

## BRIEF ARTICLES

# DEIR AL-SURIAN (EGYPT): CONSERVATION WORK OF AUTUMN 2000

KAREL C. INNEMÉE

UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN  
FACULTY OF ARTS  
LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS

- [1] In October/November 2000 conservation work and research continued in the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian (Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt)<sup>1</sup> Paintings that had been uncovered in the 1999 season were further conserved and retouched. Closer examination of the stratigraphy of painted plaster led to some new insights into the history of the building and its decoration.

## 1. CONSERVATION AND RETOUCHING OF PAINTINGS

- [2] In 1999 a number of paintings were uncovered on the lower wall of the southern *keburus*. These included three saints on horseback, a scene of a holy doctor with patients and saints Cosmas and Damian. Furthermore the figure of a standing monk was found on a half-column. Although these paintings were consolidated and cleaned, the restoration had not yet been finished. Originally retouching of the murals was planned as the last part in the project, but the bishop and a group of monks of the monastery insisted on

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<sup>1</sup> For reports on earlier campaigns see *Hugoye* 1.2, 2.2 and 3.2.

retouching in a earlier stage. Their argument for this was the fact that the *khurus* is one of the most important parts of the church and that the unretouched paintings were a disturbing element during the liturgy and the daily prayers. For this reason we decided to retouch the paintings earlier than planned.

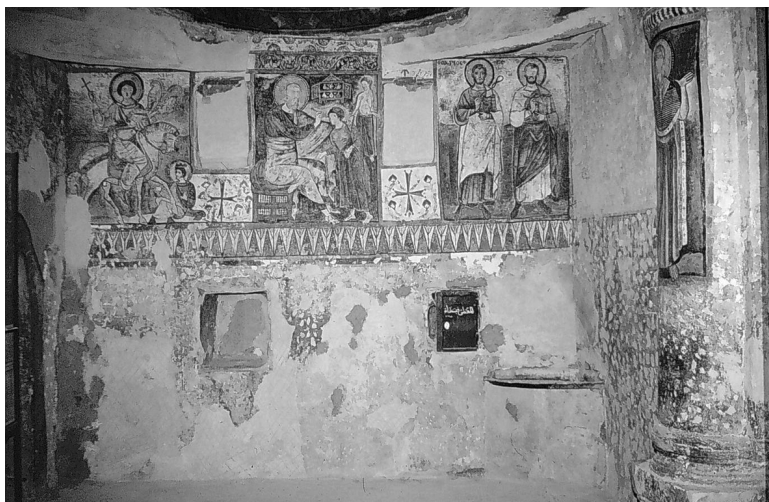


Illustration 1. The *khurus* after retouching.

- [3] The retouchings were done with Windsor and Newton watercolours, in colours that are lighter shades of the original encaustic paint. Although most of the paintings had considerable lacunae, the total composition could be easily recognized. Only damages in the faces of the paintings have not been retouched. The identity of the holy doctor remains a mystery. Since 1999 no new information has come to light that could help us identify this scene.



Illustration 2. Doctor treating patients.



Illustration 3. Cosmas and Damian.

## 2. NEWLY UNCOVERED DADO-PAINTINGS

[4] Plaster from the 18th century was still covering the lower part of the southern wall of the *kburus* and the western wall. This plaster was gradually removed during this season. Only on the western wall some traces of 13th century plaster were found underneath; mostly the 18th century plaster was directly covering the dado-decoration (layer 2). This dado continued on both the southern and the western walls of the *kburus*. To uncover the dado on the western wall it was also necessary to remove a mudbrick wall, a construction that must have been added in the 1782 and that served no particular constructive purpose. After removal of this wall and the 18th century plaster the conclusion was that the only painted decoration of the western wall that ever existed was the dado.

[5] By the removal of this wall the construction in the south-western corner of the *kburus* became better visible. This consists of a masonry base on which a marble tray has been placed. The marble is a broken fragment, now a quarter circle, of a much larger object. Originally it must have been a circular or semi-circular tray, possibly the surface of an altar.

[6] The dado on the southern and the western walls is of the same composition as elsewhere: painted columns with imitation of marble-incrustation in between. On top of this there is an architrave of red and white triangles, imitating marble and porphyry inlay.

## 3. A NEW CHRONOLOGY OF THE PAINTING LAYERS

[7] So far we presumed that the decoration of the church consisted of three phases. A closer examination of the paintings and the stratigraphy of the plaster now shows that we should distinguish four phases in the decoration. This conclusion was based on the stratigraphy of the paintings in the upper part of the *kburus* and the stratigraphy of plaster around the entrance to the southern *haikal* (see below).

[8] 1. The first paintings must have been done soon after the completion of the building, according to P.Grossmann ca. 645 A.D. These decorations were done at first in red ocre and consisted of crosses, floral decorations and peacocks. Some of these decorations were coloured with green and red encaustic paint, like in the upper part of the southern wall.



Illustration 4. The half-column at the western wall of the *kburus*.  
The mudbrick wall on either sides of the column  
has been removed, the dado is visible at the left.

[9] 2. Not long afterwards, presumably around 700, a more monumental programme of paintings was begun. Some of the initial decorations in the lower areas of the church were whitewashed over. This programme must have included the dado-decoration throughout the church. In the *keburus* a number of scenes were added over this level of the dado and on the half-columns. It seems likely that the painting of the Virgin Galaktotrophousa was one of the first paintings in this phase. The standing military saint next to her, the horse-riding saints and the doctors in the southern *keburus* are part of this phase.

[10] 3. Parts of the decoration of phase 1 in the higher parts of the church were plastered over later. This must have been done to prepare a more monumental iconographical programme for the dome and the upper walls. Most of these paintings have been executed in a mixed technique: tempera with considerable parts finished in encaustic technique. These paintings included the representations of the conversion of the chamberlain of the Candace, the apocryphal story of St. Andrew and the cannibals. Around the dome parts of a Coptic inscription were found (Hugoye 2.2, figs. 3, 4). Previously, these paintings were thought to belong to phase 2, but it is clear now that they were done later. The Coptic inscription around the dome could not be much older than from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, judging from its paleography (oral information from dr Jacques v.d. Vliet, Leiden) and this inscription must be contemporary with the surrounding paintings, judging from clear overlaps. This is one of the indications that during the 10<sup>th</sup> century major renovations were executed in the church. If the person called Moses, mentioned in the inscription around the dome, who was *begoumenos* and *oikonomos* of the monastery, was Moses of Nisibis, this could mean that the paintings were made in his time, the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It would be of course remarkable that a Syrian abbot would commission such a monumental inscription in Coptic, but since we have evidence that the community was to a large extent still Coptic, this might be an explanation.

[11] 4. The last phase of the decoration, the complete overplastering and repainting of the interior in the 13<sup>th</sup> century thus becomes phase 4. This phase is represented by the paintings in the half-domes of the *keburus* and the paintings uncovered in the nave in 2000.

#### 4. OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE ARCHITECTURE

##### 4.1. The original construction of the entrance into the southern *pastoforion* (sideroom).

[12]

During the removal of plaster in the south-eastern corner of the *kburus* it became clear that the position and shape of this entrance had changed twice. Originally the entrance was to the far right (fig. 1). At a certain moment the doorway was moved to the left, by cutting away the left doorjamb and constructing a new doorjamb at the right (fig. 2). This is clear from the fact that the first two layers of plaster continue behind the right doorjamb. The new right doorjamb has two layers of plaster, of which the 13<sup>th</sup> century plaster is the later one. This means that this change in the position of the door took place before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The main purpose of this operation must have been to centralise the entrance to the *pastoforion*. This may have been done because it was turned into an additional *haikal*. In that case it may have been done in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when in a number of churches *pastoforia* were turned into *haikals*.<sup>2</sup> It may also have been part of a general renovation of the church at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the central *haikal* was rebuilt. Finally, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the doorway was made narrower by constructing a narrow, low arch within the wider entrance (fig. 3). This may have been necessary to avoid collapse.

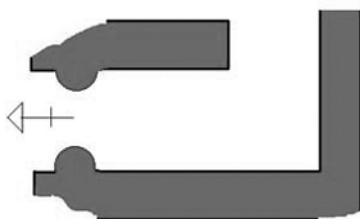


Fig. 1. Schematic plan of the southern *kburus* (not to scale), original situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Grossmann, *Mittelalterliche Langhauskuppelkirchen* (Glückstadt, 1982) 225.



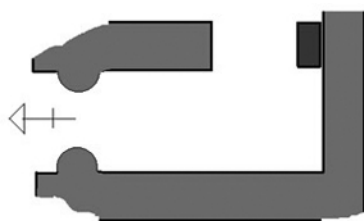


Fig. 2. Schematic plan of the southern *keburus* (not to scale), after moving of the doorway.

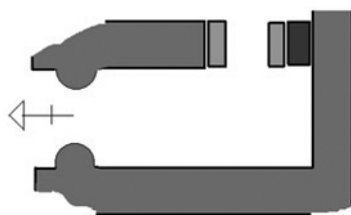


Fig. 3. Schematic plan of the southern *keburus* (not to scale), after narrowing the doorway in 1782.

#### 4.2. The original construction of the arch of the semi-dome.

- [13] During the investigations to prepare the restoration of the plaster round the arch of the southern semi-dome, it became clear that there must have been an arch, probably constructed of limestone, resting on the capitals of the two attached half-columns and supporting the semi-dome. When this arch was removed is not clear, but its former presence can be clearly assessed by the “negative” at the edge of the semi-dome and the fact that the painted decoration around the edge has been cut.

#### 5. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

- [14] During the work of Autumn 2000, which mainly consisted of finishing the conservation work on paintings uncovered in 1999, further indications were found that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century renovations of the church were carried out. The overplastering of the upper walls of the *keburus* and the addition of a number of paintings were probably part of it. These paintings, previously thought to belong to phase 2, now have been shown to belong to a later period.

A surprising aspect of this discovery is that the encaustic painting technique, generally considered not to have been used anymore after the 8<sup>th</sup> century, was apparently still in use in later periods. It may have used on purpose here to avoid a contrast with the paintings of phase 2. It is possible that also the remodelling of the doorway of the southern *pastoforion* was part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century renovation works. These activities may have taken place at the initiative of Moses of Nisibis. Investigations will continue in the Autumn of 2001 and may yield more evidence concerning these questions.