

SPECIALIST REPORT

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

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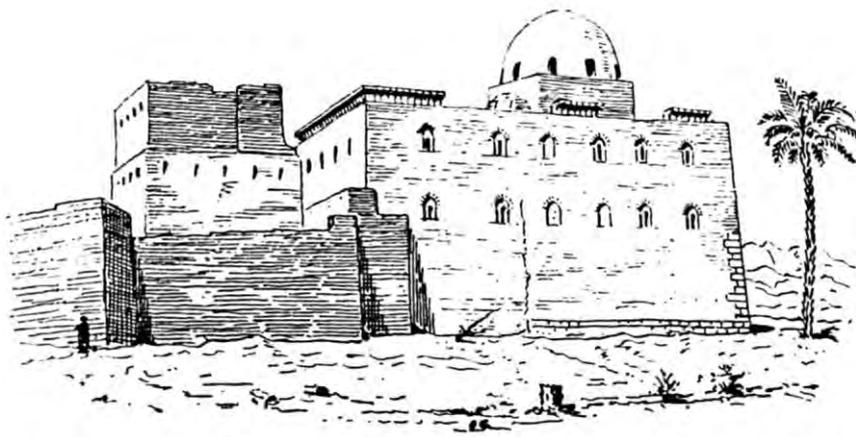
In collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development and the
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The Red Monastery Project: Wall Painting Conservation at the Red Monastery (Deir Anba Bishoi) Sohag, Dec. 2004

Dr. Cédric Meurice

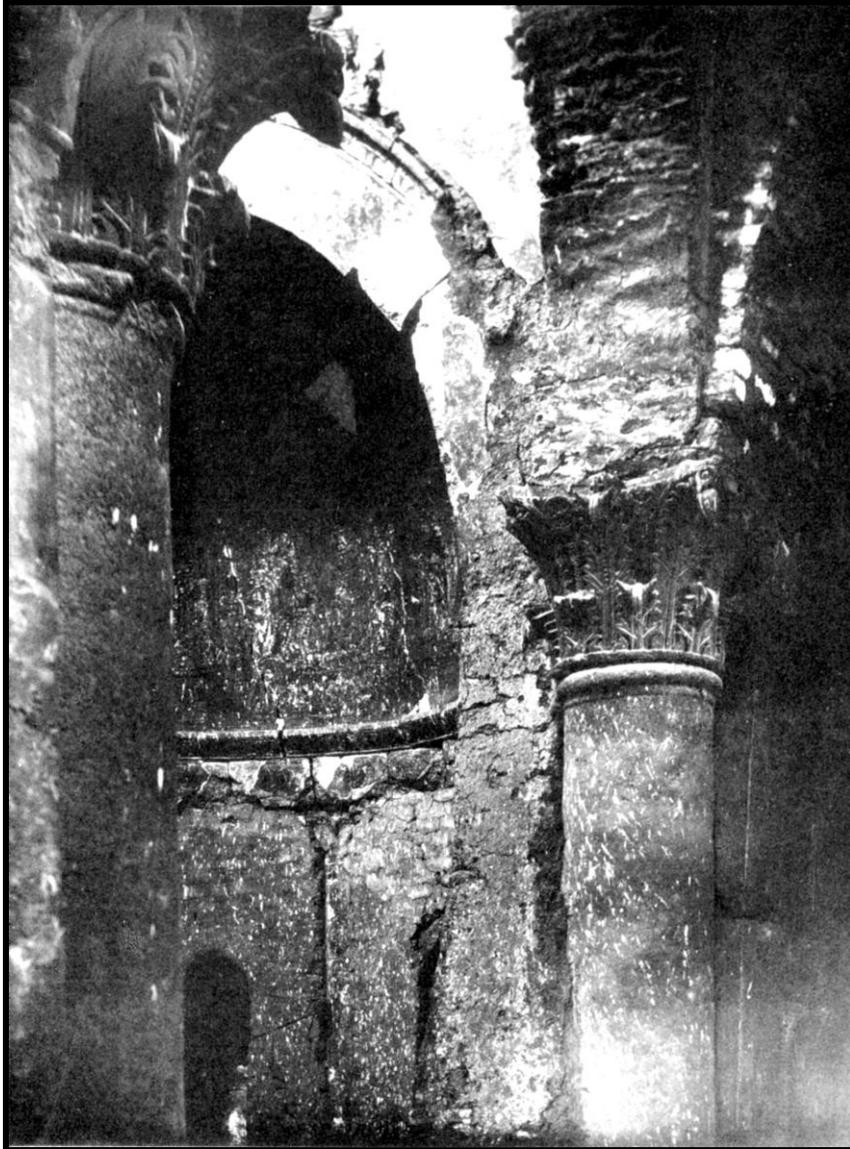


Our aim is to retrace the history of the Red monastery’s discovery, and the modifications it has undergone ever since. We began our work in December 2004 with Wladimir de Bock’s observations published in *Matériaux pour servir à l’archéologie de l’Egypte chrétienne* (Saint-Petersburg, 1901). The archaeologist insisted on the need for emergency work on the monastery, in particular to record the paintings of the three apses in the church’s choir.



This alert was expressed in his *Notice sur les monuments coptes de la Vallée du Nil* (*ibid*, p. 79-87, dating to 3. April 1898), as part of his work for the *Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art arabe* (CCMAA).

Fig. 1 : Stamp of the CCMAA.



The Red monastery is depicted as « ...une somme de documents architectoniques et plastiques d'une importance énorme [dont il faudrait] remettre dans leur état primitif les absides qui maintenant sont noyées dans une maçonnerie de briques... ».

He leads the way toward the Comité's work in favour of Coptic monuments, in addition to

Fig. 2 : De Bock, *Matériaux...*, pl. XXVIIb.

Arab ones. He also underlines a Red monastery's characteristic, on which our work should rely, *i.e.* the fact that the apses at that time still bore galleries whose columns and niches were covered with sometimes painted plaster. That is still the case in the White monastery. In order to study and reconstruct the ancient painted scenes, we will therefore have to refer to this close neighbour. That will require the composition of two archive files.



Before 1900, other archaeologists or travellers had pointed out these characteristics, without giving their detailed description. Today, we may only study the photographs and drawings they inserted in their travel's accounts. These documents should be collected, because they could give us information on previous states of the paintings.

In *Kleinasien. Ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1903), figure 81, Josef Strzygowski presents a drawing showing this previous state. This scholar went to Sohag following the advice of Somers Clarke, the Comité's architect, in order to take stock of the restorations to be conducted (« Ägypten. Expedition Strzygowski », *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 11, 1902, p.

268-270). Somers Clarke's observations are of the utmost importance: according to him, the structures hiding the two levels of each apse, including the niches, are meant to stabilize the architecture. The architraves are supported by wooden beams

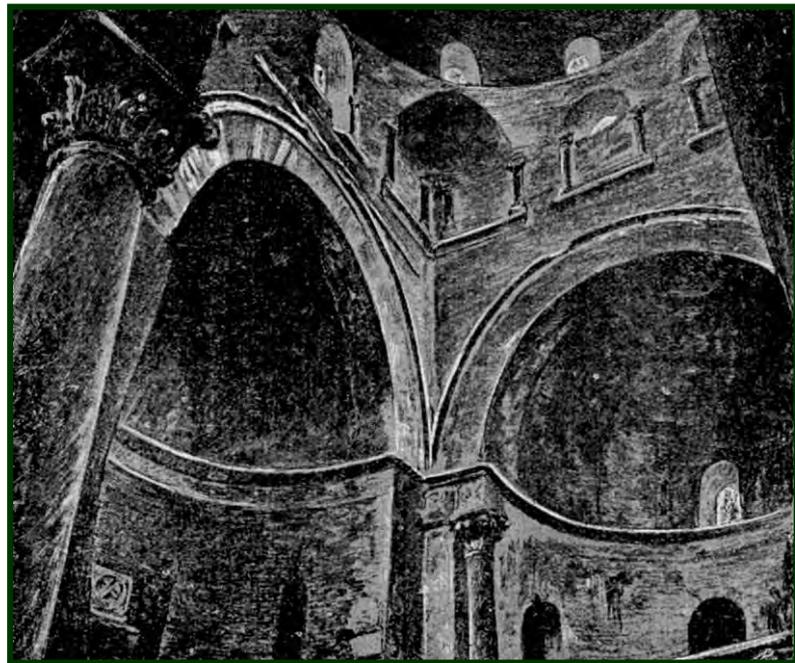


Fig. 3 : J. Strzygowski, *Kleinasien*, pl. 81.

resting on the capitals, so that they do not rest directly on the capitals. Thus, the architrave may have been constructed using small stone blocks, rather than one long bay. That explains



the progressive slagging of the structure, and the need to support it with bricks, which ended up in hiding the decorations. The destruction of the wood through natural causes (there is no trace of fire), required changes in the equipment. These observations are published in: C. R. Peers, « The White Monastery near Sôhag », *Archaeological Journal*, 1904, p. 142, note 2.



Photographs published in R. Weir Schultz's review of Somers Clarke's book (*Christian Antiquities in the Nile Valley. A contribution towards the study of Ancient Churches*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1912) could be Clarke's own ("Notices of recent publications": *Christian Antiquities in the Nile Valley...By Somers Clarke*", *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* I, 1914, p. 301-303, pl. XLI).

Fig. 4. Maybe one of the Somers Clarke's photographs (Schultz, pl. XLI).



In the late 19th century, Albert Gayet wrote:

« Comme au deïr-el-Abiad, le haikal a trois absides tréflées, pivotant autour d'un dôme central. Chacun de ses sanctuaires possède ses deux ordres corinthiens superposés, de colonnettes portant la demi-coupole de la conque ; et l'arc triomphal est cantonné de colonnes composites, où son archivoltte vient s'appuyer. Mais, mieux que l'église de Schenoûdi, celle de l'amba Beschaï laisse voir davantage *sa structure primitive* ».

(*L'art copte* Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1902, p. 148-152).

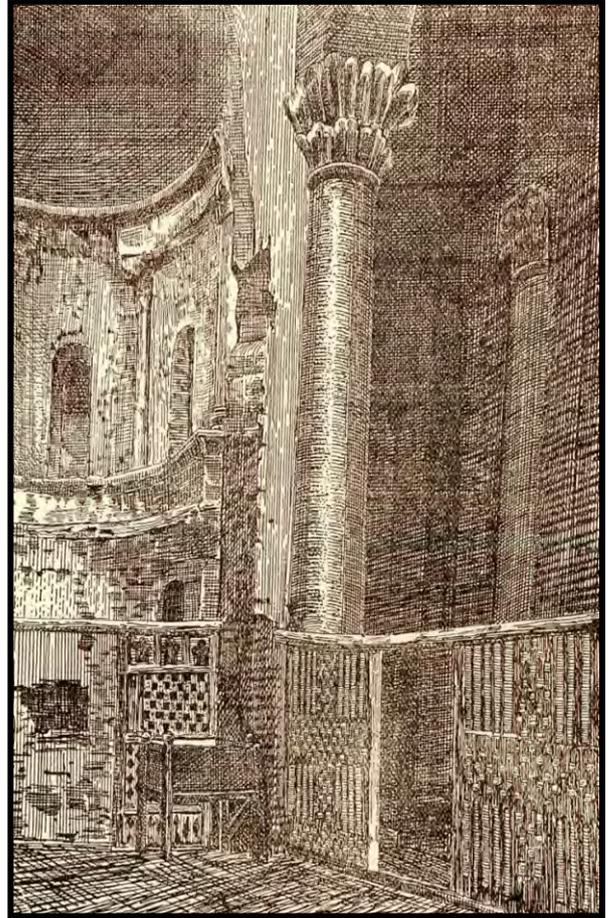


Fig. 5 : Al. Gayet, *L'art copte*, p. 151.

This primitive structure, visible in the Red monastery until the *CCMAA*'s operations, is what we must reconstitute. The first testimonies dating to the 20th century are useful for that purpose, because the number of photographs preserved from that period increases.



Jean Clédat was hired in 1903 by the *CCMAA* following this first wave of observations and studies, to undertake a systematic photographic documentation.

Fig. 6 : Cover page of Jean Clédat's handwritten notebook: « Couvents Rouge et Blanc ».

Indeed, but a few pictures taken by the Russian archaeologist were published in his book (plates XXIII to XXVIII), and the German archaeologist's archives still have to be found. Thus, Clédat's photographic documents and notebook also comprising sketches are of the utmost importance for our enterprise. This documentation is stored at the Louvre museum (Paris), and is currently being studied. It must be compared to the *CCMAA*'s own archives, which are to be precisely located in Cairo and studied. Apart from early 20th century photographs, they should also comprise watercolours and reports, absolutely necessary for our work.

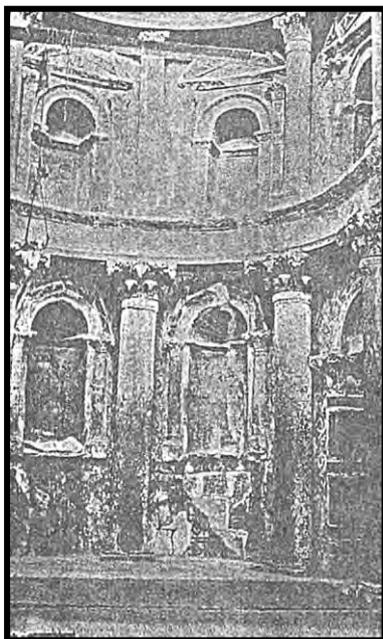


Fig. 7. J. Georg, South Apse.

In 1912, Prince Johann Georg zu Sachsen's description informs us that the restoration of the Red monastery had begun (*Streifzüge durch die kirchen und klöster ägyptens*,



Leipzig, Berlin, Druck und Verlag B. G. Teubner, 1914, p. 47, pl. 128 and 129 « Aus der Kirche des roten Klosters »). The apses are cleaned from their brick structures, as shown on the pictures in his travel's accounts.

Conclusion

My visit in December 2004 allowed me to take note of the difference between the two states of preservation, and to gain a precise idea of the building, essential to the comprehension and analysis of the ancient drawings and documents. These are currently being collected, compared and studied. Much is expected from the research under way on the *CCMAA* archives for the reconstruction of the Red monastery's metamorphoses at the beginning of the 20th century. The few examples presented here date these programs between 1904 and 1910. We hope that this chronological account of events will allow us to date and reconstitute the decoration that covered the apses' galleries in the Red monastery's church until then.