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St. Antony's Monastery

An introduction to the wall paintings



How the paintings were revealed

The wall paintings at St. Antony's Monastery have long been known to the monks and to art historians. However, until recently they were obscured by thick accretions of soot, candle grease, oil, and dirt that had accumulated on the interior walls, domes, and woodwork of the church. Many of the wall paintings had been overpainted in previous centuries. Damage had occurred from rainwater leaking through broken windows and there were holes in the walls where nails and hooks had been driven in.

In 1992 Fr. Maximus el-Antony went to Luxor to visit Paolo and Laura Mora, who were then directing the restoration of the Tomb of Queen Nefertari in the Valley

of the Queens. They sent Adriano Luzi and Luigi de Cesaris to do test cleanings in the Church of St. Antony. The small tests opened windows on to the extraordinarily well preserved paintings that had lain hidden for centuries. The project to clean and restore the interior of the church began in June 1996 and was completed towards the end of November 1999.

The work involved not just the cleaning of the paintings, but also restoration of the windows, architectural work on the roof and domes, cleaning and consolidation of the floor and of the woodwork inside the church, and the complete renewal of the previously overburdened electrical and lighting systems.



Who was St. Antony?

St. Antony was born into a prosperous land-owning Christian family in about A.D. 250. When he was eighteen his parents died leaving him in charge of the family estates. One Sunday about six months later Antony walked into church and heard the Gospel read "... and heard the Lord saying to the rich man: 'If you would be perfect, go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and come and follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven.'" He followed this advice and embraced the spiritual life completely, seeking out holy men who could advise him on how best to achieve a virtuous life. After long ascetic practice he retreated into the desert where he met another hermit, Paul, who had lived alone for eighty years being fed daily half a loaf of bread by a raven. When Antony and Paul met the raven brought a whole loaf to indicate Antony's holiness to Paul, as shown in the painting in the nave (see right). (Figures 1 and 2 in the second nave on the plan on the inside back cover: St. Antony is on the left.)

The Monastery of St. Antony by the Red Sea stands on the site chosen by St. Antony himself at which to spend the last years of his life as a hermit in the desert. It was here that he established one of the first Christian monastic communities. Following his death in A.D. 355, the 'Life of St. Antony,' written by his friend St. Athanasius, began to spread his influence throughout the entire Christian world. Monks as far away as Ireland and the western isles of Scotland sought out the wildest locations in which to emulate the practices of the 'Father of Monasticism.'



A guided tour of the church

The old church of St. Antony stands at the center of the historic core of the monastery. Beside the church two great protective towers remain as powerful reminders of the perils endured by the monks in the past. Abutting the eastern end of the church is the fifteenth century Church of the Holy Apostles, which, though added later, is closely connected so that both churches now appear from the outside as a single building.

As we see it today the church is the result of several stages of building and rebuilding. Traces of the earlier form of the church, as it was before these alterations, are noticeable. They can be seen where windows and doorways were blocked, where wall alignments do not match with each other, and where important early



paintings survive beneath later layers of plaster. The last major changes took place in the thirteenth century, when the present domes replaced an earlier roof, and the sanctuary was probably added to the older building. The magnificent cycle of murals was then painted to complete the remodeling of the church.

These wall paintings, which have been the main focus of this project, were the work of two distinct teams working in very different techniques and artistic traditions. Most of the paintings date from 1232–33 and were the work of an Egyptian Coptic team lead by a master named Theodore. A second unknown group with artistic connections to the Byzantine and Crusader traditions of Cyprus, continued later in the century.

The doors of the church have been restored by remounting their original thirteenth century inlaid panels in new frames thereby replicating the originals, which were too severely damaged to be conserved. The entrance leads directly into the first nave.

The first nave

The paintings here are of martyrs of the early church, almost all of whom are shown mounted on horseback. Beneath each figure small vignettes illustrate miraculous episodes from their lives. Each figure is painted differently with a wealth of design and coloring. Of special note is the figure of St. Theodore on the north end of the west wall (see above), to the right of the entrance. The walls of this

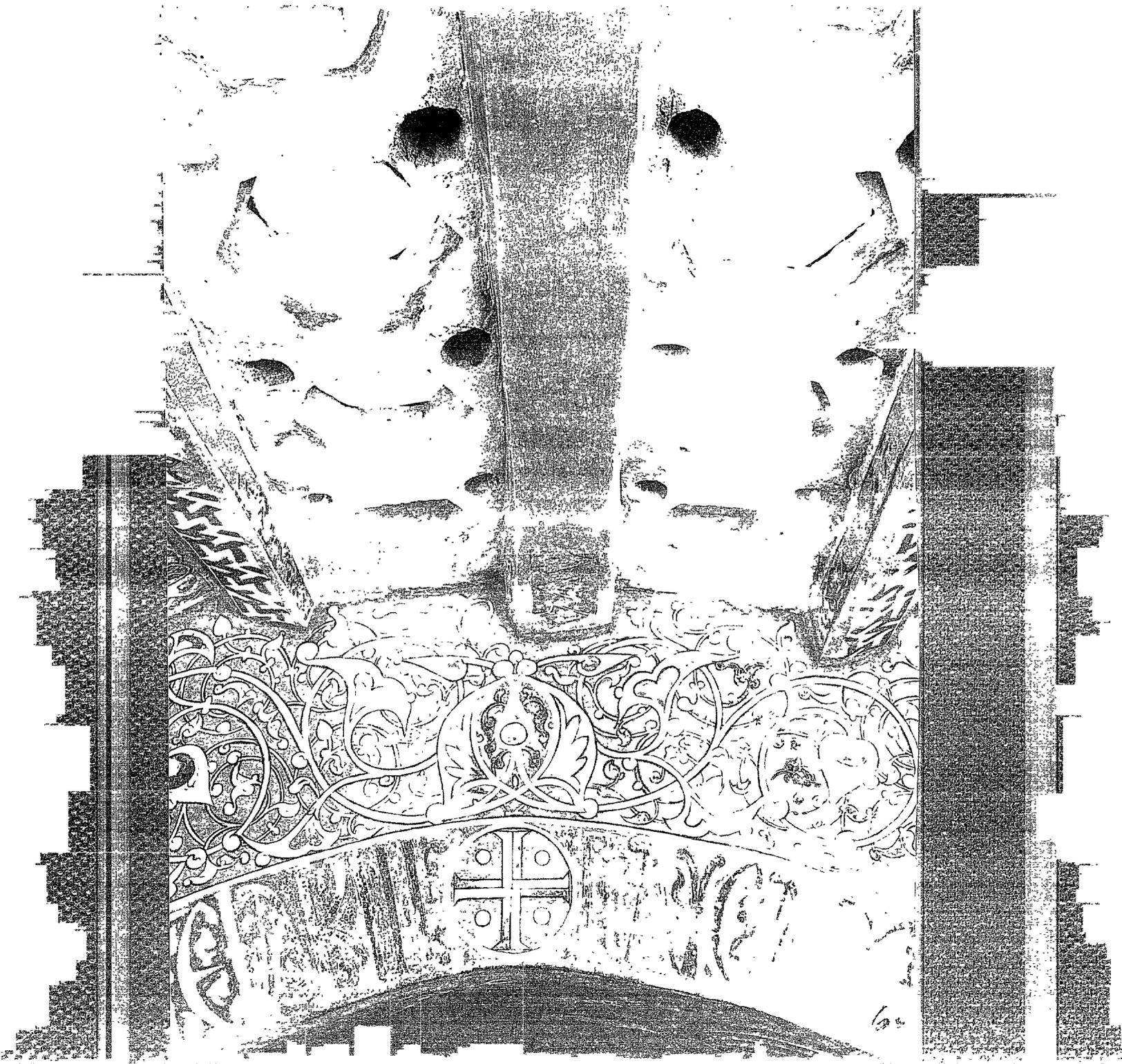
room originally contained at least five arched windows. These were blocked and plastered over before 1232–33, when the present paintings were done. Unfortunately, in every case the blocking fell out, taking large sections of the paintings with it. The positions of the windows are now marked by the regularly spaced lacunae; one window has been left open as an example. Traces of two layers of earlier paintings predating those of 1232–33 can be seen at the top of the north, south, and west walls.

The deisis chapel

Opposite the entrance a wide archway with a text in Coptic from the Psalms and paintings of the archangels Gabriel and Michael (see bottom right) leads to an undecorated annex and thence the deisis chapel, which originally had its own entrance outside the church. Soon after the 1232–33 paintings were done the original entrance was blocked and this arch cut through the recently finished murals, linking the church and chapel together. A cluster of helmets surmounted by rams' heads was drawn on the south wall of the annex by a late medieval pilgrim as a remembrance of his visit. A similar helmet with garlic on top is to be seen on the north side of the first nave.

The arched entrance of the deisis chapel is painted with a scene of Christ and the Apostles (see upper right), datable on stylistic grounds to the seventh to eighth centuries. It confirms that this is the oldest surviving part of the church complex, which also includes the annex and the internal corridor connecting the





church of St. Antony with the church of the Holy Apostles. The interior of the chapel, painted by Theodore's team, shows Christ enthroned with the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, and the 'four living creatures of the Apocalypse.' A niche at the rear of the chapel is carved with an ornamented cross, draped with a cloth and censured by two angels.

The second nave

Returning to the main church, the first nave leads into the second nave through an archway painted with figures of St. Pachomus and St. Shenouda. The paintings on both sides of the second nave show standing saints, all of whom were monks. It therefore symbolizes the next stage in the history of the Church and also in the spiritual life.

On the far wall, on the left of the great archway, is painted the Virgin Mary seated and holding the Christ Child within herself. In this form, known as the Virgin of the Sign (see overleaf), she symbolizes the revelation of the Church. On the right are St. Antony himself and St. Paul, the models for a monk's life in the desert, with the raven. In the north wall there are two windows from the earlier period before 1232-33. They remained in use, as shown by the way the thirteenth century paintings were designed around them. The long Coptic inscription over the first window names the wealthy sponsors of Theodore's paintings and gives the date of the work. Below is a blocked doorway that was originally the main entrance to the church. Opposite, in the south wall, a low doorway leads to a corridor that connects with the adjacent church of the Holy Apostles.

The khurus

The nave leads to the khurus (chancel) through the great archway, painted with the archangels Gabriel and Michael, and a Coptic text from the Psalms. These paintings were the model for those in the smaller arch off the first nave. The khurus is divided into a lower zone at the sides, painted by Theodore's team, and an upper central zone painted later by the 'Cypriot' group who also painted the arch. On the left side are the three Hebrews Mishak, Shadrak and Abednigo in the furnace protected by an angel with Nebuchadnezzar and his courtiers. On the north wall St. George is shown mounted on his white horse with scenes from his martyrdom. On the south side St. Mercurius, 'Abu Seifein,' is shown on his black horse, with episodes from his life. Beside him Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are in Paradise with souls of the saved. Below St. Mercurius a small niche is believed to lead to the grave of St. Antony, although this has never been found.

The barrel vault of the khurus is one of the most remarkable elements in the church (see opposite). It is supported on arches and made of plastered and painted wood, decorated with floral and geometric arabesque patterns and extracts from the Psalms in Coptic and Arabic. Four gypsum window frames in the center and along the sides contained fragments of the original colored and transparent glass, although all had been smashed and covered from the outside long ago. These were restored by integrating the surviving fragments of original frames and glass into new frames and inserting handmade glass so that the restored roof replicates as closely as possible



the thirteenth century vault. Below the vault the wall over the khurus arch is painted in a swirling plant motif on a rich red background, while the wall above the sanctuary arch shows the Resurrection of Christ.

The sanctuary

The paintings on the underside of the sanctuary arch, showing Old Testament Prophets, and all those in the sanctuary are the work of Theodore and his team. The sanctuary is divided into three sections each with its own altar and corresponding apse covered by a dome. That on the north is for St. Mark and that on the south is for St. Athanasius, each of whom is also shown in his respective niche. Above St.

Athanasius are large standing figures of early Patriarchs of Alexandria. In the center is the main altar and apse. The Virgin Mary is shown seated holding the infant Christ and flanked by the archangels Gabriel and Michael holding Eucharistic loaves. Above her is Christ enthroned 'Pantocrator'. The walls above the arches on each side of the central altar are painted with scenes of sacrifice from the Old Testament, and over this with the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse. The dome rests on an octagon containing windows. In the dome itself is Christ Pantocrator with angels (see back cover).

The inlaid wooden screens in front of the sanctuary and the deisis chapel date

from the eighteenth century. The open screens in the second nave are older, as shown by the inscription of Fr. Bernardus, dated January 1626, on the screen in the khurus arch. Fragments of even older screens can be seen reused as rafters in the side roofs of the khurus, which were in place in 1232.

The monastery has enjoyed a long tradition of pilgrimage. Pilgrims over the centuries have inscribed their names and prayers on the walls of the church as remembrances of their visits. Some of the earliest recorded visits were in the fourteenth

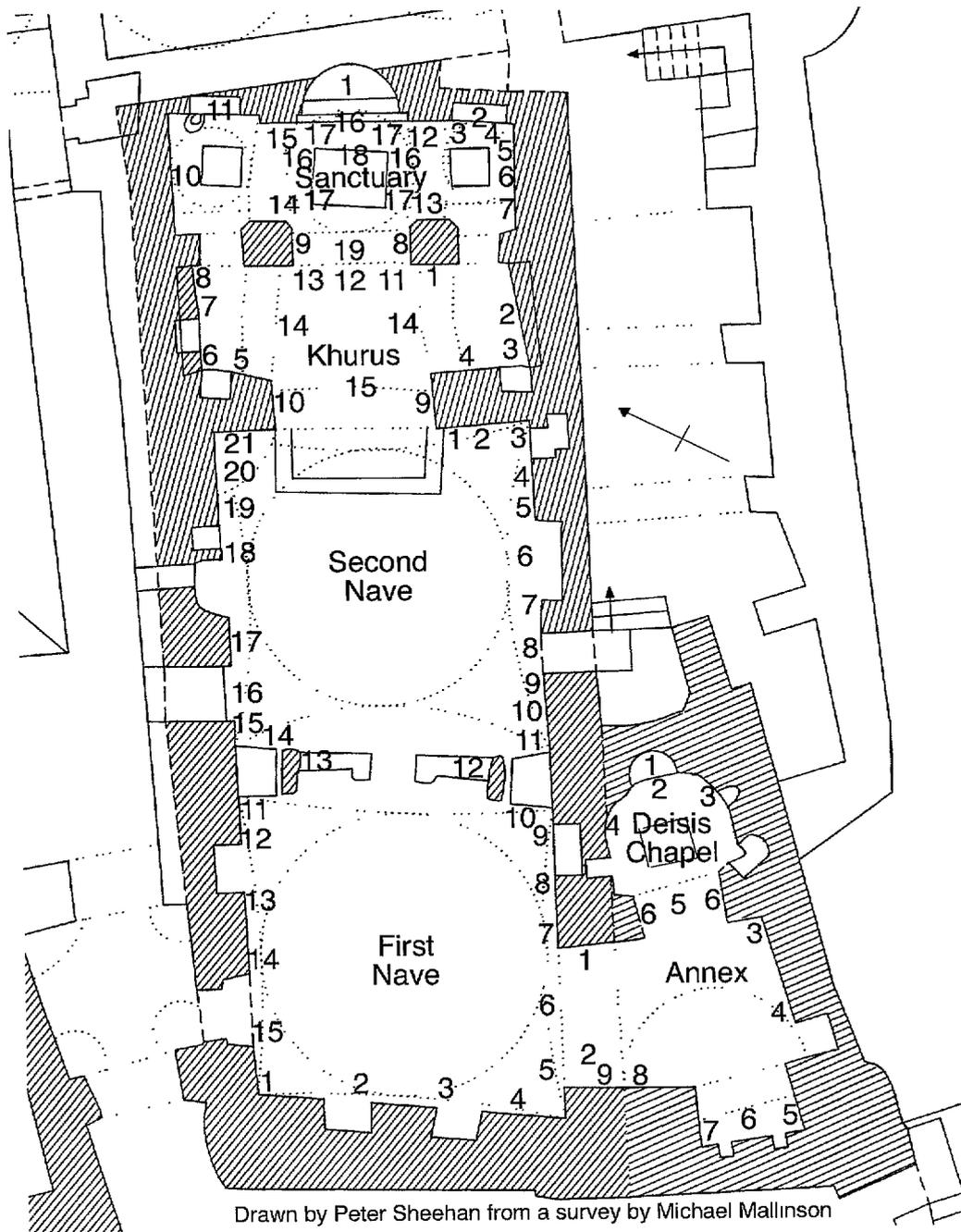
century. In 1436 Detleff Schinkel placed his family's heraldry (a trefoil inside a shield) and his name in the center of the west wall of the first nave. The helmet with garlic plume was painted in the nave by a member of the van Looz family in 1559. During the winter of 1625–26 the visiting Franciscan Fr. Bernardus Ferulensis Siculus wrote his name in five places in the church, including on the wooden screen between the nave and khurus. There are also numerous texts in Arabic, Amharic, Armenian, Greek, Latin, Russian, and Syriac.

The Monastery of St. Antony Wall Paintings Restoration Project was financed by the United States Agency for International Development under its Grant Number 263-G-00-96-00016-00 and carried out by the Antiquities Development Project of the American Research Center in Egypt in collaboration with the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Monastery of St. Antony with the blessing of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III and Bishop Yustus, Head of the Monastery of St. Antony.

The cleaning and restoration of the paintings was the work of a team from Rome led by Adriano Luzi and Luigi de Cesaris under the direction of the late Professor Paolo Mora and Mme Laura Mora. Fr. Maximus el-Antony supervised and managed the work for the monastery. The khurus windows were restored by Giorgio Funaro and Rita Rivelli (FORME) from Rome. The restoration of the exterior of the church roof was the work of El Dahan & Farid Engineering Consultants Ltd., managed on site by Karem el-Dahan. The woodwork, including the church doors was cleaned and restored under the direction of Fr. Maximus el-Antony, who also worked with all the above on the dome windows, the plasterwork, and the church floor. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by its inspectors, Mr. Mahmud Ali, Mr. Abd el-Hamid Amin Ibrahim, and Mr. Hassan Muhammed.

Yale University Press and the American Research Center in Egypt will jointly sponsor the publication of Monastic Visions: Paintings from the Monastery of St. Antony by Elizabeth S. Bolman et al. The volume will feature some 200 color illustrations and will be available in late 2000. Ordering information will be ready in the fall of 2000 from the American Research Center in Egypt and on the Yale University Press website: www.yale.edu/yup.

Photographs by Patrick Godeau, except cover photograph by Robert Vincent.



Paintings: Key to Plan

- First nave**
- 1 Theodore the General
 - 2 Menas
 - 3 Victor
 - 4 Claudius
 - 5 Theodore the Oriental
 - 6 Coptic inscription over arch
 - 7 Pirou and Athom
 - 8 Thouan
 - 9 Kaou
 - 10 Paper with Arabic text
 - 11 Heraldic helmet with garlic plume
 - 12 Phoebamon
 - 13 George
 - 14 John of Herakleia
 - 15 Sousinius

- Second nave**
- 1 Antony the Great
 - 2 Paul of Thebes
 - 3 Anonymous bishop
 - 4 Isaac the Presbyter
 - 5 Paul the Simple
 - 6 Samuel
 - 7 Pishoi the Great
 - 8 John the Little
 - 9 Pishoi
 - 10 Arsenius
 - 11 Barsum the Syrian
 - 12 Pachomus
 - 13 Shenouda
 - 14 Pisentius
 - 15 Moses the Black
 - 16 Coptic dedicatory text
 - 17 Maximus and Domitius
 - 18 Macarius the Great
 - 19 Macarius
 - 20 Macarius
 - 21 Virgin Mary (Virgin of the Sign)

- Khurus (lower walls)**
- 1 Unfinished standing saint
 - 2 Mercurius (Abu Seifein)
 - 3 Coptic dedicatory text
 - 4 Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
 - 5 The three Hebrews in the furnace with an angel
 - 6 King Nebuchadnezzar
 - 7 George
 - 8 Pasicrates (center) and two scenes from the Martyrdom of George

- Khurus (upper walls)**
- 9 Archangel Michael
 - 10 Archangel Gabriel
 - 11 Three women at the tomb
 - 12 Empty tomb with angel
 - 13 Christ meets His Mother and Mary Magdalene
 - 14 Painted vault with windows and Coptic and Arabic texts
 - 15 Decorative Motifs

- Sanctuary (lower walls)**
- 1 Virgin Mary and Child (below) and Christ Pantocrator (above)
 - 2 Athanasius
 - 3 Severus
 - 4 Dioscorus
 - 5 Theophilus
 - 6 Peter
 - 7 Benjamin
 - 8 Anonymous bishop
 - 9 Anonymous bishop
 - 10 Unfinished border of a triptych
 - 11 Mark

- Sanctuary (upper walls)**
- 12 Sacrifice of Isaac
 - 13 Sacrifice of Jephtha's daughter
 - 14 Abraham and Melchizedek
 - 15 Isaiah and the burning coal
 - 16 The twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse
 - 17 Windows flanked by angels
 - 18 Christ Pantocrator with angels and the four living creatures of the Apocalypse
 - 19 Old Testament prophets: Jeremiah, Elijah, Isaiah, Moses, David, and Daniel

- Annex**
- 1 Archangel Michael
 - 2 Archangel Gabriel
 - 3-9 Graffiti of medieval and later pilgrims

- Deisis chapel**
- 1 Niche of the Holy and Life-giving Cross
 - 2 Christ in Majesty
 - 3 Two Living Creatures of the Apocalypse and John the Baptist
 - 4 Two Living Creatures of the Apocalypse and the Virgin Mary
 - 5 Christ in Majesty
 - 6 Remains of faces of the twelve apostles