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Wall-Painting Transfer and Conservation at Naqlun : Part 2

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WALL-PAINTING TRANSFER AND CONSERVATION AT NAQLUN

PART 2

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The painting from the central niche of the apse of the church of the Archangel Gabriel was the object of a conservation project already in the previous season¹⁾ when the two layers were separated and the outer and later layer bearing a representation of the Virgin and Child was

detached and transferred to a new artificial support for independent display. This year was dedicated to the conservation of the lower painting representing Christ, which was treated *in situ*, and to the final aesthetic finishing and arrangement of the two murals.

REPRESENTATION OF CHRIST

Almost a third of the composition is missing in the upper part.²⁾ It was presumably the background of a composition featured in the semi-domed top of the niche and was likely removed during the rebuilding of the church in the 11th century. Pitting of the mural, designed to make the next coating of plaster adhere better, added to the damage, making parts of the mural difficult to interpret, especially just under the horizontal arms of the cross and at the bottom. The paint layer was powdering, especially the red and black colors. Sections of the painting were covered with soot and bore greasy yellow stains. The present form of the composition was the outcome of the bust of Christ being over-painted on top of an earlier depiction of a cross.

The wall supporting the painting is made of mixed material, 80% being red brick, the rest consisting of mud brick and limestone, and wooden beams. Dating the building is still an open issue; it is probably from the 7th-8th century. The painting was executed on a single layer of lime-sand plaster (0.5-3.0 cm thick), finely tempered with small amounts of ivory and vegetal black. The surface was smooth and well prepared. A layer of grayish whitewash was applied as background, then the composition with the cross was painted, and after some time had elapsed the figure of Christ was added to the upper arm of the cross, changing the composition to *Gloria Victis*.³⁾

The painting was executed *al secco* and Arabic gum may have been the binding

1) Cf. C. Calaforra-Rzepka, *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 171-177.

2) For photographic documentation of this mural, see the report mentioned in note 1 above, esp. Fig. 3 on page 176.

3) Cf. W. Godlewski, *PAM XIII*, op. cit., 169-170.

medium, although the degree of mineralization and the present condition of the mural precludes a determination as to whether this technique, considered as traditional in the area ever since antiquity, had actually been applied here.

The color palette was limited to iron oxides (red and yellow ochre) and black (mixed ivory and vegetal black) with the light background being considered as a separate color. Today the paint layer may give the impression of transparency, but

originally it must have been thicker and stronger. The composition was sketched "freehand" without earlier preparation.

The Christ painting had been cleaned and consolidated previously.⁴⁾ This year the retouching was done in watercolor technique by a method called *aqua sporca* with lights and diluted colors attempting to give more legibility to the original paint layer. Reconstruction was kept at a minimum as the main part of the composition was better preserved.

REPRESENTATION OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD



Fig. 1. *The Virgin-and-Child painting reinstalled in the church narthex (Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka)*

The final aesthetical arrangement of the transferred representation of the Virgin and Child, which had been postponed from the last season, was now the chief objective. The procedure of retouching was done in the same watercolor technique as in the case of the earlier layer of painting. In view of the fact that the church continues to be in use and is heavily visited by pilgrims, not to mention scholars, it was deemed appropriate to reconstruct parts of the missing composition in order to make the whole entirely more legible.

The smaller gaps were first filled with local color lighter than the original, tracing lines and shapes that had not been legible at the beginning of the work. This was followed by a partial reconstruction of the basic shapes, such as ovals of heads and haloes, hands, and the outline of the throne. The reconstructed lines were blurred to suggest the shape, but without any details, which can be discerned only on the original parts (Fig. 2).

As a final step, the transferred picture was screwed onto the south wall of the narthex, beside other paintings from the

4) Cf. Calaforra-Rzepka, op. cit., 174.

same period (*Fig. 1*). This will prevent any further damage due to accidental transport of the object, while putting the painting

high enough to be out of reach of visitors. The mounting holes were then filled with plaster and retouched.



Fig. 2. The upper part of the composition of the Virgin and Child from the central niche of the church apse, after retouching (Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka)