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Old Dongola: Kom H, Southwestern Unit

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 8, 169-178

1997

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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OLD DONGOLA

KOM H, SOUTHWESTERN UNIT

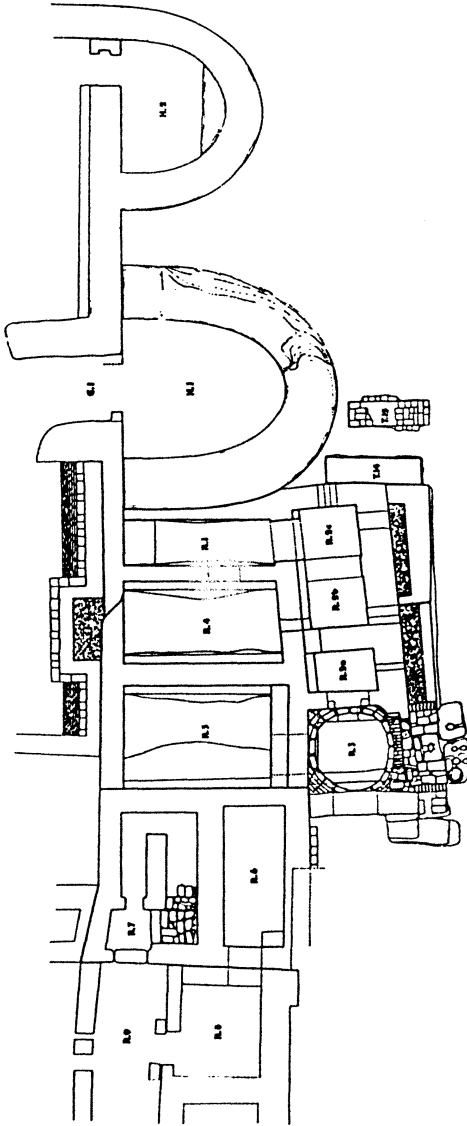
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Unit SW started being excavated in 1989, even before exploration of the monastery itself had begun. Thirteen graves unearthed during the 1989 season on the southwestern slope of the Kom were coded TWH (=Tombs west of (Kom) H). After the 1991 season, when more graves were found, the TWH cemetery was subdivided into TNWH (=Tombs northwest of (Kom) H) and TSWH (=Tombs southwest of (Kom) H, Fig. 1).

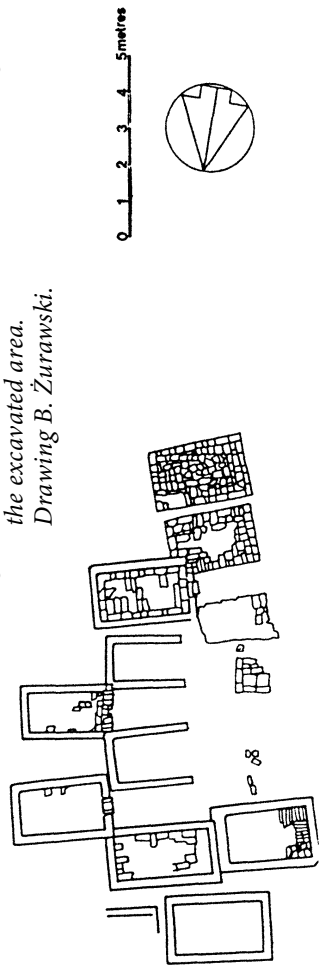
Large-scale excavations in Building SW were triggered by the finding (in 1995) of two Late Christian murals representing the Enthroned Virgin Nursing the Child. The clearing of Rooms 1 and part of 2c in 1995 produced a third image of the Enthroned Virgin and Child, and two fragmentarily preserved murals representing a bishop (?) and a Prophet (?). An entrance vestibule was also traced north of Room 2a. It was entered through an arched opening flanked by stone jambs (Fig. 2). Fragments of a horizontal wooden beam were also found on top of the jambs.

In January 1996 excavations were resumed in the entrance vestibule (Room 3). The stone door jambs were exposed to the original walking level. The threshold was found at a depth of 3.20 m below the surface of the Kom. It was made of a reused stone toilet slab which was pierced in the middle. Two similar toilet slabs were found in front of the gate, at a slightly lower level than the threshold because of the sloping ground here. On top of the northern slab (provided with two perforations) a truncated column shaft was found in a semi-vertical position. A bowl-like depression in the top of a shaft seems to suggest its use as a font. Its location to the left of the entrance appears not to be accidental.

The entrance vestibule (R.3) was constructed *part passu* with Room 2, and was subdivided into three sections: R.2a, R.2b,



*Fig. 1. Southwestern Unit on Kom H in Old Dongola. General plan of the excavated area.
Drawing B. Żurawski.*



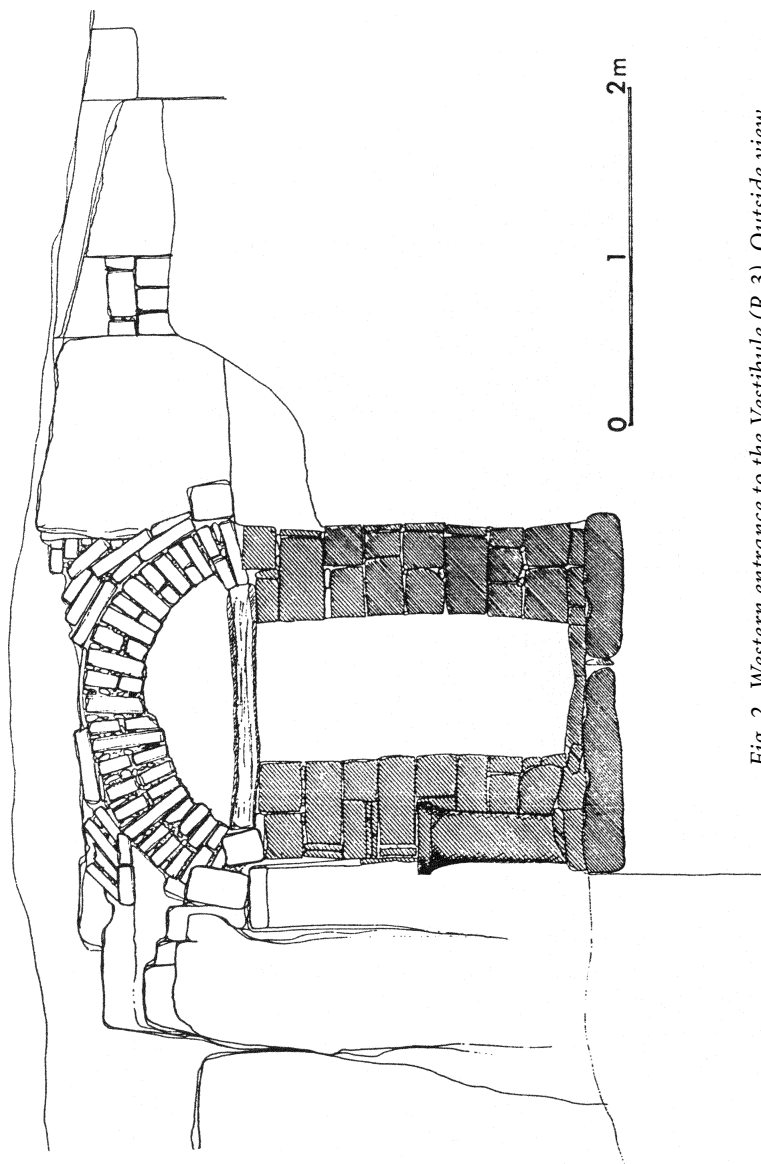
R.2c by means of two arches reinforcing the vault. A set of rooms (R.1, R.4, R.5) joining R.2 on the northern side was constructed earlier (but after Unit R.6 + R.7 was raised). Thus, the suite of rooms R.3 + R.2 was the latest extension of the building and was apparently intended to facilitate inside communication. Prior to the building of R.2, R.1 was entered through the opening in its northern wall. The western entrance to R.1 was cut later, after R.2 had been erected.

The entire length of the exterior wall formed by the western walls of Rooms nos. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, was probably lined with finely dressed stone blocks. Some of this stone facing was found in the test trench dug in the corner between the northern wall of R.3 and western wall of R.6.

The Vestibule (R.3) was constructed on a tetrapylon principle. Of its four arched openings, the northern one was blocked. The remaining three gave access to Rooms 2c and 5. The eastern opening was cut in the western wall of R.5 (since the Vestibule was added to R.5, it has no eastern wall of its own). Since the secondary openings cut through R.5's western wall had reduced its carrying strength considerably, the wall was doubled from the inside and buttressed by a coffer-like mud-brick structure filled with rubble. The western entrance was reinforced by two mighty stone jambs. The northwestern corner was enclosed within a mud-brick abutment and the incurved northern wall was additionally buttressed from inside (Fig. 4). The construction of a buttress against the southern wall reduced the span of the passage giving access to Room 2a.

The Vestibule (R.3) was paved with roughly dressed stone blocks. The western entrance was closed with a door made of four palm logs tied together with ropes and connected by stretchers (Fig. 3). A finely dressed stone was used as a door socket placed in the southwestern corner of the vestibule.

The interior buttresses were inscribed with graffiti scratched when the level of sand in the Vestibule reached the height of



*Fig. 2. Western entrance to the Vestibule (R.3). Outside view.
Drawing B. Żurawski.*

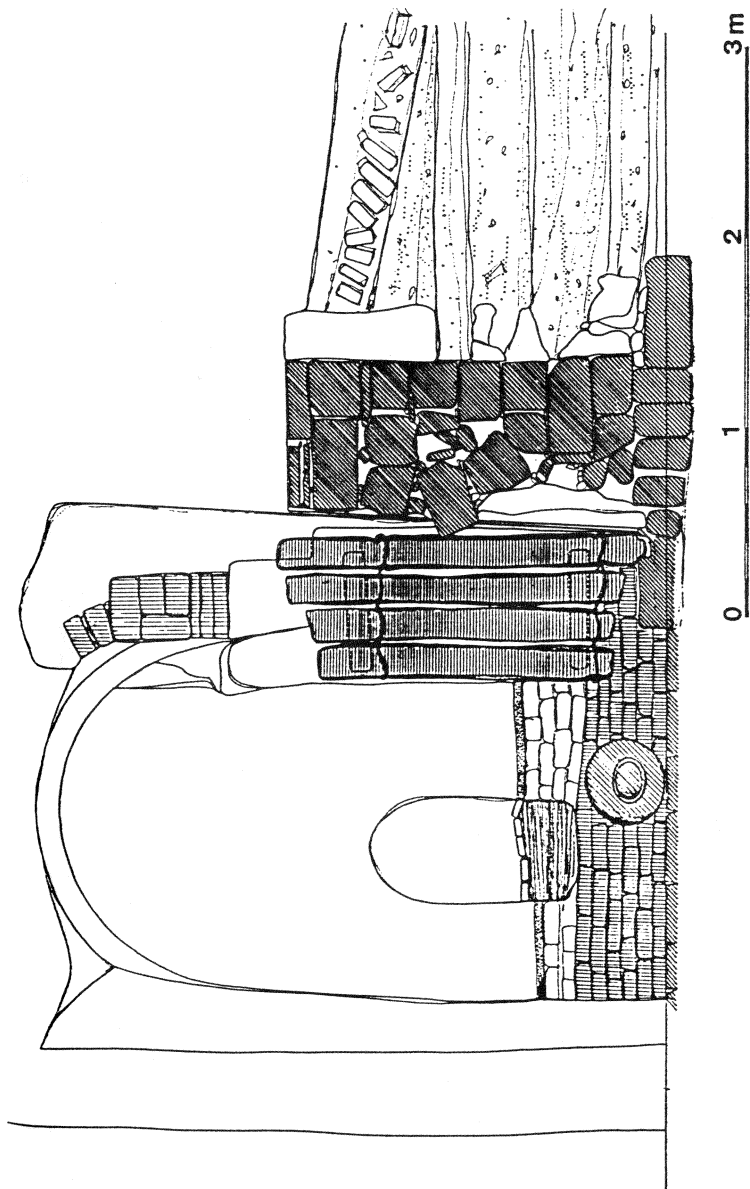


Fig. 3. Section E-W through the Vestibule (R.2). Looking south.
Drawing B. Żurawski.

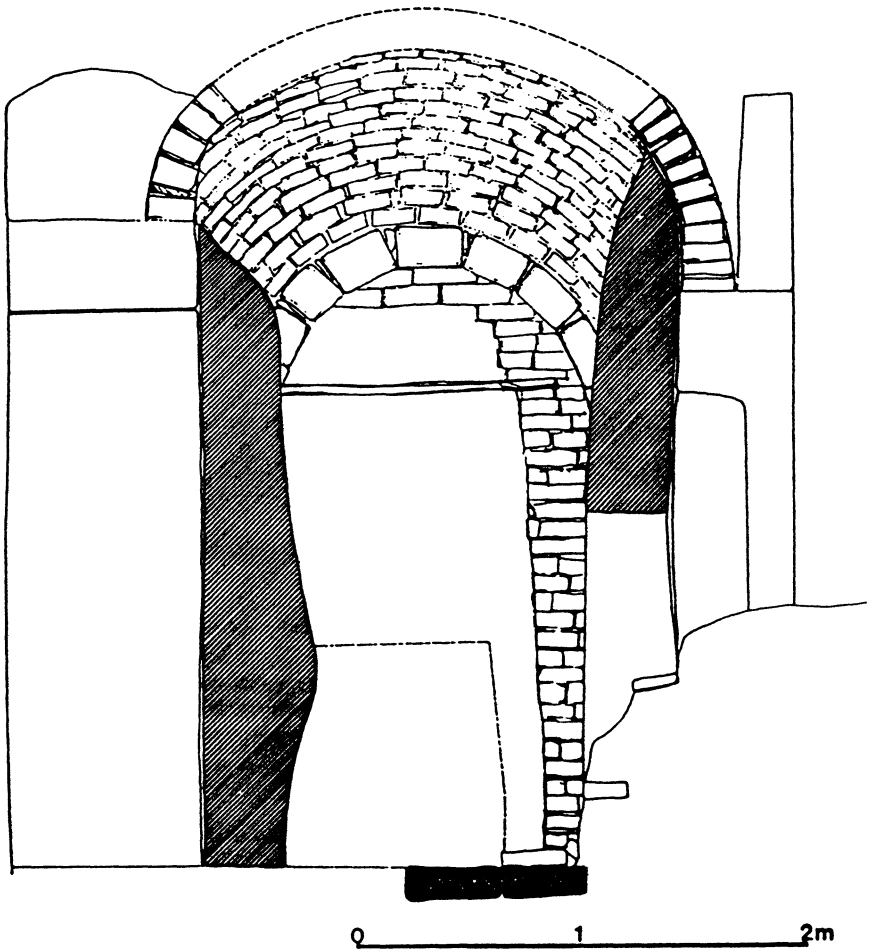


Fig. 4. Section N-S through the Vestibule (R.3). Looking east.
Drawing B. Żurawski.

close to 1 m above the stone pavement. On the original plastering above the buttresses some mural fragments were found. The master composition depicting an archangel with the sword of fire adorned the wall facing the western entrance.

In the latest phase of occupation, the passage connecting the Vestibule with the corridor-like Room 2 was reduced in height to only 80 cm. There are reasons to believe that Room 2 was deliberately filled with sand and rubble (in order to avoid inward swelling of the walls). The same layer, rich in Early Christian pottery, was discovered in 1989 in trench S/TWH/1/89 dug along the western wall of tombs 1 and 2.

Two tombs unearthed in 1996 (T.14 and T.15) are of the Terminal Christian type (very narrow shaft surmounted by an elongated mastaba without lamp-box and western platform). The grave coded T.14 was attached to the southern wall of Room 2c after the western coffered abutment had been raised. Another grave of the same late type was found outside the southern wall of the compound, 7.40 m from the southwestern corner.

During the 1996 excavations, the original floor level was reached only in the test trench dug in the western part of the Vestibule. In Rooms 2 and 1 the lowest level reached is approximately 1 m above the floor. Deeper excavation is risky because of the condition of the masonry. Curiously enough, the weakest sections are the ones made of sandstone, because of the easily disintegrating stone structure.

The magnificent murals adorning the walls of R.1 and R.2 were painted on the latest walls inside the building (Fig. 5). In R.2, the murals were painted on the first layer of plaster. Simultaneously, the intrados of the arched passage from R.1 into R.2 was plastered and a set of murals that was uniform in style and execution with those in R.2 was executed.

So far, no traces of a domestic function have been found in this area, but two hemicircles (H.1 and H.2) were construct-



Fig. 5. Prophet Ezra. Painting on the western wall of Room 2.
Drawing W. Chmiel and B. Żurawski.

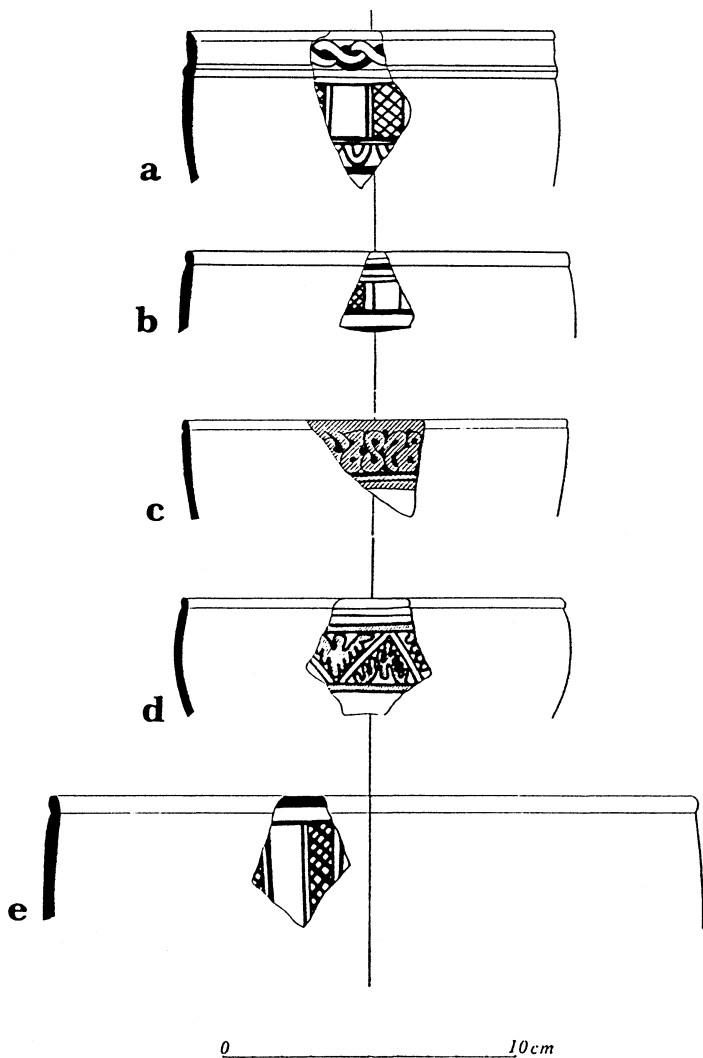


Fig. 6. Pottery from the layer of domestic waste (earliest habitation phase).
Drawing B. Żurawski.

ed to solve the problem of waste disposal. H.1 was a typical latrine cesspit located in the most appropriate place inside the compound (southwestern corner), while H.2 was raised on the site of the original Southwestern Gate (coded G.1). After the monastery had been abandoned, the hemicycles were heavily disturbed by maroq-diggers.

It is most strange that so much of the architectural activities and so many religious functions were focused outside the walls of the monastic complex. The more so that the area in the southwestern corner of the Monastery was virtually empty. In front of the katholikon there was a huge courtyard drained by means of terracotta pipes inserted in the outer (southern) wall of the monastery compound. A complete outlet of this kind was found in 1996 near the would be Southern Gate. This find terminates the longstanding discussion on the possible appropriation of the terracotta pipes which were found in great numbers during excavation on Kom H. Their association with the drainage system seems to be proved.