

Waste management: Copts live off Cairo's garbage

Text and photos by [Jonathan Alpeyrie](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

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On the outskirts of Cairo is the slum settlement of Manshiyat Naser, also known as Garbage City. The area has streets, shops and apartments but no sewage system or electricity, and its water system is polluted. Authorities often divert municipal water from the slum to areas deemed more important.

This city of 50,000 is inhabited mostly by Coptic Christians. The garbage collectors, known as the Zabbaleen, earn their living by sorting and recycling the city's garbage. The population of the area has more than tripled since 1981, although the physical boundaries of the settlement have barely increased.

Coptic farmers originally came to Cairo from the south in the 1940s. They learned how to make a living by recycling garbage. They fed organic trash to their pigs and burned or recycled the rest. (Christians in Egypt have long raised pigs—something forbidden for Muslims.) It's estimated that the Zabbaleen recycle some 80 percent of the garbage they collect.

Different families and areas within Manshiyat Naser specialize in different recycling projects, focusing on turning organic waste, metals, plastic bottles or animal bones into marketable products. In recycling plastic, locals use machines that shred, melt and then cut materials into plastic pellets, which are packaged in 40-kilogram bags and sold for four Egyptian pounds per kilogram.

In Manshiyat Naser, every corner shop displays an image of either Pope Tawadros II, the current Coptic leader, or Jesus. Close by is the monastery of St. Simon the Tanner, named for a tenth-century saint. The upper story of St. Simon's hall can accommodate up to 2,000 people, and Coptic Christians go there each day for prayer and communion.

The monastery was built in the 20th century to commemorate a miracle performed by St. Simon. The legend has it that late in the tenth century Coptic Pope Abraham was challenged by a Jewish man to prove the validity of Jesus' claim in Matthew 17:20, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to the mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." This challenge was issued in the presence of Egypt's ruler, Fatimid Caliph Al-Muizz.

After three days of prayers and fasting by Coptic Christians, Pope Abraham was guided to choose St. Simon as the one whose faith could move Mokattam Mountain. St. Simon then performed that miracle, demonstrating to the caliph and all of Egypt the truth of Christianity.

The Zabbaleen's economy was disrupted in 2012 when signs of foot-and-mouth disease were detected and authorities forced pig owners to kill most of their livestock. The enforcement of the pig slaughter brought government officials into the area—one of the few moments the government has paid any attention to Garbage City. The Zabbaleen's collection and recycling work remains crucial to the city, however, and the ruling Muslim Brotherhood is content to have the Zabbaleen do the dirty job that no one else wants to do.

Since the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt, the Copts have felt increasing pressure from Muslims, and conflicts between Muslims and the Coptic minority have frequently erupted. The latest incident occurred in April, when four Copts were killed in an interfaith clash in Al-Khosous. At a funeral for the fallen Copts at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, mourners were attacked as they exited the building. One Christian man was killed and more than 80 people were injured. Inside Manshiyat Naser, Christians have little contact with Muslims, but they feel that they

are being abandoned—and that they are not welcome in Egypt's new political order.