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Old Dongola: Fieldwork in 2004

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OLD DONGOLA

FIELDWORK IN 2004

Stefan Jakobielski

In 2004, two campaigns of excavation were carried out at the site of the monastery on Kom H (called otherwise the Monastery of the Holy Trinity) in Old Dongola.¹ During the thirty-eighth season, which lasted from January 8 to February 22,² work was undertaken in the so-called Southwestern Annex of the Monastery, concurrently proceeding with the excavation of the Monastery Church (started in 2002).³ The same sites were explored in the thirty-ninth campaign lasting from November 29, 2004, until January 12, 2005.⁴ The present interim report treats on the two campaigns jointly.

- 1 For previous work, see S. Jakobielski, *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 211-229; further reports, cf. especially *ibid.*, 213 note 5. For earlier campaigns, see S. Jakobielski and P.O. Scholz (eds), *Dongola-Studien, 35 Jahre der polnischen Forschungen in Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches, Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica VII (=Dongola-Studien)* (Warsaw 2001), 395-402 (bibliography). The most recent studies on the Monastery, cf. A. Lajtar, "Georgios, Archbishop of Dongola (+1113) and his epitaph," in: ΕΥΕΡΓΕΣΙΑΣ ΧΑΡΙΝ, *Studies Presented to Benedetto Bravo and Ewa Wipszycka by their Disciples, JJP, Suppl. I* (Warsaw 2002), 159-192; G. Chmiel, "Interim conservation measures taken to preserve wall paintings on adobe substrates at Old Dongola", *Gdańsk Archaeological Museum African Reports (=GAMAR) 2* (2003), 71-76; M. Martens-Czarnecka, "New wall paintings discovered at the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Old Dongola (Sudan) during the 2000 excavation campaign", *GAMAR 2*, 145-153.
- 2 The staff in the 38th season, directed by the present author, comprised: Dr. Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, archaeologist; Dr. Marcin Wiewióra, archaeologist-architect; Mr. Wojciech Chmiel, restorer; Messrs Jarosław Świącicki and Daniel Gazda, archaeologists; Mrs. Elżbieta Wanot, geodesist-photogrammetrist; Mr. Maciej Kurcz, archaeologist-ethnographer, Ms Anna Pałczyńska, documentalist, archaeology student. The National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums was represented by Syd. Mustafa Ahmed al-Sherif.
Funds for both campaigns were provided by the Polish Centre of Archaeology of Warsaw University with some financial assistance (in the 38th season) from the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Ureusz Foundation to promote archaeological investigations in the Nile Valley.
- 3 Daniel Gazda was in charge of this work, see his contribution in this volume.
- 4 In 2004/05, the team comprised: Dr. Stefan Jakobielski, Director; Dr. Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, archaeologist; Mr. Wojciech Chmiel, restorer; Messrs Jarosław Świącicki and Daniel Gazda, archaeologists; Mrs. Hanna Kozińska-Sowa and Ms Anna Błaszczuk, documentalists. The NCAM was represented by Syd. El-Muntaser Dafaalla. We were glad to host Prof. Witold Dobrowolski, Keeper of the Antiquities Department of the National Museum in Warsaw and Fr Henryk Pietras, Church historian, who briefly took part in the expedition. Augmenting the staff was a volunteer, Ms Marta Jakobielska, student of archaeology.

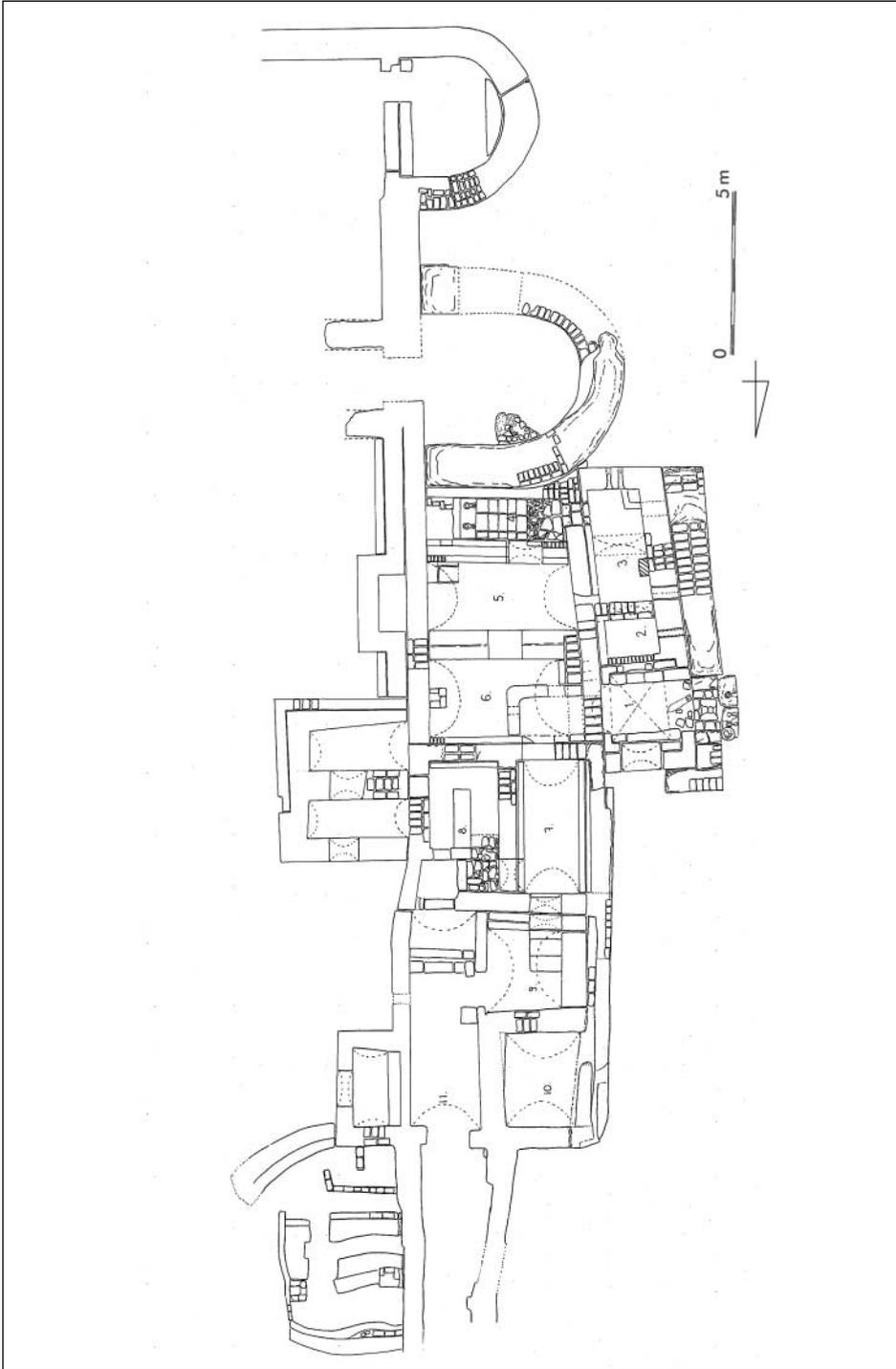


Fig. 1. Plan of the Southwestern Annex and Southwestern Building after fieldwork in 2004
(Drawing J. Swigicki, updating earlier documentation)

EXCAVATIONS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN ANNEX

Work in the Southwestern Annex actually began in 1995 and continued in 1996,⁵ revealing a sandstone ashlar entrance from the west, vestibule (Room 1), passage (Rooms 2 and 3) and part of the southernmost room 4. The excavated gallery of 20 mural paintings included four representations of the Holy Virgin, two Warrior Saints, Prophets (Ezra, Jeremy) and other saintly figures, and also scenes of Three Youths in a Fiery Furnace and the Annunciation.⁶ After protecting the murals, the building was backfilled with sand. Upon resuming excavations in 2004, the passage was cleared anew to the level of the latest occupation, and further parts of the building were explored: room 4, which appeared to contain a stone staircase, and rooms 5 and 6. The condition of walls and especially the vaults, requiring for the most part extensive conservation or total reconstruction (as most of the doorway arches), hindered the removal of sand and rubble. Once the rooms were emptied to half their height, the complex was roofed over in the traditional manner already tested by the expedition in the Northwestern Annex. It was then possible to clear all six rooms down to the original floor level, uncovering more paintings. All the essential preservation and reconstruction works, including the shelter roof, were completed in the second of the two reported seasons. In the course of this work, it became clear that the Annex was in fact attached to and connected with an earlier storied edifice,

itself many times rebuilt, extending to the north and comprising at least seven rooms on the two floors joined by a monumental staircase. In the Late Christian period, both buildings were accessible from the west, through the same vestibule (room 1), but they evidently constituted distinct parts, perhaps due to a different function served at least through part of their existence. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, until the function of both units is identified, the southern part will be referred to as the Southwestern Annex and the northern one as the Southwestern Building [*Fig. 1*].

The Southwestern Annex, 7.85 by 8.50 m, was built alongside the western section of the girdle wall, attached to its outer face. It appears to have been wedged in between the Southwestern Building and a semicircular wall enclosing the entrance to the monastic compound situated near the southwestern corner tower. The Annex, which originally comprised only three rooms (4, 5, 6) set in a row, was apparently erected not earlier than in the 11th century. In the 12th century, it was extended to include a passage comprising a square domed vestibule and long corridor running alongside its western façade. This west wall was doubled later, at the same time that an imposing arched doorway was built, leading from the west into the vestibule. This gate had jambs constructed of reused ashlar sandstone blocks, and was provided with a massive door of wooden

5 Dr. Bogdan Żurawski supervised the work, cf. his report in *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), 169-178. Note the different numbering of rooms there. Cf. also S. Jakobielski, *Dongola-Studien*, 25, 44-45.

6 For the paintings, cf. M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Wall paintings discovered in Old Dongola" in: *Dongola Studien*, 274-276, Pls. LIII-LVII; id., "Stylistic homogeneity of groups of paintings in the Monastery in Old Dongola", *GAMAR* 3 (2005), Figs. 14-19.

beams, of which some traces were still found [Fig. 2]. Stone slabs with round holes, reused from some toilet facility, constituted the threshold.

The interior of the mud-brick vestibule originally resembled a tetrapylon in plan, with archways opening in all four directions: the eastern one leading to the older part of the Annex (room 6), the southern one to the passage (rooms 2 and 3), the other two to the outside. The dome appears to have been too heavy for the supports, necessitating the blocking of first the northern arch and then the southern one, in which only a small opening was left giving onto the passage. This evidently failed to solve the problem and an extra wall had to be built inside the vestibule to reinforce the northern side and the southwestern corner.

The passage was constructed entirely of mud-brick [Fig. 3]. Its eastern side was the west wall of the earlier structure; therefore, only the south and west walls (nearly 0.70 m thick) were built, enclosing a corridor 5.50 m long and nearly 3.20 m high. Arches subdivided this space into three parts (numbered 2, 2a, and 3), each nearly square in plan. The evidence is strongly in favor of individual domes covering each of these units, not the least the extra walls built against the eastern side of the passage, which would have been quite superfluous in the case of a barrel vault, this being easily supported on a ledge cut in the wall face. The arches, too, belie the presence of a barrel vault, although they could have been useful, if not necessary, to support a flat roof resting on wooden beams.

The passage, nicely adorned with murals, led to an entrance cut in the west wall of the southernmost chamber of the original building. This room (4) was subsequently filled with a flight of stone

steps [Fig. 4] indicating that the rebuilding included the addition of an upper story. At this time, the Annex was evidently regarded as an independent unit, not yet joined (at least on the upper story level) with the neighboring Southwestern Building, which had its own staircase [Fig. 5]. However, room 4 was not long enough for the staircase to attain the desired height; from the upper landing, one could get presumably only to the top of the semicircular wall where it met the old girdle wall of the monastery. This in turn was reinforced on the inside with a kind of platform of red brick, which made the wall thicker allowing passage along its top and, apparently up a few extra steps, to the upper story through an alleged entrance in the east wall of the space over Room 5. This complicated scheme would explain the curious structure of the



Fig. 2. Entrance gate to the Southwestern Annex, seen from the west (Photo B. Żurawski)

platform on the eastern side of the Annex. A simpler solution can be suggested as well: a westward path on top of the semicircular wall leading to the roof of the passage (3) and reaching the same room from the west through an alleged entrance in the west wall. Furthermore, by obtruding the connecting doorway, the staircase in room 4 quite obviously inconvenienced the passage between rooms 4 and 5 [cf. *Fig. 4*].

The introduction of the stairway in room 4 also destroyed part of the original painted decoration. At least two compositions at the east end of the room were screened off by the upper landing. Some were saved, like a large section of a huge figure supposed to be St. Epiphanius and a painting showing St. Jeremy the Prophet, originally on the north wall at the entrance to room 5 (now recomposed from loose fragments of



Fig. 3. Interior of passage in the SW Annex looking north (Photo W. Chmiel)



Fig. 4. Staircase filling room 4 in the SW Annex, seen from inside room 5 (Photo W. Chmiel)

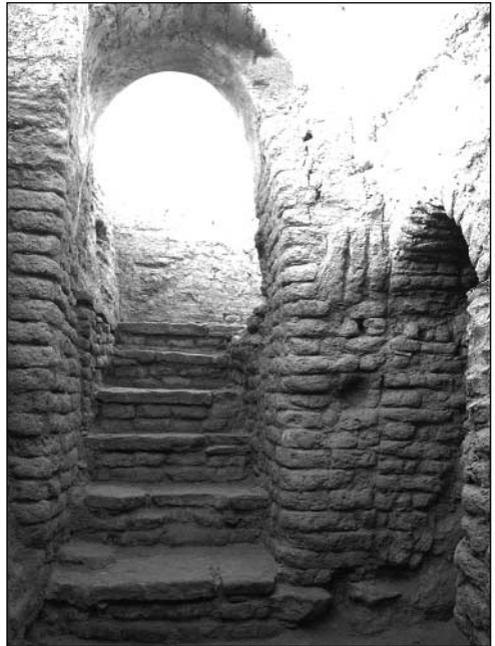


Fig. 5. Staircase leading up from corridor 7 to the SW Building (Photo W. Chmiel)

painted plaster found nearby).⁷ Representations of the Holy Virgin Galaktrophusa were painted on the jambs of the entrance to the passage (3), once it was pierced through the wall,⁸ at the same time as most of the paintings decorating the interior of the earlier (sic!) part of the Annex, i.e., rooms 5 and 6 [Fig. 6].

The most surprising composition was encountered on the north vault of room 5. It represents a festival dedicated to the

Virgin Mary with several dancers, some wearing traditional masks. The figures hold sticks, incense burners and drums. The accompanying texts in Old Nubian were perhaps meant to indicate what they were singing. The Virgin with distaff was painted in the form of an icon beside this scene. The north part of the same vault and the east wall was filled with a scene of the Nativity demonstrating the fullest iconographical breadth. Fragments of

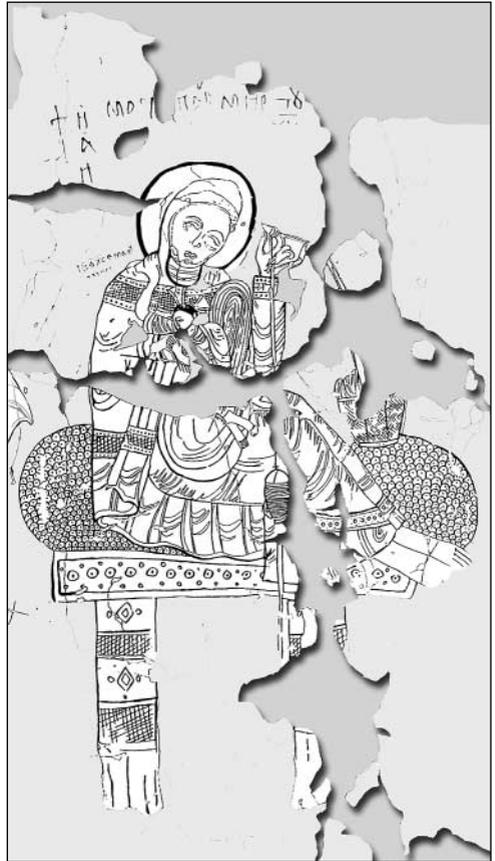
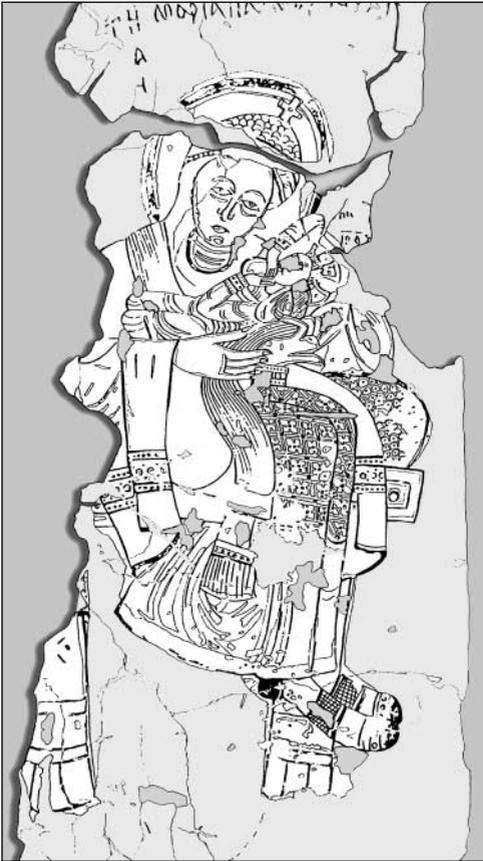


Fig. 6. Two representations of the Virgin Mary in the entrance to room 6 in the SW Annex (Drawing W. Chmiel)

7 Both paintings were discovered in 1995, cf. Dongola-Studien, Pl. LVI:1-2.

8 Ibid., Pl. LXIII; Figs. e & f on page 227.

other paintings were also identified on the walls of this room.⁹

Room 5 (4.40 by 2.20 m) and the slightly bigger room 6, connected by a single low door, were barrel-vaulted and paved with irregular stone slabs (repaired extensively with red brick in room 5). Considering the construction of the vault, one arrives at the conclusion that it was not original, the rooms having once formed a single nearly square hall, measuring 4.40 by 5.20 m. As

this space may have been too difficult to cover with a roof, it is possible that the extant vaulting was merely a stage in the original construction. Nothing but a deep terracotta basin (0.60 x 0.68 m, 0.30 m deep) was found in room 5, mounted in the southeastern corner obviously in the last period of use [Fig. 7]. In the sand underneath it, a massive marble-tray rim fragment was found, apparently used as a makeshift support for the basin.



Fig. 7. Terracotta basin in the southeastern corner of room 5 in the SW Annex
(Photo J. Świącicki)

9 For the paintings from rooms 5 and 6, see contribution by M. Martens-Czarnecka in this volume.



Fig. 8. *The interior of room 6 in the SW Annex, facing east (Photo W. Chmiel)*

Room 6 was evidently used as a chapel. There was a square structure found, built against the east wall, which could have served as an altar [Fig. 8]. It is preserved to some 0.50 m. Over it, on the east wall, there was once a huge mural representing the Archangel Michael; however, the plaster had all but been washed off the wall and lay in a crushed heap at its base. Recovered better-preserved fragments revealed an archangel's wing with the characteristic 'peacock feathers', as well as many fragments of inscribed plaster originating from the vicinity of the northeastern corner. Among these was a considerable part of Psalm 29, written in black ink in Old Nubian and Greek [Fig. 9]. The text is presented in a curious way, alternately in one of the two languages, verse after verse. Remnants of another four texts in Greek were also recorded but not yet identified; two of them, however, seem to be Greco-Nubian graffiti.

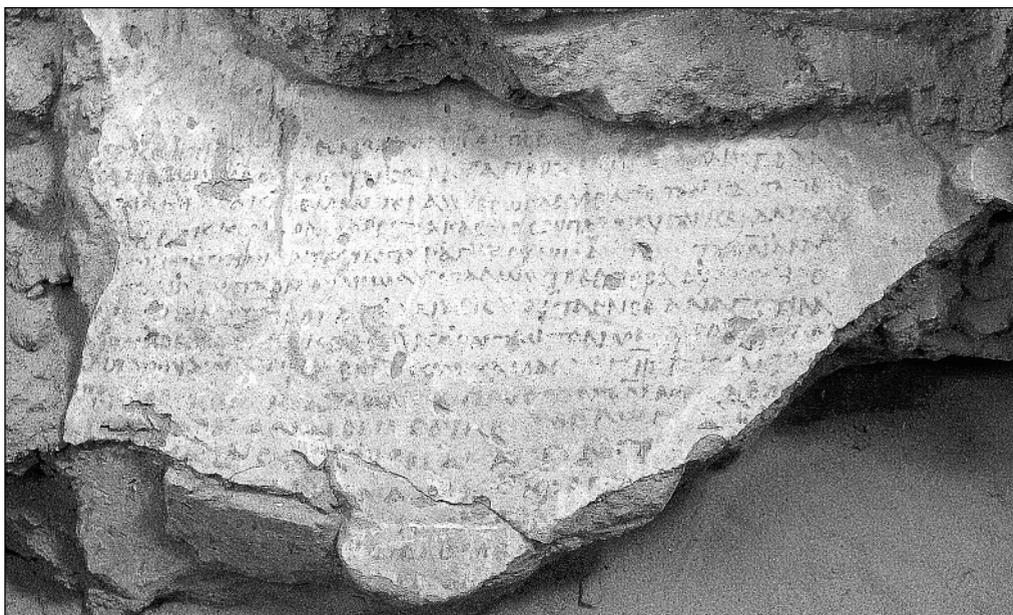


Fig. 9. *Fragment of Psalm 29 found on a piece of fallen plaster from the walls of room 6 in the SW Annex (Photo W. Chmiel)*

As for the painted decoration of the chapel, the extant representations on the vaults seem peculiar at the very least. Beside a figure of the Archangel Gabriel(?) on the north wall, there is a still unidentified scene of two men sitting in an interior, seen through an unveiled curtain, apparently concluding a financial agreement (cf. *Fig. 8* on p. 280 in this volume). There are some other separate composition possibly connected with the story, including a mysterious praying monk, fastened by his hair to a rock. The large composition observed on the tumbled remains of the vault (to be recomposed in the coming season) could be identified as a scene of the Massacre of Innocents [*Fig. 10*].

Room 6 of the Annex was used perhaps until the end of the Christian period. Even partly sanded up, it was still visited for worship as evidenced by Terminal Christian period lamps and pots or even sherds used

as substitute lamps found in great abundance in successive deposits covering the floor [*Fig. 11*]. By that time, the north-western corner of the room had been screened off with a wall, creating a kind of rectangular anteroom bypassing room 6 *en route* from the entrance vestibule (room 1) to the corridor (7) leading directly into the Southwestern Building. The L-shaped wall screening off this passage was built in two, if not three stages, being increased in height concurrently with the rising occupation level [*Fig. 12*]. A narrow doorway in the western part of the wall was left as the chapel entrance in the last phase.

There could have been another reason for the height of the screening wall. The rectangular (high) wall could have served as a natural support for the western part of the northern section of the vault above the entrance to corridor 7, which was threat-



Fig. 10. Recomposition of fragments of the collapsed vault with a scene of the Massacre of the Innocents (Photo W. Chmiel)



Fig. 11. Lamps of the Terminal Christian period from room 6 in the SW Annex (Photo H. Pietras)



Fig. 13. Destroyed vault in room 6 over the entrance to room 7 and the Terminal Christian wall supporting the vault (Photo W. Chmiel)



Fig. 12. Later vestibule in the northwestern corner of room 6, view through the entrance from the west; note small doorway on right, the latest doorway exiting the chapel in room 6 (Photo W. Chmiel)

ening to collapse (in similarity to what the excavators did during exploration) [Fig. 13]. The same is true of the arcade above the entrance from the west (with a fine realistic rendering of a palm grove [Fig. 15]). It had tumbled presumably and an effort was made to salvage the rest by buttressing the exterior of the wall and the southern part of the vault with an extra wall, *nota bene*, unsuccessfully.

Further argument for the Terminal Christian, and perhaps the last use of the Annex was provided by the burial of a man, dug from the latest occupation level in room 2. The pit cut across all layers,

including the original one, and partly damaged the face of the west wall (where the head of the deceased, oriented to the west, had been placed) [Fig. 16].

No arguments for the function of the Southwestern Annex have surfaced to date. There is, however, one observation of significance. All the dedication formulas found on the murals refer to women as donors. Assuming that the neighboring Northwestern Annex was indeed a *xenodocheion*, this part could be tentatively interpreted as the women's quarters, in conformity with a tradition¹⁰ requiring separate accommodations for the genders.

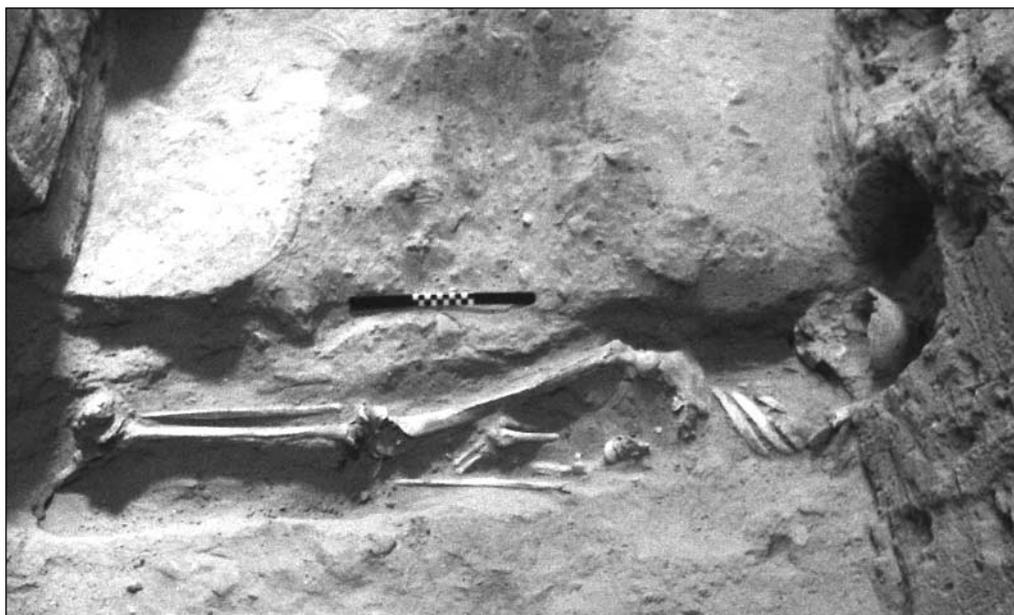


Fig. 14. Ostrakon: sketched faces on a potsberd of Terminal Christian date, found in Room 5 of the SW Annex (Photo H. Pietras)

10 For sources, see St. Longosz, Ksenodoichium – hospicjum wczesnochrześcijańskie, *Vox Patrum* XVI, 30-31 (Lublin 1997), 273-336, esp. 280ff; Cf. also P.O. Scholz, Randbemerkungen zur liturgisch-kultischen Funktion des Xenodoichiums des Dreifaltigkeitskloster in Alt-Dongola, in: *Dongola-Studien*, 174 ff.; therein extensive bibliography.



*Fig. 15. Arcade above the entrance from the west with a frieze of palms
(Photo W. Chmiel)*



*Fig. 16. Late burial in the floor of room 2 of the Annex
(Photo J. Świącicki)*

SOUTHWESTERN BUILDING

In the adjacent storied Southwestern Building (undoubtedly earlier than the Annex), fragments of a grand entrance staircase – flagstone pavement and stone slabs as flyers on the steps built of red brick – were discovered in rooms 7 and 9. In the original layout of the building (before the Annex was connected to it), this staircase must have communicated only with the ground floor of the structure of unknown function that was accessed via the door in the east wall of corridor 7 [cf. Fig. 5]. Clearing of the west facade in this section of the building (scheduled for the coming season) should bring an answer to the question whether the staircase complex had served as a great entrance hall also

in the initial phase. The flagging rising slightly to the north in a kind of ramp would stand in support of this theory. Still another staircase, made of reused stone blocks and red brick in room 8, introduced undoubtedly late in the occupation of the building when the upper story was converted thoroughly, led from the first-floor level presumably to the roof [Fig. 17]. A preliminary analysis of the walls is sufficient to indicate three major rebuilding phases, which are particularly well visible in the exterior bond of the west wall. It should be noted, too, that this wall, being the outer wall much at risk from the elements, must have undergone many local repairs over the centuries.



Fig. 17. General view of the upper story of the Southwestern Building, facing south. Numbers refer to the plan in Fig. 1 (Photo J. Swięcicki)

CONSERVATION IN THE ANNEX AND SW BUILDING

The state of preservation of the uncovered structures left much to be desired. Repeated flooding by rains attacked the bottoms of mud-brick walls and destroyed most of the entrances, seriously affecting the vaults. Indeed, one such attempt to prop up vaults threatening to collapse, made sometime in the 13th or 14th century, can be seen in room 6. Excavations could be completed only after parts of walls and most of the entrance arches were built up. All reconstruction was done with original building material (red and mud-brick) using special mortar: mud (or *qurba*) and sand mixed

with water-diluted PVA. Vertical cracks in the walls were filled in with mud and sand (1:1) mixed with 10% polyvinyl acetate in water. Plaster was readhered to walls with homogeneous injections of 10% hydropropylcellulose (KLUGEL G) mixed with water and mud. Surface damage to the paint and whitewash, resulting in flaking, was treated with 15% hydropropylcellulose in ethanol. Painted surfaces were cleaned mechanically with Wishab sponges and glass-fiber brushes. Painted surfaces were twice protected with an application of 2% polyvinyl acetate in ethanol (MOVILITH 50).

Traditional roofing of the same kind as was built over the Northwestern Annex previously, was introduced over the entire excavated area of the building.¹¹ Windows and doorways were blocked with reused brick, rendering the structure inaccessible until the next season of work.

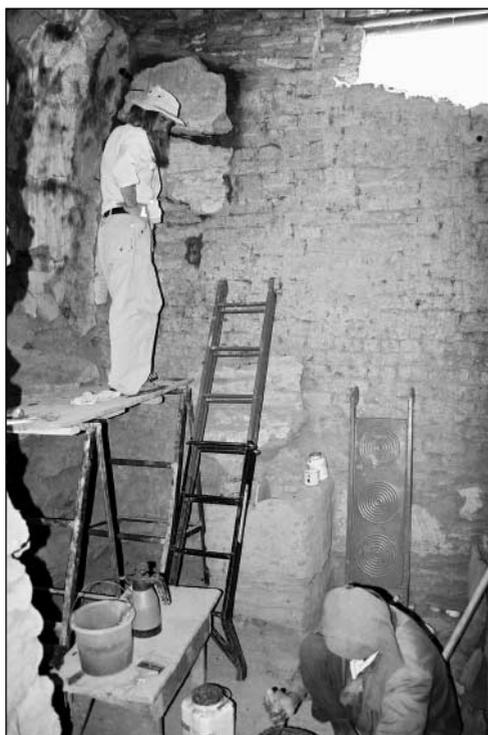


Fig. 18. Restorer Wojciech Chmiel with an assistant at work in room 6 of the SW Annex (Photo J. Świącicki)

11 Cf. PAM XII, Reports 2000 (2001), 278.