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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 15, 216-223

2004

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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THE PAINTED DECORATION OF THE CRUCIFORM BUILDING IN DONGOLA PRELIMINARY REPORT

Dobrochna Zielińska

In 2001, excavations revealed the western part of the Cruciform Building down to the floor from the later stage. In 2003, the interior of the structure was cleared down to the earlier pavement, permitting a study of the stratigraphy and the wall paintings surviving *in situ* and found in the fill.¹⁾

Larger fragments of painted compositions can be discerned on the north wall of the eastern arm and the adjoining western and southern walls, as well as in the northern arm, on the north wall directly to the right of the blocked entrance and on the east wall (*Fig. 1*). Mere fragments of plaster have been preserved in other parts of the

structure, mostly in the corners and a larger section with traces of decoration by the western entrance.

An analysis of the remains has permitted the stratigraphy of plaster layers to be determined. Four separate layers of plaster were distinguished, including three coats of lime plaster and the fourth, latest of mud plaster (*Fig. 2*).²⁾

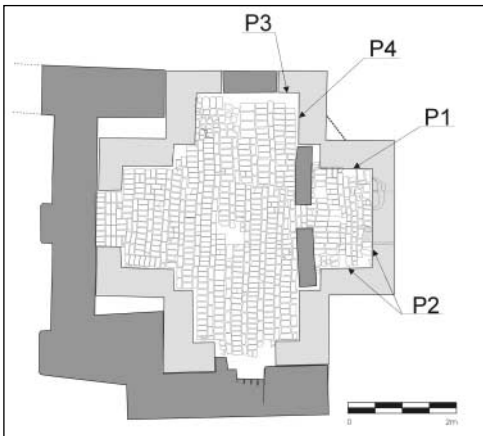


Fig. 1. Plan of the Cruciform Building showing location of preserved wall paintings



Fig. 2. Stratigraphy of lime plaster coatings preserved in the northern arm (Photo D. Zielińska)

1) For the previous season, cf. W. Godlewski, "Old Dongola, Kom A, 2001", *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 203-216. For the present season, cf. report by W. Godlewski in this volume.

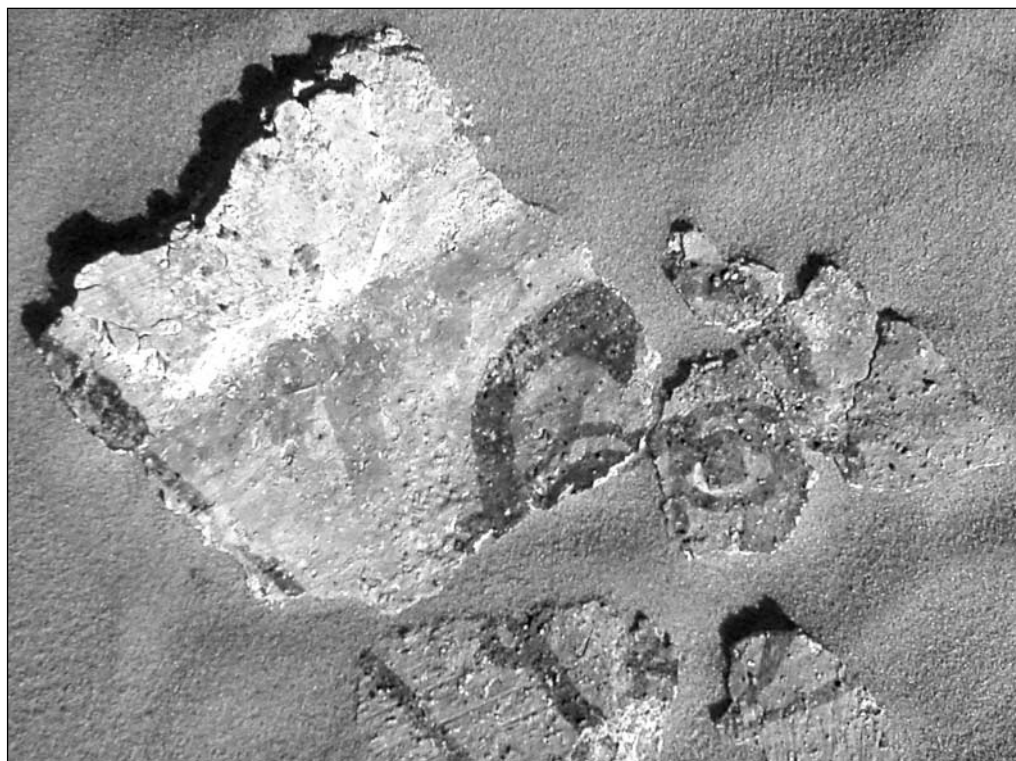
2) Initially, it was thought that the building was plastered only twice. Exploration of the lower layers, especially under the later floor, revealed an intermediary stage, cf. *ibid.*, 210.

FIRST LAYER OF LIME PLASTER

Traces of decoration surviving on the walls of the eastern and western arms indicate that the figural decoration in this layer covered the bottom parts of the walls as well as the vaults. Preserved fragments from the eastern barrel vault (P in *Fig. 1*) suggested that the decoration had been composed of representations of standing men (warriors?) wearing black boots and long white mantles (P1).³⁾ Judging by the fragments of first-layer plaster recovered from the fill, there could have been more

than two such figures. This is indicated foremost by an almost complete face of a Nubian warrior with a lance in his hand (*Fig. 3*) and similarly treated fragments suggesting parts of the body and dress.

The figures were depicted in a landscape recalling a green meadow with a sprinkling of small, synthetically treated plants featuring pale violet flowers. Apart from the landscape painted in soft splashes, floral elements appeared also as bands of decoration on a white background.⁴⁾



*Fig. 3. Face of a Nubian warrior from the first plaster coating
(Photo D. Zielińska)*

3) Illustrated in *PAM XIII*, op. cit., Fig. 6.

4) Similar plant motifs occurred in the decoration of the monastery at Bawit: J. Cledat, "Le monastere et la nécropole de Baouit", *MIFAO* 111 (1999), pl. 119, and in House A at Old Dongola: W. Godlewski, "The early period of Nubian art, middle of 6th – beginning of 9th centuries", in: *Études nubiennes. Actes du VII Congrès international d'études nubiennes, 3-8 septembre 1990* (Geneve 1992), 288.

Fragments of painted corners of walls decorated with a variety of geometric motifs were also discovered in the fill.

The color range appears virtually unlimited. Yellow, both warm and cold, other from vivid warm oranges through sienna and umber to violets of a warm and cold (pink) shades, as well as blues, emerald greens and olive hues. The preserved fragments clearly demonstrate the use of pigment mixed on a palette during painting in order to obtain the exact shade desired at any given moment. The resulting color splashes are not uniform and the colors are quite varied.

There is an equally obvious difference in how the landscape is treated compared to the figures. Elements of the background are painted softly, without any contours, merging with the surroundings, occasionally differing only slightly in shade or color warmth.

Human figures were distinguished from the background with a black, distinct but varied contour line. The contoured parts demonstrate varied coloring and a soft

delicate modeling. The shadowing of the faces was achieved through colder shades of the same color instead of by mixing with black. Some parts of the lights were painted with white on a darker background, others with a lighter shade of the color.

The robes were treated in graphic manner with a fondness for ornamentation meant to emphasize the nature and decorativeness of particular elements of the dress.

Judging by the preserved remains, the painted decoration from the first layer of the plaster represents a different workshop and painting school than the examples known from Nubia so far. Foremost, color use and treatment is absolutely unique. Color is not only considered in this case in its symbolic or informative role. It is not applied flatly to fill in a contour, as is common in the known Nubian murals. Here, it has an impression value and the color is matched on a palette, not reduced to a few primary colors.

The landscape representation also fails to find close parallels among examples of murals from Nubian territory.

SECOND LAYER OF LIME PLASTER

The second layer of plaster from Building B.III.1 was of definitely better quality. It was a compact, hard and uniform lime plaster (lime-chalk/gypsum) with an exceptionally well smoothed surface.⁵⁾

The program of painted wall decoration also changed with the plaster coating. Surviving pieces of the plaster from the building corners indicate that the walls were covered with uniform illusionist decoration right up to the spring of the vaults. Rows of regular, downturned arches of grayish-blue on a white background suggest

a painted imitation of marble or a curtain. The lines move smoothly from one plane of the wall into the next. A fragment of the same kind of decoration but in cinnabar-grayish-blue colors was found in the fill.

Fragments of illusionist pilasters were also preserved below the later floor in the western arm. The base, modeled additionally in stucco (*Fig. 4*), continued as a painted band, delimiting the illusionist decoration some 30 cm above the floor. Preserved fragments indicate that this could have served as the base of the wall in the entire interior.

5) Samples of the plaster, pigments and binders were subjected to laboratory examinations and the results are published in this volume in an appendix to the report by W. Godlewski.

Fragments from the fill assigned to the second coat of plaster preserved numerous examples of floral motifs constituting potentially a variety of ornaments characterized by large synthetic forms.

It seems that the decoration from this layer was mostly, if not exclusively, decorative in character.

The color palette was equally rich, prepared beforehand, representing refined shades, very diligently matched to particular compositions. The colors present in painting on the second layer of plaster include lemon yellow, olive green, emerald

green, shades of cinnabar and sienna, ocher, carmine, cold blue (lampblack with ultramarine?), white and black.

The pigments were applied in a variety of ways (*Fig. 5a,b*). It seems possible that the artist was conscious of the natural properties of particular pigments (their transparency), painting some areas very thinly in semi-transparent layers, and others with a smooth thicker layer (having the appearance of enamel).

Floral elements are more elaborate than in the first layer and give the impression of elaborate synthetic ornaments.



Fig. 4. Fragmentarily preserved stucco decoration on the second coating of plaster in the western arm (Photo D. Zielińska)

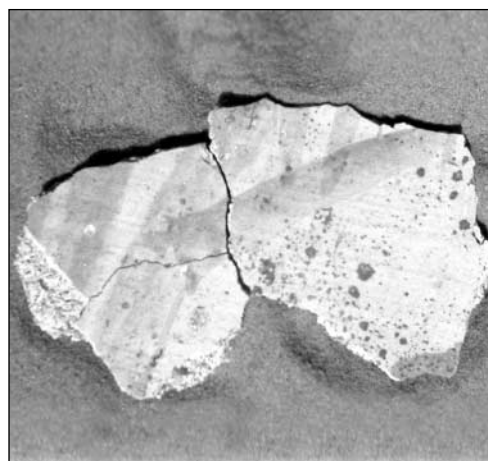


Fig. 5. Pieces of plaster from the second layer, demonstrating different techniques of applying paint: a) transparent, and b) matt (Photo D. Zielińska)

THIRD LAYER OF LIME PLASTER

The preserved sequence of plaster coats in the corners of the western arm indicates that at least in the part of the walls under the spring of the vault, the decoration on the third layer of plaster repeated that from the second. In fragments of the sequence found in the fill, apparently belonging to the decoration above the illusionist part, the same was not always found to be true.

Thick pieces of plaster are characteristic of the layer. Found in the fill, they reveal plastic decoration grooved and incised in the still wet plaster to emphasize the edges of some forms (like wings) or the feather arrangement (rhythmic pattern of small dashes) (*Fig. 6*). The fourth layer of plaster that is discernible on these fragments appears to repeat these divisions (albeit only in the painted decoration).

FOURTH LAYER OF MUD PLASTER

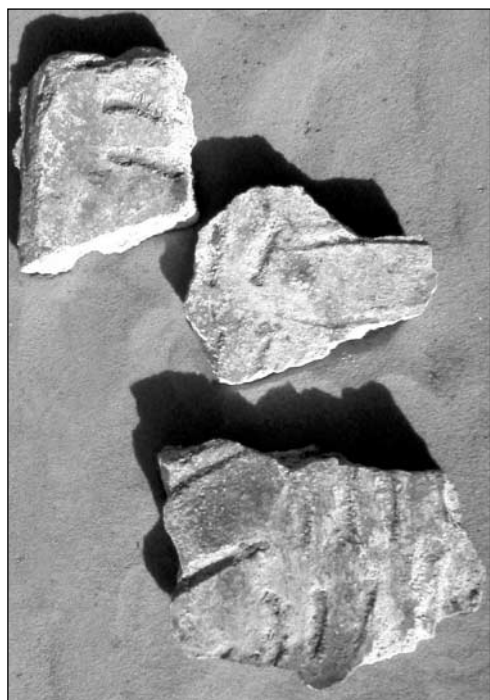


Fig. 6. Examples of grooved decoration on the third layer of plaster (Photo D. Ziełńska)

The fourth plaster coating was introduced after the building was reconstructed as a small church. It did not take into consideration the earlier plastic decoration (friezes modeled in the plaster of layer III), although the painted decoration appears to repeat some of the divisions of the earlier layer (lines at the edge of the wings). The altered function drew a change of the interior decoration, which now took on many elements typical of Nubian churches.

Fragments of an apse composition (P2 in *Fig. 1*) were preserved on the east and south walls of the eastern arm. On the east wall and a part of the north wall of the northern arm, there was a multi-figure narrative representation, most likely the Nativity (identification confirmed also by the characteristic localization) (P3, P4). The two compositions were divided and planned on neighboring parts of walls, which was typical of the late period in Nubian painting and dictated by the considerably smaller dimensions of the complexes built at the time.⁶⁾ (It also indicates that the

6) Apse and Nativity Compositions in Kulubnarti: W.Y. Adams, *Kulubnarti I, The Architectural Remains* (Kentucky 1994); apse composition in Adendan: Ll. Griffith, "Oxford Excavations in Nubia", *LAAA XIV* (1927), 112, pl. LXXV,3,4; apses in the New Church and Central Church at Serre East: id., "Oxford Excavations in Nubia", *LAAA X-XI* (1926), 99-101,113, pl. LXXVII,3, LXXIX,2,3; J. Kundstad, "Serra East and Dorginarti. Preliminary report on the 1963-64 excavations of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute Sudan Expedition", *Kush* 14 (1966), 168-169; the Nativity in Abdel Gadir: W.v.Fr. Bissing, "Die Kirche von Abd el Gadir bei Wadi Halfa und ihre Wandmalereien", *MDAIK* 7 (1937), 128-183; Ll. Griffith, "Oxford Excavations in Nubia", *LAAA XV*, 3-4 (1928), 73-76.

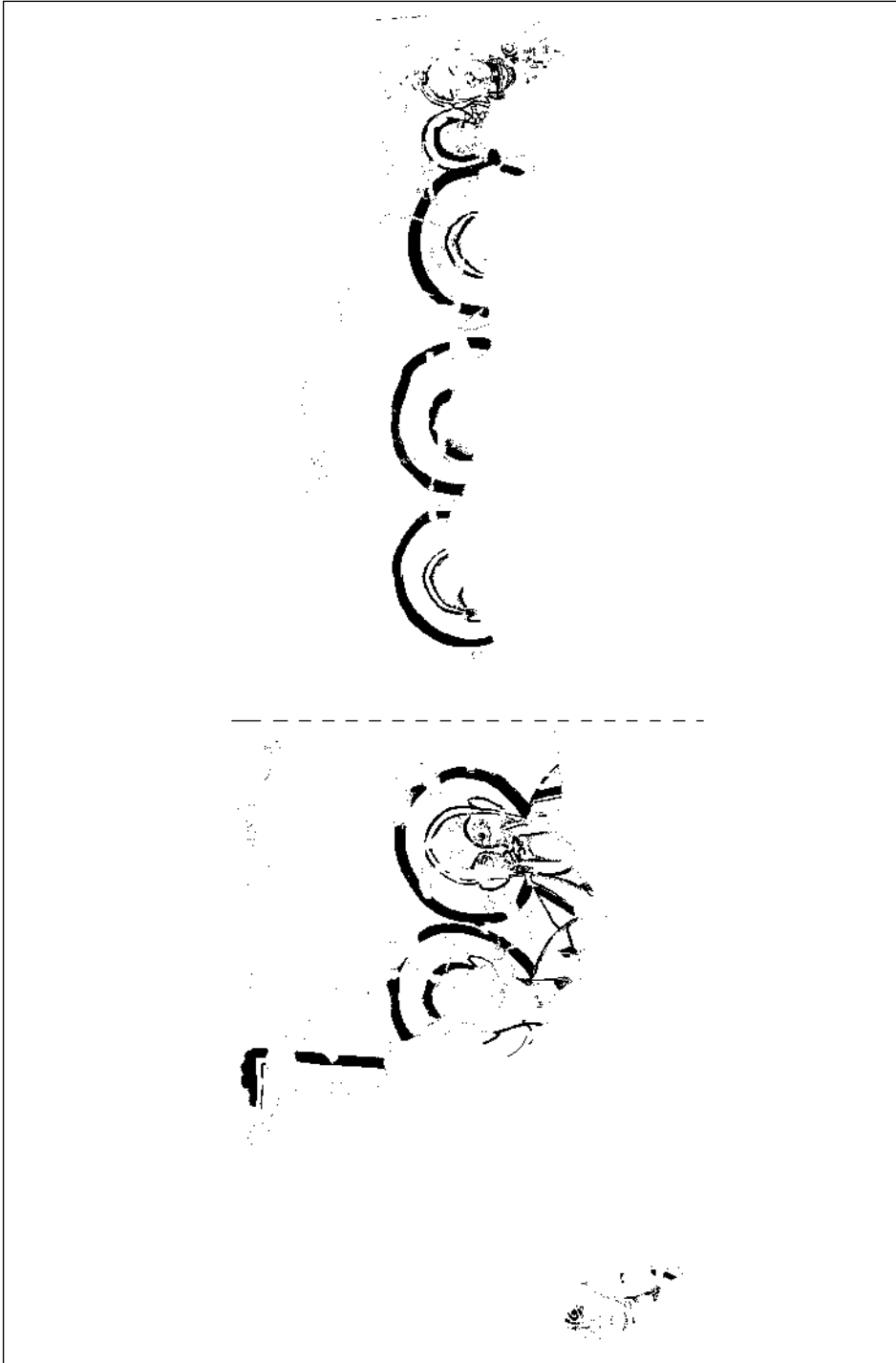


Fig. 7. Tracing of the apse composition (P2) from the fourth layer of mud plaster
(Tracing D. Ziełńska)

Cruciform Building was well suited to the demands of church architecture of the period).

Surviving parts of the apse composition show the figures of apostles foremost (*Fig. 7*). On the eastern wall, in the center part, somewhat below the level of the faces of the Apostles, there is a fragment of a face of white carnation and without a beard. The position suggests that it could have been part of the face of the Virgin Mary seated on a throne.

The westernmost figure depicted on the south wall was that of a Nubian Bishop or Archbishop (?). Both he and the apostle standing next to him (slightly turned toward him) were painted in a somewhat reduced scale, presumably for lack of space resulting from the need to paint an additional figure. The characteristic head-gear of the priest, topped by a cross with semicircular arms, is also known from the Rivergate Church at Faras and the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola.⁷⁾

The fill yielded numerous fragments which could have been part of the apse composition. These represent the heavens with white stars on a blue background and ornaments – of the robes, throne or book covers – consisting of multicolored circles. Numerous fragments of angel's wings have also survived, as well as wings decorated with the eyes motif characterizing Apocalyptic Beasts. A plastered element of

the architectural decoration (either where two arches met at the base or a pendentive) was likely decorated with the joining tips of such wings. The red edges and black ends of feathers rendered with single short lines (also characteristic of the late period) are clearly discernible.

Among the preserved pieces of the presumed Nativity Scene, it is possible to recognize specific elements. On the east wall there was the Virgin Mary lying on a typical bed decorated with horizontal bands of ornament. Standing at the head of the bed was an Angel with spread wings. Above the figures, one discerns fragments of the haloes. The hands of two figures of dark carnation represented in miniature scale (shepherds ?) have survived on the north wall, above this fragments of the legend (perhaps the name of one of them, although distorted): ΛΕΓΑΝΤ[---]. In the background of the composition, there appear to be traces of robes belonging to figures painted in a larger scale.

The style of the decoration painted on the fourth and latest coat of plaster is typical of the late period in Nubian painting. The color palette has been reduced to black, white, purple, red, blue (lampblack mixed with ultramarine?) and yellow. All the elements of the composition are outlined in black and filled in with color that presents a uniform surface. A sparing synthetic shadowing was applied only in the face parts.

EXTERIOR PLASTERING

The outside walls of the Cruciform Building were coated twice with a coarse lime plaster. The first layer bore a coat of whitewashing, presumably in order to smoothen the surface and serve as ground

for painting, traces of which are discernible in the northern façade of the western wing. The second layer of plaster was floated evenly and smoothened. It does not seem to have been whitewashed.

7) Godlewski, *PAM* XIII, op. cit., 211-212, notes 17,18.

CONCLUSIONS

Both the architecture and the interior decoration leave little doubt as to the special character of the Cruciform Building (B.III). Repeated plastering of the walls on the outside, as well as inside, confirm this conclusion, as does the quality of materials used, the techniques and the painting workshop.

With its heyday past, the damaged building was transformed into a small church. The ruined condition of the structure at the time of this remodeling is proved by the fact that in some sections the latest coating of plaster was laid directly on the bricks and in other places fragments of the earlier plaster were splashed with trickling mud.

The iconographic program and style of particular layers are known only fragmentarily. Based on what has been recovered of layers I-III, some elements of the interior finishing can be discerned, and the extent of one kind of decoration ascertained (uniform decoration covering the the walls under the spring of the vault in layers II and III).

The following three kinds of decoration inside the Cruciform Building can be distinguished based on surviving evidence:

- original painted decoration with figural representations in landscape (at least for part of the representations) covering the walls and vaults (?) of the building (plaster layer I);
- painted and modeled/stucco illusionist decoration, perhaps including figural representations (fragments of robes, wings?)

with the application of stucco elements (plaster layers II and III);

- painted decoration connected with the rebuilding of the structure as a church and its modified function, including typical elements of the painted decoration of Nubian churches, featuring characteristics of the late period in Nubian art (13th-14th centuries).

It is difficult to tell whether the changes in the painted decoration before the structure's rebuilding as a church (the lime-plaster layers) had been dictated merely by a desire to renovate the walls or by changing tendencies in painted decoration.

All three layers of lime plaster are characterized by quality workmanship in terms of building technology, as well as painting. A lack of parallels from Nubia (and Egypt) makes dating on the base of style difficult. Even so, the distinctness of the atelier and of the execution point to a very early period in the painting art of the region, a period during which the traditions of masters originating from other artistic centers were still being treasured. The period appears to combine foreign attributes, such as high class lime plastering and stucco as far as technology is concerned, and landscape in the iconography, still discernible but to be discarded eventually, with indigenous elements that were gradually taking root to create that specific individual style for which Nubian painting is known.