The Evolution of Different Fonts in the Coptic Churches Throughout the Centuries

A evolução das diferentes fontes de água nas igrejas coptas ao longo dos séculos

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/medievalista/3348>

DOI: 10.4000/medievalista.3348

ISSN: 1646-740X

Publisher

Instituto de Estudos Medievais - FCSH-UNL

Printed version

Number of pages: 335-362

Electronic reference

Mary Magdy Anwar, "The Evolution of Different Fonts in the Coptic Churches Throughout the Centuries", *Medievalista* [Online], 28 | 2020, Online since 01 July 2020, connection on 23 March 2021.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/medievalista/3348> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/medievalista.3348>

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The Evolution of Different Fonts in the Coptic Churches Throughout the Centuries

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Mary Magdy Anwar

- 1 Only after the promulgation of the Milan decree of Emperor Constantine I in 313 A. D. that Christians in Egypt had the right, after long years of persecution, to build churches by adopting the architectural styles of rectangular basilica and Byzantine known as domes. The church consisted of a nave, choirs, aisles and shrines. Baptisteries, fonts of the *laqqān*, as well as a basin named *Al Maghtas* were also built in the architecture of the Coptic Orthodox churches during the centuries that followed.
- 2 Our research aims to first of all emphasize the differences between these basins, their use and their evolution. Second to highlight their importance by exposing various examples appearing in the different ancient monasteries and churches, especially that these buildings represent a significant part of the Coptic Egyptian heritage that should not be overlooked.

The rite of Baptism and the Baptisteries

- 3 The baptism, in arabic *El-Ma'mūdīa* (*المعمودية*) is derived from Greek *baptisma* (*βάπτισμα*) which means “dyeing”¹.

It is surnamed “gate of the mysteries” and represents the first sacrament of the Coptic Church where pure water is used

2.

- 4 The priest performs trine immersion³
 , which symbolizes the three days since the death until the Resurrection of Christ.
 Those three days evoke also the crossing of the Red Seaby Moses and the Israelis and related to the Trinity⁴

. In the first centuries, the immersion was total (that was why the baptisteries were deep in the old churches). Then the custom changed, only the last immersion remained total, the first two became partial; one to the half of the body and the other to the neck

5.

- 5 The priest pours oil of gladness (*ghâlîlâûn*, *الغالبيلاون*) and Chrism (*Myron*) on the baptismal waters, then he takes the *Myron* and applies 36 unctions to the different parts of the neophyte's body for confirmation⁶.

Although, this rite recalls the one that was established by Saint John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan and to which he invited the sinners as a sign of repentance, Jesus himself was baptized there (Matthew 3:6). The date of the beginning of baptism by the Apostles is not known. The ritual took place in the rivers, as happened to the first three thousand converts by Peter and the Apostles (Acts 2:41), and in the case of Philip and

- 6 the Ethiopian's eunuch (Acts 8:36)

7.

- 7 We note that the timing of baptism was changeable. From the 2nd to the 4th century, baptism only took place during the feasts of the Resurrection or Pentecost.

Then from the 4th to the 7th century, the Epiphany became the day consecrated to baptism⁸

. However, Ibn El Seba` wrote that in the first centuries, baptismal rites were held only on one day which was the Holy Friday: the baptized person is buried in the baptismal font in the image of Christ who died and who entered the tomb

⁹. Thus, baptism is literally and symbolically not only cleansing, but also dying and rising again with Christ.

On the other hand, Butler and Ceres pointed out that it was forbidden to baptize during the Holy Week, Easter Time (

- 8 *Al-Ḥmāsīn*, *الخمسين*)¹⁰ as well as during all Lent except on the 6th Sunday of Lent at *āḥdāl-tnāṣīr*, and this was according to the recommendations of Christodolus in the 11th century¹¹, who was the patriarch that applied baptism¹².

During the era of martyrdom and strong persecution, services took place in houses where baptism was carried out secretly. When Christians were allowed to build churches, they built baptismal tanks

- 9

13.

As for the age of the baptized person, in the first centuries he had to wait until the age of 30, exactly like the age of Christ when he was baptized

- 10

14

. Since many people died before that age, the newborns were baptized, 40 days after the boy's birth and 80 days for the girl

15 .

The Baptistry: Forms, Evolution and Emplacement

- 11 The term “baptismal font – baptistry” is derived from the Latin word *baptistērīum* and from the ancient Greek βαπτιστήριον, which comes from the Greek verb βαπτίζω (*baptízō*). This means “plunges” or “immerses”, while the Latin word *fons* means “source”, “fountain”¹⁶.
- 12 According to the *Didaskalia*, the building of the font should be located at the end of the north-west aisle of the church, in the narthex to the left of the entrance¹⁷. However, this habit was not always respected¹⁸. Some historians explained that there was a difference between the location of the font and the location of the baptismal ceremony¹⁹. The baptistry usually consisted of a double portico: the baptized person entered the baptistry by one of the doors on the west side, then after baptism and confirmation, he passed through the other door on the east side which overlooked the church to receive the Eucharist²⁰.
- 13 In some early churches, the baptistry consisted of a single room, but in others it contained an adjoining “Myron anointing room” and a vestibule for dressing²¹. It is rare to find a baptistry outside the church building²², with the exception of the one located in the place of Saint Mina in Mariout; and the one that exists in the Ashmunein Basilica in the northern part of the church and finally the one of Dayr Anba Shenouda (The White monastery) in Sohag, which is located in the northern part of the South aisle outside the church. The latter consisted of a square room, sometimes used as a chapel because it includes a limestone niche dating from the 4th century and which contained a deep font that was accessed by the help of steps²³. Their importance lies in the fact that they represent Episcopal places or pilgrimage sites²⁴.

The Forms of the Baptismal Tanks

- 14 In certain places, the font stands on a central pillar or a support, which is considered as a symbol of the axis of the world, in others it is raised by four columns – the four cardinal points of the universe – that allude to the four evangelists²⁵. The baptismal font is known among the Copts as “the Jordan”²⁶.
- 15 When the baptistry became a single room not separate from the church, it was built in a rectangular or square form that is due to:
- 16 1 - The influence of the normal form of rooms built inside houses.
- 17 2 - The baptisteries that underwent the same evolutions of cubic *frigidarium* rooms in public baths (*Thermee*).
- 18 3 - The shape of square or cubic mausoleums²⁷.
- 19 The baptismal fonts are divided into two types:
- 20 I - One is dug in the ground. It consists of a basin with stairs on both sides by which the catechumen descends to receive the baptism and an upper step for the priest to apply

baptism by immersion²⁸. This shape is inspired by the image of the Jordan River which contains marble steps²⁹.

- 21 Several kinds of geometric shapes are derived from this type:
- 22 1 - The square-rectangular form represents the shape of the tombs of the martyrs of the first centuries with internal steps and also symbolizes the tomb of Christ³⁰.
- 23 Examples illustrate this aspect as the circular baptismal basin inscribed in a rectangular form without steps, located in the north-eastern part of the temple church of Abusir (Taposiris Magna, Borg El Arab) (Fig.1) discovered in 1990, which dates back to the 4th and 5th centuries and the reminiscent of the form of the baptistery of the monastery of Saint Simon in Aswan³¹.
- 24 2 - The hexagonal form refers to the 6th day of the week (Good Friday).
- 25 3 - The octagonal, 8th day of the week, evokes the day of the resurrection; a rare form in Egypt.

Fig. 1 – The circular baptismal basin inscribed in a rectangular in the north-eastern part of the temple church of Abusir, red brick stone, dates back to the 4th century.

(©Author's photography)

- 26 4 - The cylindrical shape symbolizes the matrix: baptism is the second birth of the church matrix. It also symbolizes eternity: the circle is the infinity of God³². This is the most common form, with two steps to get down. There are many examples, such as:
- 27 The Basilica in Ashmunein and the North Basilica of Abu Mina in Mariout³³, the patriarchal residence, located in the southern part of the church, surrounded by small chapels and that includes a cylindrical font surmounted by a dome supported by six columns. It dates back to the 6th century³⁴. An adjoining baptistery room with three niches in the east was likely to contain the *Myron*³⁵.

28 Cylindrical forms without stairs appear in the Old Cairo churches as the one situated in the western of the narthex of Abu Sergah church
 36(Fig. 2), constructed in limestone sculpted in high relief with cross forms, with a pedestal decorated with crosses surrounded by birds and gazelles, placed inside a niche; it dates back to the 4th century.

Fig. 2 – The cylindrical baptismal font, in the western of the narthex of Abu Sergah church, limestone, dates back to the 4th century.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

- 29 The exceptional example is the stone baptismal font recently discovered in the south-eastern part inside the Holy Family crypt in Abu Sergah dates back to the 4th/5th centuries³⁷.
- 30 5 - The cruciform shape that symbolizes the crucifixion of Christ, with stairs like the one in Pelusium (Al-Farama) (Fig. 3), discovered near the western church, dates back to the 4th century. These remains exist actually in the north-western side, with a marble sailing and ruins of steps in the eastern and the western of the pool³⁸.

Fig. 3 - The cruciform baptismal font discovered near the western church in Pelusium, red brick stone, dates back to the 4th century.

(© **AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY**)

- 31 6 - The shape of four-petal flowers that resemble the cross³⁹.
- 32 II - The other kind is built above the floor level. It contains a cylindrical basin not deep but which suits children to plunge into the water. It is built in marble or stone, its diameter varies between 0.80 to 1m. It stands on a pedestal fixed to the wall inside the niche usually ornamented by the image of Jesus Christ's baptism. In this way, water is filled and emptied manually. It is a current model which we find it in Al Moallaqa church in old Cairo. This font goes back to the 10th century (Fig. 4). It is a cylindrical shape in pink granite decorated with lines in the form of waves that represent the hieroglyphic sign of water (MW) fixed to the wall in a niche ornamented with mosaic with different geometrical forms and lotus flowers⁴⁰.

Fig. 4 – The cylindrical baptismal font in Al Moallaqa church in old Cairo, in pink granite, dates back to the 10th century, 1.50 m deep.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

- 33 In Abu Hennes at Melawi, the font is dug inside a wall in the western of the north sanctuary with two openings from the two sides that serve in maintaining the jars of the holy oil⁴¹. In Dayr El Anba Bichay (Red monastery), we find a small font that dates back to the 4th century⁴², flanked to the wall without any decorations, only with a small hole in its pedestal that helps to empty the water after baptism (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – The small font in Dayr El Anba Bichay, stone, that dates back to the 4th century, 65cm deep.
(©Author's photography)

In ancient times, the large capitals of columns sometimes served as baptismal basins. A hole was made to clear the water after baptism. The splendid marble capital found in the Coptic Museum in Cairo provides a good example. It was discovered in the ruins of the

34

Suspended Church of Saint Mark in Alexandria, which dates back to the 6th century. It takes the shape of a basket with reliefs of palm trees in the four corners⁴³.

35 In the 6th

century, a double font was built; one of small size for infants and the other larger for adults, accompanied by an annex that contains the holy oil

⁴⁴. The baptistery of Saint Mina at Mariout, west of *Martyrium*

, discovered in 1905-1907, bears witness to this type. It dates back to the 6th

century in the time of Pope Timothy and consists of several pieces: the first large square-shaped on the outside and octagonal on the inside. It contains a large circular marble basin, 1.55 m deep and 2.30 m diameter covered with a dome with steps on both sides for adults. Its walls are composed of four niches covered with two layers of mosaics. As for the second, it also consists of several niches, with a small font made for children

⁴⁵.

36

A different type of baptismal font exists in Catholic churches known as the "chalice cup" where the practice of baptism is by aspersion. This font is built of marble and is adorned with different motifs⁴⁶, such as that which appears in the font of the Church of Saint Catherine in Alexandria, which dates back to the 18

th/19th century and is decorated by the statue of Christ, surrounded by high relief motifs⁴⁷ (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 - The marble font in the Church of Saint Catherine in Alexandria, this dates back to the 18th/ 19th century.

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Other Examples of Ancient Baptisteries

The "Sultan's Baptistry" found in the Abu Seifein Church in Old Cairo dates back to the 10th century and is erected in stone. It is located to the right of the chapel of Mari Yacub el Mocata', 92 cm deep, 1.58 cm high and 33 cm wide⁴⁸.

Dayr Al-Maimoun at Atfih embraces two baptismal fonts; one in the church of Saint Anthony placed in the left sanctuary in the shape of a circular limestone, the other is in the church of Abu Seifein³⁸

asquare shaped shallow stone used for children (Fig.7)⁴⁹

. Gothic graffiti of pilgrims with escutcheons decorate their walls⁵⁰

. The Wadamon El Armanty Church also contains a circular large hole for emptying the water⁵¹.

Fig. 7 - Squarefont in the Church of of Abu Seifein in Dayr Al-Maimoun at Atfih, limestone, 95 cm deep.
(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

The “*Laqan*” Basin

This basin, which appears in the ancient churches, is used in three ceremonies by the sanctification of water: the eve of the Epiphany (19-20 January), to memorize the baptism of Christ; Holy Thursday, when Christians commemorate the washing of the feet made by Christ to all his Apostles, and the feast of the Apostles (12th of July)⁵².

It is a 60 cm long and 30 cm wide tank that is dug into the ground, in the center of the western end of the third khurus⁵³, of the central nave⁵⁴. It is filled with pure water and a pottery jar is placed at its side. The priest wears the *epitrichalion*⁵⁵ during the ritual⁵⁶.

The ancient sources insist on the importance of *laqân*. Sawiris Ibn El Moqaffa in the 10th century considered the *laqân* as purgatory and explained in *Tartib al-Kahanât* that all the churches were provided with a basin so that the faithful wash their feet on Holy Thursday

. This basin was located to the west of the church, because the priest officiates while directing his eyes during the ritual towards the East in the direction of the sanctuary

Abu El Makarm (12th century), also testified to the presence of *laqân* at Deir Abu Maqar in Wadi Habib (Wadi El-Natroun). After the celebration of Holy Thursday, the monks took water from the *laqân* and poured it into the Nile to bless it and thus served its flood⁵⁹. Otherwise, Ibn El Saba (13th century) noted the ritual of *laqân*

in his book, chapter 99, saying that the priest takes a cloth and wraps it round his waist as Jesus has done before (John 13, 4), begins to wash the feet of the faithful and then wipe with the linen with which he is girded

⁶⁰.

Butler pointed out that the first Christians who entered the church barefoot, following the recommendations of the decree of Pope Christodolus in the 11th century, were to purify their feet in these pools called “basins of purification, washing or ablution”

⁶¹. However, this habit fell into disuse in the 14th

century. In fact, these vats recall the basins that were held at the entrance of ancient Egyptian temples

⁶².

Butler asserted the existence of such basins. Indeed, a stone basin, below the level of pavement, devoted to washing, located at the entrance of the main church of the Anba Bishay monastery (The Red Convent) in Sohag, was discovered in 2017 (Fig. 8)

⁶³.

Fig. 8 - The stone basin, located at the entrance of the church of the AnbaBishay monastery in Sohag, 15 cm deep.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

The Forms of *Laqân* Basins:

1 - Octagonal form, inscribed in a square, exists to the west of the nave in the temple church of Habou in Luxor and it dates back to the 4th century⁶⁴

. The other is at Abu Seifein Church in Old Cairo. It is made of marble, inlaid with red and black marble, 90 cm x 90 cm (length and width), 25 cm deep, decorated on the inside with semi-circular shapes of the four corners

⁶⁵.

46 2 - Square shape inscribed in a rectangle with interrupted sides by circular beads, in the church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Oskar in Helwan, and dates back to the 18th/19th century⁶⁶.

47 3 - The most famous form in Egypt is the circular *laqân* inscribed in a rectangle or a square. The oldest was located at the Basilica El Ashmunein in the central nave between the sixth and seventh columns, which dates back to the 4th century⁶⁷.

. In the monasteries of Wadi El-Natroun, to the west of the central nave of the churches, there is the marble

laqân, like that of the Baramus, which dates back to the 7th century, with a depth of 14 cm, 35 cm diameter⁶⁸

. It is also found in Anba Bishoy and El-Surian monasteries. At Dayr of El-Maimun, in the Abu Seifein church in front of the entrance, there is a stone *laqân* (Fig. 9)⁶⁹.

48 These forms of *laqân* are also numerous in the old churches of Old Cairo: in El-Moallaqah where *alaqân* is located west of the central nave between the first and the second column⁷⁰; in the church of Santa Barbara and Abu Sergah (Fig. 10).

Fig. 9 - The stone *laqân* in the Abu Seifein church at Dayr of El-Maimum, in a bad situation.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

Fig. 10 – The *laqânbasin* in Abu Sergah church in Old Cairo, marble, 15 cm deep.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

El Maghtas(Epiphany Pool):

Formerly, according to an ancient Coptic tradition, a region of the Nile was chosen to
 49 plung
 e
 in before the Epiphany celebration, and children were brought down there, in spite of
 the cold, to imitate Christ who had descended into the Jordan
 71.

El Maqrizi specified that sometimes several governors participated in the celebration of
 this festival, as Mohamed Ibn-Tougague in 941 A.D. and some Fatimid Caliphs like El
 Zaher Aziz Allah. Others completely canceled the celebration, like El-Moazz and El-Aziz.
 As for El-Hakim (according to his mood), he participated a few times but in 1008 A.D. he
 50 promulgated a decree that totally prohibited this kind of celebration
 72. This is why the pool of the *Maghtas*
 is currently inside the churches as an alternative to the Nile⁷³.

51 In the 10th
 century, Sawiris Ibn El Moqaffa wrote that the faithful, men and women, required the
 presence of the
Maghtas inside the church to help them to be purified from their sins⁷⁴
 . Abu El Makarem also mentioned the presence of the *Maghtas*
 that was cleaned from sand and filled with water at Abu Maqar Monastery⁷⁵
 . In turn, Ibn El Seba' in the 13th
 century, quoted that the Epiphany celebration was held at night, in front of the *Maghtas*
 and that it was better to seek water from the Jordan and pour it into the *Maghtas*⁷⁶.
 Ibn Kabr confirmed the presence of the *Maghtas* in the 14th century churches⁷⁷.

The Form of *el Maghtas*:

No details indicate its exact location, outside or inside the church. It is an underground
 room in cubic, rectangular, round or parallelogram shape, 1.5 m deep. This basin is
 52 capped with a wooden cover (no longer used)
 78.

53 Different examples of the *Maghtas* in the old churches:

54 1 - Inside the churches of Old Cairo at Abu Sergah, there is a sumptuous rectangular
Maghtas covered with marble (Fig. 11

) in the middle of the narthex to the west of the central nave, 1.40 m deep (2.60 x 1.7 m length and width)

⁷⁹.It is in laid with black and red marble.

Fig. 11 - The rectangular *Maghtas* covered with marble in the Abu Sergah church, black and red marble, 1.40 m deep, 2.60 x 1.7 m length and width.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

- 55 2 - A beautiful Pharaonic lotus shaped *Maghtas* with circular pearls, located at the ancient church of Saint Mina in Taha El-Ama'da at Samalut, 1.75 m deep,

⁸⁰

was used until 1975, then it was abandoned because of a strange conflict between two families. Each of these two families sought to descend first into this *Maghtas*

. Then, to take revenge, one of them decided to throw in it pieces of glass. Following this aggressive act, several people were seriously injured; therefore, the priests forbade the use of this *Maghtas*⁸¹.

- 56 3 - The church of the Archangel Gabriel in the Beni-Magued village in Manfalout, has an octagonal

Maghtas, inscribed in a square behind the sanctuaries in the East, 2m x 2m (length and width)⁸² (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12 - The octagonal *Maghtas*, inscribed in a square in the church of the Archangel Gabriel in Manfalout, stone, 2m x 2m length and width.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

57 4 - In the west wall of a special room at Saint Anthony's Church in Deir El-Maimoun, there is a 2.60 x 2.50 cubic stone *Maghtas* with two steps⁸³.

58 5 - The palace of Saint Helena in the monastery of Saint Bishay (Deir El Ahmar), which is being restored, embraces the ancient monumental *Maghtas* of stone octagon form inscribed in a square. It was used previously by lay people and not monks⁸⁴ (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13 - The octagon *Maghtas*, inscribed in a square in the palace of Saint Helena in the monastery of Saint Bishay, stone, 1.50 m deep.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

59 6 - In the ancient Monastery of Anba Moussa El Baramus, discovered between 2002 and 2005, which fell into ruins, a 1.5 cubic meter limestone

Maghtas

was found dug in the plastered rocks, with steps. It appears in a room in the East next to the sanctuary of the second church

85.

60 7 - Finally in July 2017, by undertaking extensions to the church of the Virgin Sitt Miriam at El-Surian monastery, accidentally a

Maghtas

was also discovered towards the western end glued to the wall, 80 cm deep, higher than the ground of the church of two bleachers because this *Maghtas* belonged to another church (the church of Mari- Ruta')⁸⁶(Fig. 14).

Fig. 14 - The *Maghtas*
discovered in July 2017 in the church of the Virgin Sitt Miriam at El-Surian monastery, stone, 80 cm deep.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

The Pool of Extreme Unction

We found only one example of this basin. It is the one that dates back to 1395, and that exists in the church of Saint Abaskhirion El Qalini, Deir Abu Maqar in Wadi El Natroun, in the sanctuary on the left, towards the North-West part, flanked on the wall⁸⁷(Fig. 15).

Fig.15 - The
Pool of Extreme Unction in the church of Saint Abaskhirion El Qalini, Deir Abu Maqar in Wadi El Natroun, marble, dates back to 1395.

(©AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHY)

62 This demonstration confirms that

1 - The fonts (baptismal vessels) of the ancient Orthodox Coptic churches are varied and totally different from those of the Catholic churches in their structure and form.

63 They are generally simpler than others that are artistically made.

64 2 - The basin of *el laqân* and the *Maghtas* are confined to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

69

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ABSTRACTS

Although Christianity was widespread in Egypt since the 1st century, Christians were only allowed to exercise their worship freely after the Milan decree. From this date, Christianity was recognized and the churches were built.

The architecture adopted in the foundation of the churches involved the construction of some basins for different uses such as the baptismal basin which changed shape and location over the centuries. The churches also contained "El Maghtas" used for holy water during the feast of the Epiphany. The basin called "El Laqân" of circular shape not deep was carved on the floor of the old churches. Besides these, other pools were used for washing and for exercising Extreme Unction.

Thus, we will explain in this research the difference between the basins, their evolution and their importance while referring to examples from various ancient Coptic churches.

Bien que le Christianisme fût répandu en Egypte dès le premier siècle, les Chrétiens n'eurent le droit d'exercer librement leur culte qu'après le décret de Milan. A partir de cette date, le Christianisme fut reconnu et les églises furent édifiées.

L'architecture adoptée dans la fondation des églises impliquait la construction de quelques bassins pour différents usages comme le bassin baptismal qui changea de forme et d'emplacement au cours des siècles. Les églises contenaient également "El Maghtas" utilisé pour l'eau bénite durant la fête de l'Epiphanie. Le bassin appelé "El Laqân" de forme circulaire pas profond était sculpté sur le sol des anciennes églises. A part ceux-ci, on utilisait d'autres bassins pour se laver et pour exercer l'Extrême-Onction.

Ainsi, nous expliquerons dans la recherche la différence entre les bassins, leur évolution et leur importance tout en se référant sur des exemples figurant dans différentes anciennes églises coptes.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Architecture, Bassin, Patrimoine, Maghtas, Laqân

Keywords: Architecture, Basin, Heritage, Maghtas, Laqân

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