

SPECIALIST REPORT

Report On Work At Deir Anba Bishoi (Red Monastery)

December 14, 2004 – December 16, 2004

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“Conservation and Documentation of the Wall Paintings at the Red Monastery, Sohag”

The Egyptian Antiquities Conservation Project (EAC)
USAID Agreement No. 263-A-00-04-00018-00

Awarded to

THE AMERICAN RESEARCH CENTER IN EGYPT (ARCE)

Address: 8700 Crownhill Blvd. Suite 507, San Antonio, TX 78209 Tel: (210) 821-7000

by the

USAID Program Office of Productive Sector Development / Office of the Environment
USAID / Egypt

December 2004

In collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development and the
Egyptian Ministry of State for Antiquities



REPORT ON WORK AT THE RED MONASTERY

Dale Kinney, Architectural Historian

I was brought to Egypt in December 2004 for an introduction to the Red and White Monasteries and a preliminary analysis of the visible walls of the Red Monastery church. My visit (Dec. 14-16) coincided with the presence of the painting conservators headed by Luigi De Cesaris and of Cédric Meurice both of whom provided information and observations that were helpful to my work.

My goal was to become thoroughly familiar with the Red Monastery church and to identify aspects requiring further study. To that end I devoted nearly my entire stay to systematic examination of all accessible parts of the structure and comparison of what I could see with the graphic analyses (plans and sections) made in 2004 by Fabrizio Stefani and Alessandro Passardi on the basis of a survey by Michelangelo Lupo, of which I was provided full-scale copies. Important details were digitally photographed whenever possible. The walls of the basilica preceding the triconch are largely visible inside and out, except for the exterior of the south wall, much of which is covered by a later tower, and the interior of the southwest corner, which is obscured by a modern chapel. Since this part of the building is unroofed, the walls could also be viewed from above from the top of the tower. The roof over the triconch sanctuary is also accessible, but yields little information since the dome and vaults are all covered by modern plaster. Scaffolding erected by the conservators inside the left and central lobes of the triconch made it possible to climb as high as the interior of the square drum that supports the central dome and to see the architectural sculpture in these lobes at very close range. A ladder made it possible to examine some of the upper parts of the external wall of the triconch (internal wall of the *khurus*). The pavements inside the *khurus* and the triconch were not examined due to the use of the *khurus* for the liturgy.

My study did not reveal any significant discrepancies with the principal descriptions and analyses already published (Somers Clarke, Ugo Monneret de Villard, Peter Grossmann). The most significant areas of uncertainty remain:

- the covering of the central space of the triconch: wooden pyramid or some other form and/or material? Unless the cleaning of the paintings in the drum reveals new material evidence, this question can only be answered hypothetically with reference to local practice in the 5th/6th centuries;
- the form of roofing the bays between the forward triumphal arch and the triconch: transverse roof or ceiling, or a longitudinal continuation of the nave roof? The evidence (in the form of beam holes shown by Monneret de Villard) may be buried by modern plaster in the upper zone of the north wall of the *khurus*;
- the original framing of the windows in the drum. Most of the 12 windows are now framed by short pilasters and lack a lintel or any other form of upper frame. Perhaps the outline of an original frame will be discovered in the north, east, or south side of the drum under the modern plaster;
- the original place of the altar and evidence of relics: re-examination of the floor may be helpful, both here and in the White Monastery church;
- the date of the triconch. Current opinion (based on the style of the some capitals in the *khurus*) tends to the 6th century. Perhaps information to confirm or refute this will be provided by the cleaning of the paintings, if it reveals more about the first layer of plaster;
- the relative dates of the triconch and the basilica (nave and aisles): contemporary or not? H.-G. Severin has suggested that the basilica was built (or rebuilt) after the triconch, and P. Grossmann has endorsed this suggestion.

Since the walls were refaced in 1908, the most likely source of evidence for this question is the archive of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe currently being studied by Cédric Meurice.

Further research was conducted in the U.S.

APPENDIX

THE TYPOLOGY OF THE TRICONCH SANCTUARIES AT SOHAG

Presented at the Souhag Symposium, February 3, 2006

The church buildings at Sohag are well known examples of an unusual design type known as the triconch basilica. Instead of ending in the semi-circular opening that was normal by the mid-fifth century, the nave of these basilicas opens into a space with three apses, two on the cross-axis. This basic idea had many variations, ranging from the understated version at Cimitile in Italy, where the lateral apses are decidedly subsidiary projections from the central one, to the imposing elevations of the White and Red Monastery churches, where the triconch has the spatial and structural integrity of a separate building. In fact, the Sohag churches are the most complex and monumental examples of the triconch basilica that have survived, and according to some scholars, St. Shenouda's church is also the earliest. In this paper I will review the opinions on this issue and their implications for understanding how the Sohag churches were perceived by those who built and used them.

The White and Red Monastery churches are alike but not identical. The triconch of the Red church is smaller and better preserved. Its design is more compact because the center space is square rather than oblong, as in the White church. Compactness makes the Red triconch more coherent, as all of its apses spring directly from the central square, while in the White church the side apses are pushed back to allow for passageways into the nave on the west and into subsidiary rooms behind the apses at the east. In the Red church the passageways are broken through the walls of the apses, effectively replacing the niches that might otherwise have been placed at these points. This efficiency disrupts the consistency of the wall articulation, however, as instead of three niches with one in the center, as in the eastern apse, the lateral apses have two more closely spaced niches flanking a column. In the White triconch, all three apses have five niches, alternately rectangular and semi-circular in plan. The alternation is ingeniously managed so that a semi-circular niche falls in the center of the east apse, and rectangular ones in the centers of the side apses. It seems clear that the Red and White churches were designed one with

reference to the other, with the architect of the later one making slightly different choices to accommodate local needs, or to create different effects. Architectural historians are unanimous in thinking that the Red church is the later one, and that the White church, therefore, represents the original idea.

Unfortunately, due to the relatively poor preservation of the White triconch some aspects of its design must be reconstructed from the Red one, and others are lost beyond recall. The White Monastery church seems to have had a hard history. At some point its architectural sculpture, including the nave colonnades, were wrecked and had to be replaced; Peter Grossmann attributes this to a fire during the Persian occupation in 619-629. In the fifteenth century al-Maqrizi wrote that all but the “church” - by which he meant the triconch - was in ruins. But the walls of the basilica still stood in 1905 when they were seen and described by Georges Lefebvre; at that time the area of the nave was filled with the homes of an entire village of peasants and their animals - “dark alleys and sordid shacks,” as he called them. The triconch was closed off by a brick wall of fairly recent date, which must have replaced one that went back at least to the time of al-Maqrizi or more likely, according to Grossmann, to the ninth or even the seventh century. Over the center of the triconch was a dome on squinches. The original limestone walls had been clumsily lined with brick to shore them up, but Lefebvre could see two stories of fully rounded columns carrying architraves - twelve columns in each apse, six to a story - and niches between them. The frames of the niches were covered up. The middle apse was screened off by a modern wooden iconostasis and contained an altar standing over the tomb of St. Shenouda.

The architect Somers Clarke saw the White Monastery church both before and after it was cleared out and restored by the Comité de l'art arabe in 1907. The restorers removed the brick walls lining the apses but were unable to dismantle the transverse wall that hides the triconch from the nave or the brick piers that were inserted to carry its dome. The dome was clearly not original. Because of the asymmetrical plan and the “lightness of construction” of the center, Clarke declared it “impossible” that the triconch was domed originally and said that “it must have been roofed with wood,” as is still the opinion today. He also noted that the transverse brick wall must coincide with an original division of the church, because the pavement between it and the triconch -

“formed of sundry slabs of red granite, bearing traces of hieroglyphs and patterns, terribly broken up” – is uniformly 38 centimeters higher than the pavement of the nave. To reconstruct the original dividing element he looked to the Red church.

At the Red church too, in Clarke’s time, the nave and aisles were filled with houses that obscured the floor plan and the triconch was walled off, but the wall did not fully envelop the columns of the original demarcation. Clarke observed that there are four columns, the shorter outer pair aligned with the columns of the aisles of the basilica and the taller inner pair aligned with the opening into the triconch. He inferred that the central columns supported what Peter Grossmann later termed a “forward triumphal arch” preceding the triconch arch (or sanctuary arch). Clarke supposed that the transverse space between the arches “was treated after the manner of a transept,” meaning that it extended to the outer walls of the basilica and was roofed separately, as shown in this reconstruction of the White church. He found original paving in this area of the Red church, comprising squares of granite and basalt in white marble bands.

Inside the Red triconch, Clarke saw large brick piers projecting from the sides of the central apse, and the niches had been lined with brick walls, which were taken out in 1908. The sanctuary arch had fallen and been rebuilt; when it fell, it took with it the west wall of four-sided “lantern” over the central square. Clarke determined that the other three sides of the lantern are original, but the cupola they support is not. Noting that the lantern had to be strengthened to carry the dome, he imagined that, as at the White church, the original covering must have been of wood.

Monneret de Villard studied the Sohag churches intensively after they were restored by the Comité de l’art arabe. He confirmed most of Clarke’s findings about the triconchs, but disagreed about the existence of a transept. As indicated in his reconstruction of the Red church, Monneret envisioned the two unequal pairs of columns in front of the triconch as a kind of propylon projecting into the nave, carrying an arched wall or gable under the nave roof. Peter Grossmann has since characterized this area as the eastern aisle of the basilica, implicitly returning to Somers Clarke’s reconstruction of a transept. Unfortunately, changes made by the restorers of the Comité have compromised the evidence needed to determine which of these reconstructions is more likely.

Noting that the design of the Sohag churches also appeared in the church at Dendera and in the Ummayyad palace at Mschatta, Monneret de Villard raised the question of origins and filiations. Free-standing triconchs were plentiful in Roman architecture, in domestic, funerary, religious, and recreational contexts. Monneret knew examples in Italy, North Africa, and Syria, as well as mentions of *trichora* and *triconchoi* in written sources. But he believed that the Egyptian churches plus Mschatta formed a distinct group, with characteristics traceable to Syria and Constantinople. Looking at the elevation, Monneret found the closest comparison to the Sohag triconchs in the great public fountain at Gerasa, where a similar abundance of niches was also framed by a double order of columns carrying entablatures. He concluded that the Sohag churches were designed by a Syrian architect with sponsorship from Constantinople.

More than eighty years later, the questions raised by Monneret are still open. More triconch churches are now known, which has made unraveling their relationships more complex. Architectural resemblance has itself become a matter for interpretation, rather than, as it was for Monneret, a simple tool for reconstructing genealogies. We know somewhat more about the history of the White and Red churches. It is no longer assumed that both have the same historical and architectural motivations, since some scholars date them as much as a century apart.

Literary evidence indicates that the White church was constructed in the mid- to late 440s. According to the so-called biography by Besa, Shenouda was ordered to build the church by the Lord himself, who also showed him how to lay it out. Once he and Jesus had laid the foundation, Apa Shenouda found the laborers, masons, and carpenters to erect the walls. Without necessarily endorsing all aspects of this story, historians today do believe that the White church was the work of local Egyptian builders, using masses of stone taken from the Ptolemaic temple at Atripe (or some other temple) as well as Roman column shafts and capitals dating from late antiquity. Some of these spolia could be reused again after the seventh-century fire, but according to Peter Grossmann, most of the spolia currently in the triconch were put there after the fire as replacements. At the Red church, by contrast, all of the architectural ornament of the triconch is in situ and all of it, except the column shafts and a few large capitals, was newly made for the building. The restoration currently in progress has permitted Hans-Georg Severin to re-examine the

capitals in the triconch and to reconsider their probable dates. His preliminary report identifies a capital type used on the pilasters on the west wall of the triconch (lower right in the slide) as the best indicator of the date of production. Its non-classical features, including the replacement of the lower lobes of the central acanthus leaf with abstract triple trefoils, represent a stage in the transformation of the Corinthian capital that, in his view, points decisively to the sixth century. Severin also renewed his study of the reused sculpture framing the doors into the naos. Unlike the ornament in the triconch, the capitals, jambs and lintels of the north and south exterior doors evidently were not made for their current settings, but have been reassembled from an earlier installation. In an article published in 1998, Severin argued that the reuse of these fifth-century pieces indicates that the naos walls postdate the construction of the triconch, which in turn suggests that the naos has been rebuilt. Peter Grossmann cited these observations as proof that the triconch and the naos of the Red church were constructed separately. For the topic at hand, namely the typology of the triconchs, the relevance of these theories is the implication that the Red “triconch basilica” may not have been a “triconch basilica” so much as a triconch with an added rectangular forecourt.

The scholarship on triconch basilicas can be categorized as morphological or iconographical. Morphological studies, like Monneret de Villard’s, classify buildings by form and structure in order to define relationships and genealogies. Iconographical studies consider the relation of form to function in order to recover the associations or contextual meaning of the type. Irving Lavin pioneered the iconographic study of triconchs more than forty years ago. Departing from the observation that triapsidal rooms were a common feature of late antique palaces and aristocratic villas in the western part of the Roman empire, as in the famous example at Piazza Armerina, Lavin traced their spread to the east (ultimately to Mschatta) and argued that the reason for their persistent repetition was a functional association. They were triclinia, rooms in which the lord of the house received and entertained honored guests. Lavin acknowledged that not all triclinia were triapsidal, and the functional associations were present in other shapes as well, including octagons. He argued that when any of these centralized building forms were used for churches, the aulic references embodied in them carried over.

Peter Grossmann returned to Lavin's argument in an article on the classical origins of Christian triconchs, published in 1992. He rejected attempts by other scholars to trace the form to pharaonic tomb chambers, on the grounds that similarities in ground plan are insufficient to prove a connection. One has to consider three-dimensional form and also function, and the low burial chambers filled with grave goods are not like the monumental triconchs in either respect. Grossmann compared the triconchs' form to a Roman type of public fountain best represented by the second-century example at Peirene, but he concluded that the most likely source of the triconch sanctuary was the triclinia studied by Lavin, because of their functional associations. "Since the holy communion is in a way understandable as a kind of meal .. it does not seem too absurd [that] architects [planning] a church would have the idea to design the room where this holy meal is prepared ... in the shape .. of the room ... used for meals [in everyday life]."

Almost immediately, Tomas Lehmann again raised the question of origins in connection with his archaeological study of the basilica built in honor of St. Felix by Bishop Paulinus at Cimitile in Campania. Dated to the very beginning of the fifth century by a letter of St. Paulinus, the basilica at Cimitile predates the triconch churches at Sohag and has been cited as the earliest known instance of the type. Lehmann debunked this claim by arguing that the structure at Cimitile is not really a triconch. He defined "triconch" with reference to a significant number of buildings dating from the second through the fourth centuries, in which three apses of equal height and depth open off a central square, while the fourth side forms a façade. At Cimitile, by contrast, the lateral apses are really no more than niches. Rising to only half the height of the central apse, they can barely be seen from the nave. Lehmann concluded that unlike the basilica at Knossos, whose east end meets his definition of a triconch, the church at Cimitile should not be counted among the triconch basilicas. Having thus eliminated the one firmly dated example earlier than St. Shenouda's church, Lehmann nevertheless insisted that the question of where the type originated is unresolved, because other churches – including the Knossos basilica – in Crete and North Africa may have come first.

Although his formal analysis is persuasive, Lehmann's argument contradicts none other than the sponsor of the Cimitile basilica, St. Paulinus, who described the east end of his church as a triconch, specifically a "triconch apse" ("with relics of apostles and

martyrs under altars inside the triconch apse”). This raises the issue of the relationship between the discursive typologies of architecture – types that exist in language, like “palace” and “basilica” – and the conventions of practice, in which linguistic abstractions are realized and interpreted according to artisanal training and the capacities of available materials.

Another young scholar, Iris Stollmayer, seems to address this question in the title of her 1999 article “Late Antique Triconch Churches – [are they] an Architectural Concept?” Her exclusively formalist analysis sorts all known ecclesiastical triconchs into three types: freestanding triconchs like Doljani in Yugoslavia (sixth century); single-nave triconch basilicas like the Balkan examples at Cim, Bilice and Teurnia (fifth or sixth century); three-nave triconch examples like the Sohag churches and the martyrial complex of St. Simeon the Younger at Samandağ in modern Turkey (after 562). Stollmayer’s answer to her own question is a radically atomistic “no,” the triconch church was not an architectural concept; rather, the triconch was a “theme” of late antique architecture that was independently taken up by individual architects and builders in the fifth century or before. There was no common origin or model for these designs; at most one can speak of regional groups, like the Egyptian group inspired by Sohag. Like Tomas Lehmann, she rejects the possibility of an “iconography” of the triconch on the grounds that the non-Christian functions of the form were too diverse for any one set of allusions, such as Lavin’s “house of the lord,” to predominate.

The formalist deconstruction of the triconch basilica by Stollmayer and Lehmann leaves the type with no inherent connotations. But ground plans are not the only carriers of architectural meaning; scale, materials, craftsmanship, and ornament all produce associations that contribute to a building’s “iconography.” The height and the rich ornamental elaboration of the Sohag triconchs evoke monumental urban models, as Grossmann has demonstrated, of hellenistic or neo-hellenistic style. Although we don’t know what or where those models were, we can say that they would have been appropriate frames for the public functions of high-level secular officials like the Count Caesarius who sponsored the church of St. Shenouda, according to an inscription on the lintel over the south entrance to the White church that was noticed and published by Lefebvre. “To the eternal memory of the most illustrious Count Caesarius, son of

Candidianus, the founder.” Heike Behlmer has described the many visits paid to the monastery by provincial governors, imperial legates, and military commanders, including a Count Caesarius, who came often. These illustrious visitors arrived with large entourages and were suitably received. Stollmayer observed that if the place of the altar was in the propylon of the triconch, as Grossmann suggested, the triconch itself was a place apart. Shenouda preached to masses from a platform in the nave, but for private negotiations with his patron and other government officials, the triconch would have been the right sort of space. In fact, an audience hall.

The Red triconch had all the same characteristics, although we know too little about its history to know why. The main purpose of the Red triconch seems to have been to emulate the White one. Why that should have been desirable or necessary is not yet clear. Perhaps one of you will produce the contextual evidence to explain it.

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