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Naqlun (Nekluni): Preliminary Report, 2006

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NAQLUN (NEKLONI) PRELIMINARY REPORT, 2006

Włodzimierz Godlewski

A mission from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, directed by Prof. Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski,¹ completed another season of excavations (September 17 – October 21, 2006) on the site of the monastery of Nekloni in Fayum (for the previous season, see Godlewski 2007a; and Maślak 2007; Dziedzic-Dzierzbicka 2007; Żurek 2007; also Godlewski 2006; 2007b; 2007c).

Excavations were continued on two sites: the complex of monastic architecture situated in the central part of the kom, south of Tower A – trench S.4 (8 x 5 m), and the cemetery C, situated outside the modern monastery enclosure wall. A new site, Hermitage 85, was explored in the area west of cemetery C. Anthropological examination of the skeletal material from cemeteries C and A was carried out concurrently with studies of the other finds – textiles, pottery, worked wood, glass and shoes. The Arabic documents discovered in 1997 were the object of further research by Dr. Christian Gaubert. Textile restorer B. Czaja-Szewczak continued work on the conservation of textiles from cemeteries A and C.

1 The staff of the Mission included: Mrs. Barbara Czaja-Szewczak, restorer; Mrs. Dorota Dziedzic-Dzierzbicka, archaeologist, Dr. Christian Gaubert, arabist; Mr. Robert Mahler, anthropologist; Mr. Szymon Maślak, archaeologist; Dr. Maria Mossakowska-Gaubert, archaeologist; Dr. Magdalena Żurek, archaeologist; Mrs. Iwona Zych, archaeologist and Ms Marzena Anna Ozarek, student of archaeology. The work of the Mission proceeded effectively and efficiently thanks to the all-encompassing assistance of the SCA authorities, in Cairo as well as in Fayum. The Mission would like to express its gratitude to Mrs. Rania Ahmad El-Sayed and to Mr. Ibrahim El-Ragab in charge of the Mission Storehouse in Naqlun. The hospitality of the Fayum Coptic monastic community and the personal involvement of Abuna Abraam in creating a proper environment for effective work is continuously appreciated.

MIEVIAL MONASTIC ARCHITECTURE

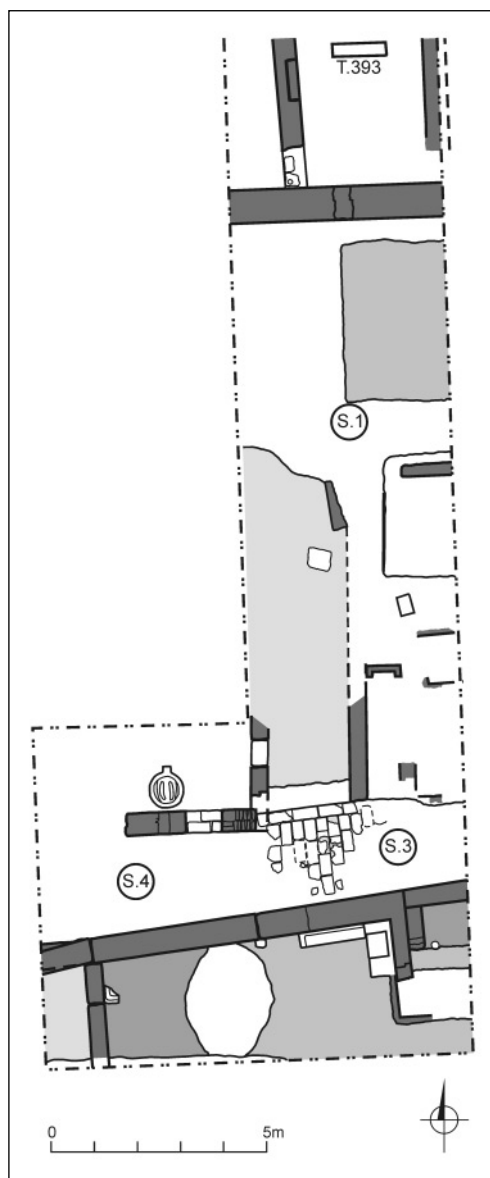


Fig. 1. Plan of Sector S.4 on Site A (Drawing W. Godlewski & Sz. Maslak)

In 2005, a new sector (S) was opened in the central part of the kom, where previous excavations had uncovered monastic architecture of the 10th-11th century, believed to be the apogee of the Nekloni monastery. The complex developed around the Church of the Archangel Michael, founded on the ruins of earlier 6th-century architecture or directly on bedrock without any leveling of the surface. It grew gradually over the next few centuries.

The object of the present season was the southern end of the sector opened last year (Godlewski 2007a: 199-202). Four superimposed structures belonging to the monastic complex, but of as yet undetermined function, were uncovered in this part of the sector (S.4) [Fig. 1]. The only relic of the oldest structure is a fragmentary pavement of limestone slabs, made so finely that it must have been part of one of the more important buildings of the 6th-century monastery. Superimposed on this pavement was the southeastern corner of a room with walls built of baked brick. Inside the room, a large limestone basin (Nd.06.814) of indefinite function was unearthed [Fig. 2]. The southern structure (S), built of mud brick in two phases, was excavated in the northern part. The floor of room S.1 incorporated in its structure fragments of a marble table (Nd.06.809) and an 11th-century Arabic funerary stela (Nd.06.808) [Fig. 4], as well as a small, stamped, glass weight (Nd.06.810) from the beginning of the 11th century [Fig. 3].



Fig. 2. Limestone basin (Nd.06.814) from Sector S.4 (Photo W. Godlewski)



Fig. 3. Glass weight (Nd.06.810) from Room S.1 (Photo W. Godlewski)



Fig. 4. Islamic stela (Nd.06.608) from Room S.1 (Photo W. Godlewski)

CEMETERY C

The cemetery, which is located to the west of the modern enclosure wall of the monastery, was identified during a topographical survey of the site carried out by the mission in 1987. At the time one tomb was explored. Excavations in the Nekloni monastery in past years have uncovered a few fragmentarily preserved funerary stelae with Greek inscriptions originating presumably from this cemetery (Godlewski and Łajtar 2006: 43-62); two completely preserved Greek stelae, possibly connected

with this cemetery, have also been identified. The stelae suggest that cemetery C, tentatively dated to the 6th and 7th century, was used also by the local Fayum community. Five more tombs were explored in 2004 (Godlewski 2005: 184-186; Czaja-Szewczak 2005: 208-209). Presently eight more tombs were uncovered in the eastern part of the cemetery, beside the modern road running along the enclosure wall of the monastery (see separate report by I. Zych in this volume).

HERMITAGE 85

Several rock-hewn hermitages were found during a survey conducted by the Mission in 1987 in the western part of the Nekloni monastic complex, located today between the enclosure wall of the modern-day monastery and the canal, to the west of cemetery C [Fig. 5]. Contemporary economic activity in this area: excavation of stone for building purposes and the expansion of agriculture, constitute a real danger to the ancient remains. Salvage excavations of one of the hermitages (no. 85 on the site map), undertaken this year, revealed that it had apparently been cleared illicitly some time in the 1970s.

Hermitage 85 is a large complex comprising an open courtyard in the southern part and ten chambers hewn in the soft sedimentary rock [Fig. 6]. The inner faces of walls were lined with brick or small rock fragments and covered with layers of mud plaster, which had also been laid on the floors. The chambers were all entered either directly or indirectly from the central courtyard (11-12) and the auxiliary courtyard (7). Two connected living units (3 and 4) lay in the northwestern part of the complex [Figs 8, 9]; they were presumably

intended for a single occupant. Room 3 (13 m²) was furnished with a cupboard niche in the north wall and two sets of floor installations, one by the north and the other by the east wall. The eastern installation included a pit measuring 1.70 by 0.96 m, cut in the rock to a depth of 1.60 m. A kind of step on the south side (1.00 m long, 0.86 m wide and 0.35 m deep), must have facilitated access to the content of the bin. At the bottom of the pit, by the south edge, there was a round depression 0.45 m in diameter, possibly for holding a large storage vessel [Fig. 11]. Similar installations were recorded in units 4 and 6, including the bottom of such a vessel in the latter case. The northern installation (3.20 by 0.60-0.76 m) was only 0.30 m deep, but it also encompassed a step on the western side, facilitating access to the shallow bin, which measured 2.40 by 0.86 m. The southern edge was lined with two big stone slabs which constituted an integral part of the installation. In the second phase, the northern part of the bin was partitioned off with a narrow wall of mud brick. The function of this installation is not clear, but it must have been domestic in nature.

The other room was smaller (7.20 m²) and less finely finished. The only furnishing was a storage bin in the southeastern corner. It was 1.30 m long and 0.66 m wide, 1.06 m deep, and had a round depression in the bottom suggestive of the presence of a large storage vessel.

The central room (no. 2) was accessible only from the courtyard. It is the biggest chamber in this set (30.80 m²), finely finished and furnished with a bench on the west wall [cf. Fig. 8]. The poor state of preservation of the walls and floor does not permit a conclusive interpretation of its function. It is not clear how it was connected with room 5, which appears to have no communication with either the adjacent inner courtyard (no. 7) or the church (no. 6). Residual traces of plaster on the southern face of a rock outcrop between

rooms 2 and 5 at the northern end could be proof of a passage between the two units as much as of a niche belonging in room 5.

Room 5 is a much smaller unit (15 m²), also finely finished with plastered walls and a well-made floor. It had no furnishings except for a niche in the northeastern corner. The east wall doubled as the wall of a small church situated to the east, providing further confirmation of the idea that the set of chambers 2-6 was planned and constructed as one uniform complex.

Considering the position of rooms 2 and 5 in relation to one another, one is tempted to see in them a living unit inhabited by one person, most likely the chief occupant of the hermitage.

The kitchen was located to the east of the main courtyard. It was a small square room (no. 11), 5.30 m² in area, with



Fig. 5. Hermitage 85 before the beginning of explorations
(Photo W. Godlewski)

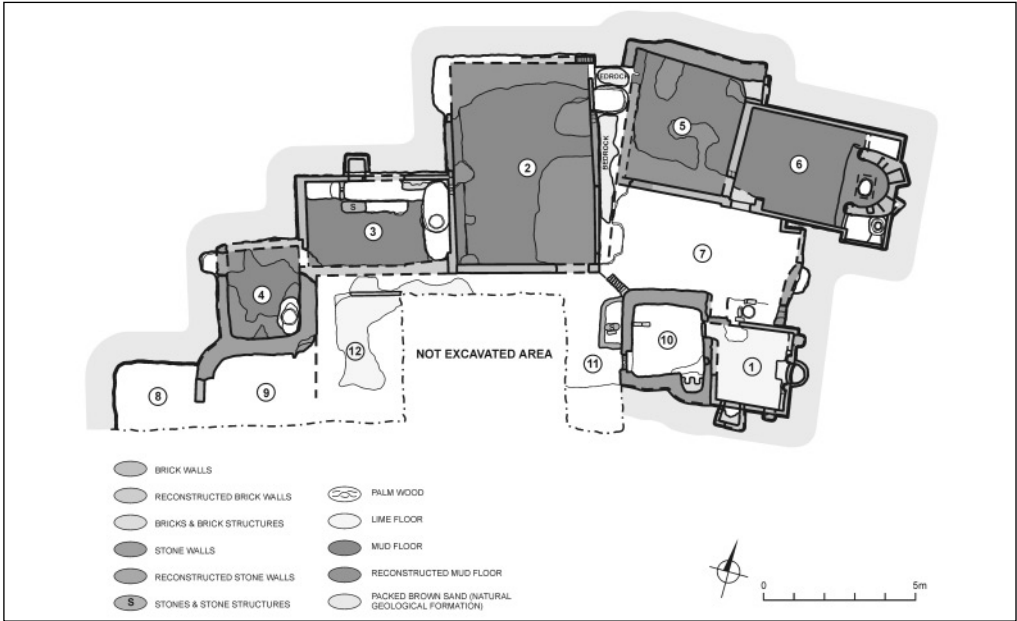


Fig. 6. *Plan of Hermitage 85*
(Drawing W. Godlewski & Sz. Maślak)



Fig. 7. *Church, oratory and kitchen, view from the north*
(Photo W. Godlewski)



*Fig. 8. Hermitage 85, view from the east in the direction of the Fayum oasis
(Photo W. Godlewski)*



*Fig. 9. Hermitage 85, view from the west onto the living units, church and oratory (on right)
(Photo W. Godlewski)*

a niche in the southeastern corner, containing a two-burner stove [Fig. 10]. The oratory (no. 1) was entered originally through a doorway in the east wall of this kitchen; this was blocked in a later phase.

The oratory was a small chamber (5.50 m²) with walls faced in brick and coated with a fine lime plaster, also spread over the floor [Figs 7 and 1 on 209]. Cut into the east wall of the room was a semi-circular niche; the floor in front of it was raised slightly. Flanking the niche were semi-round stucco pilasters, the southern one still with its capital, supporting the unpreserved arch with conch above the niche. The niche is 0.43 m high, 0.70 m wide and 0.60 m deep. Its sill was 1.10 m above the floor. Narrow benches ran against the wall on either side of the niche and there was another small niche to the north. Two more niches were preserved in the south wall. The function of the room

appears self-evident and the stucco decoration of the niche recalls the framing of prayer niches in the Kellia hermitages. Still, the Naqlun oratory does seem like an exceptional design.

A narrow passage in the northeastern corner of the main courtyard led to



Fig. 10. Kitchen
(Photo W. Godlewski)

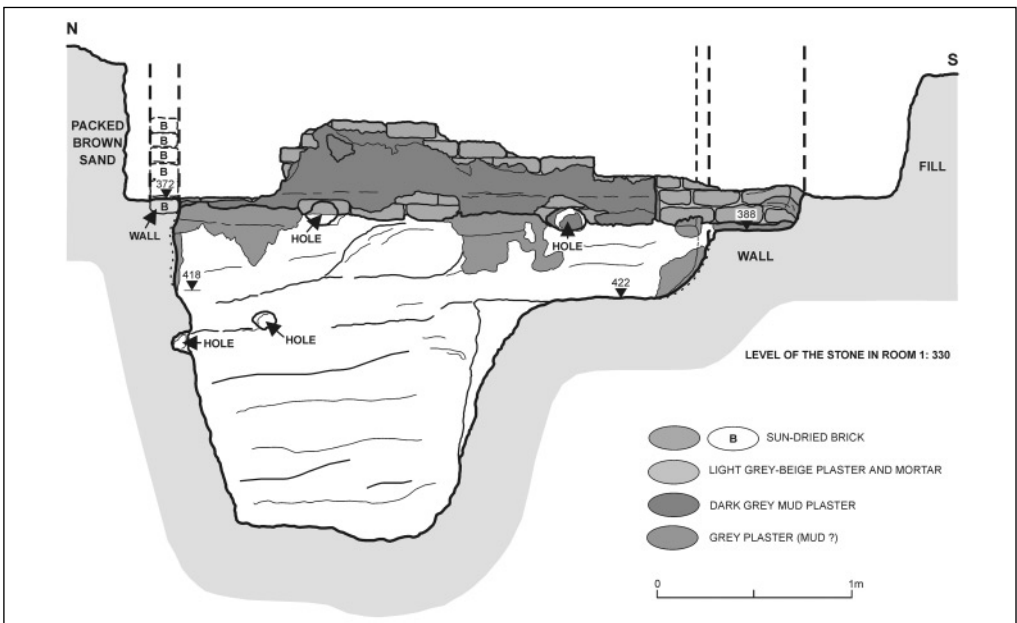


Fig. 11. Storage bin in room 3, cross-section
(Drawing Sz. Maślak)

Room 7, which was an inner courtyard. It was fairly large, measuring c. 18.00 m², bringing light into the oratory (1) and the two chambers situated north of the courtyard (5 and 6). Remains of a bread oven were found by the oratory wall in the southern part of the courtyard; originally this ceramic facility, which measured 0.44 m in diameter, must have stood inside a niche, which is now completely destroyed. A door in the north wall of the courtyard led inside a small church (no. 6).

This church encompassed a single-space naos, measuring 3.70 by 3.20 m, with an apse positioned centrally in the east end, flanked by two small pastophories reached from the naos [*Fig. 14*; cf. *Fig. 8*]. The semicircular apse, 1.50 m in diameter and 1.15 m deep, was constructed of mud brick, plastered and stuccoed. The front was richly articulated with vertical profiling, creating in effect a highly classicizing form composed of fluted engaged columns carrying presumably a triumphal arch. The lateral walls were furnished with two large niches in the middle and two smaller ones at the sides. One sill from a large niche and another one from a small one have been preserved, but their positioning suggests the presence of others. The floor in the apse and in front of it, as well as in the small unit to the south was raised with regard to the rest of the naos by a layer of flat-laid bricks. The central part of the apse was found destroyed, but the remains preserved on the floor around the pit were identified as part of a rectangular masonry structure, an altar, which originally occupied the center of the apse. The pit appears to have been made when the hermitage was abandoned, the residents presumably salvaging an object of spiritual value from under the destroyed altar.

The tiny southern pastophorium (c. 1.00 m²) had a pit 0.70 m deep sunk

below the floor by the east wall. The pit contained a big storage vessel, of which only the flat bottom, 0.30 m in diameter, was preserved. A step 0.45 m deep on the south side of the pit facilitated access to what had undoubtedly been a big vessel.

The south entrance to the church on the inside was also emphasized with an architectural framing composed of, to judge by the preserved eastern pilaster, of a pilaster on a square base and topped by an arcade or lintel.

Finely plastered walls and a lime floor completed the aesthetic appearance of this small sacral space.

The southern central courtyard was 10.00 m wide, but its length was not ascertained during the present clearing work. It is likely, however, that it was closed off with a wall at the southern end. The surface was tamped and there were benches along the northern side (only relics), as well as on the east, where it was fully preserved.

The remains of two small rooms, 8 and 9, on the west side of the courtyard were interpreted as purely domestic in nature, one being a refuse dump and the other containing evidence of penned animals, most likely donkey(s), for a certain period of time.

The illicit digging thought to have taken place in the 1970s (based on cigarette packaging found on the ancient floors) was quite extensive, making a reliable dating difficult at best. Almost the entire archaeological material from the site – pottery, glass, worked wood, matting – was found in secondary contexts. The only fragment found in place is a piece of Greek document on papyrus discovered under the brick floor in the church apse (room 6) [*Fig. 13*]. Beside numerous potsherds of cooking pots, local LR.7 amphorae and storage pots, excavations uncovered a number of fragments of

tableware, both locally produced and imported, as well as fragments of imported amphorae from Northern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean (LR.1 and LR.4). The imported plates and amphorae have placed the hermitage in the second half of the 5th century or the very beginning of the 6th. A large assemblage of glass products (see contribution by M. Mossakowska-Gaubert below, in this volume), especially plates, favor the earlier dating to the second half of the 5th century (which has been confirmed by the results of the excavation of nearby Hermitage 87 in the 2007 season) for the construction of the complex. The hermitages remained in use throughout the first half of the 6th century.

Hermitage 85 is among the most interesting monastic complexes at Naqlun.

It is undoubtedly early, like hermitages 87 and 44 in the northeastern part of the eastern concentration of hermitages. All three of these hermitages lie in small valleys and are cut in soft sedimentary rock, the walls being faced with brick or rock chips. These complexes were self-sufficient with kitchens and bread-baking ovens. Hermitages 85 and 87 have separate oratories intended for just two residents of the complex. Moreover, Hermitage 85 has a small church, which is a complete exception as far as Naqlun is concerned. Indeed, it is not a feature encountered in other monastic complexes in Egypt, except for Kellia where there are some early churches (Descœudres 1990: 47-51), but not in the hermitages themselves. Hermitage 85 seems to have been the home of a pair of anchorites, one of whom must have been a priest. The western hermitages

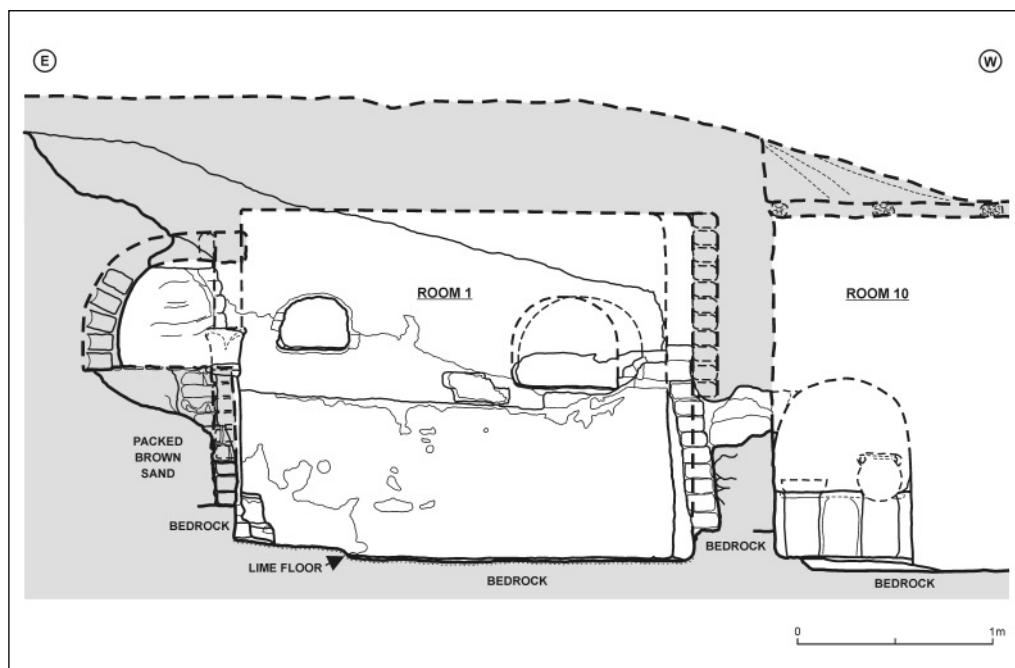


Fig. 12. Reconstruction of the oratory, E-W section to south
(Drawing Sz. Maślak)

at Naqlun count only seven complexes, of which three: 85, 87 and 90 can be dated surely to the 5th and early 6th century. For whom then was the church in hermitage 85? For the few anchorites in the western complex or for the population living around Naqlun and connected with the monastic establishment? Cemetery C, situated east of the western group of hermitages, is an important indication. It seems to have been a civil burial ground as evidenced by funerary stelae and the non-monastic character of the robes of the men buried there. The eastern hermitages lie at a considerable distance from Hermitage 85, more than two kilometers, and only no. 44 was operational in the 5th century, the other hermitages investigated to date being of the 6th century. The early Naqlun hermitages are also furnished with chambers intended for receiving lay visitors, perhaps to provide

spiritual and medical assistance (Godlewski forthcoming). This social role of the Naqlun hermits in Fayum is also reflected in the written sources, in letters and economic texts, most of which are dated however to the 6th and 7th century.

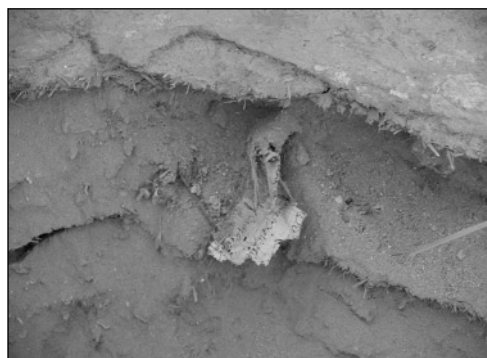


Fig. 13. Greek text *in situ* in the apse of the church (room 6) (Photo W. Godlewski)

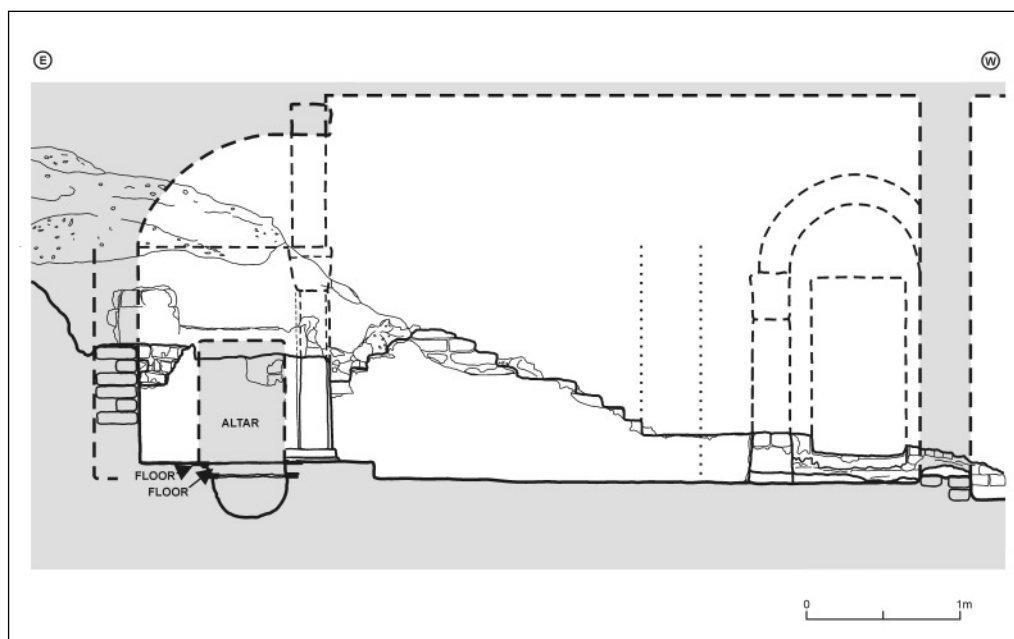


Fig. 14. Reconstruction of the church (room 6), E-W section to south (Drawing Sz. Maślak)

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