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# THE MONASTERY CHURCH ON KOM H IN OLD DONGOLA AFTER TWO SEASONS OF EXCAVATIONS IN 2006

Daniel Gazda

Fieldwork in the Monastery Church on Kom H in Old Dongola during two successive seasons in 2006<sup>1</sup> concentrated on clearing the entire length of the southern aisle of the building and the chambers in the western end (for earlier work, cf. Gazda 2003; 2005a; 2005b). Excavations outside of the building covered the structure east of the east end of the church, the graveyard to the southeast of the church, the courtyard south of the south entrance to the church and the passage between the church and the so-called Central Building (CB) (for this work, see above, pp. 337 ff.) just north of the north church entrance [*Fig. 1*].

## EXCAVATIONS

### INSIDE THE CHURCH BUILDING

The southern aisle measured 12.85 by 2.55 m. The south wall, despite extensive robbing especially in the central section, could be traced partly as remnants of a foundation and partly as a trench cut in bedrock. The east wall was sufficiently well preserved to bear remains of wall painting on mud plaster – a figure of Christ flanked by inscriptions of a school character, dated to the 11th/12th century. The floor of the aisle

was paved with ceramic tiles, much destroyed and missing in the eastern end; in the western end the floor showed extensive evidence of repairs with handy material like stone slabs, brick and broken tiles. Otherwise the aisle was completely devoid of any architectural interior furnishings.

This was not the case of the rooms in the western end of the church. The north-western corner room, 3.50 by 3.25 m, was entered from the northern aisle through a doorway 0.80 m wide provided with a stone threshold. The floor in the second phase consisted of ceramic tiles of the same kind as elsewhere in the church with numerous traces of repairs.

From this phase also comes the exceptional furnishing of this room, not recorded in any other known Nubian church. Just inside the entrance on the right, there was a structure of red brick (the bricks averaging 34x16x7.5 cm), 0.60 m deep, 1.50 m long and c. 0.65 m high, thickly coated (layer up to 2 cm thick) with waterproof gravel-lime plaster. It was empty inside with two arched openings at floor level from the front [*Fig. 2*]. Traces of burning lamps once standing on the top were observed. A red-brick masonry bench,

1 January and November-December 2006, the fifth and sixth season of fieldwork in this structure, supervised by the present author. The excavations were part of the program of, respectively, the 41st and 42nd season of the Dongola excavation project carried out by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw (for a full report of the year's work in the Dongola Monastery, see S. Jakobielski and M. Martens Czarnecka in this volume.

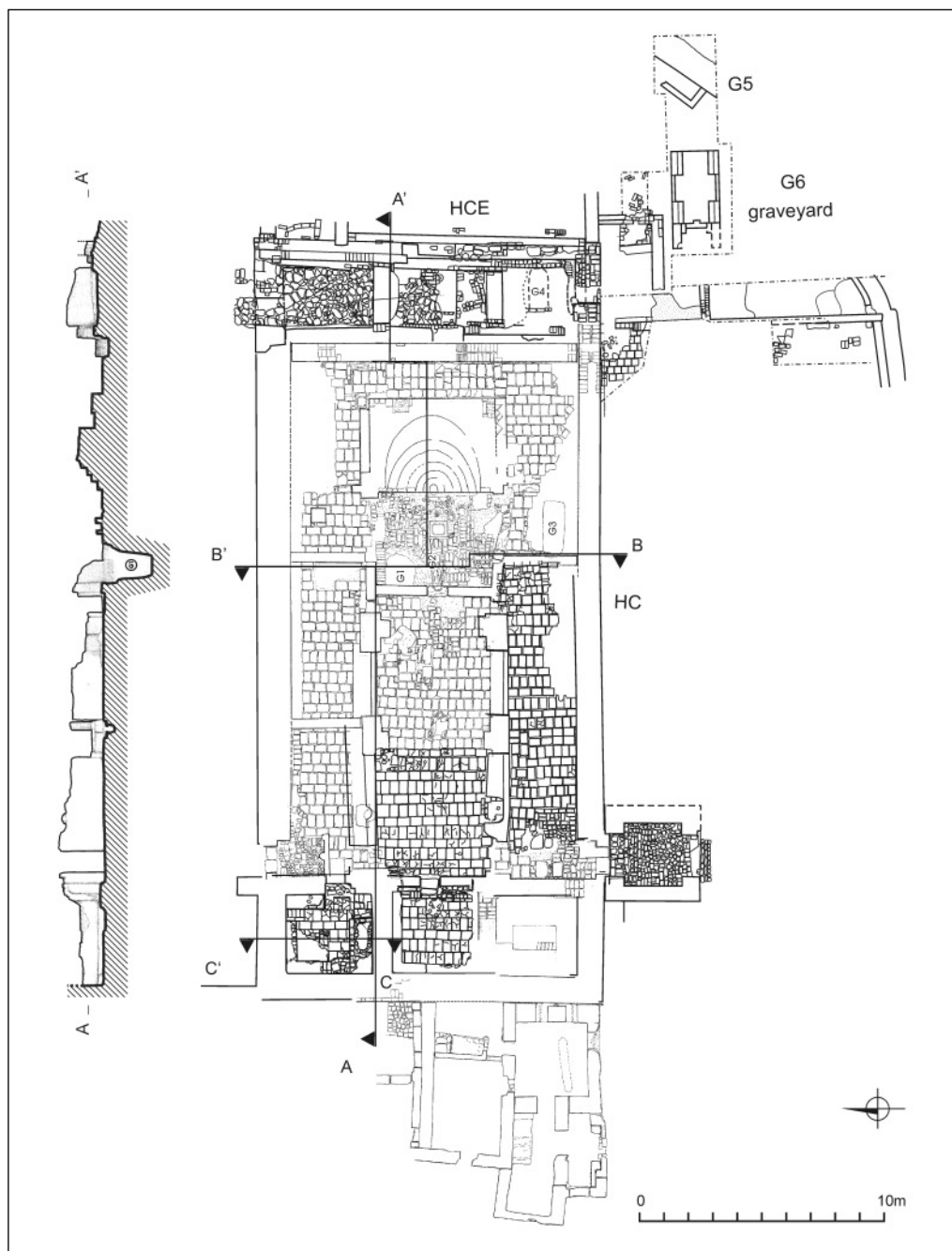


Fig. 1. Monastery Church plan and latitudinal section looking north, 2006 (Drawing M. Puzkarski after original documentation – plan: D. Gazda, M. Wiewióra and H. Kosińska-Sowa, section: D. Gazda and A. Cedro)

0.40 m wide and c. 0.27 m high, occupied the northwestern corner, 2.05 m long on the north wall and 1.33 m long on the west wall [Fig. 3]. It was also thickly plastered and bore evidence of burning lamps. This mastaba appears to have been enlarged twice, the second time simply by introducing a casing wall of brick and filling the space inside it with sand and pieces of stone. Originally, a window c. 0.60 m wide opened in the west wall above the added part of the bench. The window was blocked at a later date and a niche about 0.15-0.16 m deep, measuring 0.38 m at the base, was made in the upper part of blocking.

The third installation in this room was a masonry structure (mastaba) of red brick in the southwestern corner of the room [Fig. 4]. This mastaba was constructed over a vaulted cellar-like unit and measured 2.18 by 0.87 m, being from 0.55 to 0.61 m high. The size of bricks used in the vaulting was c. 27.5x16x7-7.5 cm; the bricks laid flat in the sides of the mastaba averaged 34x16x7/7.5 cm. The top of the structure consisted of ceramic tiles averaging 24x20x3.5 cm in size. The installation was heavily coated with the same waterproof plaster as elsewhere. The 'cellar' was about 1.05 m high initially, with a compacted-mud floor that was later replaced with a floor



Fig. 2. Monastery Church, northwestern corner room, view to the east  
(Photo D. Gazda)

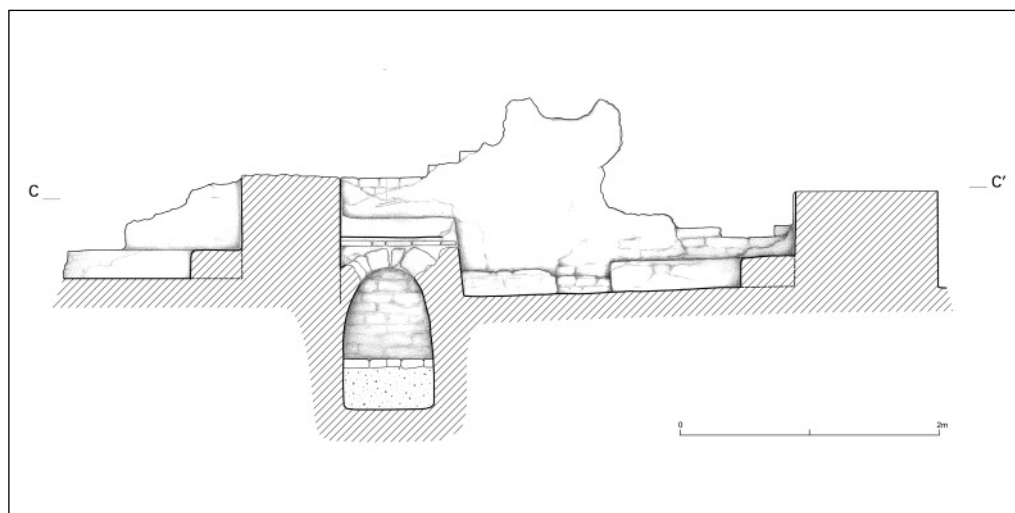


Fig. 3. Monastery Church, northwestern corner room, view to the west and longitudinal section through the room looking west (Photo D. Gazda; drawing M. Puzskarski, after original documentation by D. Gazda and A. Cedro )

of stone and brick, reducing the height to just about 0.70 m. The fill under this second floor yielded sherds of Post-Classic and Late Christian date [Fig. 5, top and middle row]. The 'cellar' was entered down some steps in the eastern end, the entrance blocked first by red bricks and later by mud brick. The wall above the mastaba bore a dipinto with the text in Greek (interpreted by S. Jakobielski as: "Hear, O Lord [my] prayer", a paraphrase of the incipit of Psalm 16(17).

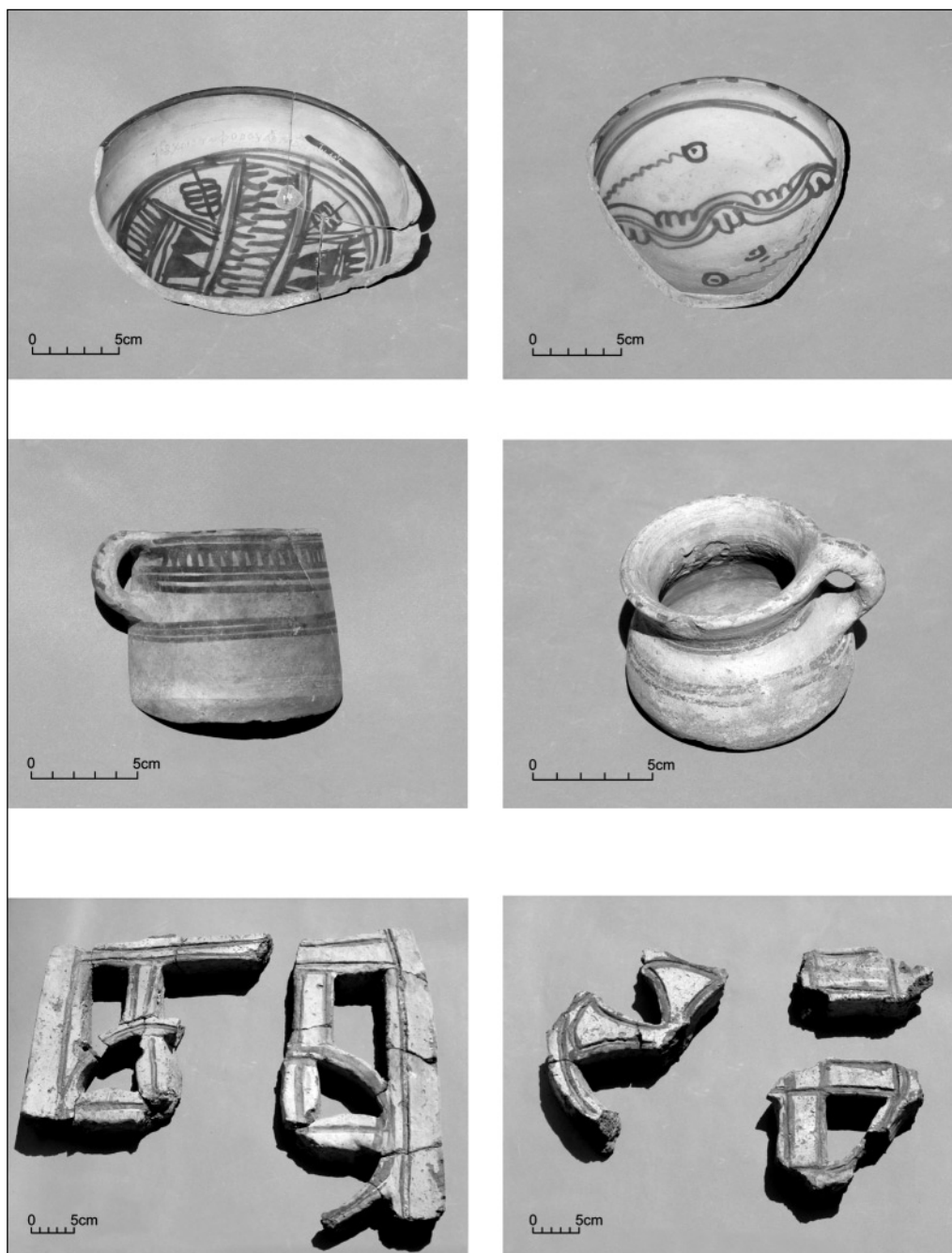
It is not excluded that the mastaba was first a tomb of a holy man or a reliquary of sorts, and thus the chamber took on sacral function. In the Post-Classic period, it appears to have become strictly utilitarian,

perhaps as a place for the monk-guardian holding the keys to the church. The mastaba at this point started being used as a bed and store.

The central chamber in the western end of the church, entered from the nave, had a plastered masonry bench of red brick alongside the north and west walls, c. 0.38 m wide and rising about 0.30 m above the ceramic-tile floor from the second phase of the church. The originally wide entrance appears to have been narrowed down to about 0.80 m in the 11th century. An architectural-floral ornament painted on plaster decorated both sides of these later walls.



Fig. 4. Mastaba-cellar in the corner of the northwestern room, view from the east  
(Photo D. Gazda)



*Fig. 5. Post-Classic and Late Christian pottery from the fill of the mastaba (top and middle row) and fragments of a ceramic window grille recovered from Post-Classic strata accumulated in Building HCE (Photo D. Gazda)*

EXPLORATION OUTSIDE

THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN  
CHURCH ENTRANCES

The northern entrance of the church led to Building CB. A massive stone basin stood outside this entrance and was used presumably before this passage was completely blocked (see above, report by S. Jakobielski and M. Martens-Czarnecka in this volume, *Fig. 15* on p. 339).

In the Classic Christian period, the southern church entrance was preceded with a probably vaulted square vestibule (2.50 by 2.41 m). The mud-brick walls of this structure were 0.40 m thick. The entrance to this vestibule, c. 1.70 m wide with a huge stone threshold, led from a brick-paved courtyard which extended all the way to the monastery enclosure wall. The passage was also paved with bricks and bears evidence of numerous repairs. The entrance including the threshold appears to have undergone a rebuilding at some point; it also appears that starting with the Late Classic period, the passage became gradually filled with sand.

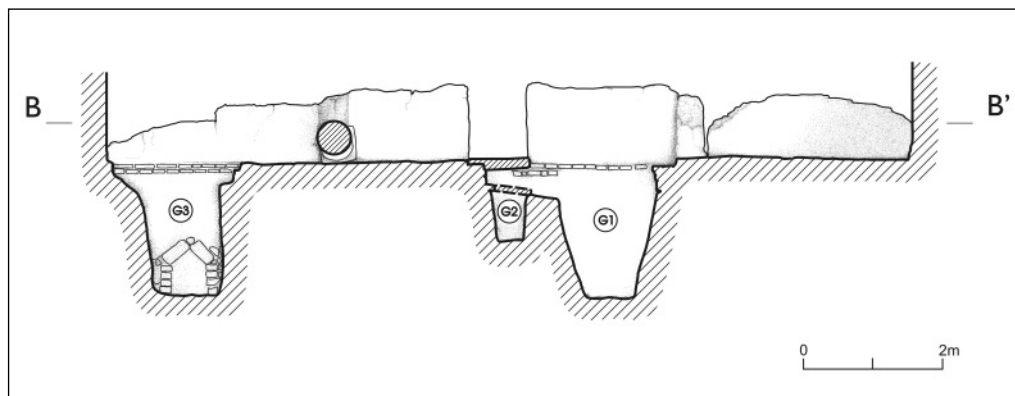
GRAVES G1-G4

Exploration of the graves found inside the church (G1-G3) and beyond the east wall of the building (G4) (Gazda 2005a:290-292) [*Fig. 6*] was completed together with an anthropological examination of the skeletal remains giving the following results:<sup>2</sup>

**Grave G1** – double burial, both skeletons supine; the skeleton on the south is that of a man of White variety, aged 35-40; the other skeleton is of a man of mixed Black-White variety, aged at death 45/50; both were relatively tall compared to the rest of the population. Plain bowl of Transitional/Early Christian date found on the chest of the younger male;

**Grave G2** – single burial; skeleton on the right side, man of mixed Yellow-White variety, aged 40-45 at death;

**Grave G3** – single burial; supine, man of White variety, 35-50 years old at death; lame in life, possibly suffering from a contracture of one arm; hole in skull from a healed wound. The grave is purported to be the burial place of Bishop Joseph, whose



*Fig. 6. Section through the presbytery looking west showing position of Graves G1-G3*  
(Drawing M. Puzkarski based on original documentation by D. Gazda and A. Cedro)

2 Description of skeletal remains based on a report by physical anthropologist K. Piasecki.



funerary stela from AD 668 was discovered in the presbytery (Gazda 2005a: 292 and Fig. 13).

**Grave G4** – triple burial, skeletons severely damaged and scattered all over the burial chamber; woman of Black or mixed Black-White variety, aged 25/30 at death; another woman of Black stock, aged 45/50; fragment of the skull of a girl (?), about eight years old at death. The grave may represent a three-generational burial. The location of this grave indicates the high social rank of the three females, who may have even been members of the royal family.

## ARCHITECTURE

### EAST OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

Structure HCE to the east of the church building has the same width as the body of the church (14.10 m including the width of the side walls) and extends east, the south and north walls of the church extending 4.15 m eastward (the northwestern corner of the walls has survived undamaged) [cf. *Fig. 1*]. The east wall (only partly explored) stood on a foundation of pink-white blocks of stone; it was raised of mud brick and in a higher part, connected with the installment of a stone pavement, of red brick. In the Classic period, the back wall of the



*Fig. 7. Unit HCE 3 with paved stone floor, seen from the north  
(Photo D. Gazda)*

structure was leveled and another red-brick wall (of smaller bricks than before) was raised in its place, connected with the construction of two mud-brick buttresses, each 0.40 m wide, supporting the east wall of the church from the outside. To judge by the earlier structures observed in HCE, the original idea calling for a longer body of the church was abandoned at some point during the construction. The part behind the east wall of the church was rebuilt, ultimately when the buttresses were added.

The wall separating this structure from the church proper (i.e. the east wall of the church) was built of red-brick on a higher level than the outer walls, but evidently at the same time. Another wall of red brick (in the northern section) and qurba brick (in the southern section), 0.30 m wide, was built at a distance of 0.20 m from the first one. The space in between was poured with mud mortar over rubble fill. This is the actual west wall of HCE. It, too, reveals three building phases. The south and north walls have been damaged extensively.

Building HCE was comprised of three units, of which the southernmost contained grave G4 (the construction of which destroyed all vestiges of earlier architecture here), the central one had a brick floor laid on a thick layer of rubble (with the southern buttress, which has survived to a height of 0.80 m, raised directly on top of it) and the northernmost one a paved stone floor (in Gazda 2005a: 290, this unit was designated mistakenly as HCW3) [Fig. 7]. The floor had been laid on a thick bedding of sand, small rubble and large pieces of pottery (dating from the 7th century). The sandstone blocks used for the paving were several centimeters thick and up to 40 cm long. The bedding, at least in the southern end, lay on a floor of lime mortar, 2-3 cm thick. The stone pavement extended northward beyond the easternmost section of the

foundations of the north wall of the church, running over it, covering also the place where a narrow passage was previously cut across the foundations.

The latest structure in this part of HCE was the northern buttress erected on a thin layer of rubble; it still stands to a height of 1.00 m. In the southeastern corner of the room thus created, a brick paving replaced the stone floor and underneath it, there was a layer several centimeters thick, containing ashes and pottery of the 8th-10th century.

No less than two occupational levels were observed between the buttresses and to the north of the northern one. The later of the two yielded pottery of Post-Classic Christian date and fragments of a window grille with a cross motif [cf. Fig. 5].

East of Building HCE, where exploration has only started, one should signal the presence of a mastaba-like structure standing on a brick pavement.

#### GRAVEYARD SOUTHEAST OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

Walls appear to have separated this area located southeast of the church from the rest of the monastery enclosure. One was a mud brick wall, which has now been observed running eastward in line with the south wall of the church, and the other a mud wall that extends south from near the southeastern corner of the church [cf. Fig. 1]. The discovery of two tomb structures has confirmed the funerary character of this area, which is estimated to cover some 150 m<sup>2</sup>.

Tomb G5, lying just one meter away from the south wall of HCE, comprises a mastaba (2.50 by 1.15 m, 0.80 m high) and a platform extending 1.10 m to the west [Fig. 8; cf. Fig. 1]. The funerary chamber lay under the mastaba, slightly off to the north; it measured 2.20 by 1.00 m, attaining a depth of 0.80 m. *Qurba* brick

was used for the inside of the mastaba, while the outside and chamber vault were of red brick. The grave was found destroyed without any burial inside the chamber.

Another tomb superstructure (G6) was discovered about one meter south of G5. Its outer dimensions were 4.05 by 1.85 m with the mastaba proper, preserved in good condition, measuring 3.00 by 1.85 m and rising 0.40 m above the then used level. The top was shaped in the form of a stepped cross [Fig. 9]. A surface of paved bricks was made in front of the mastaba on the west. The surface in the graveyard consisted of hardened rubble poured with lime mortar.

In the 8th century, as indicated by the dating of pottery from the layer covering the tomb superstructures, the graveyard was turned into a rubbish dump. It continued to be used for this purpose until the 11th century when the ground was leveled and poured with a mud mortar, forming a surface not much lower from the modern one, several dozen centimeters above the top of superstructure G6.

### CONCLUSIONS

Summing up current research, it can be said that the Monastery Church (HC) in Old Dongola was raised in the first half of



*Fig. 8. Tomb superstructure G5, view from the east  
(Photo D. Gazda)*

the 7th century, most likely between AD 652 and 668, that is, after Abu Sarh's raid on Nubia and before the death of Bishop Joseph as recorded on his funerary stela. It was built on a typical Nubian church plan consisting of three parts: the eastern one with pastophories and a passage behind the apse, the central one comprising three aisles, and the western one which was tripartite with a staircase in the south-western corner-room. In terms of typology, it is close to Adams' Type 3b (Adams 1965: 87-125) and Gartkiewicz's Type B2 (Gartkiewicz 1982: 74, 85-91). In similarity to the monastery church at el-Ghazali, the central module is slightly longer than in other churches of the same type. This may be a distinctive feature of monastery churches.



*Fig. 9. Tomb superstructure G6, view from the west (Photo D. Gazda)*

At least three construction phases have been identified. In what is believed now to be the first phase, the tripartite body of the building was erected together with the apse and piers in the nave. Already at this stage a curious change in the design was implemented, the body of the church being shortened from the east. One reason for this may have been the introduction, in place of a flat roof, of a dome supported on the four pillars in the nave. The church was paved with ceramic tiles of light red color, sized 30x30x4 cm on average; regular bricks were used for the flooring inside the presbytery, which was separated from the nave by a stone screen still observable under the remains of a mud-brick wall from a later construction phase. The aisles were separated by stone arcades. Graves G1 and G3 were already in existence in this first phase. A passage around the church, paved with similar tiles as inside the church, appeared at least on the south side of the structure. The HCE structure was built onto the eastern end of the church at the same time as the main building.

The second phase is difficult to date, but it must have occurred sometime in the Early Christian period. Both entrances to the church were narrowed at this time and a paving of ceramic tiles was laid on a bedding of fine sand 4-7 cm thick. The new tiles averaged 47x32x4 cm in size. In the presbytery, another layer of bricks was laid on the floor and covered with waterproof plaster. The ambo was rebuilt and given a new painted decoration and the masonry structures appeared inside the northwestern chamber. Graves G2 and G4 appeared, although it is probable that the former originated still in the Early Christian period, while G4 dates to Classic Christian times.

Finally, in the third phase mud-brick partition walls (0.40 m thick) were intro-

duced between the aisles in the church interior. This occurred in the 9th century. The northern nave was cut in two by another partition wall, creating a kind of entrance vestibule from the northern entrance. The walls of this chamber were coated with mud-plaster and painted. Considering that these murals appeared at floor level or just above the mastabas lining the walls here, the partitions could not have reached all the way to the roof. Masonry mastabas were built against the south wall of the nave and the mastaba on the side of

the entrance vestibule was raised and rebuilt. The ambo may have been rebuilt at this time and the presbytery was refurbished, becoming separated from the nave by a wall with a doorway.

Architecture developed all around the church right from the beginning of its existence: Building HCE on the east side, Building CB on the north, Unit S on the west, and the entrance gate on the south, which is attributed to Late Christian times. These structures continued to develop through the 13th century.

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