

Stefan Jakobielski

Old Dongola: Excavations, 1998

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OLD DONGOLA

EXCAVATIONS, 1998

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The 31st season lasted from January 8 to February 26, 1998.¹ Work was continued mostly on the monastic site of Kom H, northeast of the town of Old Dongola.² Also excavated was kiln site R3 in the pottery manufacturing area, northwest of the city.³

¹ The Mission comprised: Dr. Stefan Jakobielski, Director; Dr. Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, Mr. Krzysztof Pluskota, Mrs. Hanna Kozińska-Sowa, archaeologists; Mr. Wojciech Chmiel and Mrs. Gabriela Chmiel, restorers; Eng. Zbigniew Solarewicz, architect; the NCAM was represented by Syd. Omran Ali, Inspector of Antiquities. A group of volunteers, students of archaeology from Warsaw University, also took part in the excavations: Misses Joanna Kociankowska, Ewa Kołczyńska, Inga I. Kühn, Dalicja Niewulis, and Mr. Sebastian Drabot.

² The excavations were financed by the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University with a considerable contribution from the Bank Rozwoju Eksportu S.A., Warsaw, and some financial aid from the Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

³ Work on this site was supervised by Mr. Krzysztof Pluskota.

KOM H

Work in the monastic compound area was confined to continued exploration of the Western Annex to the Monastery.⁴ The objective was to identify mutual relations between the oldest structures in this area (Buildings NW-N and NW-S) and their function in the ultimate phase. Further parts of these buildings were excavated to the paving level; in NW-S an area 3 x 7 m (Rooms 25, 24 and 24A); in Building NW-N 4 x 3 m (Room 40 - Staircase) and 3 x 2.5 m in the former corridor between the two (i.e., east end of Room 13). The excavation generally reached a depth of 4.5 m, while the northeastern part of Building NW-N (11.5 x 3 m) was cleared to only 1 m on the average, enough to measure the walls (Rooms 37, 38, 39 and 14). A theoretical reconstruction of the Annex layout is now possible [Fig. 1].

Only two rooms: 26 and 41, remain to be explored in the Western Annex, as well as the middle section of Room 13, where the fill was left deliberately as protection for a number of paintings surviving on the walls, the conservation of which required more time than was available in the present campaign.

SOUTH BUILDING (NW-S) [Fig. 2]

Room 24, barrel vaulted, located at the end of an entrance vestibule (Rooms 22 and 23 joined together) and entered from it through an arcaded doorway, has no interior furnishing attesting to its purpose. It was originally

connected only with Room 24A by a door in its west wall. At the time of rebuilding, an additional narrow doorway was cut in the north wall to give access to the extended corridor 13, which at that time was obviously incorporated into Building NW-S. All the walls of Room 24 received (most probably in the second half of the 11th century) painted decoration comprising three figures of the Archangel Michael, two of the Virgin and Child, a standing figure of Christ and a representation – unique in Nubia – of St Menas in the attitude of a warrior [Fig. 3].

The paintings have survived in relatively good condition, except for considerable blackening with soot in consequence of intensive burning in the neighboring Room 24A, which was actually a kind of large unvaulted rectangular shaft. This room is divided into two equal parts: The southernmost end has a deep oval container cut in the rock and filled completely with ashes of burnt grass, the northern preserves merely a red-brick paving darkened by fire and no traces of any structures. Later, the doorway from it to Room 24 was partly blocked and only a small square opening left, obviously used as a furnace hole, the jambs heavily darkened by soot. What was the purpose of such a big (nearly 4 m high) furnace, it is hard to say. One of the possibilities, admittedly less likely, is its usage for smoking meat, but it could well be part of a heating system for the upper story.⁵

⁴ For previous reports, see: S. Jakobielski, *PAM IV, Reports 1992* (1993), pp. 102-106; *PAM V, Reports 1993* (1994), pp. 115-126; *PAM VI, Reports 1994* (1995), pp. 84-92; *PAM VII, Reports 1995* (1996), pp. 105-113; *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), pp. 161-168; *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), pp. 160-169.

⁵ Had the Annex been used as a *Xenon* (cf. B. Żurawski, Faith-healing and commemoration in Late Christian Dongola [in:] *Akten d. 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongresses* (Münster 1996), in print, and Jakobielski, *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), p. 167) one could imagine a room on the upper floor strongly heated on occasion for therapeutic needs. Subjecting a patient to intensive heat was one of the healing methods in mediaeval practice. I owe this remark to the Rev. Dr. H. Pietras, OSB.

Room 25 was originally connected by a low arcade with a room resembling a cell (Room 27)⁶ and once no doubt formed a part of it intended perhaps for household use. It was left undecorated. Similarly to Room 24, it was later connected with Room 13. There was, however, no entrance from it to the neighboring Room 26 situated to the east; there was only an inner high window in the upper part of the east wall,

blocked at a later time. It seems that Room 26 (still to be excavated), later left without an entrance, was totally excluded from circulation starting in the 12th century. The initial position of its entrance, as well as its original layout remains unclear. In the space above the room, on the upper story (surviving in this part of the building), a small staircase was built later, apparently giving access to the roof.

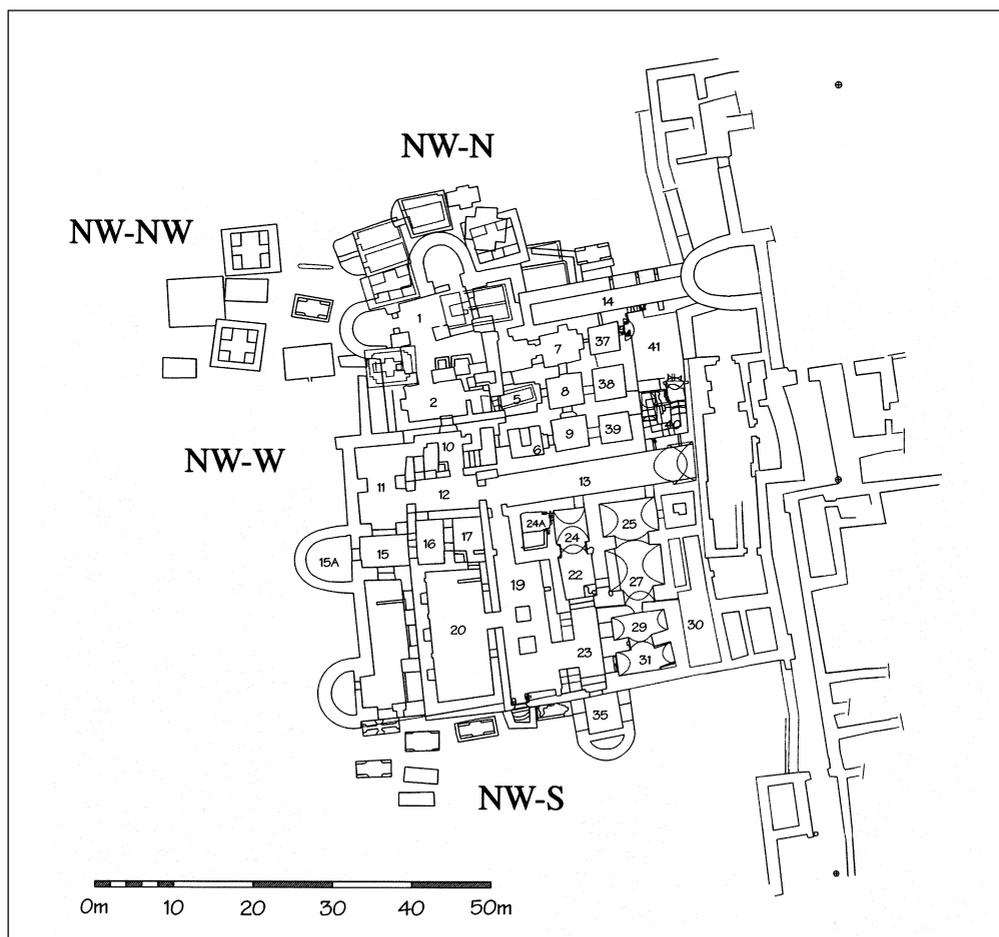


Fig. 1. Plan of the Western Annex
(Drawing Z. Solarewicz)

⁶ One of the (perhaps later) functions of this room, excavated in the previous season (cf. *PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998)*, pp. 163-166), was apparently the dispensing of Holy Communion.

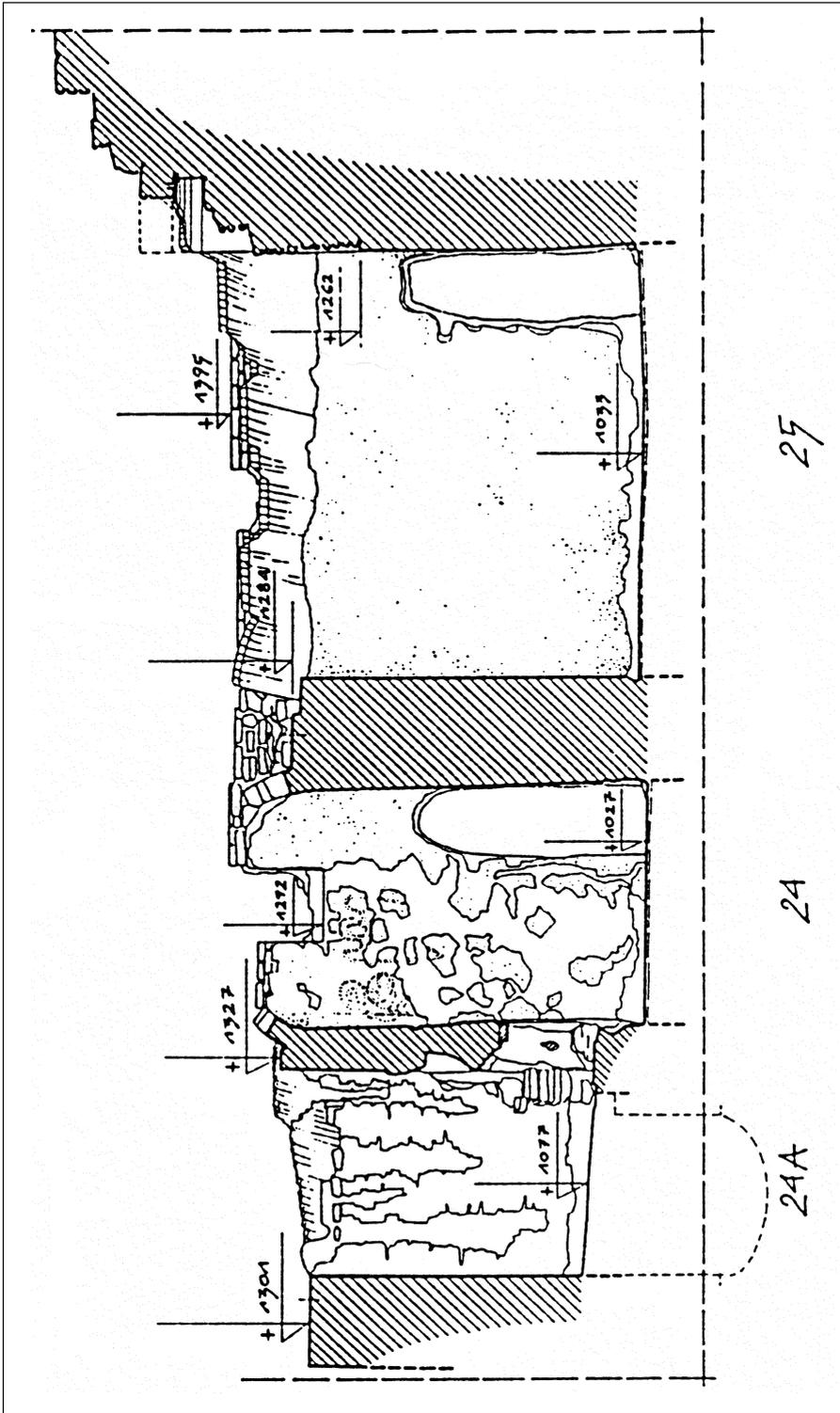


Fig. 2. Building NW-S, E-W section through Rooms 25, 24, 24A
(Drawing Z. Solarewicz)

The partly excavated Room 13 (13 x 2.20 m) originally formed a kind of open space between the two buildings. During the first rebuilding in the second half of the 11th century, it received a barrel vaulting and a new plaster coating with rich painted decoration. On the east wall, there is a magnificent figure (nearly 4 m high) of the Archangel Michael backed by the Holy Trinity [Fig. 4] a unique iconographical theme in medieval art, provided with a set of inscriptions in Greek, written in black ink, apparently containing hymns to the Archangel and the Apostles.⁷ Other murals fill the inte-

rior, seemingly taking up all the available space on the upper parts of walls. As solely the eastern part of the room has been excavated completely, so far only two figures of this row of murals are fully exposed: a standing anonymous Warrior Saint and a badly damaged representation of the Holy Virgin on the south wall; at least seven other paintings still await clearing and conservation. The remaining part of Room 13 was excavated only to a depth of 1 m, sufficiently deep to see the edges of painted plaster. Most probably in the beginning of the 12th century, after successive rebuilding, life-



Fig. 3. Western Annex, Room 24. Painting depicting St. Menas as a warrior (Photo W. Chmiel)



Fig. 4. Western Annex, Room 13 (Chapel). Monumental figure of the Archangel Michael backed by the Holy Trinity. Second half of 11th century (Photo W. Chmiel)

⁷ The texts are being studied by Dr. Adam Łajtar.

size figures of Christ and the Twelve Apostles (six on each wall) were painted in the lower parts of the northern and southern walls of the eastern end of Room 13 [Fig. 3]. It is one of the best paintings by the Dongola masters and it is remarkably preserved. The addition of this composition created in the east end of the room an iconographical program suitable for a sanctuary; therefore, it seems that Room 13, formerly a passage, had been transformed into a chapel.

NORTH BUILDING (NW-N)

This building, originally constructed as a square (9.5 x 9.5 m), free-standing monastery keep in Egyptian style, was, initially at least, two-storied with flat roofs mounted on wooden beams. It contained nine square rooms. Six of them (Rooms 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9) were investigated in 1991-92 and 1993,⁸ the remaining three forming the eastern row (Rooms 37, 38,39) were partly excavated this season. Some time before the 11th century, a wall running east was con-



Fig. 5. Western Annex, Room 13, north wall. Christ and the Twelve Apostles (Peter, John, Philip, Thomas) 12th century
(Photo W. Chmiel)

⁸ Cf. S. Jakobielski, Monastery of the Holy Trinity at Old Dongola, [in:] *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism* (Kraków-Tyniec 1995), p. 39f.; S. Jakobielski, K. Pluskota, B. Żurawski, Polish Excavations at Old Dongola, *Kush* XVI (1993), p. 293f.; B. Żurawski, The cemeteries of Old Dongola, [in:] *Actes de la VIIe Conférence Internationale des Études Nubiennes, CRIPEL XVII*, 2 (1997), p. 195f.; id., Old Dongola 1984-1993. The Mortuary Complex. A preliminary Report, *EtTrav* XVII (1995), pp. 349-353.

structed in the northern end of the building, reaching the northwestern bastion of the Monastery girdle walls. Thus, between the outer west wall of the Monastery and the North Building a kind of L-shaped yard was created (accessible from corridor 13), later rebuilt to form three units: Rooms 41 and 40 (Staircase) to the east, and an elongated Room 14 to the north. In this last room (partly excavated this season), many incised graffiti were found [Fig. 6], among them an inscription in Old Nubian of Georgios, the archpresbyter (and later archbishop in Dongola, buried in a magnificent in-

scribed crypt in the Annex).⁹ The inscription apparently mentions his 33rd birthday (the 2nd of the month Phamenoth,) and the 7th year of his office. Taking into consideration that he died in AD 1113 and that his episcopate lasted for 50 years, as is known from his stele,¹⁰ it can easily be calculated that this inscription was written in AD 1063, i.e., the year in which he was appointed a bishop. In the same room there is also a graffito scratched by another bishop named Marinos (11th century or later) and a list of seven Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Yael, Anael, Zadekiel.

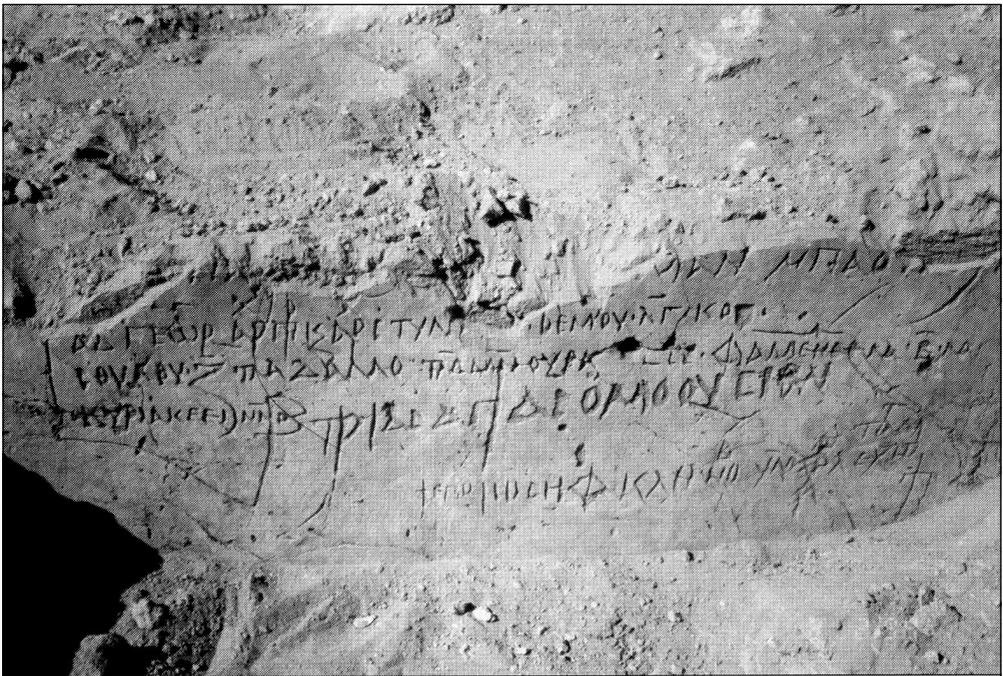


Fig. 6. Western Annex, Room 14. Inscription of Archpresbyter Georgios from AD 1063. (Photo S. Jakobielski)

⁹ Cf. Jakobielski, *op. cit.* (n. 8), pp. 40-43; Żurawski, *Cemeteries, op. cit.*, (n. 8), p. 123.

¹⁰ For a preliminary publication of the stele of Georgios: A. Łajtar, Greek inscriptions from the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola, [in:] *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism* (Kraków-Tyniec 1995), pp. 50-55.

The Staircase (Room 40) was completely excavated. It comprises four flights of steps made of stone blocks climbing around a rectangular pier [Fig. 7].

The only entrance to the staircase on the ground floor level led from room 41, accessible in turn from room 37 (the last of the northern row of rooms in the keep) through a doorway, perhaps blocked in the 12th century. No doubt this staircase served both buildings, NW-N and NW-S, at the time when the latter of the two, initially low (and so without its own stair-

case), received an upper story as a result of the 11th-century rebuilding, turning the Annex into one complex. A small wooden plaquette depicting a Warrior Saint, somewhat damaged by fire, was found in the rubble of the staircase [Fig. 8]. The findings bear evidence to two main stages of rebuilding in this part of the Annex: the first, i.e., initiated by Georgios when he was still only an archpresbyter,¹¹ and the second after his death in 1113. In both cases, the function and character of Buildings NW-N and

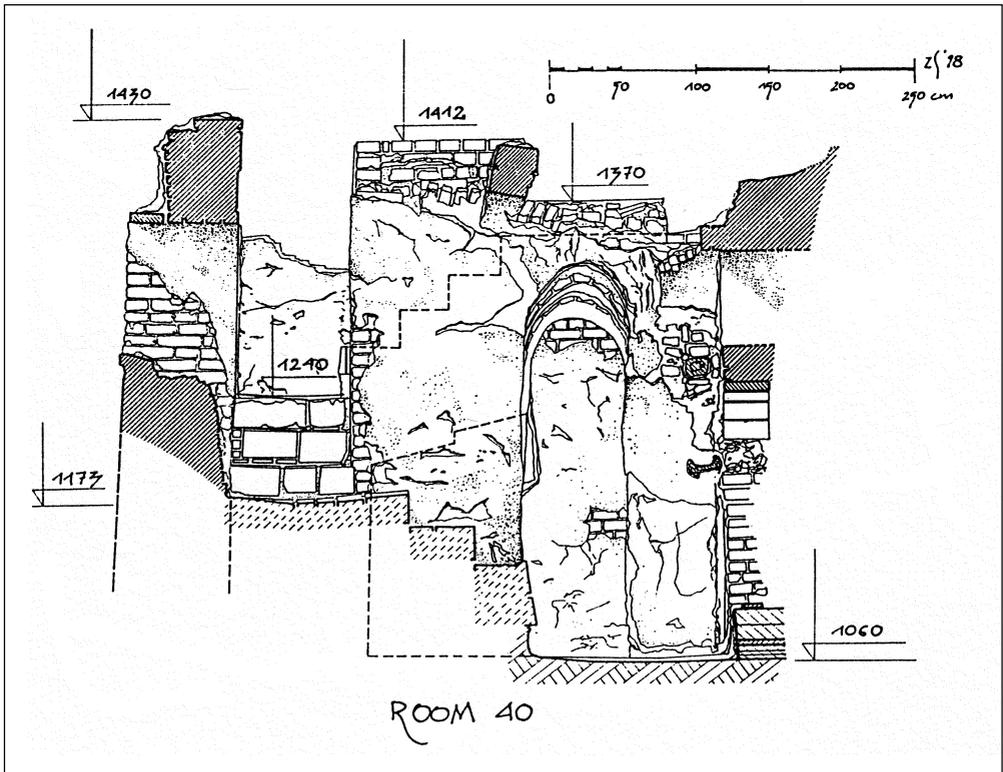


Fig. 7. Kom H, Building NW-N. Section N-S through the staircase (Room 40) (Drawing Z. Solarewicz)

¹¹ Proof is provided by a dedication of Georgios on a mural in Room 29 constructed during the first renovation of Building NW-S, cf. Jakobielski, *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), pp. 163-165, fig. 3A; *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), p. 167.

NW-S were changed considerably. Even if we are to assume hypothetically that from the times of Georgios they had served as a *Xenon* (combination of hospice and hospital),¹² their primary function (at least in the case of the South Building) remains an open question. In consequence of the first rebuilding, the South Building was enlarged, receiving new Rooms 23, 29 and 31 and incorporating Room 13. The upper story over this room, as well as over the entire South

Building (which originally had no staircase) must have been built at this time. The two structures had to have been joined on the upper story level as neither the Northern Building nor the Staircase (40) ever had any direct ground-floor connection with Room 13 (which, judging from the decoration, became the main chapel at this point). In the North Building (NW-N), the biggest changes of function and communication system were introduced after the death of the Archbishop Georgios, once a crypt for him had been arranged underneath Room 5. A commemorative complex was then created in the NW-NW section of the Annex, where Room 3 (newly built, combined with Room 1), and Room 5 (now joined with Room 2) were turned into funerary chapels. The main outer entrance to the Building from the north in Room 4 ceased to function and the only possibility to access this part of the building was from the southern entrance of Building NW-S (Room 19). Doorways in the passage to the Staircase through Rooms 7 and 37 were blocked at this time. From this moment in all probability the whole Annex, integrated into a single building, was used as a *Xenon*, in which direct contact with the burial places of the Holy Men played no mean a role in the therapy. Thus, most of the small rooms of the former keep located in the vicinity of the tombs could have been used as places for meditation. Patients were able to find spiritual consolation, receiving Holy Communion in Rooms 7 and 27 on weekdays (as proved by liturgical texts found on the walls)¹³ and taking part in liturgical services held in the numerous chapels (Rooms 3, 5, 29 and possibly 13).

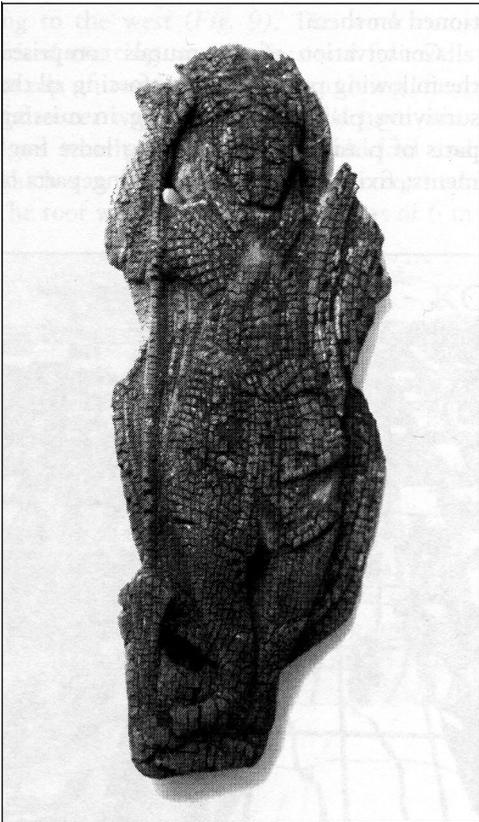


Fig. 8. *Western Annex. Wooden plaque with representation of a warrior saint. 12th century*
(Photo W. Chmiel)

¹² Cf. Żurawski, *Faith-healing*, op. cit. (n. 5).

¹³ Cf. Jakobielski, *PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998)*, p. 166; for the texts, see Łajtar, op. cit. (n. 10), pp. 56-61.

The condition of the discovered structures necessitated extensive conservation treatment. Most of the protective measures taken concerned walls and murals in the Western Annex. The following repairs and reconstruction works were undertaken over the course of the season.

In places where the walls revealed vertical cracking (Rooms 13, 10, 12) iron anchors of 0.9 cm diameter were used to stabilize the structure. The same method was applied to the 13 m long and badly damaged barrel vault in Room 13, where similar anchors were fixed and a red-brick supporting construction erected in order to attach the remnants of the vault to the walls.

Walls were repaired in Rooms 13, 40 and 24, where rain water flowing from the ruined upper story had caused serious destruction. The gaps were filled with red

brick. Original building material (red-and mud-brick) was used for all temporary blocking (doorways in Rooms 9 and 24) and casing walls (in Room 13) intended to keep the unexcavated fill in position.

The niche in the blocked doorway between rooms 7 and 37 was repaired. Two steel pipes were introduced instead of the original wooden beams (now completely rotted away) and a fragment of the original wall, restored from pieces and forming a block a half square meter in size, was repositioned on them.

Conservation of the murals comprised the following procedures: reinforcing all the surviving plaster edges; filling in missing parts of plaster and reattaching loose fragments; fixing in place the peeling parts of paint or whitewash. The surface was cleaned mechanically with special sponges



Fig. 9. Western Annex in 1998. Work on the roofing of the complex (Photo W. Chmiel)

and glass fiber brushes, and chemically using a Kremer product known as Marsillian soap. For protection of the painted surface a 2.5 per cent solution of Movilith 50 in ethanol was used. Altogether 39 square meters of painted surface were treated.

For the sake of protecting the excavated rooms of the Annex, a roof covering 240 square meters, was built, supported on a structure made of 13,000 new red-bricks in order to attain the desired height with proper sloping to the west [Fig. 9]. The work comprised erecting square piers and full walls on top of, respectively, the surviving inner and outer walls. The full walls have windows which are temporarily blocked and which can be opened whenever required. The roof was made using 98 pieces of 6-m long steel pipes (diameter 1.5 in),

making up a total of 588 m, covered with a mat of palm leaf ribs and dacron. On this, layers of dung mixed with mud (*zibala*) were put. Nine rectangular openings for lighting the interior were introduced in the roof and temporarily covered with mats of palm leaf ribs and a layer of *zibala* as well. To protect the only well preserved painting in room 20, which failed to be included under the roofed area, a provisory screening structure was made. The surface of the painting, measuring 2 x 2.5 m, was protected with a mat of palm leaf ribs fixed vertically between two pilasters built against the wall. The surface of the mat was covered with a layer of mud and gum arabic. In Room 18, which was an entrance corridor to the roofed part of the Annex, an iron door was mounted.

KOM R

In the pottery manufacturing area, some additional investigations were carried out on site R1, in Kiln R1-E, which is one of the latest, partly dug into the fill of waste material from the earlier production. The observation of individual strata in the kiln fully confirms previous suggestions of this particular site having been in use only in the Early Christian and the beginning of the Classic Christian periods (i.e., between AD 600 and 850).¹⁴

On site R3, a pottery kiln with a diameter of 1.40 m, the hearth preserved to its full height of 1.60 m, was excavated. It was provided with only one opening on the eastern side, an aperture used for ventilation, as well as for controlling the firing process. Two stages were distinguished. The pottery material found in context with the kiln permits the production center on Kom R3 to be dated to the Terminal Christian period (13th-14th century).

¹⁴ For a bibliography of the previous works at this site, cf. *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), p. 159, n. 4. More recent publications include: K. Pluskota, Old Dongola recent pottery finds, [in:] *Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the International Society for Nubian Studies, CRIPEL XVII, 2* (1997), pp. 235-245; cf. also K. Pluskota, Pottery from Old Dongola, [in:] *Akten d. 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongresses* (Münster 1996), in print.