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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN NAQLUN IN 1991

Włodzimierz Godlewski

The 1991 field season of the Polish Archaeological Mission at Naqlun in the Fayum lasted from 4 to 30 October.¹ Work concentrated on three sites: the area between hermitages 25 and 89 uncovered in earlier campaigns, site D on the kom and, thirdly, the interior of the Church of Archangel Gabriel which is part of the present-day monastic complex.

In Hermitage 89² the team cleared the remaining sand from the courtyard of the complex, which had been excavated in the previous season; an entrance with a stone threshold was found, leading onto the court from the southeast. Inside room A.1 work continued on the storage pit discovered last year. The pit was cleared down to the bottom. In its lower part, under a red brick floor, it contained sherds of storage vessels, mainly chocolate amphorae. From 15 to 20 pots were discovered; they appear to be typologically homogeneous, dating in all probability to the beginning of the 7th century AD.

In the area between Hermitages 25 and 89, a small room was cleared. It turned out to have a well preserved kitchen with two furnaces which were also accessible from the courtyard of Hermitage 25 and undoubtedly constituted an integral part of

¹ The mission sponsored by the Polish Centre was directed by Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski and included: Mr. Tomasz Górecki, archaeologist-ceramologist; Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer, Mrs. Ewa Parandowska, conservator, Mr. Tomasz Waliszewski, archaeologist; Prof. Ewa Wipszycka, historian-papyrologist. The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by Mr. Mohammad Ahmed Abdel-Halim, inspector of the Arabic and Coptic Section of the EAO in Fayum and Mr. Mamdouh Mohammad Ouda, conservator from the Centre of Conservation of Islamic and Coptic Monuments in Cairo.

² W. Godlewski, Deir el-Naqlun, 1990, *PAM* II, 1991, pp. 48-53.

it. This is the second kitchen to be found in this complex and it is evidently earlier than the other one uncovered in 1989 on the opposite side of the complex. The entire space of the newly found kitchen was filled with vessels and a fill consisting of sand and *sebakh*. The most numerous among the vessels³ were cooking pots (16), representing a variety of types dated to the second half of the 7th century. Of some interest is a vessel re-used in the construction of the furnace and dated to the same period. It has a cylindrical body and convex bottom on three supports in the form of handles (carinated bowl); the decoration consists of painted and plastic ornaments. Numerous pieces of papyrus were retrieved from the fill overlying the furnace and filling the room itself. They were found to come from the leaves of two codices measuring respectively 25 x 18 cm and 26 x 19.8 cm. Written in two different hands, the codices appear to be a Coptic calendar written in the Bohairic dialect. The larger of the two codices contains notices for 30 subsequent days of the month; the smaller one is missing the beginning. On paleographic grounds the two codices can be dated to the 11th or 12th century.

On site D on the kom excavations continued in what was apparently part of a habitation complex. The extent of the building has not been determined as yet; it is quite clearly not a homogeneous structure, but one that developed gradually. Although only the ground floor has been preserved, it was evidently a storied structure once. The present season saw the clearing of two rooms D.9 and D.20, which turned out to have different functions. D.9 was probably part of the living quarters; its vault was constructed without scaffolding and it had a niche with a conch vault in its eastern wall. D.10 on the other hand was a kind of corridor facilitating communication inside the building.

³ Mr. Tomasz Górecki is responsible for the publication of pottery from Naqlun.

The upper floor of the building had clearly been decorated with murals; fragments of painted plaster were retrieved from the fill of the rooms on the ground floor. In both rooms excavated this season the fill consisted of debris from the walls and a wooden roof in D.10. The latter room also yielded a piece of architectural decoration in the form of a juxtaposed column consisting of separate elements: shaft, base and mechanically shortened capital. The column should be dated to the early 6th century; in the building in question, it must have been reused in the upper floor rooms above D.10.

The potsherds found in the structure of the floor and vault of room D.9 belong to amphorae and plates from southern Egyptian workshops (Aswan) and from Central Egypt. Imitations of Late Roman pottery and fragments of amphorae can be dated to the turn of the 6th and 7th century AD. The pottery from the fill is decidedly later – from the 11th and 12th centuries. Glazed wares are rare.

The most valuable find retrieved from the debris in room D.9, from a spot just inside the entrance to D.10, is a large wooden chest decorated with inlaid bone and ivory. This rectangular casket is 41 cm long, 28 cm wide and 35 cm high, and has a pyramid cover. At first glance it is clear that it was made rather carelessly from parts of two different pieces of furniture or screens. The decoration is suggestive of a date in the Fatimid period – most probably a Sicilian workshop⁴ from the turn of 12th century – but the fittings are undoubtedly later.

The casket contained five books written in Arabic on paper. Two of them were of a high quality waxed paper, two others were bound in leather. Together with the books there were some

⁴ P.B. Cott, Siculo-Arabic ivories in the Museo Cristiano, *The Art Bulletin* 12, 1990, pp. 131-46; E.G. Umberto Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia, Cultura, contatti e tradizioni*, Milano 1979, pp. 447-475.

letters and a text on parchment containing a list of prayers to God.⁵ The set is evidently Muslim in character and clearly later than the casket, but the dating of the books encounters some difficulties. The discovery of the casket in the ruins of the monastery came as somewhat of a surprise; it was presumably lost or left behind on purpose in the ruined building sometime in the second half of the 19th century, at a time when the monastery was already abandoned. Inside the Church of the Archangel Gabriel⁶ regular renovation works carried out in the building uncovered a set of murals on the western and northern walls of the church narthex and naos (Figs 1 and 2). Architect Saami Tudry removed the superimposed layers of plaster revealing the paintings which were then immediately protected by Mrs. Ewa Parandowska, conservator from the National Museum in Warsaw, and Mr. Mamdouh Muhammad Ouda from the Centre of the Conservation of Islamic and Coptic Monuments in Cairo. The brevity of the field season permitted only two of the paintings to be recorded and effectively protected: one was a representation of the Mother of God and Child, enthroned between two standing archangels (No. 1 on Fig. 1), the other a saint mounted on a horse, identified by a legend as Pičoš (ΠΙΔΩΥ) (No. 2 on Fig. 1). Both representations were painted by the same artist and can be dated on stylistic grounds to the 12th century. They are undoubtedly one of the best murals known from Egypt of this period.⁷

⁵ See contribution by Yusuf Ragheb, below p. 57.

⁶ J. Dobrowolski, Naqlun. Deir el-Malak Ghubrail: the existing monastic complex, *Nubica* 1-2, 1990, pp. 161-70; P. Grossmann, Neue frühchristliche Funde aus Ägypten, *Actes du XI^e Congrès International d'Archeologie Chrétienne*, Roma 1989, vol. II, pp. 1862-65, fig. 8.

⁷ W. Godlewski, J. Dobrowolski, The Church of Archangel Gabriel and its paintings. Preliminary report, *BSAC* 1993 (forthcoming).

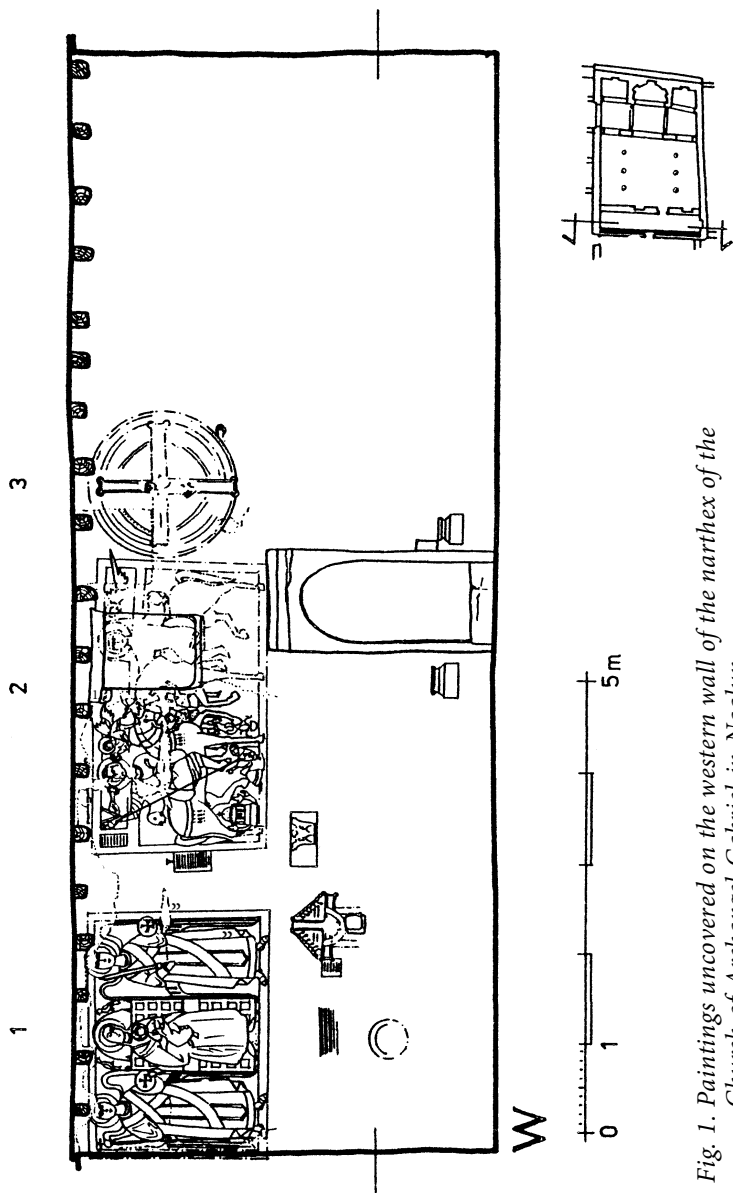


Fig. 1. Paintings uncovered on the western wall of the narthex of the Church of Archangel Gabriel in Naqlun.

The murals were painted upon a layer of lime and sand plaster mixed with chaff, of varying thickness (0.5-5 cm), laid directly upon a wall of fired brick in mud mortar.⁸ The wall was structurally reinforced on the inside with horizontal wooden beams, which were covered with plaster. The surface was left unpitted and covered over with a new plaster of similar make-up, about 1.2 cm thick. Superimposed on this were two thin layers of bluish-grey limewash.

The upper edges of the compositions are lost; there are extensive losses of the painted surface and cracking in the central part of the composition, where the horizontal wooden beam runs along the length of the wall. The surface is very uneven, edges of the plaster around the losses are warped and peeling from the wall. The surface is covered with countless cracks and blisters.

Preservation of the paintings began with the removing of the superimposed layer of plaster. This was achieved by mechanical means with chisels and trowels for preliminary work, and scalpels and brushes for final cleaning of the surface. The condition of the paintings was recorded by photographic means during the cleaning process. The next step was to protect the edges of the losses and the crumbling parts of the murals with Japanese tissue and a 15% Paraloid B-72-in-alcohol solution. The whole surface of the painting was reinforced and impregnated with a 4% solution of Paraloid B-72 in acetone, carefully sprayed twice all over the mural surface. The missing areas of the paintings were cleaned thoroughly and rotting pieces of beams were removed from the wall; they were replaced with stones in lime mortar (hydrated lime, stone powder, sand,

⁸ The following is taken from Mrs. Ewa Parandowska's report on the preliminary preservation works.

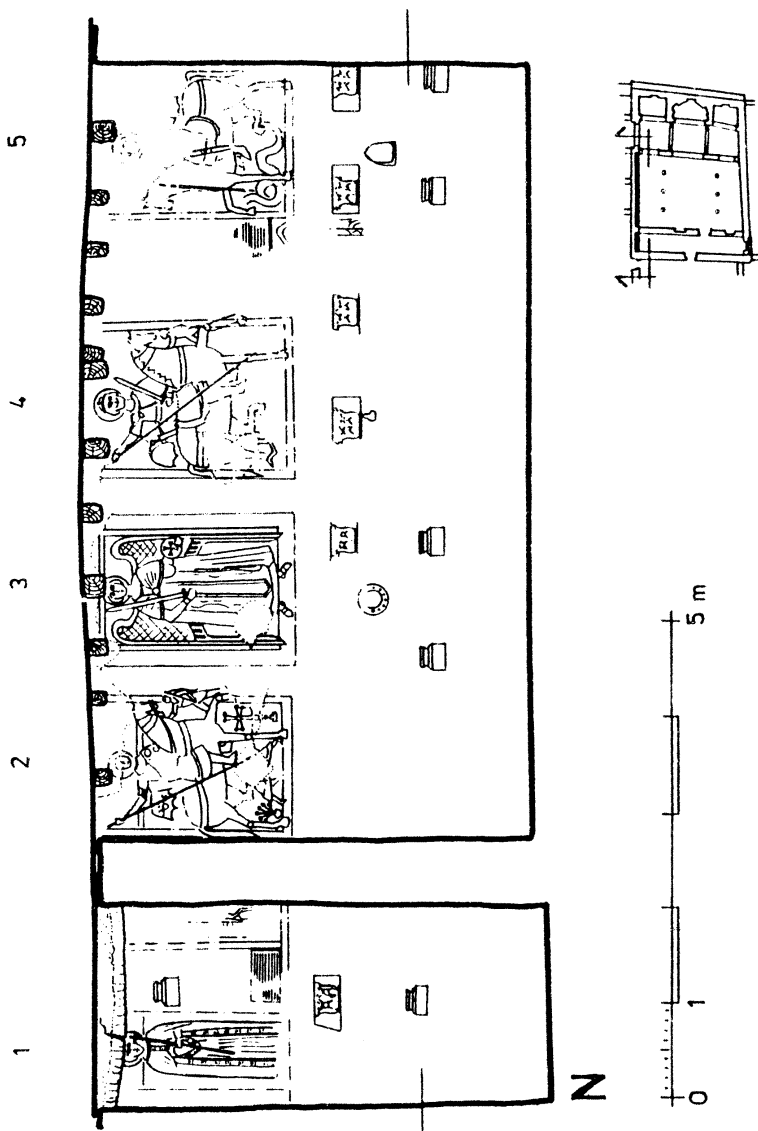


Fig. 2. Paintings uncovered on the northern wall of the naos of the church of Archangel Gabriel in Naqlun.

chaff and polyvinyl [VINAVIL] in water dispersion). The same mortar was used to fill the losses in the upper part of the painting, between the ceiling beams, and to reinforce the side edges. Losses of the surface were filled with a mortar colored with sifted ash, but without chaff added.

After the losses in the plaster had been filled and the blisters and cracking of the plaster reinforced with a 30% solution of Mowilith D-50, the Japanese tissue paper was carefully and thoroughly removed using acetone. The surface of the wall painting was once again protected with a layer of 3% solution of Paraloid B-72 in acetone. A photographic record was made of the state of the mural after preservation. At this point the work had to be interrupted for the season.