

A NEWLY DISCOVERED PAINTING OF THE EPIPHANY IN DEIR AL-SURIAN

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Introduction

Since 1995 a team of restorers under the auspices of Leiden University has been working on the uncovering and conservation of mural paintings in the church of the Holy Virgin in the Syrian Monastery (Deir al-Surian) in Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt.¹

In the period September-December 2006, a 13th century painting of the Dormition of the Virgin was detached from the wall in the northern semi-dome of the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian, and an older painting, representing the Epiphany, was discovered. Between 15 September and 20 December 2007 the Epiphany mural painting was consolidated and restored, and the mural of the Dormition was put in its new place in the museum of the Monastery. This paper is the first report of the discovery.

Since its construction in the middle of the 7th century, the church of the Holy Virgin had been decorated with mural paintings. However, this decoration has not remained unaltered throughout the centuries. The first layer of painted decoration was

¹ The team during the 2006/2007 season consisted of Mr. Cristobal Calaforra (field-director), Ms. Milene Gil Duarte Casal, Ms. Agnieszka Kijowska, Ms. Monika Czerniec, Ms. Urszula Dabrowska and Mr. Ashraf Bushra Kamel (restorers) and Dr. Karel Innemée (project-director). The inspector during this season was Mr. Abd el-Fatah Abd el-Halim Zeitun. The project was financially supported by Dr. Sarwat Bassily, Cairo.

simple and must have consisted mainly of crosses and geometrical patterns, judging from the few fragments that have been found so far. From the end of the 7th century onwards a second layer of paintings was applied. It seems that most of these paintings were made before 800 AD and almost all of them were completely or partially painted in the encaustic technique. Around or shortly after 900 AD a third layer of paintings was added. Some of these paintings covered paintings of the second layer, but most of them were intended as an addition to the iconographical programme of the 8th century. In the beginning of the 13th century the church was completely renovated and accordingly, the whole of the interior was newly plastered and redecorated. Finally in the 18th century, the church was once again renovated and re-consecrated in 1782. At this time the church's interior had been plastered again and only the 13th century paintings in the three half-domes in the south, west and north of the church were left visible.²

This was the situation until 1991, when the painting of the Ascension in the western semi-dome of the church had to be detached after a fire had seriously damaged it. Underneath the painting of the Ascension an older painting was discovered, representing the Annunciation.³

This discovery was the starting point of a discussion concerning the dating, authorship and iconography of the painting and of further investigations into the presence of other paintings under the layer of 18th century plaster. Even before these investigations were begun it had been suggested that the Annunciation was part of a cycle and that under the 13th century painting of the Dormition in the northern semi-dome there might be a painting of the Nativity.⁴

Since 2001 there were clear indications that underneath the painting of the Dormition should be a representation of the

² Karel Innemée, 'Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings in Deir al-Surian', in *Hugoye, Journal of Syriac Studies*, vol. 1, nr. 2, <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>

³ P. van Moorsel, 'La grande annonce de Deir es Sourian', *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 95 (1995), 517–537

⁴ K.C. Innemée, 'Deir al-Sourian—the Annunciation as part of a cycle?' in *Cahiers Archéologiques* 43 (1995), pp. 129–132

Nativity. When 18th century plaster was removed at the left lower edge of the Dormition painting, the inscription *Melchior* on the layer beneath became readable, while on the right side of the Dormition painting, two sheep became visible on the layer of painting beneath. These revealed fragments from the earlier layer of plaster alluded to the existence of a program containing the adoration by Magi and shepherds; events directly associated with the Nativity.

Overview of the seasons of work from 1996–2008

Since 1996 an international team of restorers and scholars has been involved in uncovering and restoring the paintings on the subsequent layers of plaster in the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian. In the course of this project the poor state of preservation of the paintings in the northern semi-dome became more and more apparent. The original 7th century wooden construction supporting the semi-dome had completely disintegrated and was supported by additional beams as part of the 13th century renovations. But even one of these beams had almost entirely been eaten by termites. As a result of deep cracks in the masonry of the dome, the two layers of painting (dating from the 8th and 13th centuries) had been detached from the surface and from each other in many places. Parts of the Dormition painting started falling down in 2000 and some parts of the painting had to be prevented from collapsing by gluing Japanese paper on the surface as a temporary measure. After a long period of preparation the decision was taken to separate the two paintings, although it was clear that the oldest of the two paintings was already damaged in the 13th century and that its condition could have only deteriorated since then.

In the period September–December 2006 the painting of the Dormition was detached, using the *stacco*-technique. This technique involves detaching the painting together with the layer of plaster on which it was painted. This detachment was done in seven large pieces. In Autumn–Winter 2007–2008 the painting was re-assembled and mounted on a new support in the museum located next to the church of the Holy Virgin in the monastery.

The painting that appeared underneath was in extremely fragile condition. Considerable damage must have occurred before the 13th century, when it was covered by a layer of plaster. Part of the

damage was caused by the cracks in the masonry of the dome, but the fact that the paint was easily flaking off must have been due to the fact that the whitewash in the semi-dome was not fresh at the time that the painting was made. A thin layer of greasy dirt, caused by oil lamps and incense prevented the layer of encaustic paint from attaching well. The western semi-dome, where the Annunciation was painted, had probably been built shortly before it was decorated and here the fixation of the painted layer is much stronger. Because of this damage, approximately 30% of the surface of the Epiphany painting is missing. Nevertheless, the painting is clearly readable and its painterly quality is exceptionally high.

In the course of the detachment of the Dormition it became clear that indeed the adoration of the shepherds and the Magi was represented to the right and to the left respectively, and the central part of the composition consisted of a Virgin enthroned with Christ Emmanuel on her lap. This characterises the composition as an Epiphany, rather than a Nativity.

The composition of the Epiphany painting

The composition consists of three main parts: centre, right and left.

In the centre there is a representation of the Virgin Mary, seated on a richly decorated throne (fig 2). She wears a greenish grey *maphorion* and a grey tunic with blue *potamoi*. Her halo is golden yellow with a red rim on which there are white dots. To the right of her head there is a damaged monogram that can be read as ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ. This epigraphy corresponds to other representations of the Virgin in the church: the painting on the column to the right of the doors to the sanctuary, and the inlaid ivory figure on the doors between the nave and the *kekhurus*.

On her lap she holds a dark blue oval shield or *clipeus* on which the infant Christ is represented with certain characteristics of an adult (Christ Emmanuel). He is turned towards the left, where the three Magi are approaching. Although much of the figure is lost, it is clear that he is dressed in a tunic and *pallium*, while holding a book in his left hand and making a gesture of blessing with his right hand. Above the head of the Virgin, in the top of the conch, the star of Bethlehem is visible against a dark blue background. On either side of the Virgin an archangel is standing: to the left is

Michael and to the right is Gabriel. They wear greyish tunics and purple *pallia*. Michael makes a gesture of introduction towards the Magi, while Gabriel has his right hand raised in a gesture of speech towards the shepherds. Both carry a staff ending in a cross in their left hand. Their names are (partly) legible in Greek inscriptions at the bottom edge of the painting. + APXHATTEAOY + MHXA.A and .XHA. ΓAYPHA.

The left part of the composition contains the figures of the three Magi. The upper part of their bodies is rather heavily damaged, while the lower part is better preserved. The figure to the far left has brown hair and wears a blue Phrygian cap. He is dressed in a grey tunic with a red under tunic. Over this he wears a purple mantle. His shoes are blue.

The middle figure has a brown beard (the hair on the head is no longer visible). He wears a purple Phrygian cap, red trousers, a light blue mantle and dark red shoes. The third figure has grey hair and wears a red cap, purple trousers, a beige mantle and red shoes. In his hand he carries a dark blue box, in which are white dots. Two names, written below the figures of the Magi, are still legible. The one to the far left is called +ΔΙΚΑΤΙΑ, the one in the centre is called +ΜΕΛΙΩΡ. Between the heads of the Magi—although heavily damaged—are visible the heads of their horses. In the sky above them is an angel with both arms outstretched.

To the left of the Virgin is depicted the adoration of the shepherds. Three persons in short tunics with bare legs are standing in a landscape with trees in the background and rams (curiously enough no sheep) around their feet. An angel in the sky which is symmetrical in position, gestures to the angel on the left to announce the birth of Christ to these shepherds (fig 3). To the far right a badly damaged inscription is visible. A possible reading is +ΙΜΕΝΕC, probably originally meant to be read as +ΙΙΙΜΕΝΕC (shepherds).

The composition is framed by a wide decorative border in the arch between the conch and the central *kebrus*. This border consists of rectangular panels, filled with symmetrical patterns of floral and geometrical motives. In contrast to the painting itself, which has almost entirely been painted in encaustic, the border is done in tempera with occasional touches of encaustic.

Dating and authorship

The painting belongs to the second phase of the decoration of the church, a layer that so far has been dated to the 8th century. Within this phase the painting possibly belongs to a later period, since drops of encaustic paint have fallen on the painting below in the *keburus*, showing that this painting was made earlier.

The painting is certainly not the work of one master. Between the figures on the left and the right there are considerable differences in style and technique of painting. This is most apparent in the way the faces and the hair of the figures have been painted. If we compare the two angels over the heads of the magi, and the shepherds and the archangels, we see that the angels on the left have their locks of hair indicated by fine white lines on a brown background, while the hair of the angels on the right consists only of various shades of brown. The master who painted the figures on the right used white highlights in almost all faces. The face of the Virgin has been painted in a way that differs considerably from that of the other figures. The egg-shaped face, the linear rendering of the almond-shaped eyes, the eyebrows and the nose give the face a distant, almost immaterial character. This part of the painting in its motionless frontality is in sharp contrast with the vivid movements that characterise the left and right parts of the composition. Because of this deliberate difference in style it is difficult to ascribe the figure of the Virgin to one of the two masters. The figure of Christ Emmanuel has more similarity with the style of the right part of the painting and therefore the Virgin may also have been painted by the same master. There are slight differences in style within the painting of the Epiphany, but even more striking is the difference with the way that the Annunciation in the western semi-dome has been painted, especially if we compare the treatment of the face of the Virgin. Her face in the Annunciation could hardly be more different from that in the Epiphany and it clear that it was done by a third person, basing himself on (a) different example(s) and—maybe for this reason—painting in a different style. The Epiphany has been painted in the encaustic technique and the high quality of the craftsmanship shows once more that this

technique was still practiced in 8th century Egypt by apparently a considerable number of painters.⁵

Iconography

The painting of the Epiphany must have been part of an iconographical programme, to which also the Annunciation in the western semi-dome belonged. Whether there has been an apse with a painting of the Ascension remains hypothetical and whether there is a painting of the Pentecost under the 13th century paintings in the southern semi-dome, is a question that cannot be answered yet. Nevertheless it seems logical to presume the existence of an 8th century sequence of Christological scenes in four semi-domes, to be read clockwise.⁶

The idea of a sequence, showing episodes from the life of Christ implies a narrative aspect. In the paintings in the nave of the church of Deir al-Baramus one finds such a series, starting with the Annunciation and ending with the Pentecost⁷ (based on the interpretation of the remains of the last scene being correct). The 13th century paintings in the semi-domes of the church of Deir al-Surian consisted of a sequence beginning with the Annunciation, followed by the Nativity, the Ascension and the Dormition. But as in the Byzantine *dodekaorton*, such a sequence can have more aspects. A Nativity would have been suitable as a scene to follow the Annunciation. This is the case in the 13th century painting in the southern semi-dome of Deir al-Surian. So if in the 8th century the Epiphany was depicted after the Annunciation, rather than the usual Nativity, it is worthwhile at least to speculate on the reasons for this choice.

Although a cycle of scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin seems to have a narrative basis, based on the chronological order of events, the two 8th century paintings in the semi-domes have clear symbolic aspects as well. The presence of the prophets in the western semi-dome is a deliberate anachronism with a purely

⁵ K.C. Innemée, 'Encaustic painting in Egypt' in B. Mathieu, D. Meeks, M. Wissa (eds.) *L'apport de l'Égypte à l'histoire des techniques*, Cairo 2006, pp. 133–142.

⁶ See note 4.

⁷ G. van Loon, M. Immerzeel, 'Inventory of Coptic Wall-paintings', in *Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East 1* (1998) pp. 10–13

symbolic character. Likewise, the narrative aspect of the painting in the northern semi-dome has been suppressed. In the left and right halves where flying angels are addressing the Magi and the shepherds, the image has a narrative character. The painters have convincingly achieved an expression of movement. Even though the Magi, according to the gospel were not addressed by an angel prior to their visit, the way of representing it has a narrative character and the angel must have been introduced to create a symmetry with the right half of the painting. The standing archangels flanking the throne of the Virgin seem to act as transitional figures. Like Byzantine *silentiarii* they belong to the central part of the composition as guardians of the throne of the Virgin. At the same time they are turned towards the visitors; Michael makes a gesture of introduction to the Magi, while Gabriel raises his hand in a gesture of speech towards the shepherds. Neither of them are mentioned in the biblical episodes of the adoration by the Magi or the announcement to the shepherds, and their presence in the painting can be explained as a link between the rather timeless central part of the composition, the enthroned Virgin, and the flanking scenes with magi and shepherds. Both adorations are in fact separate events, welded together by the object of their veneration and combined within the framework of the Epiphany.

The part of the painting that depicts the adoration of the Magi shows the three wise men dressed in oriental costumes. All three wear Phrygian caps; only the first two wear the characteristic trousers, while the one to the far left wears a conventional tunic. The archangel Michael makes a gesture of introduction in the direction of the Virgin and Christ. This reminds one of the mosaic of the adoration in San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, where the Magi and the angel next to the throne of the Virgin are shown in a comparable way (figs. 4,5). Here, as in Deir al-Surian, the three Magi are shown as young, middle-aged and old respectively. The iconography of the mosaic in Ravenna, as so many works of art from the Justinian era, has been clearly influenced by Byzantine imperial iconography and court ritual. The visit of three oriental travellers to a Judean carpenter's family has been transformed into

a Byzantine court audience of an empress with the crown prince on her lap.⁸

The central part of the composition, the Virgin with Christ enthroned, flanked by two (arch)angels, is the object of the attention of both the Magi and the shepherds. At the same time it is a timeless, iconic representation, especially of the Virgin. Her face has a frontal gaze and appears to be detached from the events depicted on her right and left. The Christ child, although on the lap of his mother, seems to be part of the adoration of the Magi, rather than being in contact with the Virgin. The contact between mother and child is in fact minimal. She does not hold him in the way one would expect in a more narrative representation of the adoration of the Magi, but carries an oval shield on which Christ is depicted like a miniature adult, raising his hand in a gesture of blessing in the direction of the Magi. Although there is a certain resemblance with the iconographical type of the Virgin *Platytera*, this is clearly a different way of representing the Virgin with Christ. Whereas the *Platytera* can be considered a way of representing Christ in the Virgin's womb, we have here the Virgin holding what seems to be a *clipeus* as an object of veneration.⁹ Such round portraits were known in late antiquity both as commemorative representations of the deceased and as imperial portraits.

This way of representing the Virgin is known from a number of other compositions. One example is the painting in the prayer niche in Chapel XXVIII in the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit,¹⁰ where the Virgin is depicted in a similar way; enthroned and flanked by two angels and presenting to the beholder an oval shield on which Christ is depicted. (fig. 6) The angels flanking the Virgin are incensing, instead of directing their attention to visitors. The Virgin still looks placidly ahead, while Christ Emmanuel seems to make his sign of blessing towards the beholder. Although the Magi are absent, one may still call the representation an Epiphany, be it the literal sense of 'appearance'. The beholder—in this case the inhabitant of the cell in which this niche was painted—could

⁸ R. Farioli, *Ravenna Romana e Bizantina*, Ravenna (without year), fig. 91, 92

⁹ C. Ihm, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei vom vierten Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des achten Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden 1960, p. 64.

¹⁰ Ihm, *Tafel XVIII*, 1.

imagine himself in the position of the Magi. Christ was appearing to him through the painting in the prayer niche. A similar composition was found in the prayer niche of cell 1723 of the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara.¹¹

Another parallel to the Epiphany in Deir al-Surian is the 6th–7th century miniature, bound in the 10th century Edchmiadzin Gospels.¹² Here the Virgin holds again a blue oval *imago clipeata* of Christ, showing it to the Magi who are now approaching her from both sides. It seems that for the sake of symmetry only one angel is depicted (fig 7).

The most notable parallels with the Deir al-Surian Epiphany are a number of so-called Monza-ampullae, which are led alloy flasks that were taken by pilgrims as containers for holy oil from the Holy Land. Some of these are kept in the Cathedral of Monza and others in the Abbey of Bobbio¹³. Four of these flasks, published by André Grabar, carry representations of the Epiphany. All four have been cast from different moulds and are slightly different in their details. Flask number 1 from Monza shows a composition with the Virgin enthroned in the centre and the three Magi on the left and three shepherds on her right (fig 8). Above the head of the Virgin is an eight-pointed star in a circle. On either side of this star are two angels pointing at the star and turned towards the Magi and the shepherds respectively¹⁴. Monza ampulla number 2 has a slightly different composition, but due to its mediocre state of preservation not all details are clear. The details of the shepherds on the right side of the depiction is similar to ampulla number 1. On the left is visible a part of a standing angel and at least one head of one of the Magi. The upper part of the Virgin is missing.¹⁵

Ampulla number 3 differs again with numbers 1 and 2. Both shepherds and Magi are standing in a row on either sides of the

¹¹ Paul van Moorsel, Mathilde Huijbers, 'Repertory of the preserved wall paintings from the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara', in *Acta ad Archeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* IX, Rome 1981, pp. 153–156, Pl. XVIII–XIX.

¹² L. Dournovo, *Armenian Miniatures*, London 1961, p. 37.

¹³ A. Grabar. *Ampoules de Terre Sainte*, Paris 1958.

¹⁴ Grabar, p. 16, pl. I–II.

¹⁵ Grabar, p. 18, Pl. IV.

throne. There are no angels flanking the throne, while the angels in the sky are turned towards the star instead of towards the visitors.¹⁶ According to Grabar, ampulla number 9 from Bobbio was cast from the same mould as Monza number 3, but close examination of the ampullas show slight differences. The former is only partially preserved, showing only the right half of the throne and the shepherds.¹⁷

The compositions of the Epiphany scenes on the flasks show certain differences between each other. The same is the case with other themes that occur on these ampullae, such as Ascension scenes or the women at the tomb of Christ. In spite of these varieties the representations on the pilgrims' flasks from Monza and Bobbio are considered to be based on monumental apse compositions in churches in the Holy Land. In the case of the Epiphany scene, the monumental example would have been a Justinian apse decoration in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.¹⁸

The compositions on the flasks, especially Monza number 1, show a considerable similarity with the Epiphany painting in Deir al-Surian; the main difference is the absence of the two archangels on most of the flasks and minor differences such as the absence of the oval shield on which Christ is represented. But on the other hand, both representations show a number of similarities in details that can hardly be a coincidence:

- ~ the backrest of the throne of the Virgin has a characteristic inward curved shape;
- ~ the middle shepherd in Monza numbers 1 and 2 points at the star above the head of the Virgin, while looking back at the shepherd behind him.
- ~ all representations are semi-circular.
- ~ the flocks of the shepherds consist of only rams, not sheep.

¹⁶ Grabar, p. 20, Pl. VIII.

¹⁷ Grabar, p. 37, Pl. XLII.

¹⁸ A. Grabar, *Martyrium II*, Paris 1946 (Variorum reprint, London 1972), p. 174; B. Bagatti, *Gli antichi edifici sacri di Betlemme*, Jerusalem 1952, p. 12 sq.; Ihm, pp. 53/54; K. Weitzmann, 'Loca Sancta and the Representational Arts at Sinai', in *Studies in the Arts at Sinai*, Princeton 1982, pp. 48/49.

We could therefore suppose that the Epiphany of Deir al-Surian has been based in its composition on the same prototype as the Monza ampullae, that is, the now lost apse of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The artists have allowed themselves certain liberties and variations, and the *clipeus* in which Christ has been represented may be one of these.

The position of the Epiphany in the Church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian

The Epiphany is part of a narrative cycle that starts with the Annunciation in the western half-dome and is meant to be read clock-wise. If the 13th century decoration of the church does indeed reflect the 8th century programme, then it is likely that there was an eastern apse with an Ascension and that the southern semi-dome contains the final scene of the cycle. There is indeed still a painting under the present 13th painting in this conch and it is very possible that the subject is the Pentecost.¹⁹ It has been stated above that the Epiphany can be seen as part of a christological cycle, but its narrative aspects have been suppressed in favour of symbolic aspects. Otto Demus considers three layers of meaning in the christological mosaics in Byzantine churches. First of all the church is considered an image of the Cosmos and its decoration supports this symbolism. In the second place the decoration refers to the topography of the Holy Land, giving the believer the opportunity to make a virtual pilgrimage, while his eyes wander over the mosaics. The third interpretation is based on the cycle of the ecclesiastical calendar. The mosaics reflect the main episodes in the life of Christ and the feasts that commemorate them.²⁰ These three aspects, or at least the latter two, also seem applicable in the case of the cycle in Deir al-Surian. Apart from these there seems to be a fourth aspect in the case of the Deir al-Surian Epiphany: the liturgical context.

The representation of the Virgin enthroned with Christ, be it with or without the Magi and shepherds, is a common and suitable subject for an apse, since it reflects the concept of the incarnation. The incarnation is also what is re-enacted in the transubstantiation that takes place during the Eucharist below the apse. Painting and

¹⁹ See note 4.

²⁰ O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, London 1976, pp. 14–16.

ritual, each in their own way are expressions of the appearance (epiphany) of Christ.

If the Epiphany is represented in a lateral semi-dome instead of the apse, it raises the question whether there is still a symbolic connection with the liturgy. In the Red Monastery near Sohag in Upper Egypt, the northern conch of the sanctuary carries a painting that bears a certain similarity with both the western and the northern semi-dome of Deir al-Surian. The Virgin is represented suckling Christ and surrounded by four Old Testament prophets, who prophesied about the incarnation. In a number of Nubian churches we find the Nativity represented in the north-eastern part of the church, over the entrance to the northern *pastoforion*. Such is the case, for instance, in the cathedral of Faras²¹ and in the central church of Abdallah-n-Irqi.²² This would suggest that there is a possible connection between the theme of the incarnation and the function of the northern *pastoforion*, at least in the region of Nubia and Upper Egypt.²³ In Middle and Lower Egypt side rooms occur much less and to date there was no reason to presume any connection between the preparation of the holy gifts and the northern side room.

Over the entrance of what used to be the northern *pastoforion* in Deir al-Surian we find a painting that possibly alludes to a change in its function. It was done after an enlargement of its door to make it suitable to be used as a second *baikal*, dedicated to the liturgy of St. James.²⁴ This change in function possibly took place around 800 AD. Previously the northern side room of the central sanctuary must have had a different function. The function of the side rooms, the so called *pastoforia* has never been completely clear

²¹ K. Michałowski, Faras, *Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, Zurich 1967, pp. 143–148, Taf. 63–69.

²² P. van Moorsel, J. Jaquet, H. Schneider, *The Central Church of Abdallah Nirqi*, Leiden 1975, pp. 89–92. Here Van Moorsel alludes already at a function of the northern *pastoforion* as a place where the eucharistic gifts were prepared.

²³ K.C. Innemée, 'Observations on the system of Nubian church-decoration', in *Cahiers de Recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille* 17 (1995) pp. 279/289.

²⁴ K.C. Innemée, 'A newly discovered mural painting in Deir al-Surian', in *Eastern Christian Art* 1 (2004), pp. 61–66.

in Coptic churches. Peter Grossmann observes that they seem to have been part of Upper rather than Lower Egyptian church architecture, and that they occur long before they are associated with their name and function in later Byzantine tradition. The southern *pastoforion* is usually called *diakonikon*; a room where deacons would keep their utensils, while the northern *pastoforion* is known as *prothesis*; after the rite of preparing the holy gifts. This rite of the *prothesis*, however, cannot be attested before the beginning of the 7th century, when the Great Entrance, the ceremonial procession with bread and wine, is first mentioned by Maximus Confessor.²⁵ Yet even at that time there is no evidence for the use of the northern *pastoforion* in this ceremony. This is the situation in the Byzantine Church. In the Coptic Church there is no evidence to date for the use of the northern side room as a place for preparing the holy gifts.²⁶

A strong indication that the northern side room has had a function in the preparation of the holy gifts, at least in one church, was found at the excavation site of Deir al-Baramus, approximately 10 km north-west of Deir al-Surian. During recent excavations, a direct connection was found between a small bakery; apparently used for the making of the liturgical bread, and the northern *pastoforion*. A depot of wine-amphorae discovered just outside of the *pastoforion*, suggests that both bread and wine were kept here before the liturgy. The northern *pastoforion* must have been used for this function until the 9th century, when the church suffered considerable damage. In the process of restoration the *pastoforion* was enlarged and turned into a side-chapel. The ruined bakery was not rebuilt.²⁷

²⁵ Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia* 16, G. von Berthold, *Maximus Confessor, Selected Writings*, London 1985, p. 201. G. Descoedres, *Die Pastophorien im syro-byzantinischen Osten*, Wiesbaden 1983, pp. 91 sqq.

²⁶ P. Grossmann, *Mittelalterliche Langhauskuppelkirchen und verwandte Typen in Oberägypten*, Glückstadt 1982, p. 171, note 770; Idem, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, Leiden 2002, pp. 27/28, 113–116

²⁷ K.C. Innemée, 'Excavation at the Site of Deir al-Baramus 2002–2005', in *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* XLIV (2005), p. 62. In the Coptic tradition the bakery of the liturgical bread is called *beth lahim*, literally meaning 'house of bread'. This is also the meaning of the name of the town that we know as Bethlehem.

The situation in the church of Deir al-Baramus is evident and could support the supposition that in Deir al-Surian during the same period the northern *pastoforion* had a similar function. In that case the Epiphany painting was possibly meant to underscore the function and symbolic meaning of this area of the church.



Fig. 1 The painting of the Epiphany after consolidation, cleaning and partial retouching



Fig. 2 Detail: the Virgin enthroned



Fig. 3 Detail: the archangel Gabriel and a shepherd.
The face of Gabriel has been retouched partially



Fig. 4 Ravenna, San Apollinare Nuovo, the Virgin enthroned
(after R. Farioli, *Ravenna Romana e Bizantina*)



Fig. 5 Ravenna, San Apollinare Nuovo, the three Magi
(after R. Farioli, *Ravenna Romana e Bizantina*, Ravenna, without year)



Fig. 6 Bawit, Monastery of Apa Apollo, Virgin flanked by angels
(after J. Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, MIF 40 XII, 1904)



Fig. 7 Edchmiadzin Gospels, Epiphany.
(after <http://armlet1600.sci.am>)



Fig. 8 Monza, treasure of the Collegiale, flask nr. 1
(after A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, Princeton 1968)