

## Original article

## THE MONASTERY OF ST. HEDRA IN ASWAN, AS A COPTIC PILGRIMAGE DESTINATION

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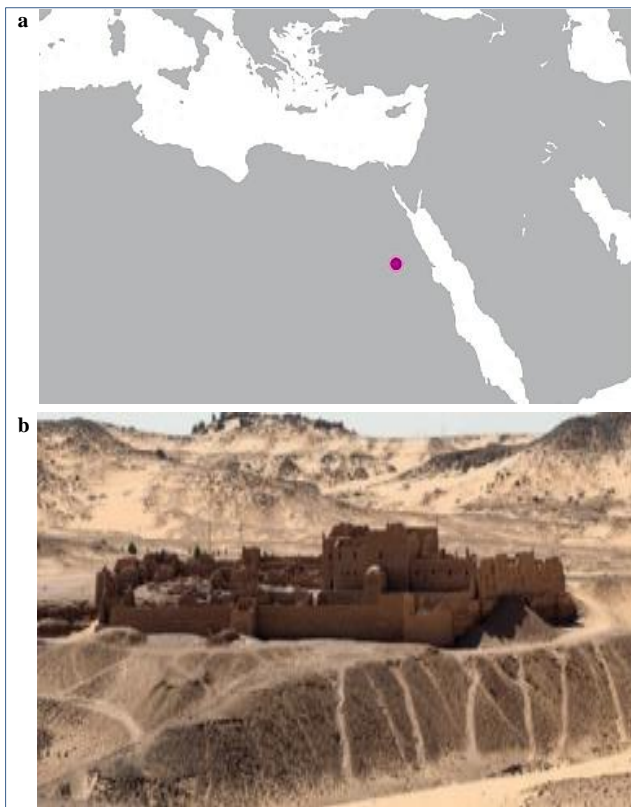
## Abstract:

This paper aims to explore and show the great importance of the monastery, which is considered one of the important Coptic pilgrimage medieval monasteries in Egypt. This monastery of Saint Hedra is located on the west bank of the Nile in the Aswan governorate. It was dedicated to his founder, Saint Hedra, who was the Bishop of Aswan at that time. The monastery was built in the seventh century. It is among the monasteries that belonged to Saint Pachomius, the founder of Communal monasticism in Upper Egypt at the beginning of the fourth century A.D. The monastery has a unique design; it is large and was built on 2 terraces, the lower one and the upper terrace. Also has many of the building's elements. The main part of the monastery is the church, which takes the basilica design; however, it is partly ruined and mostly of the parts of the monastery. Also, it was one of the Communal monasticism monasteries in Upper Egypt that had many monks who lived in the twelfth century; however, it became one abandoned monastery in the thirteenth century. This monastery has great historical, architectural, social, and religious values nowadays, and there are some excavations being carried out at this site, which shows the great importance of this monastery as a pilgrimage destination for many pilgrims all over the world. Moreover, it has one of the intangible heritages, which is the great celebration, named in Arabic as *Mulid*, which is consecrated to the Saint Hedra and is trying to revive this celebration wider. This study aims to put this site on the map of Christian pilgrimage in Egypt due to the great importance of the Monastery, which are historical, architectural, religious, and social values. Also, it should be added to the religious touristic programs as a pilgrimage destination for many Christians.

## 1. Introduction

There are many meanings of the word pilgrimage; the most convenient meaning is a physical journey undertaken by believers to a sacred and Holy place. However, the literal meaning of the pilgrimage is moving through traditionally and historically specific destinations, and it is a sanctification and glorification of God and his Saints. Scholars mentioned the pilgrimage to visit Holy ascetics parallel journeys to the Holy places in Palestine [1]. The concept of pilgrimage exists in all religions, starting from the ancient Egyptian times when Abydos became the main pilgrimage center for God Osiris. Pilgrimage is still being performed by all people in all religions, as Jewish to their synagogues, Christians to churches and monasteries, and Muslims to mosques in Meka and in Madina. There are many Coptic pilgrimage sites in Egypt, more than sixty sites [2]. The most famous one is the ancient city of Abu Menas in *Maryut* in Alexandria, which is considered the second most important and sacred site after Jerusalem,

followed by the monastery of the Virgin Mary in *Muharaq* [3]. The monastery of Saint Hedra is considered one of them, which is in Aswan, fig. (1-a). Aswan is one of the most southern and famous cities in Egypt [4] in Upper Egypt; it lies about 899 K.M. to the south of Cairo [5] on the eastern bank of the Nile River. Its name is derived from the Greek name of *Syene* and it was named in the ancient Egyptian language as *šwnw*, which means to trade [6]. It was also an important source for granite. Aswan is the second largest governorate in size and the biggest diocese in size; it extends from the south, starting from Abu Simbel to the north, where Edfu is [7]. Aswan also had a great importance during the Coptic period, especially in the fourth century A.D. (325 A.D.), once it became the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch [8]. It has 2 monasteries: the monastery of Qubal El-Hawa and the other one, which is the main concern in this research, which is the monastery of Saint Hedra, which has a unique view of the desert, fig. (1-b).



**Figure (1)** **a.** site map of the Saint Hedra monastery in Aswan, (After: Bodenstern, 2019), **b.** overview of the monastery of Saint Hedra in Aswan desert (After: Olschok, 2018).

## 2. Methodology

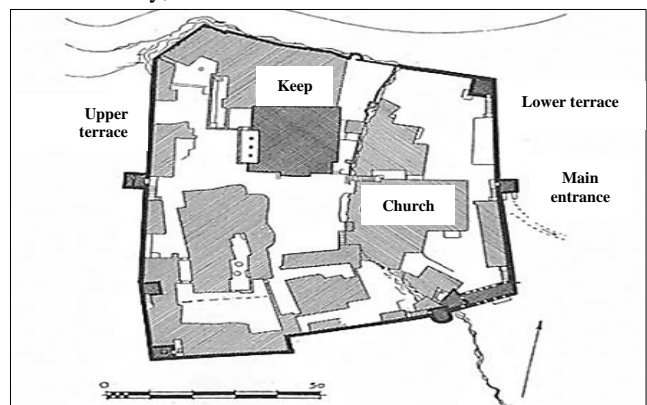
The monastery of Saint Hedra in Aswan is considered one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Egypt, mainly in the Aswan governorate, for many reasons, starting with the great historical, architectural, religious, and religious values of the Monastery. This study is a revival of its position in the past as a famous destination for many pilgrims.

### 2.1. Historical background

The monastery takes the name of the bishop, anchorite, monk, and Saint Hedra; later, it was named the monastery of Saint Simeon by the travelers and archaeologists. The monastery was founded by Saint or Anba Hedra, who was the Bishop of Aswan during that time. This monastery was constructed in the seventh century [9], and it was excavated and reconstructed by Ugo Monneret de Villard between (1924-1926). In addition, the German Archaeology Institute has been conducting a great project, and much research has been conducted on this site, revealing not only the religious significance but also the economic and social purposes, documentation of the inscriptions and graffiti, and documentation of many funerary stelae [10]. The monastery was one of the monasticisms communities in Upper Egypt until it was destroyed in 1173 A.D. and was ruined during the thirteenth century [11]; however, its main features are still preserved nowadays. It also has historical, archaeological, and religious importance and provided more details and valuable information for many archaeologists and travelers until the twentieth century A.D. [12].

### 2.2. The description

The monastery is located on the west bank of the Nile, in front of the island of Elephantine. It is one of the largest monasteries in Egypt [13]. It measures about 5.880 square meters. It has an irregular rectangular shape; it has a long north-south axis. The monastery has the normal elements of any Coptic monastery; it has 2 entrances: one is located on the eastern wall, while the second entrance is in the middle of the western wall, and both have towers [14]. The monastery is divided into 2 parts, or terraces, the lower part, and the upper part. The whole monastery is enclosed by a high enclosure wall made of mud mortar, whose height is about 6 m., and its width is about 2 m. The lower part, which includes the entrance, rock caves of the monks, the main church of the monastery, the baptistery, and a room for the pilgrim. The upper part of the monastery, which is reached by some steps, has a large keep, fig. (2), which is a strong and commanding tower, has also many cells for many monks, many rooms, an oil press to the south of the keep, a refectory, a kitchen [15] and several workshops [11]. There are some other ovens and some workshops. The main element of the monastery is the largest church, which takes the name of the patron Saint of the monastery, which is *Anba Hedra*.



**Figure (2)** the plan of the monastery as a square shape showing the main parts starting with the main entrance, the lower and upper terraces, the main church and the keep (After: Clarke, 1912)

### 2.3. The church

The church is the main building of the monastery; it is located on the south side of the enclosure wall [16]. It takes the basilica design; its length is about 28 meters and its width is 18 meters. It was built in the first half of the eleventh century. It has 2 entrances, one of which is located on the eastern side, which leads to the side aisles. The church is mostly ruined, and the most peculiar architectural feature is its octagonal dome. The church was constructed in 2 phases, the first phase was the building of the rock-cut chapel in the sixth or seventh century, and the second phase was the construction of the church itself in the seventh and eighth centuries. The church had many restorations; the first one was in the tenth century and the second one was in the twelfth century. This church was built in front of this rock-hewn wall and at the entrance of the cave. This church consists of a sanctuary with 3 squared rooms, a nave, 2 side aisles, and 2 octagonal domes, which are an imitation of Fatimid architecture. In addition, there is

a baptistery located on the eastern side of the south aisle. The church was rebuilt, and funerary *stelae* were reused in the reconstruction of this church. It consists of 3 layers of plaster, and there are some paintings, one of which dates to the twelfth century. It is in the eastern apse of the church, where the sanctuary takes a shape of a cross and has a semi-dome [16] made from red bricks with a height of 6 meters. There is a corridor or a passage behind the sanctuary. Also, there is a representation of Jesus and the 24 elders Apocalypse [17]. There are also some paintings on the dome that represent Christ and some angels, while there is a representation of the Virgin Mary standing between 2 bowing angels on the west side of the church inside a niche [11]. Moreover, there is a grotto located on the west side of the northern aisle, which was used as a residence place for the monks [10]. There is also a chapel dedicated to Saint Michael on the upper terrace [18]. The ground level of this church is lower than the monastery ground level.

#### **2.4. The patron Saint of the monastery**

Saint Hedra, or the great father, Anba Hedra, was the bishop of Aswan. He was born to a Christian parent who raised and taught him the principles of Christianity. When he was 18 years old, his parents wanted him to marry; however, he refused and imitated that he was ill. Then he decided to go to the church to ask about the will of his Lord. While returning home, he saw a funeral ceremony. He asked himself, “Listen, Hedra, it is onto this one that died, but you yourself who died from this futile world”. After he participated in burying the deceased, Hedra did not come back home, and he decided to live the rest of his life as a monk. So, he went to the monastery. When his parents knew that they had gone there and tried to convince him to return to their home, they left him to continue his new life. Saint Hedra lived a life of worship, asceticism, fasting, and prayers. Later, he became the disciple of Saint Poemin, who inspired Saint Hedra to be a good example like him. He dedicated his life to studying the life of Saint Antony, the father and founder of monasticism. He lived a solitary life in the desert, where he lived in a cave. The Saint has frequently suffered from devil temptations, and he had a continuous war with the devils, however, he defeated them every time [19]. Also, he had performed many miracles, and many Syrian monks came to ask him about many unclear Bible issues. When the bishop of Aswan died at that time, many monks and people took the Saint to Alexandria, which was against his will to have been ordained as a bishop by Pope Theophilus of Alexandria (385-412). Later, the monastery took the name of the Saint [9]. Lastly, he departed on the twelfth of the Coptic month of *Kiahk* [20] in the time of Emperor Theodosius (379-395), which represents the annual feast of the Saint. The Christians believe they considered the day of the death or martyrdom of the Saint in the day of his birth and not the actual day of his birth.

#### **2.5. Values affecting the monastery**

The monastery of Saint Hedra in Aswan is considered one of the unique medieval inhabited monasteries in Upper Egypt, and it is one of the Pachomius monasteries, which was founded by Saint Pachomius in the fourth century. He was the founder

of communal monasticism [21] at the beginning of the fourth century and this type of monasticism was completed by the 2 Saints Bigoul and Shenute. More than one monk used to share the same cell, they had to obey all the instructions, and gather in the Holy Mass, and have the communal meal together. Then everyone could live for a period alone.

##### **2.5.1. The historical and architectural values**

This monastery has a great historical value once its construction dates to the sixth or seventh century, which gives more information about the monastic life during that time, although it is a ruined one. The monastery was built as had been the case in Europe [17], but it has since the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century. The monastery was built in a historical place dating back to ancient Egyptian times, and there are some paintings that date to the pre-dynasty era [22]. It was built above the mausoleum of Agha Khan. Also, the discovery of the funerary *stelae*, which dates to the ancient Egyptian period, was reused in the rebuilding of the monastery in the tenth century. These funerary *stelae* are preserved nowadays in the Coptic Museum in Cairo [9]. Many historians and travellers had mentioned this monastery in their writings, like Abu Salih, who had spoken twice about this monastery the first time when he mentioned that there was a church dedicated to Saint Hedra in that place. The second time, he spoke about a monastery of the Saint on the left side of the Nile bank, which still had many monks [23]. Abu al-Makarm spoke about this monastery as one of those inhabited by monks in the thirteenth century and there are some European travellers who also spoke about this monastery in the eighteenth century like Jomard, Jullien, Johann George, and Maspero. They described it as one of the largest and best-preserved medieval monasteries in Egypt during the thirteenth century [11]. Gr-*affiti* was written in Arabic and Coptic languages on the walls of the monastery [24] in the thirteenth century about (1295 A.D.). The monastery has a unique and unusual design that has 2 terraces, the lower and the upper. There is a church on the lower terrace, which is octagonal with 2 domed bays, and there is a court for accommodating the pilgrims. There is also the keep on the upper terrace, which is the most completed and preserved one among the elements of the monastery. It has many cells for the monks, which used to accommodate more than one monk. There are about 5 different size ovens, and 4 mills or presses exist among the elements of the monastery. There is not a well in this monastery, but there is a cistern for water. Also, the study of pottery in Aswan depends on the pottery kilns of the monastery. The church has some paintings that exist nowadays, and there are some geometrical shapes like octagonal and squares on the ceiling. The walls have 3 layers of coating pilaster. There is the cemetery of the monastery, which gave us a great source of information for archaeologists and historians about the lives of the early Christians and their habits. Also, it showed the social and economic purpose of the monastery [10]. It was written in different languages and formulas [11]. There are many tombstones or funeral *steale* that were discovered by Borian in the nineteenth century (1884 A.D.) in the cemetery, which dates to the fifth or sixth century, that give proof that this mon-



astery was constructed during that time, it was transformed into the museums in Cairo and Alexandria. A great documentary text was discovered by Monnert de Villard during his excavations in the monastery during the twentieth century [17] from 1924 to 1926. The recent excavations of the monastery have revealed many different workshops of potteries, textiles, glasses, outraces, ceramics, and some papyrus that ensure that this site has many manufacturing for many materials and many industries have been found in this site [22]. In addition, there are some basins for purifying the salt.

### 2.5.2. The social value (The mulid)

This monastery has great social value once it has a great Coptic heritage, which is “our legacy from the past”. It could be divided into 2 parts: The 1<sup>st</sup> part is the tangible heritage, which represents the ancient elements of the monastery, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> part represents the intangible heritage, which represents the ceremony and festival that are dedicated to the saint Hedra, it is also called in Arabic *Mulid*. Egypt has many *Mulids* that were dedicated to many and different Saints and Martyrs; the most famous one belongs to the Virgin Mary and Saint George in some churches and monasteries all over Egypt. The *Mulid* had its roots in ancient Egypt when they celebrated with their deities. In the Coptic era, the saints and the Martyrs replaced these ancient deities, and they were also taken by the Muslims as *Sheikhs*. The word *Mulid* means, in English, the birthday of the person, while in Christianity, it represents the day of the departure of the Saint or the day of the martyrdom of the Martyr to be their birthday rather than the actual day of their birth. The monastery has an annual celebration, or *Mulid*, of Saint Hedra, although it is an inhabited monastery and there are no monks, and this monastery is under the supervision of the supreme council of Antiquities [7]. However, the Coptic Orthodox church got a permit to make the annual festival for the Saint, which is celebrated on 12 of the Coptic months of *Kiahk*, which corresponds with the twenty-first of December, which represents the day of Saint departure [14] where many pilgrims are gathered, fig. (3). And they used to visit the cave of the Saint. The Holy Mass could be conducted every year by the Bishop of Aswan, accompanied by many priests and deacons in white costumes. The celebration could last for 3 days. The visitors could participate in the recitation of religious prayers and chanting *Tamgeed*, which is considered one of the most important rituals during the commemoration of the Saint festival. Also, there are some miracles being done by Saint Hedra. The icon of the Saint could be carried by one of the priests; also lighting candles and crosses are carried during the celebration while chanting special prayers that are dedicated to Saint Hedra. Many pilgrims ask for the intercession of the Saint to achieve their hopes or solve their problems [25]. Many modern houses were built around the monastery to accommodate the great number of pilgrims during the days of the festivals, or *Mulid* [26]. Many pilgrims used to make a pilgrimage tour to this monastery during the festival days from different places all over the world. They had inscribed their names on the wall of the monastery; there are also many inscriptions and graffiti written by Coptic and Muslim people

on the walls of the monastery [13], in addition to a Greek one that was inscribed by a Nubian scribe. Also, there was a large logging in the lower terrace of the monastery to accommodate the large numbers of pilgrims [8].



**Figure (3)** many pilgrims are gathered to celebrate the Mulid of Saint Hedra in his monastery in Aswan, (After: Gadallah, 2022).

### 2.5.3. The religious value

Egypt is the source of monasticism, which was spread all over the world. There are 3 types of monasticism. The first type is the individual one, which was founded by Saint Antony, the father of all monks. The second type is the communal one, which was founded by Saint Pachomius. While the third type combines the 2 other types of monasticism [11]. The monastery of Saint Hedra is one of the valuable medieval pilgrimage monasteries [12] for many pilgrims and visitors accompanying the monastery of Qubbat al-Hawa in Aswan. It has great importance since the holiness of his patron Saint, which is Saint Hedra, reached the highest spiritual degree in monasticism as a hermit who could move from one place to another easily. This monastery is one of the Pachomian monasteries, which was founded by Saint Pachomius, who is the founder of communal monasticism in Sohag, Upper Egypt. The monastery of Saint Hedra had a great number of monks during the twelfth century, and there is also a cemetery that included a great number of the buried monks, which gave us valuable information about the conditions and habits of the early Christians. Many elements existed in the monastery, and some industries were conducted in that place for manufacturing many objects. There were also 5 ovens and 4 mills, which prove that many different monks had lived in this place. In addition, the ancient rock tomb that dates to ancient Egyptian time was used by the monks as a residence place for them [15]. There are many cells that were constructed in the keep of the monastery. These cells had a unique style that included about 3 steps built of mud brick, which were used as beds for every monk to live together and practice all the spiritual rituals together, which represent the communal life that was established by Saint Pachomius [14]. Moreover, there are some monasteries

that followed the system of Saint Pachomius in Sohag in Upper Egypt, like the white and the Red monasteries. Some valuable information about communal monasticism has come from the monastery of Saint Hedra, such as that some monks dwelled together in a cell to eat and pray together; some of them used to eat once a day and others once a week [16]. In addition to that, every monk had to do a specific job. Among the teachings of Saint Pachomius is that the monk who does not work will be fought by one devil, while the monk who works will be fought by many monks [14]. This monastery was one of the pilgrimage sites for many pilgrims, especially the Nubians, who used to write their names on the walls of the monastery. Nowadays, a mass is being conducted by the priests and deacons, and many people celebrate the feast of Saint Hedra, asking for the intercession of the Saint and hoping to get some miracles from him.

### 3. Results

The monastery of Saint Hedra is considered one of the most valuable Coptic sites in Aswan, which gave us great information about the communal monasticism that belonged to Saint Pachomius, the founder of this type of monasticism. This monastery is considered one of the important destinations for many travellers and historians, and it has many inscriptions on its walls that prove the importance of this site for many pilgrims that used to come to make a pilgrimage tour to this place, and there is an ancient lodging to accommodate many numbers of the pilgrims, which proves the great importance of this monastery as a pilgrimage site due to the great values of the monastery, especially the annual festival of Saint Hedra. It could be of a great importance to many pilgrims in Egypt if it were reconstructed with all its elements to facilitate many pilgrimage rituals to be performed at this site and to correspond with the aspects of Coptic pilgrimage.

### 4. Discussion

Based on the above information, there are many Coptic pilgrimage sites in Egypt. Saint Hedra monastery is considered one of these sites according to the intangible and intangible heritage of the site, which corresponds with other pilgrimage sites in Egypt like the historical site of Saint Means in Marut in Alexandria, which has the same criteria for being a pilgrimage site, and this corresponds with the existing factors that make this monastery a pilgrimage site. In addition to that, there are some excavations being carried out nowadays by the German Institute in Cairo and many writers wrote about this monastery however, it could not be presented as a pilgrimage site, although just the excavations showed the great importance of this monastery with different archaeological, architectural, social, and religious importance. Some scholars mentioned the pilgrimage to visit Holy Ascetics parallel journeys to the Holy places in Palestine, and Saint Hedra the hermit and the Bishop of Aswan reached the highest degree of holiness during his lifetime till nowadays, and there is a great festival there where many monks and believers gathered around him. However, there is no specific orientation regarding the importance of this site as a pil-

grimage site, although it was a famous site for many travellers and historians during the eighteenth century from different countries all over the world.

### 5. Recommendations

There are some recommendations to develop this monastery and the surrounding area to accommodate a large number of visitors and make it a desirable destination for Coptic pilgrimage in Upper Egypt.

- \*) Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and Monuments must think about the best restoration and preserving for this monastery to show the great shape of this huge and ancient building with its unique elements that could not be repeated among the Coptic churches and monasteries in Egypt. Also, it could enable the pilgrims to perform the common rituals of the pilgrimage.
- \*) Also, it is necessary to provide this monastery with a fresh and sweet spring of water, as the lack of the water was one of the main reasons that made it an abandoned monastery, also trying to return the monastic life to this monastery by allowing for many monks live there.
- \*) A great and big effort should be exerted to revive the intangible heritage to this site which is the great celebration or *Mulid* for the Saint and try to add this celebration on the Heritage list of UNESCO along with the festivals that relate to the festivals that are being held in the places that were visited by the holy family during their journey in Egypt.
- \*) In addition to building a hotel to accommodate many pilgrims and visitors to this site for the great importance of this place as a historical, archaeological, social, and religious values for this site as a pilgrimage site for many people in all over the world.
- \*) Also building a museum, which plays a great role in presenting all the tangible intangible heritage for the site and documenting the great history of this monastery and presenting the great excavations and discoveries for the German mission in this site since their great project in 2014 [24].
- \*) Establishing some of the shops that are selling some of the souvenirs that could always remind the pilgrim of the place and help in encouraging others to make a pilgrimage tour to this monastery.
- \*) The touristic companies and agencies should add this site to the tourist tours in general and to the Coptic pilgrimage programs due to the great importance of these huge and unique pilgrimage sites to all Christians all over the world.
- \*) The touristic companies must concentrate on the disabled and sick people, who are the main and major segments for this kind of tourism and try to find solutions to the obstacles that may face religious tourism.
- \*) Providing the site with ambulances vehicles, in addition to the equipped cars and buses to help and transport the elderly, the disabled, and people with special needs who are interested in this religious tourism, mainly the pilgrimage to this site.
- \*) The Ministry of Local Development must elaborate the surrounding area to make it a touristic site to accommodate

large numbers of visitors, in addition to linking religious tourism to many other types of tourism in Aswan, such as archaeological and entertainment types.

- \* Marketing is a magic tool for increasing the number of tourists visiting this site, along with other similar monasteries in Sohag governorate like the White and Red monasteries.
- \* Linking between religious tourism and many other types of tourism in Aswan, where there are many tourist sites, entertainment, and modern buildings that could be visited along with the pilgrimage tour.
- \* Using the River Nile as a great method for transportation, like the Nile cruise to this monastery, and connecting it with similar Pilgrimage sites in Sohag governorate, like the White and Red monasteries.
- \* Lastly, try to imitate and use the same techniques and promotions in other successful countries in this field, such as Jordan and Palestine, to attract the same large numbers of pilgrims to Egypt.

## 6. Conclusions

This monastery is considered one of the most valuable Coptic pilgrimage sites regarding the important and outstanding factors that exist in this monastery, including the tangible and intangible Coptic heritage. The monastery has an untraditional shape with many building elements that give enough illustrations of the life of monasticism in this place. This site is dedicated to a famous Saint. There is a big celebration held annually regarding Saint Hedra, and many pilgrims could gather during that time to seek the intercession of the Saint. Many pilgrims believe in the power of this Saint. Many pilgrims used to perform some rituals of the pilgrimage, the main one being to baptize their children in the new monastery of Saint Hedra. The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities has constructed a cement road to facilitate the arrival of this monastery. Moreover, many new buildings have been built to accommodate the large number of visitors and pilgrims during the 3 days of the festival of the Saint. There are many tourist sites in Aswan governorate that date back to many periods, like the ancient Egyptian period, Ptolemy, Greek, Christian, Islamic, and the new era.

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