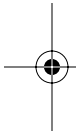
Even with these limitations, anyone who might be able to consider taking a pilgrimage to North African Christian sites will be abundantly rewarded spiritually and aesthetically by the mosaics, architecture, monuments and artifacts that can be found with just a little effort. Those interested in reading more in African history will find the available literature intriguing but incomplete. Pilgrims to Africa bring an empty cup to a full spring. Current efforts to reassess and understand these lost sites and texts and narratives are modest and should proceed without making any pretenses of being definitive. The authoritative inquiries will be made not by Europeans or Westerners, but by young Africans over several coming generations.

Scratch the surface of the archaeology of the North African coastal and inland Christianity in Numidia, Mauretania, Byzacena and Libya,





and you will find the remains of ruins of many martyrial oratories and cemeteries and churches that date to the fourth and fifth centuries, and some as early as the third (see map 4 of pre-Constantinian churches). Many are not even properly identified or grasped by map-makers or guides as significant. They are often missed by a tourist industry that, if it understood its own self-interest better, would be identifying these faceless sites and bringing global visitors there to discover for themselves the treasures long buried. But that task is not yet perceived to rank high among the priorities of tourism in Africa, though it some day will. The civil authorities in northern Africa have shown limited interest in archaeological projects that hint at a crucial intellectual history, textual remains and paleographic artifacts of Christians in the centuries before the Arab conquest.



UNDER SANDS: THE BURIAL OF ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS AND BASILICAS

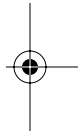
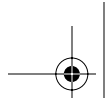


The focus of Egyptian archaeological authorities on Pharaonic Egypt has diverted attention from the rich Christian archaeological sites in the Nile. Many sites are in shambles, hard to find and have no logistical support for convenience or even accessibility.

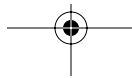
There is a poignant analogy between visiting archaeological sites and visiting ancient texts. Both have been buried in the sands of the desert and the fires of the Arab conquest. They need to be recovered, not just by Africans of the north but also by young Christians of the south. Some awareness of these sites is being reawakened by business and commercial activities and entrepreneurial interests. This commerce may provide a foothold for respectful interaction between Muslims and Christians that could benefit both equally.

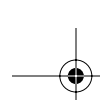
While the scholars will be visiting the texts, the laity will be visiting the sites. Both may become priorities for reconstructing mutual





Map 4. Pre-Constantinian churches





interests in the troubled Christian-Muslim relationship. Business interests of the south, east and west of Africa are beginning to discover common interests in Tunisia and Morocco as well as Egypt. Algeria and Libya are poised for massive tourist numbers. Sudan may be the most difficult area to restore trade relations. Christian business people from Nigeria to South Africa are finding common interests in North Africa, and may become the natural peacemakers.

The arenas of archaeology and linguistics need to be thoroughly restudied—archaeology because so many sites are unexcavated, and linguistics because so many of the root words in the sub-Saharan African languages have deep affinities with the Amharic, Semitic, Nilotic and Arabic language systems that have been appropriated by both Muslims and Christians over a millennium. Linguistic affinities may point to greater hidden links between the headwaters of the Nile in Uganda and the lower Nile Delta.

