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Monastery Church on Kom H in Old Dongola : Third and Fourth Season of Excavations (2004, 2004)

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 16, 285-295

2005

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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MONASTERY CHURCH ON KOM H IN OLD DONGOLA. THIRD AND FOURTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS (2004, 2004/5)

Daniel Gazda

Continued exploration of the Conventual Church (HC) in Old Dongola¹ has uncovered altogether over two-thirds of the building together with part of the area to the east and south of it [*Fig. 1*].

The presbytery (c. 4.70 by 3.80 m) was cleared. In the last stage of rebuilding, it was a rectangular room set off from the nave and aisles by a mud-brick wall, 0.40 m wide, erected directly on top of the second ceramic-tile pavement and remains of the initial stone altar screen. At the highest point, this wall rises 1.15 m above the floor. An entrance with a massive stone threshold led to it from the nave, presumably under an arch.²

The aisles were not open onto the presbytery, being partitioned off with crosswise extensions of the presbytery wall.

Granite columns on rectangular bases (shafts 0.45-0.47 m in diameter, bases 0.49 x 0.49-0.50 x 0.37 m) stood at the south-eastern and northeastern corners of the room, screening the presbytery from the partitioned eastern ends of the aisles (each c. 2.60 by 2.30 m). The column on the south was preserved together with base to a height of 1.03 m.

The original floor bears numerous traces of repairs with chance material, such as

bricks from the vaults, ceramic tiles, red brick and stone. In the northwestern part, it was destroyed altogether. In the center and on the east it was covered with a hard lime-and-gravel plaster.

The altar from the last occupational phase (0.72 x 0.67 m, c.0.70 m high) was a cubical structure of red brick and reused stone blocks, hollow inside and built on top of the late floor, some 1.20 m away from the apse. It was coated with mud plaster. The floor in front of it bears evidence of numerous ceramic and stone mountings for the wooden furniture of the presbytery [*Fig. 2*]. Another altar of red brick (0.60 x 0.60 m, preserved height 0.30 m) stood in the partitioned out part of the eastern aisle. It was also erected on the second-phase floor.

Two tombs were discovered in the presbytery: G1 in the northwestern part and G2 in the center, between the altar and doorway from the nave (see below). A third tomb, G3, was located in the partitioned off part of the southern aisle.

The nave was c. 14.90 long and 4.60 m wide, this including the massive stone piers (1.52-1.57 by 1.22-1.24 m), of which there were two on either side. Several long blocks of stone (0.70 m long) found in the rubble testify to stone arcades spanning the

1 For the first two campaigns, cf. D. Gazda, *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 230-236; also D. Gazda, *GAMAR 3* (2005), 77-81; for the current fieldwork in the 38th and 39th season of excavations at Dongola, see report by S. Jakobielski in this volume.

2 A graffiti on a nearby wall could depict this doorway.

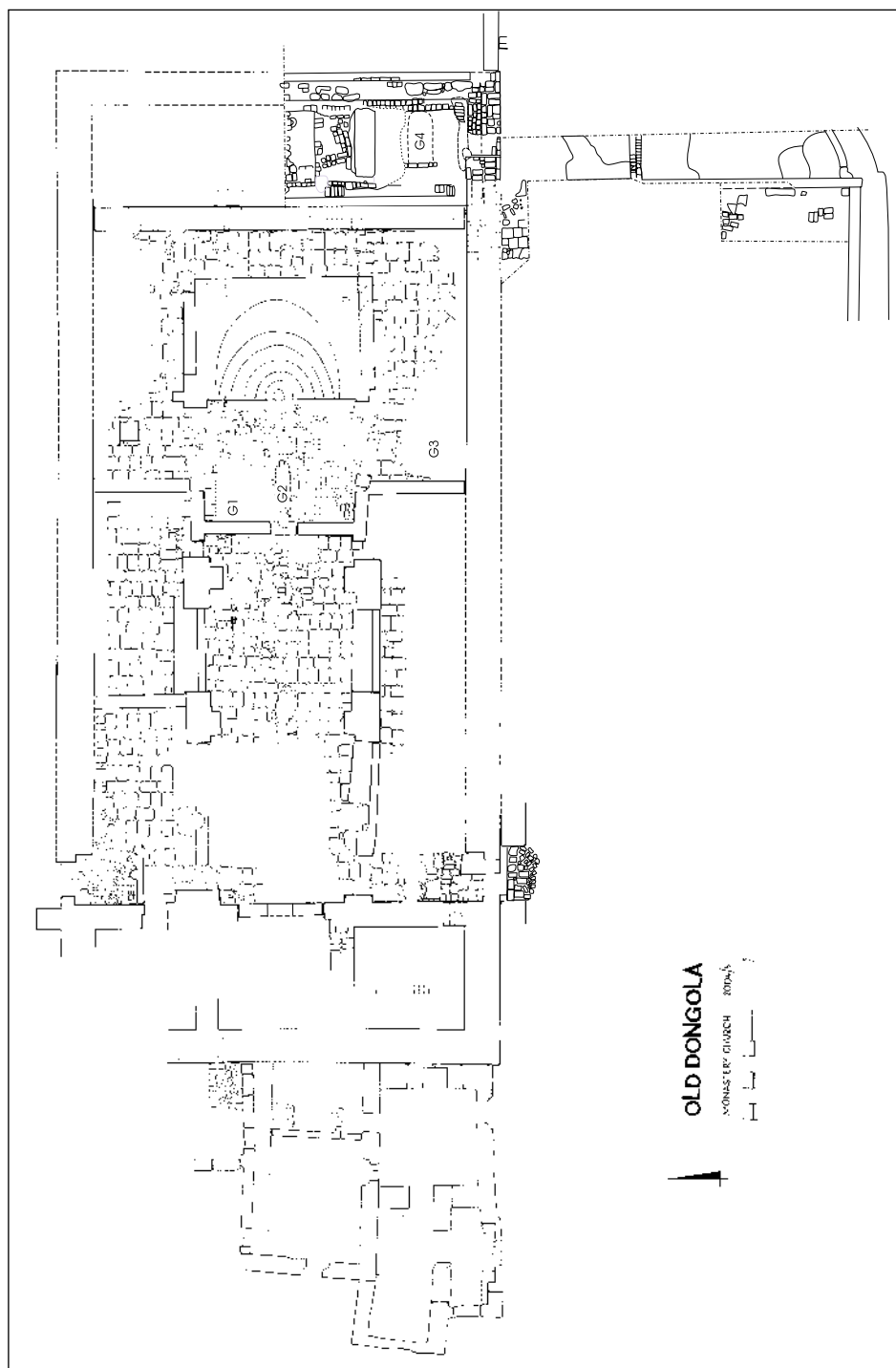


Fig. 1. Plan of the Monastery Church, following the fourth season of excavations in 2004 (Drawing M. Puszczarski based on D. Gazda, M. Winiwóra & H. Kozłńska-Souza)



Fig. 2. Late altar and mountings for wooden altar and canopy (Photo D. Gazda)



Fig. 3. Reliquary cache in the floor of the nave (Photo S. Jakobielski)



Fig. 4. Column once supporting the pulpit podium (Photo D. Gazda)

central bay to form the support under a domed roof. The floor was made of ceramic tiles of the same kind as elsewhere in the church (0.47 x 0.32 m, 4 cm thick). A reliquary cache was found in the central part of the nave. Adjoining the northeastern pier were ruins of a pulpit [Fig. 3]. Wooden stairs must have led up to the pulpit from the south, as indicated by thresholds surviving from two separate phases of rebuilding, posts under the steps and a column, which must have supported the pulpit podium and which had a slot for a sandstone screen slab joining it to the pier [Fig. 4].

Mud-brick walls, c. 0.20 m thick, were introduced at a later date to separate the nave from the aisles. They were erected on top of the ceramic-tile floor from the second building phase of the church. The wall in the south aisle ran even with the southern face of the piers, surviving to a maximum

height of 1.25 m in the western end. On the nave side, there was a mastaba (c. 0.60 m wide and 0.50-0.56 m high) adjoining it. It was built of mud brick with a red-brick top, the core filled with debris, potsherds and organic remains. Two doorways, the eastern one 0.60 m and the western one c. 1.00 m wide, led from the nave into the aisles. No evidence of any internal partitioning was noted in the southern aisle.

The northern aisle, which was screened off by a similar late mud-brick wall, was partitioned with two transversal walls of mud-brick founded directly on the ceramic-tile floor. The middle part thus created was 6.35 by 2.60 m big. The red-brick structure in its southwestern corner, between the piers, obviously preceded the second-phase pavement of the church [Fig. 5]. It was 3.00 by 0.82 m at the maximum and 0.20 m high. The western end of the aisle formed



Fig. 5. View of the central part of the church; earlier red-brick structure in the northern aisle seen in the foreground (Photo S. Jakobielski)

a kind of anteroom communicating with the grounds outside the northern entrance to the church. Blocking of the doorway on two separate occasions indicated that it had fallen into disuse. Arguing in favor of a barrel vault rising over the southern aisle is a 0.30-0.35 m wide mud-brick wall found doubling the outer church wall all along the middle section of the aisle.

On the opposite side, in the southwestern corner of the church, which was separated from the southern aisle with a red-brick wall, c. 0.70 m thick, there was a poorly preserved staircase (3.60 by 3.40 m) [Fig. 6]. Steps c. 1.00 m wide wound their way up around a brick pier measuring c. 1.30 x 1.00 m. The entrance to the staircase was from the north, paralleling the architecture of the Faras Cathedral and the Old Church in Dongola. Initially, one of the western rooms had been open onto the

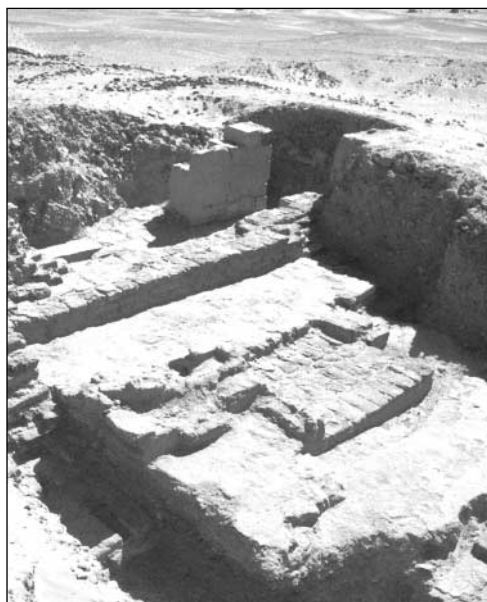


Fig. 6. Staircase in the southwestern corner of the church (Photo S. Jakobielski)

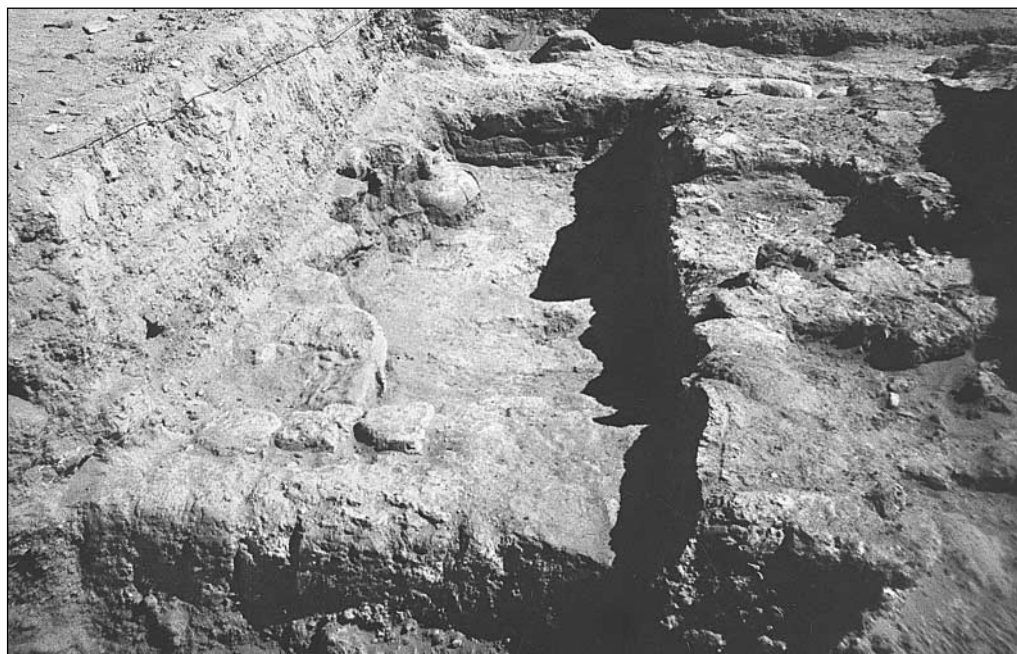


Fig. 7. Room HCW3, view from the west (Photo D. Gazda)

nave, forming a passage c. 2.70 m wide. This was narrowed down to 1 m with the same kind of mud-brick walls that were used to partition off the nave from the aisles.

The southern entrance to the church, uncovered in the western end of the southern aisle, where it joined the staircase, was found to have been narrowed down to 0.66 m from the initial width of c. 1.10 m. The sandstone blocks used for this purpose were laid directly on top of the original stone threshold.

The presence of an ambit, at least on the south side, was determined in trial pits dug near the southeastern corner of the church. A trench was also excavated to bedrock from the south wall of the church to the monastery girdle wall in order to get an idea of the intervening ground. The ambit, presumably about 4.40 m wide, was laid with a ceramic-tile floor, which

passed into bricks and stone by the southern church entrance. Traces of a thick hard lime floor were observed in places.

Testing in the area east of the church revealed several heterogeneous structures, which will be the object of further fieldwork in the coming seasons. Meriting mention is tomb G4 discovered in the southern part of the area (see below) and a room with a mixed stone and red-brick pavement (HCW3) [Fig. 7].

Contextual dating evidence provided by pottery found under the sandstone slabs of the pavement points to the 6th-7th century. The pottery underlying the brick-paved part of the room's floor, mixed with large amounts of ashes, dated to the Classic (later) period. Two tamped earth floors were also noted above this floor (possibly Classic and Post-Classic).

THE TOMBS

Four tombs were discovered and explored inside the church [cf. Fig. 1].

The tomb in the northwestern corner of the presbytery (G1) appeared to have been disturbed, presumably already after the church had been abandoned. The fill contained various stone and ceramic elements from the structure and furniture of the church. The burial itself was at a depth of 1.60 m below the late church pavement [Fig. 8].

Tomb G2 was located on the main axis of the church, between the altar and the passage from the presbytery into the nave. The grave pit was 1.95 m long, 0.50 m wide and 1.25 m deep below the pavement, the bottom part being already excavated in bedrock [Fig. 10]. The threshold of the passage overlay the western end of the structure. Two massive stone slabs making up the covering were supported on a brick ledge running around the pit. They were

found c. 0.23-0.40 m below the pavement, which was quite severely damaged in this spot. The burial consisted of a single skeleton (anthropological examination remains to be carried out) and no tomb equipment of any kind. The evidence indicates that this was an early burial.

The third tomb (G3) was located in the eastern end of the southern aisle. The total destruction of the pavement above it could indicate the presence of some kind of superstructure that was robbed out in later times. The pit was 2.20 m long, from 0.90 to 1.05 m wide from east to west, and c. 1.70 m deep. The actual chamber was a red-brick structure with gabled roof, built c. 0.80 m below the pavement. The entrance, which was from a shaft on the west, was found blocked with bricks [Fig. 9 top]. The skeleton lay in a 20-cm deep layer of clean sand at the bottom of the chamber. Traces of



Fig. 8. Tomb G1 in the presbytery
(Photo D. Gazda)

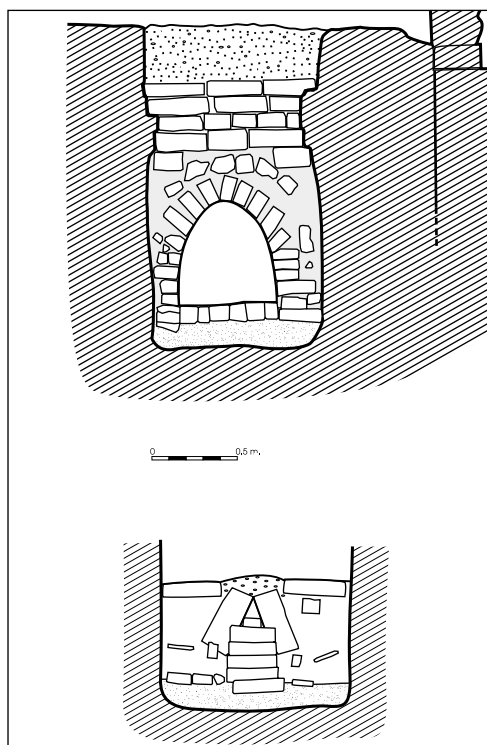


Fig. 9. Sections through the entrances to the chambers of grave G3 (top) and G4
(Drawing D. Gazda)



Fig. 10. Tomb G2 in the presbytery
(Photo D. Gazda)

textiles and ropes were observed stuck to the bones. The fill above the brick chamber contained potsherds which can be dated to the Early Christian period. Architectural examination indicated that the tomb should precede the construction of the second layer of paving and the raising of the piers inside the church, an investment believed to have occurred in the second half of the 7th or early 8th century.

The fourth tomb (G4) was already outside the church, in the area east of the building. The shaft was 0.74 by 0.92 m, 1.40 m deep and was partly cut into the

perimeter wall of yellowish *qurba* brick. The red-brick chamber measured 2.15 by 0.90 m; it was 0.90 m high and covered with a barrel vault. The façade, built of a single row of red bricks, divided the chamber from a square shaft at the western side [Fig. 9 bottom]. The entrance with a radiate arch of bricks above it was 0.74 by 0.58 m; the blocking consisted of bricks bonded in mud. Inside the chamber there were two damaged skeletons and no grave equipment of any kind. The pottery in the fill and in the tomb structure suggests a date in the Classic period, around the 9th century.

WALL PAINTINGS AND STELAE FROM THE CHURCH

A few fragmentary murals were also discovered, e.g. palm trees on the western face of the wall separating the nave and presbytery [Fig. 11], and other fragments on the eastern face of the wall narrowing the entrance from the central of the western rooms into the nave. All the murals were executed on a coating of mud plaster and can be dated on the grounds of style to the 11th/12th century.³

Four funerary stelae were found in the church. Two of these deserve to be mentioned even before a full epigraphical study is carried out. The stela of Joseph, discovered in the southern part of the presbytery, is made of a slab of yellowish sandstone (80.5 x 63 x 6.5 m) [Fig. 13]. The text in Coptic with initial and closing formulas in Greek counts 29 lines, fitted inside a cross-like frame. It was made for the former bishop of Aswan, who had come to Dongola presumably to organize monastic life in the capital. He died on the third of Pachon in year 382 of the Era of Martyrs, that is, in AD 668. The stela is



Fig. 11. Palm tree painted on the western face of the wall between the nave and presbytery (Photo D. Gazda)

³ Personal information from Dr. Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka.

the oldest dated inscription concerning the history of Makuria and dates the origins of the monastery to, the first half or the middle of the 7th century.

Another stela was found inserted face down into the floor of the presbytery in its northern part. The slab of dark brown sandstone measured 27 x 19-21 x 4 cm. A Greek inscription in neat letters filled with red paint refers to Ioannes, deacon of the "Great Church", but gives no date by year. The style points to the Early Classical period as the most likely date [Fig. 14].

Newly found elements of architectural decoration included rosettes carved in a sandstone block, a monogram on a key-store [Fig. 12], ceramic window grille fragments. The chronological range of the pottery from the excavations is from the 6th to the 13th/14th century.



Fig.13. Stela of Joseph, AD 668
(Photo S. Jakobielski)



Fig. 14. Stela of Ioannes, deacon of the "Great Church" (Photo D. Gazda)

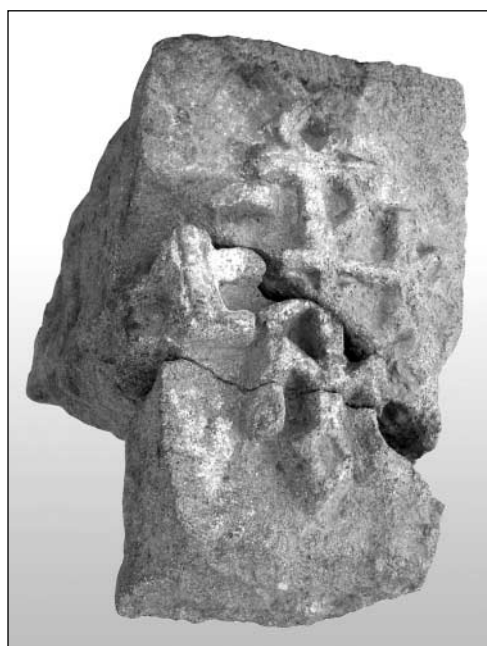
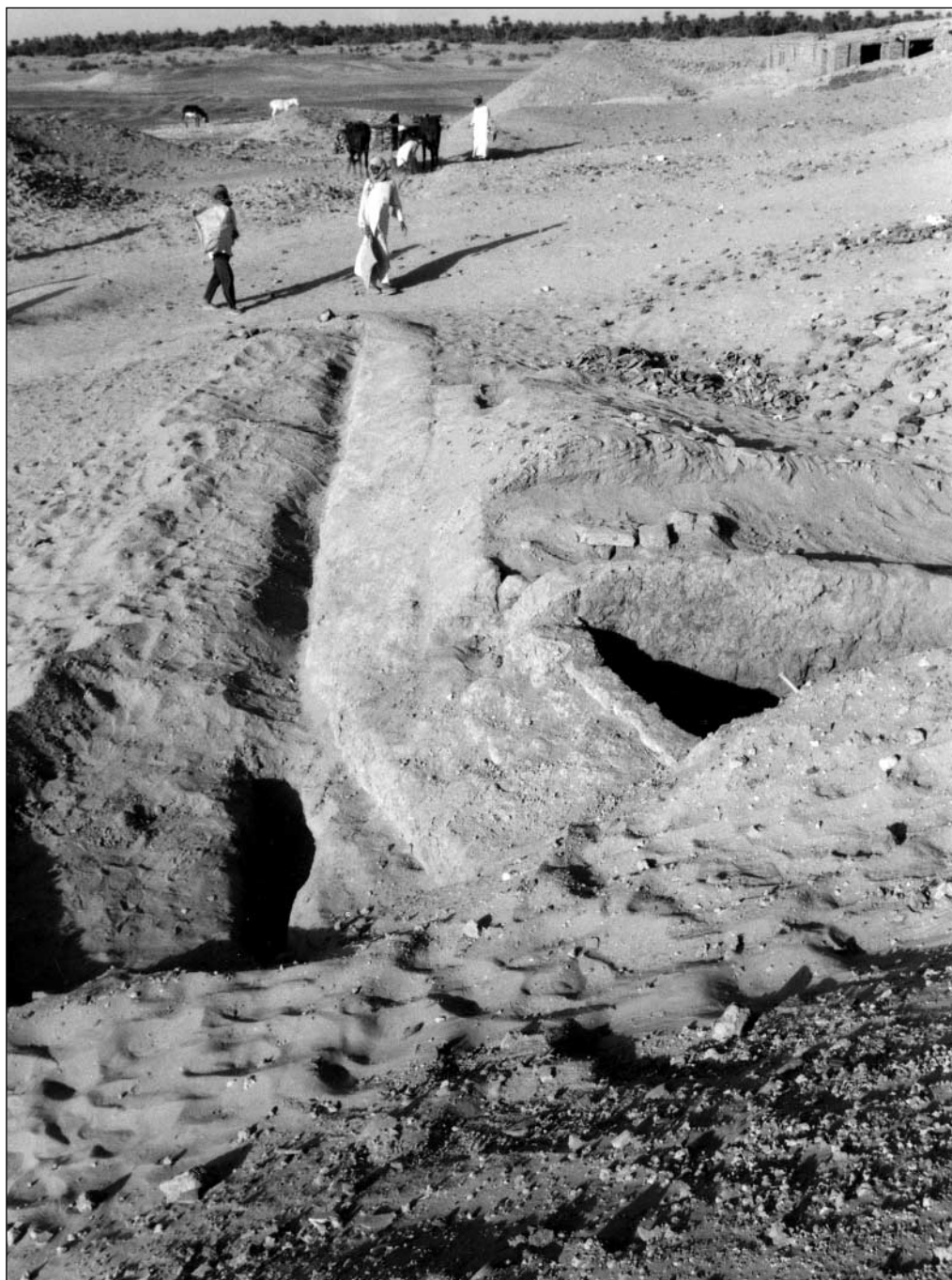


Fig.12. Monogram from a doorway arch between the southern aisle and nave
(Photo S. Jakobielski)



*Fig. 15. Section of the outer wall of the monastery, view from the east
(Photo D. Gazda)*

OUTER MONASTERY WALL

A section of the outer monastery wall was exposed in the trench extending from it to the monastery church. The wall proved to be c. 1.30 m wide and was built of mud bricks (28 x 12 x 7 cm on average). At this point its preserved height was c. 0.85 m

[*Fig. 15*, cf plan in *Fig. 1*]. It stood on a thin occupational layer containing pottery and organic remains. Based on contextual evidence, the erection of the wall can be dated than the church, that is, the end of the 7th or even beginning of the 8th century.

SUMMARY

It is now clear that the church had a three-aisled body measuring c. 25 by 12 m. It was built in the first half of the 7th century. The initial form was a structure with columns in the nave. In the second phase, which must have followed Ibn Abi Sarh's raid on Dongola in AD 652, it was rebuilt, introducing a dome that was supported on the four piers. Finally, the latest alterations were made in the 11th century, when mud-brick walls

were built inside the body of the church and given a new coating of plaster decorated with murals. The pavement testifies to two building phases, the first corresponding to the building of the first church, the second, made of ceramic tiles, tentatively attributed to the reconstruction that introduced the piers in the nave. It is evident by now that the church was used as a burial place for ecclesiastics connected with the monastery.