

## DEIR AL-SURIAN (EGYPT): ITS WALL-PAINTINGS, WALL-TEXTS, AND MANUSCRIPTS

To the memory of Paul van Moorsel  
(d. 1 July 1999),  
our guide to the Wadi al-Natrun.

*In January 1999, an international team working under the auspices of Leiden University and the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo continued its work in Deir al-Surian in the Wadi al-Natrun (Egypt). In the Church of the Virgin, work was resumed on the wall-paintings, while in the library, conservation work was carried out on the manuscripts. In this article, three of the people involved in this project give an account of recent developments and new insights.*

### I. THE WALL-PAINTINGS OF DEIR AL-SURIAN: NEW DISCOVERIES OF 1999

KAREL C. INNEMÉE

UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN  
LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS

[1] In 1991, during restoration work after a fire that severely damaged a painting in the western semi-dome of the church of the Virgin in Deir al-Surian (Egypt), an older painting, representing the Annunciation, was discovered. This discovery triggered off a lively

discussion among art historians concerning the date of the painting and the background of its maker. The number of questions surrounding this painting was one of the reasons to continue the investigations into its context, since there were indications that elsewhere in the church other paintings were present under the unpainted eighteenth century plaster and under the other paintings in the northern and southern semi-domes in the *khurus* of the church.

[2] Since 1995, when a first trial campaign was launched, not only have a number of paintings come to light, several inscriptions have also been found. These finds have indeed shed a new light on the history of the monastery and its church. Reports of previous campaigns have appeared in *Hugoye* vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2. During January 1999, work was continued in the southern part of the *khurus* and in the dome over this part of the building.<sup>1</sup> The present article is intended to be a preliminary report of this campaign.

[3] During the 1999 campaign a number of (fragments of) paintings discovered on the upper south wall of the *khurus* in the previous season were consolidated. In addition to this, most of the remaining eighteenth century plaster on the southern wall was removed, revealing a number of other paintings (Ill. 1). The removal of plaster also enabled the author to make a number of observations on the architecture of the church in its relation to the painted decoration.

## 1. STRATIGRAPHY OF THE PAINTINGS

[4] In the previous report one section was dedicated to the stratigraphy of the subsequent layers of painting [cf. Innemée 1998b, 2.]. The paintings discovered in the *khurus* are all on layers 1 and 2 and more details concerning these two layers have now emerged, allowing us to confirm a number of earlier preliminary conclusions. One of these conclusions was that the first two layers of painting were executed within a short span of time, that is between the middle of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth century. The

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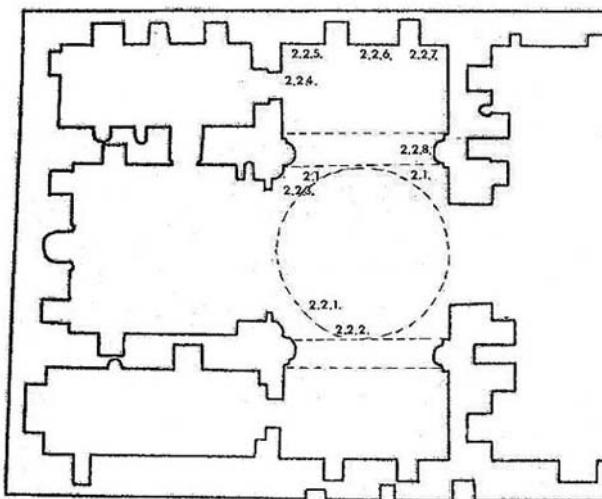
<sup>1</sup> The conservation team consisted of Ms. Ewa Paradowska, Mr. Cristobal Calaforra, Mr. Ashraf Nageh, Ms. Hanan Nairouz (restorers), Ms. Mariana Abd al-Shehid, Ms. Hoda Dahab and Mr. Ashraf Bushra Kamel (students at the Restoration Department of Minia University), and Dr. Karel Innemée (field-director).

paintings found on the first layer until January 1999 were of a very simple character, mainly crosses painted in orange-red ochre. During the last campaign other, more elaborate paintings were discovered on the same layer. One characteristic they share with the paintings previously discovered is that they are mainly ornamental in character. But it has now been established that the first layer also contains polychrome paintings. The arch that opens into the southern semi-dome was initially surrounded by an ornamental border, surmounted by a cross. This design of this border was painted in ochre and then finished in red, green, and yellow. Crosses higher on the wall were painted only in red ochre, suggesting that they were also intended to be finished in more than one color. Crosses that have been found on the second layer were of a similar design as those on the first layer. The design was painted in orange-red ochre and then elaborated in more colors. In the upper parts of the *khurus*, the first layer of painting was plastered over with a thin lime-plaster; on the lower walls only a very thin layer of limewash was applied before the second layer of painting was executed. In some places it looks as if the second layer of painting was done directly on the limewash of the first layer of plaster. This gives the impression that the first layer of painting was not yet finished when the plan for the decoration of the church was changed. In the higher parts of the *khurus* the paintings, both the finished and the unfinished, were plastered over. In the lower parts, the work had not yet proceeded far enough and whitewashing was apparently sufficient. In some parts it seems it was not even necessary to whitewash before the new decoration could be begun. The fact that the ornamental crosses on the second layer are so much similar to crosses on the first layer suggests that the decision for a change in plan was taken soon after the beginning of the first decoration. No paint samples have been analyzed so far, but it seems that the pigments and the medium in both layers are also the same.

[5] The second layer of painting must have been covered by Layer 4. This must have been done around the year 1200. The windows in the square zone under the dome were furnished with new tracings in gypsum and glass. Remains of these windows and the surrounding plaster are still *in situ* and in some other places patches of the plaster of Layer 4 have been found. Nothing can be said about paintings on this layer of plaster, since it was apparently

all removed before the replastering of the interior of the church in 1781/2.

## 2. NEWLY DISCOVERED PAINTINGS



Plan 1. Plan of the *khurus*.

Numbers mark locations of paintings referred to in the following discussion.

### 2.1. Paintings on Layer 1

[6]

Around the arch that opens into the southern semi-dome, remains of an ornamental border were found. The first remains had already been found in 1998, but at that time it was not yet quite clear to which layer they belonged. After the complete removal of the eighteenth century plaster from the southern wall, it was revealed that they were part of the first layer of decoration. On either side of the arch the remains of a peacock and a cross encircled by a wreath were found (Ill. 2). Higher up on the wall only crosses in orange-red ochre have been found where the plaster of Layer 2 was missing. These crosses were covered with the paintings of the Eunuch of Candace and the illustrations of the apocryphal Acts of Andrew and Matthew [cf. Innemée 1998b, 3.5].

## 2.2. Paintings on Layer 2

### 2.2.1 The Dome

[7] It has now been established beyond any doubt that the inside of the dome over the *khurus* was decorated with paintings. Of these paintings, however, very little remains as far as it is possible to judge so far. Only at the lower edges and around the windows are fragments recognizable. In the north-eastern part of the dome the composition contained two thrones, of which parts of the legs and armrests can be distinguished. On either side of each throne there were standing figures, of which only the feet, wearing sandals, remain. These figures were probably placed in a landscape, since we can see an undulating green and yellow background. These scanty remains have so far not permitted any interpretation. Less than half of the surface of the dome has been investigated and conserved and at the moment there is still the possibility that during a next campaign remains which will give us a clue towards an identification of the scene will be found.

[8] Below this representation, most probably running around the whole dome, there is Coptic text between two ornamental borders. The previous season a fragment of this text was found in the southern part of the dome and now another fragment in the north-eastern part has been uncovered (Ill. 3, Ill. 4). The most recently discovered fragment mentions the names of Father (ΠΑΠΑ) Moses, *bigoumenos* and *oikonomos* (of the monastery) and Father Aaron,<sup>2</sup> while the earlier fragments reads:»...This is in truth what the Lord has...” It is tempting to think that Moses and Aaron might be the same as “Moses and Aaron, priests and directors of the monastery,” mentioned in an undated colophon of a Syriac manuscript from Deir al-Surian.<sup>3</sup> However, these fragments still await more detailed study and the parts still covered by plaster need to be uncovered.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Jacques van der Vliet (Leiden) kindly helped us with the deciphering of the Coptic text.

<sup>3</sup> W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838*, 3 vols. (London, 1871) 2:668a.

### 2.2.2. Scenes in the Square under the Dome

[9] During the previous season a number of scenes, depicting the conversion and the baptism of the eunuch of Candace and scenes from the apocryphal Acts of Andrew and Matthew were discovered on the southern wall, to be exact in the square zone under the dome. In January 1999 remains of a number of paintings were found on the opposite (i.e., the northern) wall. Much less was preserved here and the state of preservation was problematical. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that these paintings fitted into the same iconographical program. Like those on the southern wall, the paintings on the northern wall were divided in two zones, one over the other. The wall at this level has two windows that are still kept as aperture, one in the middle and one in the east. A third window, the westernmost one has been walled up, like that on the southern wall. So far the remains of two scenes have been found, over and between the two open windows (Ill. 5). Over the middle window we see half a circle, which looks as if it is suspended from the upper border of the painting. Within this circle there is a schematic representation of a town against the background of a starry sky. Such half-circles in the upper parts of paintings are most often meant to represent the spheres of heaven, from which a hand of God or other divine interventions appear. A town within such a circle might therefore be intended as a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Right of this there are the remains of a standing man with a halo around his head. No remains of inscriptions have been found which could help us identify this scene.

[10] The second scene, painted under the first one between the two open windows, has almost completely disappeared, except for a piece of bluish-grey background, on which we see the shoulder and part of the halo of a figure. Most fortunately an inscription left of this figure has been entirely preserved. It reads ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΣ ΠΙΕΡΜΕΝΙΟΣ, St. Gregory the Armenian, i.e., St. Gregory the Illuminator. Since he is well-known for his preaching of Christianity in Armenia, we can consider (the remains of) this scene a counterpart to those on the opposite wall, where the theme is also conversion and baptism. If this is the iconographical theme for the decoration of this part of the church, the unidentified scene with the town in the half-circle should also fit within this

framework, but since we have scarcely any known parallel for an iconographical program like this, a solution is not yet available.

### 2.2.3. A Fragment on the Upper Eastern Wall

[11] The wall separating the *khurus* from the *haikal* has only been superficially investigated. Nevertheless, one fragment, uncovered on the far right part of this wall, gives us an indication that a large composition was or still is present on this wall. The fragment reveals a group of men, six in number, looking up at something or someone. Future investigations will have to reveal the subject of this composition, but a representation of Pentecost or the Ascension is not to be excluded.

### 2.2.4. The Lower Eastern Wall: Two Mounted Saints

[12] Almost the complete southern part of the *haikal* has now been stripped of its eighteenth century plaster. Only the lowest part, the decorative zone with the painted imitation of columns and an architrave is still covered. The paintings at ground level show us a number of saints, painted on the eastern and the southern walls. The state of preservation of these paintings ranges from mediocre to bad. A difference with the paintings higher up on the walls is that here almost the entire compositions have been preserved, but that the surface has suffered many small pieces of damage, which adds up to at least a 50% loss of the painted surface.

[13] On the eastern wall of the southern *khurus*, two saints on horseback have been found, represented with the heads of their horses facing each other (Ill. 6). Both saints wear a blue tunic and a red *chlamys*, a military cape. The right one holds a spear in his raised right hand, but at what kind of animal or human being this spear is aimed is no longer distinguishable. The lower part of both paintings is missing because the doorway between the *khurus* and the southern *haikal* has been cut through the painting.

### 2.2.5. The Lower Southern Wall: St. Victor

[14] The southern wall contained two windows, which were walled up later. The windows used to divide the surface up into three more or less equal parts. The small cavalcade of saints continues on the southern wall, left of the left window. Here we find a painting of St. Victor Stratelates, identified by an inscription, this time in

Greek: Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ... ΚΤΩΡ (Ill. 7). He is represented riding towards the right and wearing a bluish-grey tunic. In his raised right hand he holds a spear ending in a cross. This spear is directed towards a small kneeling figure in front of his horse. This man is dressed in a red *chlamys* and wears a crown on his head. No inscription reveals the identity of this man. His costume would suggest that he could either be the emperor Diocletian or Romanus, the pagan father of the saint and governor of Antioch, but according to the legends neither of the two has ever been confronted by Victor in a way as represented here.<sup>4</sup> Behind the kneeling man, the remaining space under a window, now walled up, has been filled with an ornamental cross, surrounded by a garland of flowers.

#### 2.2.6. The Lower Southern Wall: A Doctor Treating Patients

[15]

A remarkable painting was uncovered in the middle of the wall, between both windows (Ill. 8). On a small but neatly decorated stool, a saint is seated, turned towards the right. He wears a red tunic with a grey pallium. His hair and half long beard are grey. Much of the painting has been lost, including the face, but his right hand is clearly recognizable. In this he grasps a spoon, scalpel or similar instrument, which he holds close to the eyes of a much smaller person standing in front of him. His left arm is dropped around the shoulder of the man. The latter is dressed in a red tunic with a greenish cloak over it. In his left hand he holds a staff. In the background stands a third person, his chest bare and the lower part of his body dressed in a red garment. Between the head of the saint and the third person there is a small open cupboard in which there are six red and green bottles. It is evident that we are dealing with a representation of a doctor treating patients. The cupboard can be nothing other than a medicine chest. The next question is of course which saint is represented here. Several holy doctors are known, but there is not a trace of an inscription to be found on this painting. It is most usual to find an inscription next to the head of a saint, but even though the background has been damaged, it seems as if there has never been any inscription here. The prominent place he takes in the decoration of the church suggests that it should be an important saint, maybe even so well-known

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. De Lacy O'Leary, *The Saints of Egypt* (repr. Amsterdam, 1974) 278–9.

and recognizable that the painter did not find an inscription necessary. This could mean that we here have a representation of St. Luke. Of course this interpretation is highly speculative. If a counterpart of this painting were to be found on the opposite wall, it might help us to give a more trustworthy identification.

### 2.2.7. The Lower Southern Wall: Saints Cosmas and Damian

[16] It is evident that the saints in this part of the church have been grouped according to their profession. Right of the painting of the seated doctor two holy physicians are represented standing, Cosmas and Damian (Ill. 9). The inscription left and right of the heads, again in Greek, reads: Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΚΟΣ.....ΑΜΙ... Cosmas wears a yellow-brown tunic and a grey pallium, Damian is dressed in a grey tunic with a brown pallium. In their right hands they hold a spoon, scalpel or spatula. In the left hand of Cosmas we see an object that is not immediately recognizable. It consists of two cylinders, connected by an angular middle section. Two intertwining black lines emerge from the cylinders. Most probably it is a portable medicine chest, a common attribute for doctor-saints. Because of damage of the painting, the object that Damian was holding in his left hand has disappeared.

### 2.2.8. The South-Western Half-Column: A Standing Monk

[17] Opposite the half-column that carries the painting of the Virgin Galaktotrophousa, on the wall separating the *khurus* from the *haikal* [cf. Innemée 1998b, 3.3.; Innemée 1998c, 87] there is another painted half-column on which parts of a painting have been uncovered in previous seasons [cf. Innemée 1998b, 3.6]. In January 1999, the total half-column was stripped of the remains of its thirteenth century plaster and a thick layer of eighteenth century plaster,<sup>5</sup> revealing not only its total profile with a pedestal, attic base, and capital, but also a painting of a standing monk with raised hands (Ill. 10). The man, whose face has been heavily damaged, has grey hair and beard and is dressed in a brown tunic with *clavi*, over which he wears a black-and-white striped cape. Around his head there is a yellow halo. At the left side of his head there is the word

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<sup>5</sup> In the upper and lower left parts of the column cross-sections of the thirteenth and eighteenth century replastering were left as a testimony to its presence.

ABBA, faintly legible. At the right side of his head only faint traces of an inscription were found, doubtlessly the last letters of his name. But since only ...IOΣ could be read, there is absolutely no certainty about the identity of the saint.

[18] The pedestal and the base of the column have a classic appearance, similar and almost identical to the opposite half-column [cf. Innemée 1998c, fig. 14]. In its original shape, the capital had a lower part with a stucco decoration consisting of small arches. The spaces under these arches were painted alternately in red and green. One level higher there is a conical part which carries a painted decoration of a cross between four flowers. It looks as if this is one of the best preserved capitals in the church, belonging doubtlessly to the first phase of the building, i.e., the middle of the seventh century. The damaging of the delicate stucco arches must have been done before the thirteenth century replastering of the church. Both the base and the capital were covered by a thick layer of plaster, giving it a new profile and obscuring its original shape. The eighteenth century replastering added another layer, sometimes several centimeters thick, giving the column a rather shapeless appearance.

### 3. THE WAY OF WORKING AND PAINTING TECHNIQUE

[19] After an examination of the paintings and the stratigraphy of the plaster and paint, a number of preliminary observations could be made concerning the way the church was decorated. As has been mentioned above, the first layer of decoration was probably never finished. The plan was changed and work was resumed on the second layer. The painters worked in a similar way on both layers: first the outlines of the paintings were indicated in orange-red ochre, after which the final decoration was added, leaving the ochre partially visible. On the second layer the frames of the figurative scenes were indicated in ochre. After that, a number of painters started working within these outlines, probably simultaneously. The paintings of the equestrian saints, the seated and the standing doctors and the standing monk all betray a different style of painting. Possibly three or even four different hands can be distinguished here. Nevertheless, they were part of one iconographical program. The two crosses under the windows have the same basic design, but the final execution was different.

[20] In spite of stylistic differences in their way of working, the painters used a similar technique. They started with a first layer of paint in tempera technique *al secco*. No details are yet known about the pigments and the medium, but the mat surface of this layer is clearly distinguishable from the following layers. These have a mat gloss and saturated colors. After cleaning the surface of this paint layer with a rotating cotton brush it took on a wax-like gloss. Also considering the structure of the surface of the paint, it seems almost certain that the final layers of paint in the first and second layer of decoration have been done in the encaustic technique. This way of working can be found almost everywhere in the paintings in the *khurus*, although some parts have been executed in tempera only. This is certainly true of the Coptic inscription around the dome, the decorative lower zone and some of the border-decorations.

[21] There is a remarkable similarity between these observations and those of Michel Wuttmann, the restorer of the IFAO in Cairo, who treated the painting of the Annunciation in the same church in 1991. He also concluded that the medium of the painting was very likely to be wax, while the border was executed in tempera. In addition to this, he remarked that in some places a black layer of primer could be seen under the painting.<sup>6</sup> Such a black layer has also been found as a primer in the painting of the military saint, next to the painting of the Virgin Galaktotrophousa. This would mean that several painters have been simultaneously at work in several parts of the church using the same technique, but in slightly different styles, and that the Annunciation, also painted on the second layer of plaster, was done in more or less the same period as the paintings in the *khurus*.

#### 4. OBSERVATION CONCERNING THE ARCHITECTURE

[22] As has been mentioned, two walled-up windows were found in the southern wall of the *khurus*. The reason that these windows were done away with was the construction of the defensive wall around the monastery, directly against the southern wall of the church. At the time that the paintings of the second layer were made, this wall

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Wuttmann, “Circonstances de la découverte de la peinture de l’Annonciation dans la conque ouest de l’église de la Vierge au Deir Al-Souriani et observations techniques,” *Cahiers archéologiques* 43 (1995): 128.

did not yet exist and the windows were still open. This can be deduced from the fact that the red frames of the paintings have been carefully drawn around the windows. The complete blocking and overplastering of the windows belongs to the thirteenth century phase of the remodeling and redecoration of the church. The date of the construction of the wall would therefore provide us with a *terminus ante quem* for the paintings of the second layer in the *khurus*. A recently discovered Syriac inscription in the church mentions that a certain Mattay and Ya'qub have “built and constructed” the monastery in the year 818/19 [Innemée-Van Rompay 1998, C.5.1.]. This building campaign must have taken place very soon after one of the most destructive Berber raids on the Wadi al-Natrun. In the course of the ninth and tenth century the monasteries of the region were fortified out of necessity and it is very well possible that the activities of Mattay and Ya'qub included the building of the defensive wall. This would mean that the paintings of the second layer date from before 818/19.

[23]

Some observations could be made concerning the construction of the semi-domes in the *khurus* as well. In the far right corner of the southern wall, remains of the first wooden beam that supported the southern semi-dome were found. This beam had almost completely disintegrated, only the hole in the wall where it used to be, containing its decayed remains, was found. But it is clear that the plaster of the second layer and the border of the painting of St. Cosmas and Damian were both done around the already existing beam. This is in accordance with the fact that traces of an earlier layer of painting, also belonging to the second layer of plaster, have been found in the southern semi-dome. In other words, the construction of the semi-domes in the *khurus*, and most probably the western semi-dome as well, dates from before the paintings of the second layer. If the hypothesis formulated above is right, this would mean that the semi-domes should be dated somewhere in the eighth century.

[24]

Before the church was replastered as a preparation for the paintings of the thirteenth century, a number of windows were blocked with stone with an extremely hard mortar, resembling modern Portland cement. Such blockings were found in the western windows of the northern and southern walls under the dome and at ground level in the nave and the *khurus*. Wooden beams supporting the dome and the semi-domes were added.

## 5. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

[25] More evidence has come to light which can help us build up a more precise chronology for the subsequent phases of decoration of the church. As it appears now, there are good reasons to assume that in the eighth or ninth century the eastern part of the church was decorated with a coherent iconographical program which contained a number of themes rare in Christian iconography. The use of the encaustic technique is one argument to plea for a relatively early date. If we assume that the Syrian presence in the monastery dates back to the beginning of the ninth century [cf. Innemée-Van Rompay 1998], and that the inscription of Mattay and Ya'qub concerns also the building of a defensive wall, it would mean that these paintings, in which the inscriptions are in Greek and Coptic, date from before 818/19, that is from the time that the monastery was still purely Coptic. As it appears now, there are also good reasons to assume that the famous painting of the Annunciation, discovered in 1991, can be linked to the paintings in the *khurus*.

## REFERENCES

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1:  
General view of the southern part of the *khurus*.



Illustration 2:  
Peacock and cross,  
decoration left of the arch surrounding the southern semi-dome.



Illustration 3:  
First part of the Coptic text surrounding the dome.



Illustration 4:  
Second part of the Coptic text surrounding the dome.



Illustration 5:  
Fragment with St. Gregory the Illuminator.



Illustration 6:  
Two unidentified saints on horseback,  
eastern wall of the southern *khurus*.



Illustration 7:  
Saint Victor on horseback, southern wall of the *khurus*.



Illustration 8:

A holy doctor treating patients, southern wall of the *khurus*.



Illustration 9:  
St. Cosmas and Damian, southern wall of the *khurus*.



Illustration 10:  
Painted half-column on the western wall.

