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CHURCH OF MAR ELIAS BTINA IN BEIRUT (LEBANON) AND ITS WALL PAINTINGS. CONSERVATION PROJECT REPORT

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Abstract: In 2007, renovation work in the Greek-Orthodox Church of Mar Elias Btina in Beirut resulted in the discovery of some wall painting fragments. They were fully uncovered and preserved in 2010 and 2011 by conservators from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in cooperation with archaeologists from the PCMA UW. The wall paintings, dated provisionally to the 12th–13th century, was an almost complete decoration of the presbytery walls, which included depictions of the Prophet Elijah and a number of unidentified saints. This discovery significantly enriches the corpus of St Elijah's representations in the medieval art of the Christian East and opens new avenues of discussion regarding church art of Beirut in the Crusader period.

Keywords: Mar Elias Bitna, Beirut, Lebanon, medieval wall paintings, church, conservation

The Church of Mar Elias Btina in Beirut is located within the grounds of the Mar Elias Btina College on Mar Elias Street in the district of the same name. Located on what were in the 1950s the southern outskirts of the city, it is now part of a densely built-up area lining the road to the airport, which borders on the west the College grounds with their spacious courtyard, school building and church. On the south there is the Mar Elias Palestinian Refugee Camp. The Greek-Orthodox church stands within a former monastery building constructed in the 19th century, which has served as a school since 1953.

The unexpected falling of a piece of white wall plaster from the north wall of the church presbytery in 2007 uncovered a fragment of damaged wall painting. Conservators from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, then working on another project in Beirut, were called in to test the plaster coats in the oldest part of the church for other wall paintings and, once the presence of murals was established, the decision was taken to remove all secondary coats of plaster and to undertake essential conservation measures. This work was carried out over two summer campaigns held in 2010 and 2011.

FORMER MONASTERY BUILDING AND CHURCH

The church edifice was incorporated into a building that was raised in the final quarter of the 19th century to house a monastery. The main body of this edifice is square in plan, three floors high (including the ground floor) and has a large central courtyard [Fig. 2]. An external staircase on the north wall of the building leads to the first floor, which features two-level galleries opening onto the central court, the semicircular arcades supported on slender columns. The church occupies the west wing of the building up to the level of the first floor. The interior consists of three stylistically different parts that are also chronologically distinct, resulting in a fairly complex and heterogeneous layout [Fig. 1].

The earliest, eastern end of the church features a small, square presbytery [Fig. 1:a]. The walls and barrel vaulting were hewn from solid rock. The upper

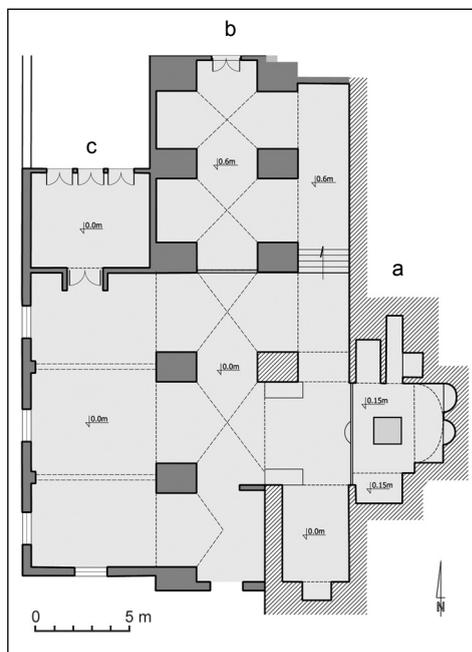


Fig. 1. *The Mar Elias Btina College in Beirut* (Plan S. Lenarczyk, M. Puskarski)

Team

Dates of work: September 2010, September 2011 (completed in September 2013)

Director: Krzysztof Chmielewski (Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw)

Conservators and students of conservation: Katarzyna Górecka, Magdalena Rogowska, Anna Tomkowska, Maciej Żelechowski-Stoń (Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw), Karolina Mołga, Magdalena Penar (Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków)

Archaeologists: Dr. Tomasz Waliszewski (PCMA and Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Zofia Kowarska, Szymon Lenarczyk (independent)

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part of the east wall terminates in a broad, hemispherical conch, below which are two small niches. Two small rooms of irregular shape adjoin the north wall, with a slightly wider room abutting the south wall. A cuboid altar of stone stands in the middle of the presbytery. A wooden iconostasis separates the presbytery from the remainder of the church. The principal section of the interior [Fig. 1:b] was constructed along with the monastery complex in the 19th century. Its broad expanse is divided by a row

of pillars supporting a groined vault. At the north end this part of the interior is around 2 m higher, forming a kind of choir loft accessed by a few steps. The east and southeast walls (like the adjoining presbytery) were excavated in solid rock, the remaining walls are masonry. The most recent addition to the church is the west end [Fig. 1:c], built in the 20th century. This part of the church interior was enlarged by introducing a flat ceiling over it and preceding it by a small vestibule through which the church is entered.

UNCOVERING THE PAINTINGS

The wall paintings were uncovered in stages, removing carefully with knives, hammers and scalpels the overlying plaster layers [Figs 3–5]. In 2010, the extant murals covering the upper section of the concave wall surfaces of the presbytery

were exposed in full. Secondary layers of plaster were removed from the vault, revealing the underlying plaster layer, which, however, proved to be undecorated. Work in 2011, aimed at uncovering the painting in the conch, revealed instead



Fig. 2. *The Mar Elias Btina College in Beirut nowadays*
(Photo M. Żelechowski-Stoń)



Fig. 3. Uncovering the wall paintings in the presbytery of the Mar Elias Btina church: top, removing plaster coats from paintings on the north wall; center, removing non-original plaster from the conch (discernible shape of the carved shell decoration); bottom, new mortar filling gaps in the murals on the south wall (Photos M. Rogowska)



*Fig. 4. Fragment of wall painting uncovered by chance in 2007
(Photo K. Chmielewski)*



*Fig. 5. Conch with carved shell decoration after treatment
(Photo M. Rogowska)*

a monumental shell carved in solid rock. Its sculpted form gradually became discernible as successive layers of secondary plaster, in some areas as many as ten, representing successive episodes of reno-

vation, were removed. Some of these layers were additionally painted a homogeneous grey or dark blue, others were white or clay-colored. The end effect was a complete obscuring of the details of the shell.

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE WALL PAINTINGS

Two adjoining compositions were recorded on the north wall of the presbytery, faced by a similar set on the south wall. The scenes, which were surrounded by a red border, were not identical in size and shape, nor were they symmetrically spaced. The paintings were in such poor condition that it was difficult to discern the details. Schematic drawings of the images gave a clearer idea of the iconography.

The representation on the north wall depicted a seated figure of the Prophet Elijah. The prophet sits in front of a backdrop of schematically rendered rocks and bushes. He is shown frontally, the hand of his right arm, bent at the elbow, supporting his face, which is turned a little to the right. His left arm is held straight with the hand resting in his lap. Elijah wears a long, voluminous, dark green mantle fastened on his chest. His long hair, which falls onto his shoulders, is discernible, as are the long beard and moustache framing his face, and the outline of his mouth and nose. The prophet's head is encircled by a yellow halo, bounded by a thin black and white line. In the top right corner of the composition, above the prophet's shoulder, the outline of a flying raven with a small round bread in its beak can be seen. Below it, a damaged, but still relatively legible, white inscription in Greek gives the prophet's name. The composition is set against a grey-blue background.

The second scene surviving on this wall was set within a horizontal rectangle. This partly extant composition depicted the Prophet Elijah standing in frontal pose on a chariot, of which only part of one wheel can be seen. Elijah's symmetrically outstretched arms are bent at the elbows. In his right hand he holds the end of his mantle, which he proffers to the Prophet Elisha, whose depiction has been lost. His left hand holds the reins of four red horses harnessed to the chariot. The horses are depicted in profile, their backs and heads overlapping. Fragments of the harnesses and saddles are discernible. Part of a schematically painted rock can be seen behind them. Above this, observed against a grey-blue background are the semicircular traces of a symbolic representation of the firmament. One white Greek letter (Λ or A) is all that remains of an inscription giving the prophet's name. The figure of Elisha survives as a preliminary drawing in red. Visible details include the prophet's long robe, which is belted at the waist, and part of his head encircled by a halo. The left and lower sections of the composition are lost entirely [*Fig. 6*].

The south wall of the presbytery bore two compositions depicting two figures of unidentified saints standing against a grey-blue background. The painting was damaged, surviving only partly in the underlying drawing. The figure on the

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left holds the right arm aloft, bent at the elbow, in a gesture of benediction. The left arm hangs loosely, the hand clutching an unfurled scroll, on which several damaged and poorly legible Greek letters can be seen. The saint wears an undergarment and a mantle around his shoulders, which is fastened on the chest [Fig. 7].

The saint on the right is similarly attired in a red robe with a green mantle around his shoulders. His right arm is bent at the elbow with the hand poorly discernible; in his left hand he holds a damaged scroll. To the saint's lower left is a small, standing figure (donor?) clad in a red robe, the arms raised in prayer. The faces have been lost,



Fig. 6. Composition of Elijah on his chariot on the north wall: top, painting after treatment; bottom left, map of lacunas; bottom right, clarifying drawing (Photos M. Rogowska, drawings M. Zelechowski-Stoń)

but the heads were encircled by yellow halos circumscribed by a black and white line.

Several graffiti from later periods were incised in the plaster layers on different

parts of the walls. They were recorded in due course and will be studied by Patricia Antaki (Université Saint-Joseph and Université de Poitiers).



Fig. 7. Composition of two standing saints on the south wall: top, painting after treatment; bottom left, map of lacunas; bottom right, clarifying drawing (Photos M. Rogowska, drawings M. Żelechowski-Stoń)

WALL PAINTING TECHNIQUES

Once the murals had been uncovered it became apparent that fragments of earlier, underlying wall painting could be seen along the damaged plaster edges. It is not possible to determine the extent to which this earlier artwork survives, as it is overlain by the plaster supporting the top painting. However, considering a painted halo that can be discerned on an exposed section of the north wall, it seems likely that the earlier painting is also of medieval date.

Samples of plaster and paint layers were removed from various areas of the vaults and conch (including the secondary plaster layers from the conch) and submitted for laboratory analysis. The completed analyses enabled the following sequence of the earliest technological strata on the walls to be determined:

- stone substrate of the walls and vaults (limestone rock),
- render layer, and
- plaster layer with painting (both first chronological phase),

- plaster layer with painting (second, top painting chronologically).

The surface of the vault and the carved surface of the conch are covered with a layer of render corresponding to the render underlying the paintings. All of the aforementioned renders have a lime binding agent and a quantitatively predominant lime filler.

The binding medium in the paint layers is calcium carbonate. No natural organic binders were observed in any of the samples. In consequence, these paintings can be said to have been executed in the true fresco technique, on wet plaster. Traces of a vinyl binding agent identified in two of the samples doubtless came from secondary layers or from materials used in the course of conservation.

Several natural pigments were identified in the samples taken from the paint layers. These included lime white, iron oxide red, iron oxide yellow, plant black, and green earth.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT

Conservation measures included:

- consolidation of delaminated plaster,
- structural reinforcement by impregnation of plaster with synthetic resin,
- securing of damaged plaster edges with fresh mortar,
- surface cleaning of murals to remove layers of secondary calcite, salts, black soot and dirt,
- impregnation of weakened paint layer where necessary,
- filling of losses in the carved stonework of the conch with fresh mortar,
- filling of plaster losses in the wall paintings and vaulting with fresh mortar,
- chromatic integration of the fresh mortar used on the surface of both the conch and vault.

CONCLUSIONS

Stylistic analysis of the wall paintings is compromised by the poor state of preservation. The compositions are fairly rigid and schematic in form. They were executed presumably in the 12th–13th century, the period when most of Lebanon's extant medieval frescoes were painted. It should be kept in mind that we are dealing with two chronologically separate layers of painting, created at least several dozen years apart.

Few medieval wall paintings have survived in Beirut and in terms of iconographical themes, the representation of the Prophet Elijah, the identification confirmed by an inscription, is the only known depiction from Lebanon. Erica Cruikshank Dodd mentioned a wall painting from the Church of Sayyidat al-Darr in Hadchit that may have depicted Elijah in a chariot, although its iconographic identification was uncertain due to the significant degree of damage (Dodd 2004: 59–60). It is no longer to be seen today, obscured by a new layer of paint. A seated figure of Elijah, although

not confirmed by a legend, was depicted in the Church of Mar Elias in Kfar Qahel (Dodd 2004: 52–53). Geographically, the nearest depiction of Elijah in his chariot are the 11th century paintings from the church at Deir Mar Musa and from the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah in Ma'arrat Saydnaya, both in Syria; compositionally, they are similar to the fresco discovered in Beirut (Dodd 2001: 49–51; Immerzeel 2005: 163–165 and 169–170).

The carved shell discovered in the conch of the presbytery probably dates from Late Antiquity, attesting to a larger architectural structure, such as a tomb (for an almost identical conch from the Roman period, see Deir Mar Touma in Saydnaya in Syria, Castellana, Di Bennardo, Fernández 2007: 133 and 139, Figs 98 and 110). In the medieval period, it was incorporated into the interior of a church or chapel built on the site.

The paintings of Elijah confirm the dedication of the present-day church, which lies in a region where this prophet was greatly venerated.¹

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¹ Modern Beirut history specialist May Davie proposed to consider the Mar Elias oratory as part of the symbolic protection of Beirut territory, in similarity to the Khodr mosque, the old Church of Saint George, in the eastern part of the town or the medieval Church of Saint Michael (Davie 1996: 31–32). The authors thank Patricia Antaki for drawing their attention to this information.

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