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The Monastery Church om Kom H in Old Dongola 2002

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THE MONASTERY CHURCH ON KOM H IN OLD DONGOLA 2002

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In the southwestern part of the monastery, fieldwalking revealed the presence of a rectangular building, better visible in B. Żurawski's aerial (kite) photographs. The ground was strewn with pieces of red brick and granite, as well as potsherds. The building had been presumed to be the monastery church, but without any hard evidence. The western wall and the southwestern corner had been cleared during the 1990 and 1993 campaigns when the adjacent Unit S was being excavated.¹⁾

In 2002, during two field seasons in January-February and in November 2002 through January 2003, some testing was carried out in the area of this structure. A fragment of the apse was uncovered and work was continued in the eastern end of the building and in the western part of the north aisle (*Fig. 1*).

The apse uncovered in the eastern end of the building was rectangular, measuring 5.10 by 4.10 m with a *synthronon*, of which the three lower steps have been preserved (originally six-stepped?) (*Fig. 2*). Two *mastabas* had been built, one on the north side of the apse (0.43-0.46 by 3.14 m), the other on the south (0.43 m wide, length

unexcavated as yet). In the east wall of the apse, close to the northeastern corner, a heavily sooted niche for lamps, 0.63 by 0.64 m, was recorded. Behind the apse there runs a passage 1.35 m wide, which was not separated from the lateral pastophoria.

The *prothesis*, 2.35 by 5.35 m, was separated from the north aisle by a wall and entrance with a stone threshold (0.73 by 0.34 m). Two basins were located in the southeastern corner of the room. The smaller one, 0.33 by 0.27 m, adjoined the apse wall and was found filled with ashes and numerous fragments of flint. The larger one adjoining the east wall of the church, 0.65 by 0.25 m, revealed a compact layer of ashes at the bottom with oil dripping on top. Just by the eastern wall of this room there is a stone socket set in the floor base under a presumably wooden altar foot measuring 13 by 11-13 cm.

The *diakonikon* on the south was 2.80 m wide and has yet to be explored in its entirety. In the southeastern corner it preserves a pit, 1.20 by 0.60 m big, some 70 cm deep. It was covered with ceramic tiles of a different kind than elsewhere in

1) For the results of this work, cf. S. Jakobielski, "Old Dongola 1991-1992", *PAM IV, Reports 1992* (1993), 106-107; S. Jakobielski, "Salvage works", *KUSH XVI* (1994), 306-309; id., K. Pluskota, B. Żurawski, "Polish Excavations at Old Dongola. The twenty-fifth season 1991/1992", *KUSH XVI* (1994), 296-298; S. Jakobielski, "35 Years of Polish Excavations at Old Dongola. A Factfile", in: *Dongola-Studien, 35 Jahre der polnischen Forschungen in Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches*, eds. S. Jakobielski and P.O. Scholz, *Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica VII*, (Warsaw 2001), 23.

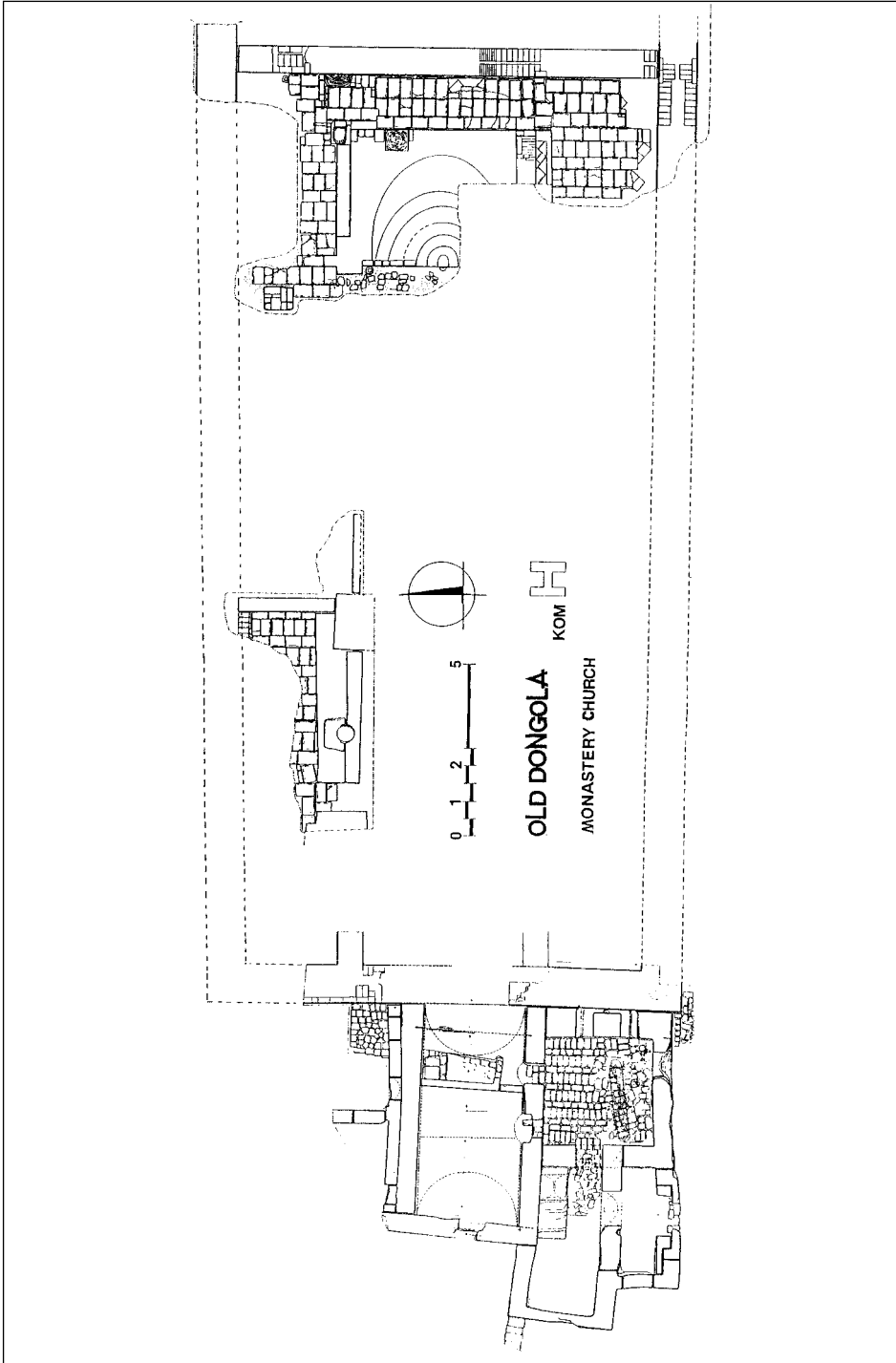


Fig. 1. Plan of the Monastery Church with Unit S rooms adjoining it on the west
(Drawing, based partly on earlier documentation, M. Wiewióra)



Fig. 2. *The apse with the synthronon, viewed from the west*
(Photo D. Gazda)

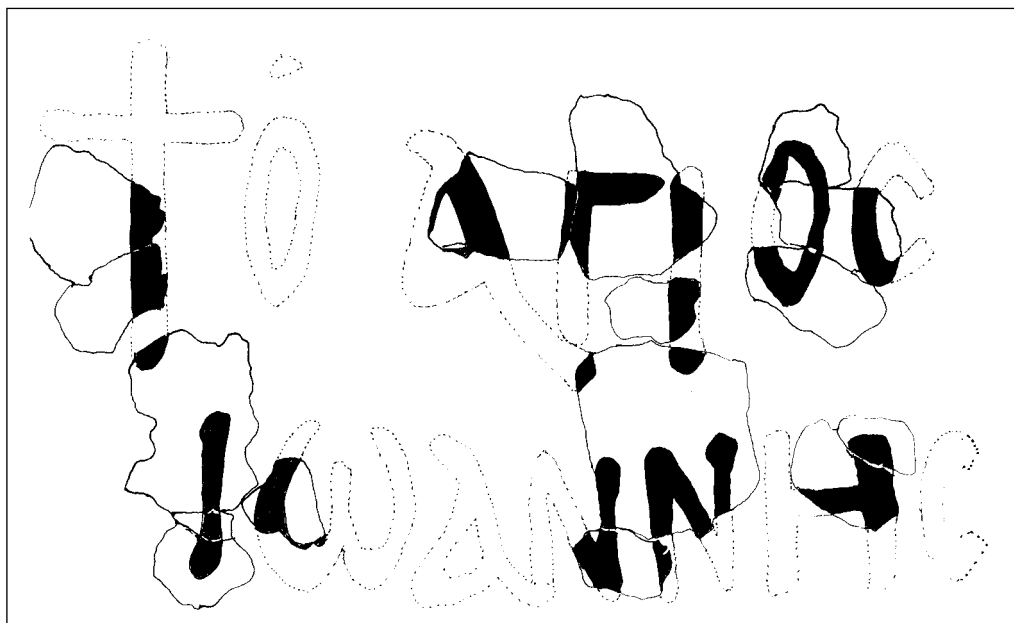


Fig. 3. *Reconstruction of a legend accompanying the apse mural*
(Drawing S. Jakobielski)

this room. Inside the pit, it was filled with debris consisting of mud bricks, red bricks, stone and pottery.

In both rooms two levels of flooring were observed. The original paving is best visible by the southern wall of the church and under the *mastaba* on the south. It is made of brick tiles measuring 30 x 30 x 4 cm, laid obliquely with regard to the church wall. The second level of paving used ceramic tiles 47 x 15 x 4 cm, arranged in rows parallel to the walls.

In the part of the presbytery that has been uncovered the floor was found to be made of stone flagging and red brick. Sections of a clay floor, 1-1.5 cm thick, were discovered in front of the apse on the west. Just by the apse wall in the south-eastern part of the presbytery a storage jar was found set into the floor (rim diameter of 18 cm, depth 40 cm); it must have been used to mount a movable element of a wooden screen. The apse walls were coated with lime-plaster originally. The rubble in the presbytery and northern lateral room yielded many fragments of murals executed on this particular coat of plaster, possibly the remains of a typical apse composition representing the Twelve Apostles. One of the accompanying legends, presumably from this composition, was reconstructed from pieces (*Fig. 3*). The paleography of the writing with the letter “*γ*” separated from “*ι*” suggests a date for the execution of the inscription in the 8th century at the latest.²⁾

In the north aisle fragments of two piers were uncovered, as well as a wall on the south separating the lateral aisle from the nave, a passage between the aisles and a wall in the east partitioning the north aisle, part of a floor and a *mastaba* adjoining

these walls (*Fig. 4*). This part of the church may be presumed as a kind of entrance vestibule measuring c. 4.50 by 3.00 m. The mud-brick wall partitioning the side aisle measured 2.35 by 0.40 m and started from a pier that stood between the aisle and nave, measuring 1.55 by 1.55 (?) m. Two other walls also joined the pier. The section of E-W wall to the west of the pier, 0.40 m wide and running for a length of 3.75 m, featured a column of gray granite of a diameter close to 0.48 m built into it. A rectangular structure, 0.80 by 0.58 m, was built around the bottom of this column. A *mastaba* 0.73 m wide ran im-



Fig. 4. The so-called vestibule, viewed from the east (Photo S. Jakobielski)

2) S. Jakobielski, *Inscriptions*, in: K. Michałowski, *Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw* (Warsaw 1974), 279-309.

mediately next to this wall. The floor in the vestibule was made of ceramic tiles of the same kind and size as in the pastophoria. Bricks in vertical bondwork preserved in the northeastern corner of the vestibule, by the north wall of the church, may be indicative of a stone threshold from the church entrance.

The vestibule near a monumental northern entrance had been decorated with murals. Opposite the entrance, on the south wall, there was a great composition of the Nativity. The bottom part has been preserved with traces of the Virgin's bed on the left, next to a kneeling Salome, then two of Herod's soldiers in the center (Fig. 5). The sole other alleged occurrence

of the subject in the Nubian variant of the Nativity was noted on a mural from the Northwestern Annex.³⁾ On the same wall, but on the other side of the granite column there was a representation of the Three Magi on horseback, undoubtedly part of the Nativity scene, albeit composed atypically at the bottom instead of in the left upper corner.

The eastern wall is filled with a representation of three standing figures, preserved from the knees up. The central figure is that of an archangel. The two scenes were undoubtedly painted by the same hand. A third representation, a heavily damaged depiction of the Holy Trinity, was found on the western wall,



Fig. 5. Detail of the Nativity mural depicting Herod's soldiers
(Photo M. Wiewióra)

3) M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Mural Paintings from Old Dongola", *African Reports* I (1998), 107-108; id., "Wall Paintings discovered in Old Dongola", in: *Dongola-Studien*, op. cit., 262.

next to the passage into the nave. The three figures were shown seated on a throne (Fig. 7). A small figure in the dress of royalty and a veil under the crown, possibly a queen (Fig. 6), was depicted to the right of the representation. To the left, there seems to have been an analogous figure (of which the head has not been preserved) dressed in robes and with the pouch typical of royalty slung across the left shoulder. The kings and eparchs of Nubia were thus depicted in the late period. This composition was executed on a mud plaster coating, while the style and colors date it to the 11th/12th century.

The north, south and west walls of the church, all 1.10-1.15 m thick, as well as the apse walls were constructed of red brick measuring 32-34 x 14-16 x 6-7 cm on average. The bricks used in the apse and east wall appear to conform to the lesser size. The pier was made of stone and brick. Vault bricks measuring 38x25x6 cm were



Fig. 6. Detail of the mural of the Holy Trinity depicting a royal figure in a veil (Photo S. Jakobielski)

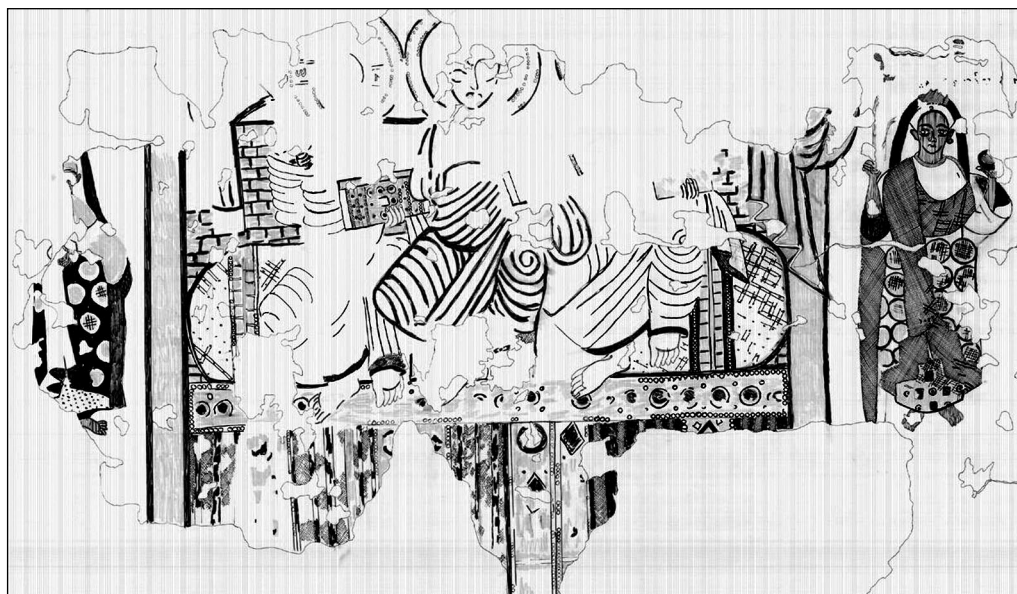
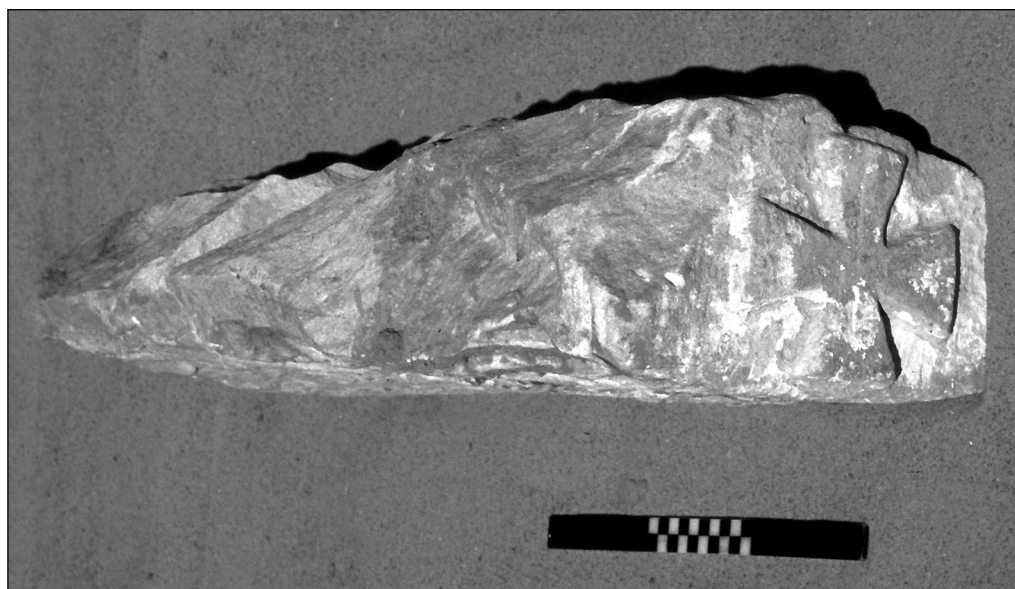


Fig. 7. Mural of the Holy Trinity from the western wall of the church (Tracing S. Jakobielski)

found in quantity in the rubble. In the apse two layers of plastering were noted. As for architectural decoration, the pieces discovered in the rubble included a particularly noteworthy relief carving of a rosette and a cross on a keystone (*Fig. 8*), a slab from the altar screen, several sandstone voussoirs from the presumed monumental northern church entrance. Pottery recovered from the rubble fill dates from the 7th to the 13th-14th centuries. Other finds included window grilles, as well as a ring and lamp hook found in the niche in the apse wall, a metal key from the smaller basin in the north pastophorium, a small bell from the presbytery, a sickle from the vestibule.

To sum up, the church was obviously three-aisled, the inside measurements being 25 by 12 m. It must have been erected in the 7th century at the latest and remained in use until the 13th century for sure. Three phases of rebuilding have been recorded. During the last phase, in the 11th century, the interior underwent some alterations and murals were introduced in the vestibule. Of the two recorded floors, the earlier one was connected with the building of the apse, while the second ceramic tile paving dates most certainly from before the 11th-century rebuilding. Further excavations should verify these conclusions.



*Fig. 8. Stone block with carved cross
(Photo S. Jakobielski)*