

PROJECT REPORT

Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings in Deir Al-Surian

KAREL C. INNEMÉE, LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

1. INTRODUCTION

[1] The Sketis, now known as Wadi al-Natrun, is one of the oldest centres of monastic settlements in Egypt. This region of salt-lakes is situated west of the Nile-delta, half-way between Cairo and Alexandria. Of the many monastic settlements in this area, four monasteries have survived and are still inhabited: Deir (“Monastery”) Abu Maqar, Deir Anba Bishoi, Deir al-Surian and Deir al-Baramus. The origin of these monasteries lies in the period between the 4th and the 6th century and they have known an almost uninterrupted habitation. Their architecture and collections of icons and manuscripts reflect the traditions of fifteen centuries of Christian history of Egypt.

[2] Deir al-Surian, or “The Monastery of the Syrians,” occupies a special position among the Coptic monasteries. Built by monks from the neighbouring Deir Anba Bishoi in the sixth century, it passed into the hands of Syrian monks, probably during the eighth or ninth century. Syrians have been visiting Wadi al-Natrun as pilgrims, merchants or as refugees in times of trouble. From the ninth century onward the monastery was inhabited by mainly Syrian monks, although contacts with neighbouring monasteries and the local population were maintained. During the ninth and tenth centuries an exceptionally rich library of Syriac (and later also of Arabic) manuscripts was collected in the monastery. Many manuscripts of this library can now be found in libraries in London, Rome, St. Petersburg and Paris. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth century the Syrian population of the monastery gradually died out and Coptic monks took possession of the monastery once again. The more than 100 monks that inhabit the monastery nowadays are all Egyptians, but the Syrian history of the monastery lives on in its name and its treasures of art.

[3] The oldest church of the monastery is dedicated to the Holy Virgin (Al-‘Adrā’). Its original construction dates back to the middle of the 7th century. In 1991, after a fire that destroyed most

of a painting in the western half-dome of the church, an older layer of painting was uncovered of which the existence was expected already by Jules Leroy.¹ Only after the removal and conservation of the heavily damaged layer of painting by a French-Netherlands team, headed by Prof. Paul van Moorsel, it was shown that the underlying painting represented the Annunciation, executed in a style and technique so far unknown in Christian art in Egypt.² So far there is no certainty concerning the dating of this painting, the identity or origin of the painter.³ Between 1991 and 1994 in several other parts of the church plaster fell off or was removed, showing traces of older painting. The questions surrounding the Annunciation-painting and the need to preserve the fragments found later were the main reasons to undertake a short campaign in September 1995.⁴ It had a two-fold purpose: preserving the (fragments of) paintings uncovered before and investigating the possible existence of more paintings under later layers of plaster. More than 50 test patches ('windows') were opened and revealed the presence of at least three painted layers of plaster on almost all walls of the building. A second mission was undertaken in September 1996 with the purpose of further uncovering and consolidating of a number of paintings and inscriptions discovered in the previous season. The architectural context of the paintings was also a subject of investigation. In 1996, Dr. Peter Grossmann of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo (DAI) was able to draw a number of conclusions concerning the original shape of the church after the removal of plaster in certain parts of the walls.

[4] In November 1997 work was continued and in January 1998 a fourth campaign was undertaken. This report presents some of the

¹ J. Leroy, *Les peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natroun* (Cairo, 1982) 69, pl. 128.

² P. van Moorsel, "La grande annonciation de Deir es Sourian," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale* 95 (1995): 517–37.

³ The proceedings of a symposium on this subject, reflecting the diversity in opinions, are published in *Cahiers Archéologiques* 43 (1995): 117 sqq.

⁴ This and following campaigns were undertaken under responsibility of the Netherlands Institute in Cairo (NIAASC) by Karel Innemée (Leiden University) and Mrs. Ewa Parandowska (restorer at the National Museum, Warsaw).

most important paintings uncovered and conserved during these campaigns.

2. STRATIGRAPHY OF THE LAYERS OF PLASTER

[5] In the present state of the research the following layers of plaster and painting can be distinguished:

1. The first layer of plaster, most probably applied shortly after the building was finished (*i.e.* approx. 645 A.D.). It consists of a coarse, yellow layer of mortar, covered with a white limewash. The first traces of decoration on this layer consist of (probably decorative) patterns in yellow and red ocre.
2. Before applying a more sophisticated layer of painting, the paintings in ocre were in some places white-washed with a layer of light grey limewash. This can be seen most clearly on the separation-wall between the nave and the *keburnus* (the part of a Coptic church that corresponds roughly to the transept in western architecture), left of the door between both spaces. Where no previous painting was present, this second layer of painting was applied directly on the first plaster. The paintings belonging to this layer have most probably not been executed in the same period, but over a span of several centuries, between the 7th and the 12th. Apart from paintings, this layer contains several inscriptions, both in Coptic and Syriac.
3. At least in one place, again left of the doorway leading into the *keburnus*, this layer was partially plastered over with a grey plaster, in order to add an inscription. This Syriac inscription was dated to the 12th century (1155/6 A.D.?).
4. Most of the inner surface of the church was plastered over at a certain moment with a white lime-sand plaster. This layer carries paintings which have been dated to the 13th century on the basis of their style. The paintings in the half-domes belong to this layer, but also in several other places paintings or remains of paintings in the same style have been found. It seems that both plastering and painting were done in the 13th century by one artist or one group of artists in order to re-decorate the church with one coherent decoration.
5. In 1498 A.M., *i.e.* 1781/2 A.D.⁵ the interior of the church was re-plastered with a pinkish-grey plaster. By then several of the paintings on the columns were completely or partially covered

⁵ According to a document in the archives of the monastery (oral information from Father Martyros al-Souriani).

by the masonry piers that had been constructed (in the 14th or 15th century?) to support the barrel-vault over the nave. Before this re-plastering, loose plaster from previous centuries was removed from the walls. Much of this debris was dumped in the space between the separation wall between nave and *keburus* and a wall built in front of it later.

3. WALL-PAINTINGS UNCOVERED

3.1. Decorative Lower Zone

- [6] In 1995 investigations were started on the northern wall of the *keburus*, where in recent times fragments of painting became visible after loose plaster had dropped off. Further removal of plaster brought to light part of a decoration, consisting of a painted imitation of columns, carrying an architrave. This lower zone reaches up to a height of approx. 2 meters. Window 7, on the north wall of the *keburus*, revealed the lower part of a standing figure, probably that of a saint, on top of this architrave. This decorative lower zone must have been present on all the walls of the church, running along the walls of the nave and the *keburus*. This could be deduced from that fact that in all cases where a window was opened at approximately 2m from the floor, remains of the painted architrave were found. This lower zone has served as a basic decoration of the interior of the church and in the following centuries paintings and inscriptions were added on the higher parts of the wall. One of these inscriptions, a Syriac text on the southern wall of the nave (window 30, text I) is dated three hundred and twenty (...) A.H., i.e. 932/940 A.D.⁶ This gives us a *terminus ante quem* for the decorative lower zone. Given the fact that the dated Syriac text is written over an older and faded inscription, the decorative painting might date back to the 9th or even the 8th century.⁷

⁶ This and other texts discovered in the church will be published in K.D. Jenner & L. Van Rompay, "New Syriac texts on the walls of the Al-'Adra Church of Dair al-Suryan, first notes," in *Mitteilungen zur Christlichen Archäologie* (Vienna).

⁷ A comparable iconography can be found in the 13th century painting of the three Patriarchs in the old church of St. Anthony's monastery near the Red Sea; P. van Moorsel, *Les Peintures du monastère de Saint-Antoine près de la Mer Rouge* (Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale; Cairo, 1995) 95–8.

3.2. The Three Patriarchs (Fig. 1)

[7]

In 1995 one of the windows on the same wall of the church revealed the face of an old man with a grey beard (window 59). In 1996 this window was enlarged in order to uncover the complete painting, measuring approximately 2 x 2 meters. The composition shows the three Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, enthroned in paradise with the souls of the blessed, represented as small naked figures, on their laps. They are dressed in brown and reddish brown tunics and *pallia*. Only the middle one wears a white *pallium*. All three have almost identical, severe faces and long, white hair. A peculiar detail is that the three arch-fathers are feeding the blessed fruits. In the background there are four trees from which similar naked figures are picking fruits. The tree in the upper left corner is still covered by plaster and painting supposed to be from the 13th century. There are no inscriptions in the painting mentioning the names or the subject, which suggests that the representation must have been easily recognizable to the viewers. This is hardly surprising, since the daily evening prayer in the Coptic Church contains a prayer for the dead, saying “Graciously, O Lord, repose all their souls in the bosom of our holy fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”⁸ The theme of the three patriarchs enthroned in paradise occurs in iconography only since the 9th/10th century⁹ and this is the first example in Coptic wall-painting known so far. An exact dating for the painting is hard to give, but since it is partially covered by a painting supposed to be from the 13th century and considering its style it might be dated to the 11th century.

⁸ *The Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil* (Cairo: St. John the Beloved Press, 1993) 16.

⁹ E. Lucchesi Palli, “Abraham,” in E. Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* I (Rome, 1970) 30.



Fig. 1: The Three Old Testament Patriarchs,
represented in paradise with the souls of the blessed on their knees,
ca. 1000 A.D.

3.3. The Virgin Galaktotrophousa

[8]

In the *keburus* of the church a thick layer of 18th century plaster was removed from two half-columns engaged to the pier on the right side of the entrance into the *baikal* (sanctuary). In 1995 a window (nr. 57) was opened in a layer of plaster, heavily damaged by nails driven into one of the half-columns. Further removal of the plaster in 1996 revealed a representation of the Virgin, breast-feeding Christ. The position of this painting is remarkable, since normally speaking a painting or icon of Christ would be expected in this position, with the Virgin and child at the left side of the entrance to the *baikal*. The Virgin is seated on a delicately decorated throne with a red cushion. She wears a blue tunic with red *potamoi* and a blueish green *maphorion* over it. The *maphorion* is decorated with crosses. Her eyes are looking straight ahead. Her head is surrounded by a yellow halo, against the background of a red half-circle, probably meant to represent the upper part of the back-rest of the throne. With her right hand, in which she holds a *mappa*, she supports the infant Christ, while her left hand supports her breast, depicted unnaturally small. Left of her head there is the Greek text H A(gamma)IA, written as a monogram; the name MAPIA, which doubtlessly must have been written at the other side of her head, has been lost. The background of the painting is dark blue and it is surrounded by a black and an orange-red line. A number of characteristics of this painting indicate an early date: it has been painted by a skilled master, who worked in a technique which at least for the part of the face is very close to the style of painting in the Fayyourn-portraits. The texture of the paint is similar and although no analysis of the paint has been done, it would not be surprising if the technique used for the face of the Virgin would turn out to be encaustic. The iconographical detail of the infant Christ sitting on the right knee of His mother occurs in early paintings and becomes more and more rare in later times.¹⁰ The same is the case for the epigraphy: H A(gamma)IA MAPIA (ἡ Hagia Maria) is the earliest inscription in representations of the

¹⁰ Most, if not all, known examples of the Virgin suckling Christ, sitting on her right knee, date from the 7th century. Cf. G.A. Wellen, *Theotokos* (Utrecht/Antwerpen, 1960) Beilage III: Bawit, Ch. 42, Room 30; Saqqara, Cells A, 1725, 1807; p. 192.

Virgin, later to be replaced by MP (theta)Y, the abbreviation for 'Mother of God'. In these respects the painting is comparable to a painting from room 30 in Bawit, where the same composition with the same epigraphy can be seen.¹¹ These factors, combined with the fact that a painting of the Virgin would be one of the first subjects to be represented in a church dedicated to her, make it likely to assume that this mural painting belongs to the second half of the 7th century.

3.4. Unidentified Military Saint (Fig. 2)

[9]

On the other half-column, engaged to the same pier, a painting of a standing military saint was uncovered. Complete uncovering was impossible, since the left part of the painting was covered by the right door-jamb of the *baikal*-doors, constructed in 913/4 A.D. It shows a standing, beardless young man, dressed in a blue tunic, covered by a shorter, reddish-brown tunic. He wears a girdle from which a sword hangs in a red sheath. He holds its hilt with his left hand, while his right hand holds a staff. He has dark, half-long hair and his eyes look straight ahead. The head is surrounded by yellow halo, framed by a black line with white dots on it. At the right side of the head the last letters of a Greek inscription ending in ... C (gios), ... C(rios) or ... C(tios) are visible. If this is the last part of the name of the saint, it could be Sergios, Dimitrios or Georgios, all three known to be depicted as young, beardless men. Considering the space available for the inscription, it must have been a short name, which makes Sergios one of the most probable identifications. In early iconography military saints are often depicted standing, instead of mounted on horseback. Although the state of preservation of the face is worse than that of the Virgin, it is rather clear that the style of painting is different. Also the way of rendering the folds in the dress shows a different style. It might therefore be the work of another master, but similarities in the technique of painting make a dating in the second half of the 7th century, but maybe slightly later than the painting of Virgin, acceptable.

¹¹ G. Maspero, *Fouilles exécutées à Baouit = Melanges de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 59 (1931): pl. XLII, XLIII.



Fig. 2: Unidentified military saint (St. Sergios?), beginning 8th cent.?

- [10] The same half-column carries decorative paintings below and above the painting of the unknown saint. Below, a red cross has been painted, surrounded by horseshoe-shaped wreath of green leaves. The capital of the half-column is conical in shape and it is decorated with a similar motive: a cross in two shades of red, surrounded by green branches. It would have been interesting to know what themes were represented on the counterpart of this pier, the one on the left side of the entrance to the *baikal*, but no traces of paintings have been found here. As remarked already, it was and still is usual in Eastern Churches to find the Virgin enthroned left of the *baikal* and the painting or icon of Christ at the right. The question whether Christ was depicted on the left in the case of this church and if so, for what reason the two representations were inversed, will therefore be hard to answer.

3.5. Paintings on the Upper Walls of the Khurus

- [11] On the eastern wall, just under the dome, traces of paintings were found, belonging to layer 2 (window 66). In the lower part of the dome apart of a Coptic inscription on layer 2 was found, probably running all around the inside of the dome (window 67). Of the text only the four letters ... (pani).. were uncovered, too little to translate. Later, in January, the continuation of the same text was found in the southern part of the dome. This text reads:

+ . (ʔ) (E N O Y M E (theta) M H (phi) H (theta)
 A . (gamma) I)
 ...this is in truth that what the Lord has...

- [12] The remaining part of this text is expected to be found in one of the following seasons. Over this text remains of paintings were found, suggesting that the inside of the dome was painted and may be still containing paintings.

- [13] Below this text, on the southern wall of the *khurus*, a number of paintings were found that can be called very important for Coptic painting (Figs. 3 and 4). The wall has three windows, the right one having been walled up. Between the left and the middle window in the upper zone there is a beardless man seated on a two-wheeled chariot, holding a tablet in his hand with a Coptic inscription. In a T-shape, above, right of his head there is a Coptic inscription (pi)E(theta)(omega)(sj) NKANTAKH (the black man of the Kandake). This is an illustration of the New Testament book

of Acts 8: 27, where the conversion of the chamberlain of the Ethiopian queen by the deacon Philip is described. Of the figure of Philip nothing but his raised hand in gesture of speech is preserved. The second scene of this story was depicted on the same level between the middle and the right window. A Coptic inscription reads: (pi)ICIOYP (the eunuch). Although heavily damaged, the scene is clearly recognizable as the baptism of the eunuch, probably taking place under a sort of red canopy. A part of his bare shoulder and the hand of Philip over his head have been preserved and in the lower part of the scene two feet between wavy lines, representing water, are visible.

- [14] In the lower part between the left and middle window there is a scene which was at first puzzling: a standing man with grey hair seems to address five figures with dog-heads. The scene can be identified as St. Andrew preaching in the land of the dog-headed (*kynokephaloi*) cannibals. This apocryphal story is related in the *Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud anthropofagos*.¹²

- [15] Between the middle and the right (walled-up) window a second baptism scene was found. The same man as in the scene of the dog-heads (St. Andrew) is shown, baptising two people. This scene is probably intended to show the continuation of the missionary work of Andrew among the pagans.

- [16] These scenes show themes that are rare in Christian iconography. So far there is no evidence for the reason why they were represented here, but since the subject of both is conversion and baptism of foreign people, there might have been a context connected with Pentecost. It is not to be excluded that the dome over the *kburus* contained such a representation. During following seasons attention will be focused on the remains of paintings in the dome and the walls just below the dome.

- [17] Right of the right window and left of the left window, in the corners of the *kburus*, the remains of in total four crosses were found. These crosses, all different in shape, have been painted in mainly red and green and are surrounded by a frame of red with a row of white dots on a black line in it.

¹² F. Blatt (trans.), *Toepelman* (Giessen, 1930).



Fig. 3: The conversion of the eunuch of Candace, 10th–11th cent.?



Fig. 4: St. Andrew preaching to dog-headed people, 10th-11th cent.?

3.6. Other Paintings in the Khurus

- [18] There is very clear evidence for more paintings on the walls in the *khurus*: several fragments of paintings representing saints have been discovered during the 1995 season. On the half-column opposite the painting of the Virgin the lower part and the face of a male saint with grey hair have been discovered (windows 18 and 19). On the wall over the entrance to the southern *baikal* window 53 shows the head of a horse, possibly part of a painting of a mounted saint. On the southern wall of the *khurus* a fragment of drapery is visible (window 54). In the northern *khurus* several fragments of the decorative lower zone and figures painted over it have been uncovered (windows 7–16). All these fragments seem to belong to layer 2. The presence of layer 1 underneath can be noticed in a small number of windows.

3.7. St. Dioscorus

- [19] On the easternmost column in the northern nave, two windows were opened in 1995 (nrs 42, 43). These revealed two standing figures with monk's caps. Next to the head of one remains of an inscription were visible. This season both paintings were entirely uncovered. Both paintings are on layer 4 and are similar in style to other paintings in the church, dated to the 13th century. The inscription next to the head of one of the two became clear and readable: 6 Letters in Greek: () C (O) C and an inscription in Syriac: Dioscorus the Patriarch. He is depicted in the costume of a monk with the rank of a priest. No episcopal vestments can be recognized. He wears a *phelonion* covered with medallions, nine originally, of which 6 are still visible. Under the phelonion a red *sticharion* with an *epitrachelion* are visible. The epitrachelion is decorated with a rectangular field covered with circles with dots inside. The lower part of the painting is missing; here the 18th century plaster is directly applied on the brick of the column.

- [20] The counterpart of this painting is to be found at the opposite side of the nave, where a similar head is visible. This might be St. Severus, who is often depicted as a counterpart of Dioscorus. On the northern face of the column the second figure turned out to be in a lesser state of preservation. Apart from the vague contours of a standing figure in the dress of a monk, nothing could be distinguished.

3.8. The Palimpsest Wall (Fig. 5)

- [21] In the eastern part of the northern wall of the nave, where windows 39 and 40 were opened in 1995, these windows were enlarged and a large surface, covered with inscriptions, was revealed. On either sides of this surface a walled-up window was discovered under the plaster of layer 4, suggesting that these windows were closed in the 13th century or earlier. The inscriptions, most of them in Syriac and Coptic, were mainly found on layer 2, but several local overplasterings can be distinguished, indicating that for a long time inscriptions were added on this wall. On later overplasterings also Arabic inscriptions can be found. A full translation of the texts is not yet available. One fragment is a part from the Coptic liturgy, other inscriptions seem to be made by visitors as graffiti. The reason that especially this wall of the church was popular among visitors for leaving inscriptions seems to be the presence of the relic-shrine in the N–E corner of the nave. The present *maqsurā* (shrine) cannot be much older than the 18th century, but the niche in which it stand has the same dimensions as the 11th cent. relic shrine, made in the time of abbot Moses of Nisibis, now kept in the store of the monastery. This can be taken as an indication that from an early moment this corner of the church was the place where the relics were kept and venerated by visitors.

3.9. Various Test Patches

- [22] In the *keburus* a number of test patches were made to investigate the presence of paintings. On the western and northern walls no evidence for paintings underneath could be found. At the inside of the arch between the nave and the *keburus* no painting was found; on the western face of the same arch fragments of floral decoration were found.
- [23] A test patch on the southern wall of the nave, opened in spring '97 (window 73), showing a fragment of a painting on layer 4, was cleaned and showed a part of a horse's head and a hand holding a cross.



Fig. 5: *Palimpsest*-Wall with Syriac and Coptic inscriptions.

3.10. Paintings in the Haikal (Sanctuary)

[24] Under the squinches in the N–E and N–W corners of the sanctuary remains of paintings were found on the wooden beams.

The clearly represent winged creatures, possibly *Cherubim* or apocalyptic creatures (*tetramorphs*), much similar to the *tetramorph* in the haikal of Benjamin in Deir Abu Maqar. Although these paintings were never covered by plaster, they were not noticed until now.