BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Menas

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint Menas

Egyptian soldier who became a hermit, martyr of the early 4th century, venerated at his tomb at Abu Mena.

Feast day	November 11
Born	c. 285, Nikiou, in the Nile Delta (Egypt), according to tradition
Died	early 4th century (the sources hesitate between 296, 300 and 309), Phrygia or Alexandria, according to the sources
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	falsely accused people, traveling merchants, Heraklion (Crete)

In this booklet

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Abu Mena, the Holy City of Saint Menas

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Menas

Saint Menas (Mina in Coptic and Arabic) was an Egyptian martyr of the early 4th century, a soldier in the Roman army who became a hermit and was put to death for his faith during the persecution of Diocletian. His tomb, in the desert west of Alexandria, became the greatest pilgrimage of Christian Egypt: Abu Mena. His feast day is November 11.

Who was Saint Menas?

Menas is one of the best-loved saints of the Christian East, and of Egypt in particular. He is counted among the "great martyrs", those witnesses of the faith whose cult crossed every border. Yet his story is hard to establish. We know it through many texts, written in Greek, Coptic, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic and even Old Nubian: a Coptic encomium of the 7th or 8th century, the Synaxarium, and collections of miracles. These sources agree neither on the year of his death nor on the place of his martyrdom. Some historians have even wondered whether there were two martyrs of the same name, one in Phrygia and one in Egypt. What is beyond doubt, on the other hand, is the scale of the devotion paid to his tomb from the late 4th century onward.

Key dates in the life of Menas

- **c. 285**: Born at Nikiou, in the Nile Delta, according to tradition, into a Christian family.
- **c. 300**: Having lost his father, he joins the Roman army; most accounts place him at Cotyaeum, in Phrygia (present-day Kütahya, in Turkey).
- **A few years later**: He leaves the army and withdraws to the desert to live as a hermit.

- **Early 4th century**: He publicly confesses his faith and is beheaded; the sources give the years 296, 300 or 309.
- **Shortly after**: His body is buried in the desert of Mareotis, southwest of Alexandria, at the spot where, according to the story, the camels refused to go on.
- **Late 4th century**: A first church is built over his tomb, which has become a place of healing.
- **5th and 6th centuries**: Abu Mena becomes the main pilgrimage of Egypt; pilgrims bring home the famous flasks of Saint Menas.
- **Mid-7th century**: The shrine is ruined at the time of the Arab conquest.
- **1979**: The ruins of Abu Mena are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The soldier who chose the desert

According to the traditional account, Menas was born around 285 at Nikiou, near Memphis. His parents, Eudoxius and Euphemia, had no children. One day, on a feast of the Virgin Mary, Euphemia prayed for a long time before an icon of the Mother of God to obtain a son, and she heard a voice answer "Amen". The child was named Menas, a name tradition links to that word. Historians point out instead that the name is very old in Egypt, but the story speaks clearly of a mother's trust.

His father, who held an office in the administration of the province, died when Menas was fourteen. A year later the young man joined the army, where he received a high rank thanks to his family's reputation. After three years he left the uniform, because he wanted to belong to Christ alone, and went to live in the desert.

Witness and martyrdom

After five years of solitude, according to tradition, Menas saw in a vision angels crowning the martyrs. A voice promised him three crowns: for his virginity, for his life of asceticism and for his martyrdom. He then left his solitude and declared before the magistrate that he was a Christian. He refused to deny his faith despite torture and was beheaded. The accounts place his death in Phrygia or in Alexandria, and give it different dates: we must admit that we do not know for certain where or when he died.

Christians gathered his body and loaded it onto a camel to bring it back to Egypt. Once in the desert beyond Lake Mareotis, the animal refused to go any further, and the other beasts did the same. The faithful saw it as a sign: this was where Menas wished to rest. They buried him on the spot.

Abu Mena, the saint's city

The memory of the tomb is said to have been lost, until a shepherd discovered that his sick sheep were healed by rolling in the earth and water of the place. Healings multiplied, and a church was built over the tomb. Excavations have shown that the first foundation dates from the late 4th century. The shrine was then enlarged several times, until it became a true holy city, with its basilicas, its baptistery and its great hostels for pilgrims.

Visitors went home with small clay flasks filled with blessed water or oil, stamped with the image of the saint praying between two camels. A very large number of them have been found all around the Mediterranean: they bear witness to the immense reach of his cult. The shrine was ruined in the 7th century. In the 20th century, the Coptic Church founded a new monastery dedicated to Saint Mina near the ruins, which once again draws many faithful.

Devotion and art

Saint Menas is honored by the Catholic Church, by the Orthodox Churches and by the Coptic Church, which celebrates him on 15 Hathor in its calendar. In the Latin calendar his memorial falls on November 11, the same day as Saint Martin. He is invoked by people who are falsely accused and, traditionally, by traveling merchants. In Crete, the city of Heraklion took him as its patron: it is said that in 1826 a mysterious horseman prevented a massacre of Christians there, and the faithful recognized the saint in him. Since then, Cretan art has often shown him as an officer on horseback.

The oldest image remains that of the orant, arms raised, between two kneeling camels. He should not be confused with Abbot Mena, a later monk shown beside Christ on a famous Coptic icon kept at the Louvre.

What can we learn from Saint Menas?

Menas gave up a promising career to seek God in silence, then found the courage to speak of his faith in public, at the cost of his life. His story, handed down in accounts that do not always agree, carries a simple message: whoever belongs to Christ has nothing to fear. For centuries, crowds of the sick and the poor came to his tomb seeking healing. You can pray to him for those who suffer, for people unjustly accused, and for the courage to bear witness.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Menas and the novena to Saint Menas.

Where to pray to Saint Menas

- **Abu Mena** (Egypt), about 45 kilometers southwest of Alexandria: the ruins of the holy city and the Coptic monastery of Saint Mina.
- **Heraklion** (Crete): the cathedral of Agios Minas, placed under his patronage.

- **The Louvre** (Paris): several pilgrim flasks bearing his image.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Menas for the Sick and the Falsely Accused

Saint Menas, an Egyptian soldier who became a hermit, gave his life for Christ in the early 4th century. For centuries, the sick and pilgrims came to his tomb at Abu Mena to ask for healing. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him the sick, people who are falsely accused, and all who need courage to bear witness to their faith.

Prayer to Saint Menas

Saint Menas,
you left the honors of the army
to serve Christ in the silence of the desert:
teach me to prefer God to every success.

You proclaimed your faith before the judge
without fearing torment:
give me the courage to say who I am
and in whom I believe, with gentleness and firmness.

So many of the sick came to you
seeking healing and peace:
present to the Lord all who suffer,
those who are unjustly accused
and those who have lost hope.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Menas

- On his feast day, November 11.
- For someone who is sick, or for yourself in the trial of illness.
- When you are falsely accused or suffer an injustice.
- For soldiers, and for those who must choose between their conscience and their career.
- For the Christians of Egypt and the Middle East.

A short invocation

> *Saint Menas, faithful witness of Christ,*
> *keep me in the truth and pray for those who suffer. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Menas from November 3 to 11, and read the life of Saint Menas.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Menas

This novena offers nine days of prayer with Saint Menas, an Egyptian soldier, hermit and martyr of the early 4th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, November 11, begin on November 3. You can also pray it at any other time of the year, especially for someone who is sick.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Menas, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come from the ancient accounts of his life, which mix history and tradition.

Day 1: A child asked for in prayer

According to tradition, the mother of Menas prayed for a long time before an icon of the Virgin to have a child, and heard the answer "Amen". The whole life of Menas begins with a trusting prayer.

Prayer: Lord, bless couples who are expecting a child and those who suffer from not having one. Teach us to pray to you with trust.

Act of the day: Pray a decade of the Rosary for a family expecting a birth.

Day 2: Growing up without his father

Menas lost his father at fourteen. Very early he had to take his life in hand, without the support of the one who would have guided him.

Prayer: Lord, be the Father of orphans. Support young people growing up without guidance and give them elders they can trust.

Act of the day: Get in touch with a young person or a grieving family.

Day 3: The soldier

Once in the army, Menas quickly obtained a high rank. He knew discipline, obedience and the prestige of the uniform.

Prayer: Lord, protect soldiers and all who serve their country. Keep them upright and respectful of life.

Act of the day: Pray for soldiers on mission and for their families.

Day 4: Leaving everything for Christ

After three years, Menas gave up his career for the desert. He preferred Christ to everything the world could offer him.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from what keeps me far from you. Grant that I may choose you every day.

Act of the day: Give up today something that keeps you from prayer.

Day 5: The silence of the desert

For five years Menas lived as a hermit. In solitude he learned to listen to God and to let himself be purified by him.

Prayer: Lord, help me find moments of silence in which I can truly listen to you.

Act of the day: Spend ten minutes in complete silence before God, without any screen.

Day 6: The three crowns

Tradition says that a voice promised Menas three crowns: for his purity, for his asceticism and for his martyrdom. God is never outdone in generosity.

Prayer: Lord, make me faithful in small things, and keep alive in me the hope of eternal life.

Act of the day: Carry out a thankless task with care, offering it to God.

Day 7: Speaking of one's faith

Menas left his solitude to proclaim publicly that he was a Christian. He did not hide his faith before those who could condemn him.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage to bear witness to Christ, gently and without shame.

Act of the day: Tell someone simply what faith brings to your life.

Day 8: The martyrdom

Menas refused to deny Christ and died by the sword. His death is not a defeat: it is the complete gift of his life.

Prayer: Lord, support the Christians persecuted today, in Egypt and throughout the world. Give them your strength and your peace.

Act of the day: Pray for persecuted Christians, or support a charity that helps them.

Day 9: The tomb of healings

At the tomb of Menas, at Abu Mena, crowds of the sick came for centuries seeking healing. The martyr goes on serving his brothers and sisters.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Menas, visit the sick and grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who is sick, and if possible attend Mass.

Living the novena with Saint Menas

Menas was a soldier, a hermit and a martyr. His life passes through discipline, silence and witness. During these nine days, you can entrust to him the sick, people who are unjustly accused, soldiers and the Christians of the East. If you can, end the novena by visiting someone who is sick or praying for the Christians of Egypt.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Menas,*
> *soldier of Christ and faithful martyr,*
> *you left everything for the Lord*
> *and gave your life for him.*
> *Present to God the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me courageous in faith*
> *and watch over those who suffer.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Menas at any time, and read the life of Saint Menas.

PILGRIMAGE

Abu Mena, the Holy City of Saint Menas

Abu Mena is the site of an ancient Christian holy city in the desert of Mareotis, about 45 kilometers southwest of Alexandria, in Egypt. It grew up around the tomb of Saint Menas, a martyr of the early 4th century. Its ruins have been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1979, and a Coptic monastery dedicated to the saint stands nearby.

The greatest pilgrimage of Christian Egypt

According to the ancient accounts, the body of Menas was brought into this desert on a camel and buried at the spot where the animals refused to go on. The place was forgotten, and is said to have been found again thanks to a shepherd whose sheep were healed by touching the earth and water of the tomb. Archaeologists date the first church to the late 4th century. Under Emperor Arcadius, the crowds became so large that the church had to be enlarged: this was the first of three great enlargements.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, Abu Mena became a real city, the main pilgrimage shrine of Egypt. Pilgrims found basilicas, a baptistery, baths and vast hostels there. They went home with small clay flasks filled with blessed water or oil, stamped with the image of the saint between two camels. The city was destroyed in the mid-7th century, at the time of the Arab conquest.

What you can see

Excavations, begun in 1905 and continued throughout the 20th century, uncovered the great basilica, the church that probably sheltered the saint's tomb, the baptistery, baths, dormitories for poor pilgrims and even wine

presses. The site is fragile: rising groundwater, caused by irrigation of the surrounding land, has made several structures collapse, and some areas have had to be closed to the public. It has been on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Near the ruins, the Coptic monastery of Saint Mina was founded in the 20th century on the initiative of the Coptic patriarch Cyril VI. Today it is a place of prayer much visited by Egyptian Christians.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Menas. At the site, entrust to him the sick, people who are unjustly accused and the Christians of Egypt, then say the prayer to Saint Menas. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Abu Mena lies near the new town of Borg El Arab, about 45 kilometers from Alexandria. Access conditions for the archaeological site, as well as the monastery's hours, may change: check with the Egyptian tourist authorities or the monastery before you come. Modest dress is expected in the monastery.

Credits and sources

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