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Old Dongola: The Mosaic Church (Kom E) 1993

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OLD DONGOLA THE MOSAIC CHURCH (KOM E) 1993/94

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Kom E sits on the brink of a rocky gebel 100 m east of the modern village of El Ghaddar. Fifty meters north are two Rock Tombs of approximately 6th century date. The vast stretch of the Transitional/Early Christian cemeteries starts a couple of metres east of the Kom.

The Church on Kom E (known also as the Mosaic Church) is the only church in Nubia whose whole interior was once paved with mosaics. The regular geometrical pattern in the western part of the haikal is analogous to the mosaics found in the presbytery of the Church of the Stone Pavement in Dongola (Fig. 1). The computerized model of Kom E with the Church outline on it presents the ground relief in somewhat exaggerated form.

The works of the 1993/1994 season started around the ferruginous sandstone base situated precisely in line with the southern wall of the Church. It appeared to be the southernmost base of a set of four of similar size and shape. The monolithic columns were dislodged and removed in ancient times. The space thus roofed was a sort of transversal narthex giving access to the nave and to the staircase. Its northern, eastern and southern walls survived only in negative. The robbers left *in situ* only a huge southwestern corner slab and the northern part of the eastern wall. The western wall of the narthex was considerably thinner than the walls of the church itself. The foundations were surprisingly deep, perhaps because of the sloping bedrock. The builders tried to set the foundations on firm ground. They gave up after digging a foundation ditch more than one meter deep (compared to the later Dongolese manner of laying foundations, the depth of these is enormous). The foundation bricks of 38 x 18 x 8 cm were bonded in lime mortar.

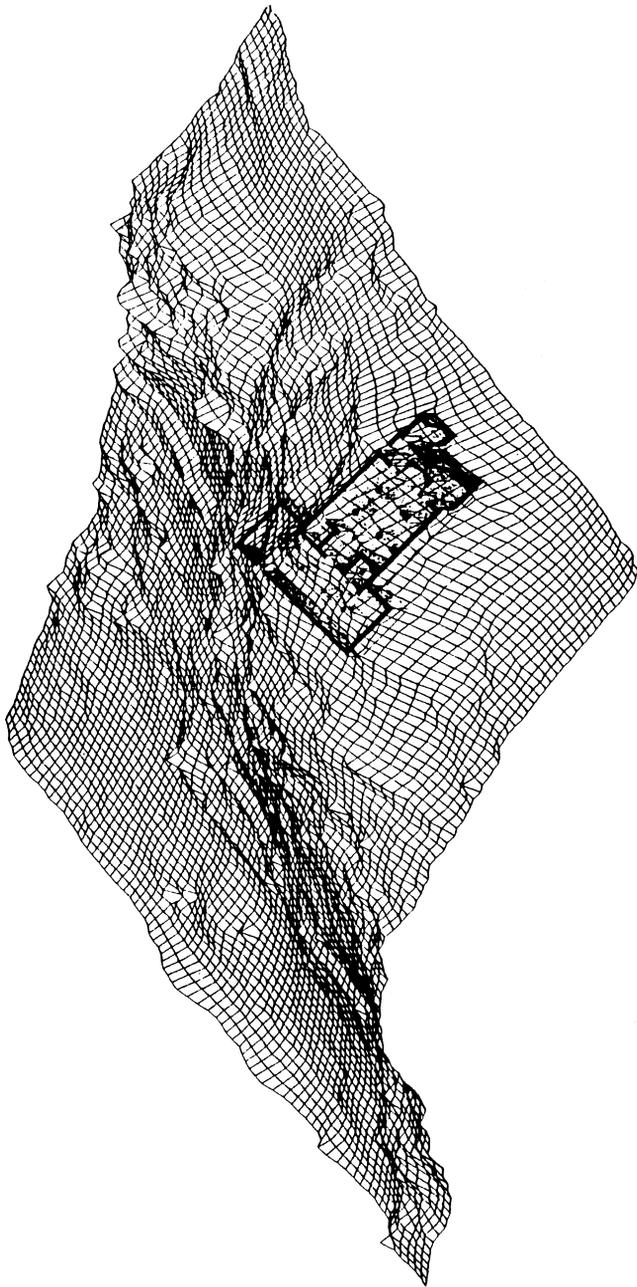


Fig. 1. Computerized model of Kom E with scanned-in church outline.

Afterwards the spandrels on both sides of the foundation wall were consolidated with brick fragments, stones and gravel.

The narthex was apparently built later than the main body of the church. Its flooring is higher than the naos pavement. It is paved with irregular half-bricks, brick fragments and bricks of smaller size apparently considered as the mosaic underlay. At least part of its interior was embellished with black and white pebbles. The tripartite space enclosed within an elevated border along its western wall was filled with a mosaic set in lime mortar. The design resembles the patterns of early-phase pebble mosaics in the eastern part of the Church.

The narthex was entered by means of two openings in the western wall. The huge ferruginous slab found in the southwestern corner suggests an entrance parallel to the doorway in the still existing part of the western wall.

The narthex roof was laid on wooden beams. Perhaps at some time it was repaired or covered with thin slabs of ferruginous stone commonly found in the desert. A great number of such slabs set in mud mortar were found in the course of the excavations.

The preserved part of the western wall of the narthex borders the only existing entrance to the Church located in the northern part of the western wall of the narthex. It is a most unusual place since the light of the entrance is blocked by the northernmost narthex column. The entrance was considerably reduced in width at a later period.

The four narthex column bases were founded on top of a bench-like foundation of big well-fired bricks set in lime mortar mixed with kaolin clay known locally as *gir*.

During the 1994 season the whole interior of the Church was cleared. Its layout reveals traces of curious architectural modifications, which constitute a reversal of the general trends observable in Nubian church planning. First of all, the narthex,

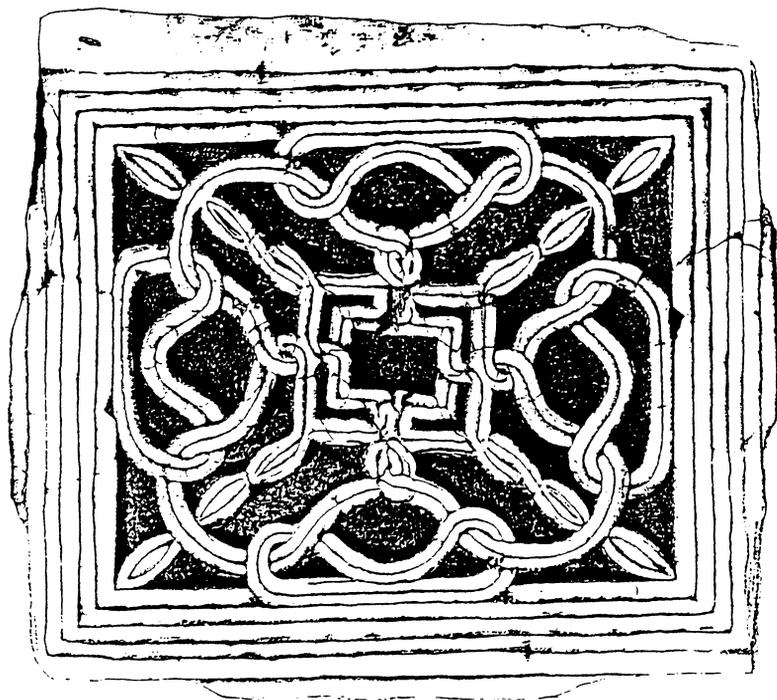


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the cancelli slab. Drawing B. Żurawski.

which was an ephemeral phenomenon and promptly went out of fashion in the earliest Nubian ecclesiastical architecture, became a secondary invention in the Church on Kom E, together with the mosaic.

The eastern passage behind the apse, the function of which in Nubian churches remains somewhat enigmatic, in the Church on Kom E is evidently associated with the baptism ritual. It was difficult to accomplish the ritual logic of baptism in the small baptistery, where the tiny patch of the pavement was sufficient only for the celebrant priest. Apparently, the

baptized would leave the font by means of the western flight of steps and would proceed through the eastern passage to the exit in the northeastern corner of the Church.

The ambo, made of soft yellowish sandstone, was built after the mosaics had been laid in the *naos*. The space between the pulpit and the northeastern naos column was later blocked with reused bricks and stone architectural *spolia* (a small white sandstone capital and a part of a column shaft was built into the lowest course of the blocking). The blocking was made either to increase the height of the ambo or to prop up the timber roofing.

The mosaics belonging to the first embellishment of the Church, were repaired and rearranged at a later date. The earliest repertoire of strict geometric patterns was augmented by curvilinear (floral?) motifs of undulating lines springing from the vessels(?). The earliest mosaics were set in lime mortar. The last repairs were done in clayish renders. Probably the best preserved part of the mosaic still rests below the red brick platform constructed at a later date in the eastern end of the northern aisle.

The *higab*, which was a later addition, was made of ornamented *spolia* of ferruginous sandstone and slabs of yellowish sandstone decorated only with a single-lined moulding. The cancelli slabs which screen the *haikal* from the nave are bordered by the eastern pair of naos columns and stone jambs. Probably the jambs flanking the nave entrance to the presbytery were capped by spheroid caps made of sandstone. The original *higab* should not have been higher than 110 cm.

In the northern part of the *haikal* area were two caches set in the stone pavement. Three fragmentary oil lamps were found inside. There is nothing liturgical or even exceptional about these lamps but their enormous size.

The staircase in the southwestern corner of the naos was paralleled by a similar room in the northwestern corner. The interior of this space was laid with mosaics and then covered by

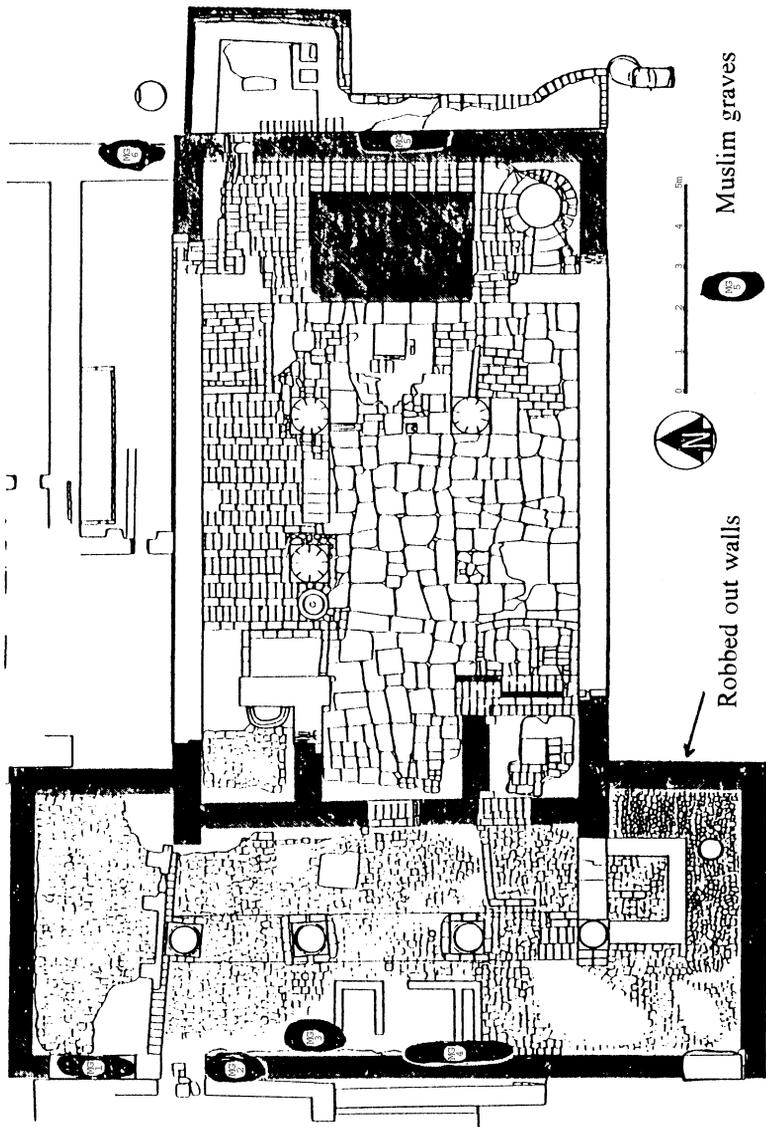


Fig. 3. The Mosaic Church on Kom E. Drawing B. Żurawski.

a layer of irregular brick fragments. Generally the elevated floor in this space matches the level of the narthex flooring. There are good grounds to situate another western entrance to the naos in the robbed out western wall of this space. It could have been cut through when the main entrance to the naos was blocked by the huge sandstone column base dragged from outside.

On the original mosaic flooring level in the northwestern space a curious font-like container was built against the northern divider separating this space from the *naos*. It was built using materials easily dissolved in water, so it could not have served as a tank. It was found filled to the upper edge with desert pebbles of the same size and colour as the pebbles used for the mosaic. There was a venerated mural on the wall above the container in question.

On top of the pebbles an oil lamp was found. It had left smoke stains on the eastern wall of the space and on the pebbles. Perhaps it is a rare *bona fide* Nubian liturgical innovation. Worshippers could have collected the pebbles in the desert and brought them to the church where they could have been used for floor repairs. Donating the pebbles could have been connected with a vow or some religious expectations. Its worth noting that in modern popular Nubian beliefs white pebbles laid on Muslim graves symbolize prayers.

The pottery found within the church belongs to the latest phase of the building's use. Late Christian lamps dominate the forms. Altogether fifty lamps have been found, most of them placed on the floor level along the eastern wall of the *haikal* and in the pastophories. Most of the lamps were used till the stone-hard layer of burnt oil transformed them into shapeless nodules.

Murals were introduced at an unspecified later period, at least in the northern aisle. Once venerated by the lamps put on the flooring below them, they disappeared together with the robbed out walls. Of the later painted decoration only 127 tiny pieces of coloured mortar have survived. Most pieces bear traces of violet ochre applied on a *gir* underpaint. Half of the fragments collected

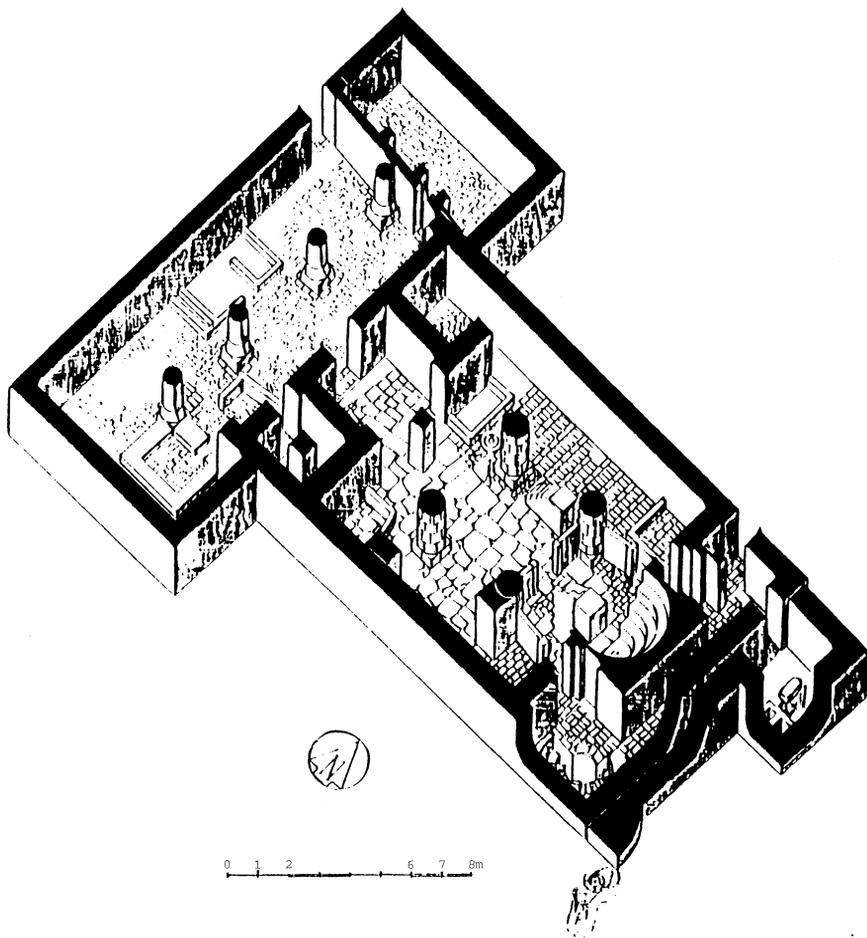


Fig. 4. The Church on Kom E. Isometric view. Drawing B. Żurawski.

was found in one place against the middle section of the northern wall of the naos.

The construction period of the Church is well defined by the rich deposit of 6th century ceramics found outside the

northern outer wall on the level corresponding to the foundation footing. The most emblematic pieces are fragmentary one-wicked Aladdin lamps, a White Ware thin-walled censer lid with some intricate moulded decorations and a complete seven-wicked Aladdin lamp. These lamps are convincingly linked to the 6th century horizon in Nubia.

The church on Kom E was lavishly plastered inside and out with a fine quality lime mortar. The lime was slaked on the spot. Two rectangular compartments were built for the purpose in the naos against the eastern walls of the western corner rooms.

At an unspecified period after the 8th century the eastern wall of the Church was doubled by a buttress ending at the southern end with a solid masonry hemicycle. At the northern end it terminates in a subrectangular storeroom communicating with the northern sacristy.

Near the southeastern corner of the Church, outside the baptistery a cistern was hewn in bedrock. Its circular mouth was cased with voussoir-shaped stones. The bottom of the cistern is only 142 cm below the first foundation course of the southern wall. Theoretically, the water could soak in and the cistern could serve as a well. The Christian graves in the TEE cemetery (Tombs East of Kom E) attest to the extremely high water level in the desert in the Early Christian Period. The burials excavated in 1985 were flooded with water, which transformed the grave fillings into stone-hard deposits (the bottom of the deepest grave excavated in TEE was 50 cm higher than the bottom of the well).

On the basis of two seasons of excavations, the following architectural development of the church on Kom E can be postulated:

1. The first Church on Kom E was probably commissioned in connection with the two 6th century Rock Tombs. The tombs

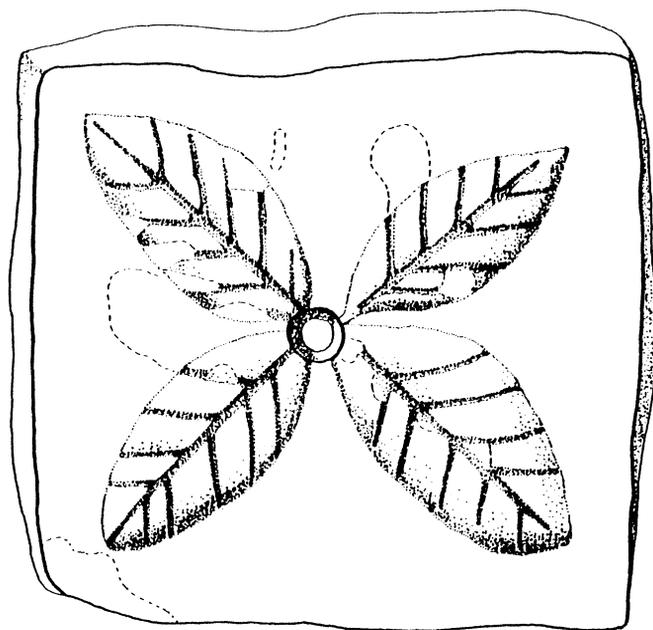


Fig. 5. Perforated ferruginous slab, possibly a "Stocklampe" base.

and the commemorative church might have given rise to the vast Early Christian cemetery. The pottery evidence, general style of the stone sculptures and general functional-architectural analysis of the Church layout set the construction of the building in the middle of the 6th century, probably before the official baptism of the Dongolese court.

There are virtually no affinities between the early churches commissioned by the king at the foot of the fortified city of Dongola (Kom A) in the course of the 6th-7th centuries AD.

The most striking disparities are in the style of capital modelling. Generally flattened capitals topping the columns in the narthex of the Church on Kom E, with aggressively incurved sides of the abaci and sketchily worked surfaces bear no resemblances to their contemporaries from the early churches on Kom B. Not much can be said about the larger capitals capping the columns of the naos of the Church on Kom E. Only a fragment of a corner volute was found.

2. The vigorous growth of the Christian population in the Letti Basin stimulated by the conversion of the Dongolese court is the most reasonable cause of the installation of the baptismal tank in the southern sacristy and the addition of a roomy narthex.

3. The remodelling and enlarging of the first church on Kom E took place in the course of the 6th century or in the first half of the 7th century at the latest. Perhaps the first mosaics were laid at that time.

4. Soon after the addition of the narthex and construction of the baptismal tank, a stone ambo was built between the northern columns of the naos and left unplastered as was the new higab made of the same yellow sandstone.

5. The reshaping which took place along the eastern wall of the church could have been done simultaneously with the filling of the baptismal tank. The construction of the eastern storeroom blocked the exit which was probably used by the newly baptized and by the people bringing water to the baptistery.

6. The last masonry additions to the church structure were the mud brick buttresses and supports propping up the endangered roof beams.