

# SPECIALIST REPORT

Report On Work At Deir Anba Bishoi (Red Monastery)

December 12, 2007 – December 17, 2007

Dale Kinney

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

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SUHAG**

**2007**

**Dale Kinney, Architectural Historian**

Much of my work onsite from December 12 to December 17 consisted of intensive consultation with project architect Nicholas Warner, which enabled us to reach substantial agreement on the relative phases of construction of the church building and the probable reconstruction of the superstructure and western face of the triconch. My deliberations with Warner were assisted by the observations and advice of other participants in the project: Father Maximous al-Antony, Elizabeth Bolman, Cédric Meurice, Sam Price, and the painting conservators, especially Luigi De Cesaris; as well as visitors Sarah Bassett, Michael Jones, and Brian Madigan.

Working with digitized versions of Warner's preliminary drawings, which made it possible to generate and evaluate multiple alternatives on the spot, we considered three possible coverings of the triconch: conical, domical, and flat, concluding that a low dome is the most consonant with the overall design and best corresponds to the geometry of the lower elevation (figure 1).

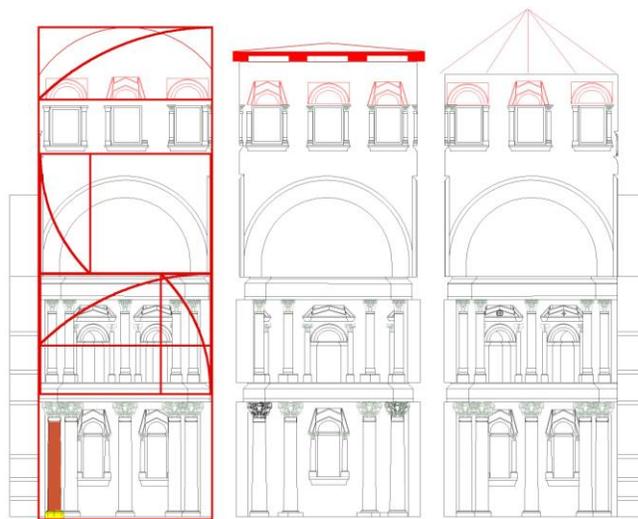


Figure 1: Dome options. Nicholas Warner, December 2007.

Similarly experimenting with the juncture of the nave elevation and the triconch façade, we discovered that by positing columns of the same height as those in the upper level of the triconch we could reconstruct a gallery rising exactly to the height of the base of the drum. This eliminates the possibility of an “eastern aisle” in front of the triconch; instead, the two central columns of this “aisle” must have been freestanding. We posit that the columns constituted a kind of monumental templon, probably supporting a wooden beam and joined at ground level by wooden or marble screens (figure 2). I will continue to study the possible form of the screen. Our reconstruction of a templon precludes Grossmann’s hypothetical pitched roof over the nave, supported by the columns of the “eastern aisle”; we feel confident in rejecting it. In the absence of compelling alternatives, I incline to agree with Warner that the original covering of the nave was flat.

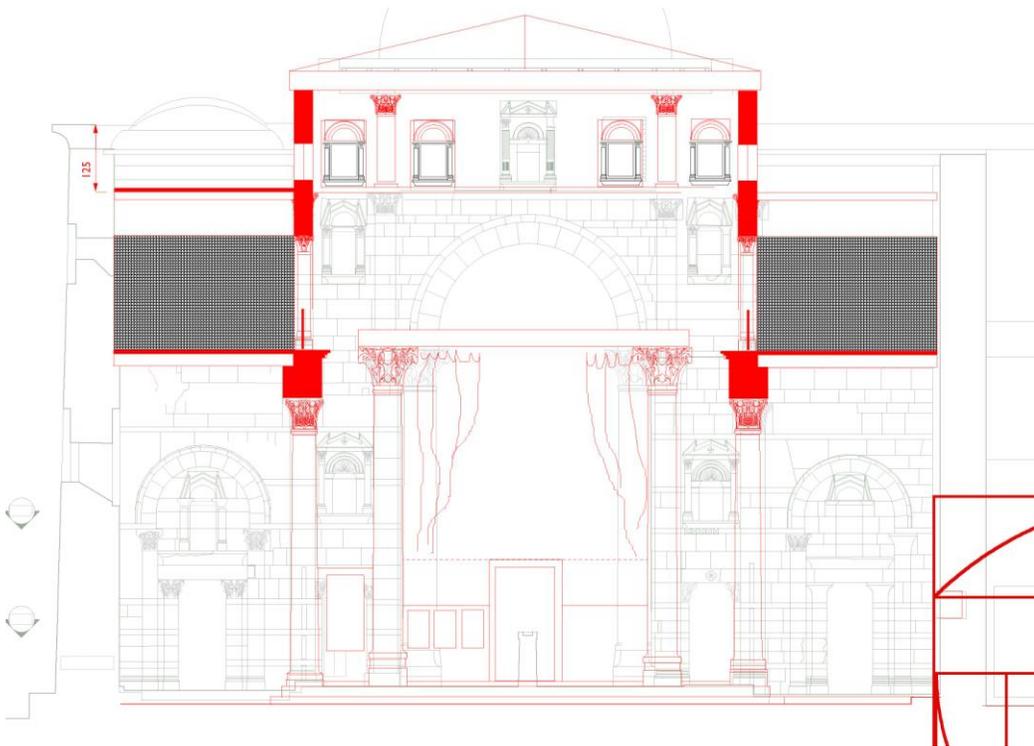


Figure 2: Sanctuary Façade Solution. Nicholas Warner, December 2007.

The uncovering of a seam on the eastern face of the western wall of the north lateral chamber confirmed Warner's view that the rectangular wall that joins the triconch to the western nave (the "box") is later in date than the triconch.

Unfortunately, we were prevented from studying the box internally because it has been obscured by new wooden structures that accommodate the use of the box for liturgical celebrations; this part of the study may have to wait until the liturgy moves back inside the triconch. In any case, Warner and I agree that it will require systematic excavation of the west end and of selected other portions of the box to resolve the questions of its original lay-out and relation to the triconch. The date of the box is also dependent on the outcome of the study of the inscriptions visible in the northwest corner and elsewhere.

While onsite I took the opportunity to begin writing the descriptive part of my contribution to the planned book. This required very particular attention to the forms and ornament of the niches, which I had not previously studied so carefully. In addition, the removal of scaffolding from the north lobe of the triconch and the cleaning of the ground-level capitals on the south facilitated additional study of the architectural sculpture. The color now visible on the capitals clarifies the vocabulary, limits of standardization and range of variation in minor motifs. I am less inclined than H.-G. Severin to deduce a developmental schema from these variations, since the capitals seem homogeneous in overall design and craftsmanship. Further study of the ornament around the south wall into the box suggests that it is *in situ* (or perhaps displaced a few feet, if the south wall has been rebuilt). The north door, although it continues to be more puzzling, is also less heterogeneous and inappropriate than appears from Severin's analysis. Finally, the opportunity to pay another visit to the church of St. Shenute ("White Monastery") and to spend some time with the architectural sculpture there further clarified its distinctions from the elements at Deir Anbā Bīshōi.

Following my stay at Sūhāg Elizabeth Bolman kindly arranged for me to visit the triconch church adjoining the *mammisi* at Dendera and the pseudo-triconch in the Monastery of the Syrians in Wādī Natrūn. I was also able to visit the Coptic Museum in Cairo, where I focused on niche types and architectural ornament. Since leaving Egypt I have learned of an imposing triconch in Butrint (Albania) that may be significant for questions of origin and transmission, on which I am currently doing research.