

WALL PAINTINGS DISCOVERED IN DONGOLA IN THE 2004 SEASON

Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka

Continued excavation of the so-called Southwestern Annex of the Holy Trinity Monastery in Old Dongola was one of the objectives of two seasons of fieldwork in 2004.¹ In 1996, when the explorations began, the rooms that were discovered then² featured a rich painted wall decoration.³ Another two rooms (consecutively numbered 5 and 6) were excavated and found to be richly painted, too, but the condition of these murals left much to be desired due to the generally poor state of preservation of most of the walls and vaults.

The painting layer was washed out, powdering, peeling from the plaster. The colors were faded and the surface obscured substantially by bat urine. In many areas all that survived were small fragments of little consequence, belonging to larger compositions. Even so, these sad remains of murals yielded some fragments that were quite clear, with obvious iconography and vivid coloring. Large parts of these paintings could be completed with the detached fragments found in the fill on the floor.

As a result, the last two seasons at Dongola have brought to light evidence

that has enriched Nubian wall painting with entirely new content and added meaningfully to the repertoire of scenes. At the same time, it has confirmed the existence of some iconographic elements, which had already been discovered earlier and which appeared to define the specificity of the painted mural decoration in the Dongolan monastery.

The largest composition was a developed Nativity scene that occupied the north and east walls in room 5 (inv. no. P 28/SW5NE). It included the cycles of Adoration by the Magi and Shepherds and a figure of the prophet Isaiah. It is the second time that this particular representation appears in Dongola in combination with the Nativity scene proper. The division into registers is a characteristic feature. Scenes are shown developing in horizontal registers with a marked border separating the upper part of the heavens from what takes place below, on the ground. Thus, we have hosts of angels looming in the heavens, looking down on the main scene with Mary, the Child and St. Joseph, and the scenes on the north wall depicting Archangel Gabriel showing the way to the crib for the Magi riding horses of different color, and two

1 For a review of current work, see S. Jakobielski's report in this volume.

2 Cf. B. Żurawski, "Old Dongola. Kom H. Southwestern Unit", *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), 169-178.

3 M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Mural Paintings from Old Dongola", *GAMAR I* (1998), 108-111; Id., "Wall Paintings discovered in Old Dongola", in: S. Jakobielski and P.O. Scholz (eds), *Dongola-Studien, 35 Jahre der polnischen Forschungen in Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches, Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica VII (=Dongola-Studien)* (Warsaw 2001), 274-276.

shepherds progressing on foot. The composition has a simple red-black frame around it, and at the bottom, it is set off with a wide band of stylized vegetal pattern. Below, on the same axis as the upper representation, two soldiers were pictured in antithetical pose (foretoking symbolically the Massacre of the Innocents or the Passion of Christ). The figures are all accompanied by legends giving their names.

The scenes are full of expression, the figures shown in dynamic stances. Heads are in profile. The Magi are galloping on their horses, the shepherds seem to be stepping back in awe, still holding hands, Salome is in *proskynesis*, the host of angels emerges from the clouds in the sky in a flurry of overlapping halos and slippers

[Fig. 3], soldiers raising swords above their heads, apparently in battle [Fig. 5]. The figures are dressed appropriately: the angels in antiquated *chitons* and *himations*, the Magi in eastern caps, caftans and trousers, all treated individually in terms of colors and patterns, similarly the soldiers with decorative sheaths for their swords fastened to their belts. The shepherds are naked except for a loincloth.

The principal scene of the Nativity stands in contrast to this dynamic scene. It is represented on the neighboring, east wall of the room and is easy to reconstruct despite the fragmentariness of the preservation. Mary was depicted lying on a draped ornamental bedspread with St. Joseph and the Archangels next to her and the Child in a crib with an ass and ox painted above,

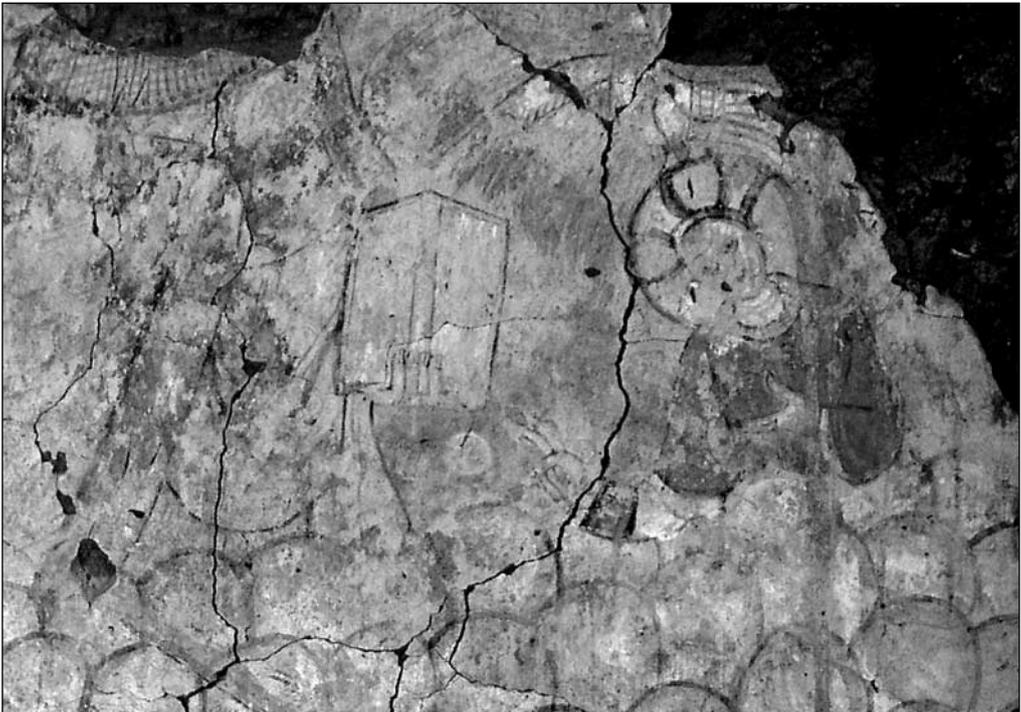


Fig. 1. Christ in the scene with the prophet Isaiab, room 5 of the SW Annex in the monastery on Kom H in Dongola (Photo M. Martens-Czarnecka)

in keeping with apocryphal description. In the upper register, running above the whole scene, angels' heads are shown emerging from the clouds. The figures are static, motionless. The iconography of the scene is typical with elements that are repeated in every Nativity known from Nubian painting. There is one element, however, that is new – the four Living Creatures from St. John's apocalyptic vision, shown around the crib. Their heads (lion, man, eagle and ox) emerge from wings patterned with a decorative net-and-eye pattern. This form of representation of the Living Creatures usually accompanied images of Christ and the Holy Trinity, in which

Nubian painting abounds, but had never before been seen in a Nativity scene.

On the right of the Nativity proper, in the southern part of the east wall of room 5, there was a scene that should be identified as the prophecy of Isaiah (inv. no. P 28a/SW5E). The prophet Isaiah is added sometimes to the Nativity scene as his was the most faithful prophecy of the coming of the Savior (Is 7:14,15; 9:6; 11:6,9).⁴

In our mural the prophet was painted as a big figure, standing, his right hand stretched out in an oratorical gesture, touching *Manus Dei*, which – assuming certain parallels like the figure of Ezra from the same annex – could have occupied the up-



Fig. 2. Murals on the north wall of room 5 of the SW Annex, including dancing scene and a standing Mary and Child (Photo W. Chmiel)

4 For example, the Al-Mu'Allaqah Church in Old Cairo, cf. K. Urbaniak-Walczak, "Die Geburtsdarstellung in der Thekla Haymanot Kapelle der Al-Mu'Allaqah Kirche in Alt-Kairo", in: D.W. Johnson (ed.), *Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies*, Washington, 12-15 August 1992, vol. 2:2 (Rome 1993), 471-489.

per parts of the composition, now lost. His left hand was raised to the chest, supporting an open codex with its back to the viewer. The prophet was turned full front to Christ, who was shown as a half-figure emerging from the clouds [Fig. 1], leaning toward the prophet in blessing, confirming by the same the fulfillment of his prophecy. The painter added a dove above Christ's halo, presenting thus an allegory of the Holy Spirit, with radiate beams around it.

The Nativity scene, as described here, basically repeats a typical iconographical scheme current in Nubian painting of the period. Suffice it to mention the two murals already known from the Southwestern Annex of the monastery⁵ and the church,⁶ as well as the Nativity scene from the Faras Cathedral.⁷ All of them, while based on Byzantine models, contain elements that define the local peculiarity of this art. Foremost, the Magi always galloping on horseback to Bethlehem and two of Herod's soldiers, swords raised high, represented in an antithetical group. The image of the prophet Isaiah, evidenced for the second time in Dongola next to a Nativity scene, adds to this list of characteristics. Extended cycles, a variety of depictions (heads *en face*, in three-fourths and in full profile), and foremost the animation of figures are the key features of this given painterly workshop and find parallels among paintings discovered earlier in this annex.⁸

The mural on the north wall of room 5, to the left of the Nativity, is of particular merit for researchers. Painted next to a representation of a standing Mary and Child,

framed like an icon (inv. no. P 29/SW5N) [Figs. 2,4], was a scene of dancing figures, three rows of men participating in a kind of dance (inv. no. P 30/5N). The figures are accompanied by inscriptions in Old Nubian, which undoubtedly explained the goings on, even though experts are still at a loss on how to read them. For the present, the interpretation is conjectural. The composition of the scene is well considered [cf. Fig. 7].

The men form two groups differing in dress [Figs. 6,7], although skin color would argue in favor of the same ethnicity of the dancers. Their dress would thus be merely costume. Some of the figures wear masks trimmed with *kauri* shells, with holes for the eyes, imitating some long-snouted and big-eared animal. The loincloths have long wide 'tails' attached, the men's legs are bare. The second group is composed of men wearing sleeveless *chitons* and long trousers drawn at the ankles, short skirts, shawls and scarves on their heads. Both groups are shown in motion, hopping, bending forward or leaning back. Their heads are shown in three-fourths, *en face* or in full profile. They hold presumed musical instruments: the masked men have two batons which they hit one against the other, those in headscarves hold what appears to be a castanet made of two gourds tied together with rope.

The mural undoubtedly represents some ritual dance, encompassing two folk traditions, one from Black Africa, the other from the Arab-dominated North. Zoomorphic masks, usually of hyenas, decorated with shells, are known from the nearby Bambara

5 Inv. no. P 41/NW22E, cf. Martens-Czarnecka, *GAMAR I*, op. cit., 107-108, Fig. 17.

6 Inv. no. P 1/HC/VS, cf. D. Gazda, "The Monastery Church on Kom H in Old Dongola 2002", *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 234, Fig. 5.

7 Field no. 18, cf. K. Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand* (Zürich-Köln 1967), 143-147, Pls. 63-69.

8 M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Stylistic homogeneity of groups of paintings in the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola", *GAMAR 3* (in press).



Fig. 3. Host of angels from the Nativity scene



Fig. 4. Mary and Child from the north wall



*Fig. 5. Soldiers from the Nativity scene, room 5 of the SW Annex on Kom H in Dongola
(All photos M. Martens-Czarnecka)*

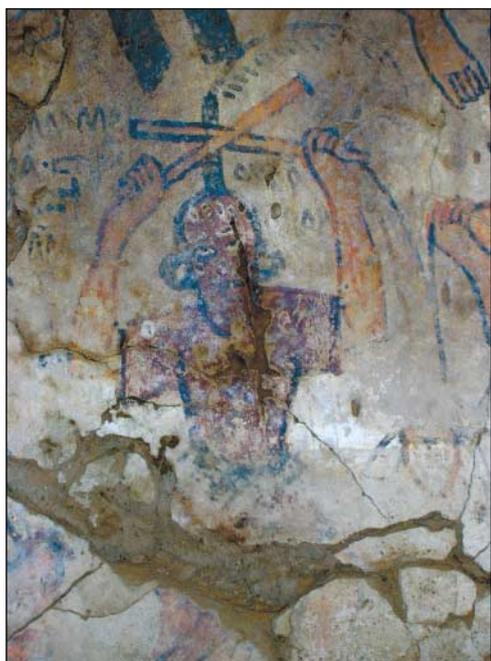
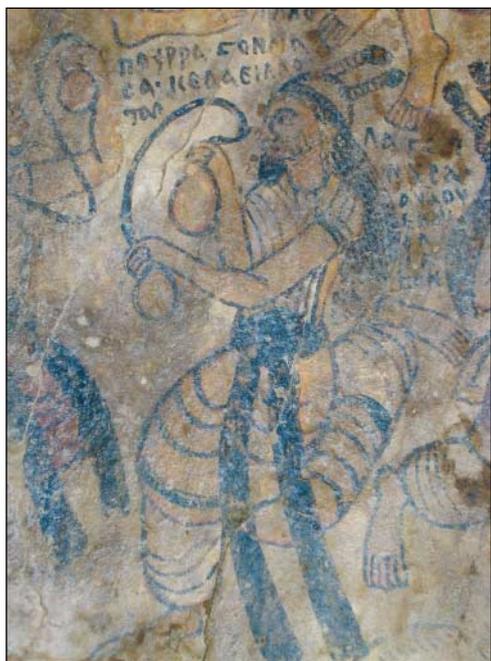


Fig. 6. Figures from the dancing scene on the north wall of room 5
(Photo M. Martens-Czarnecka)

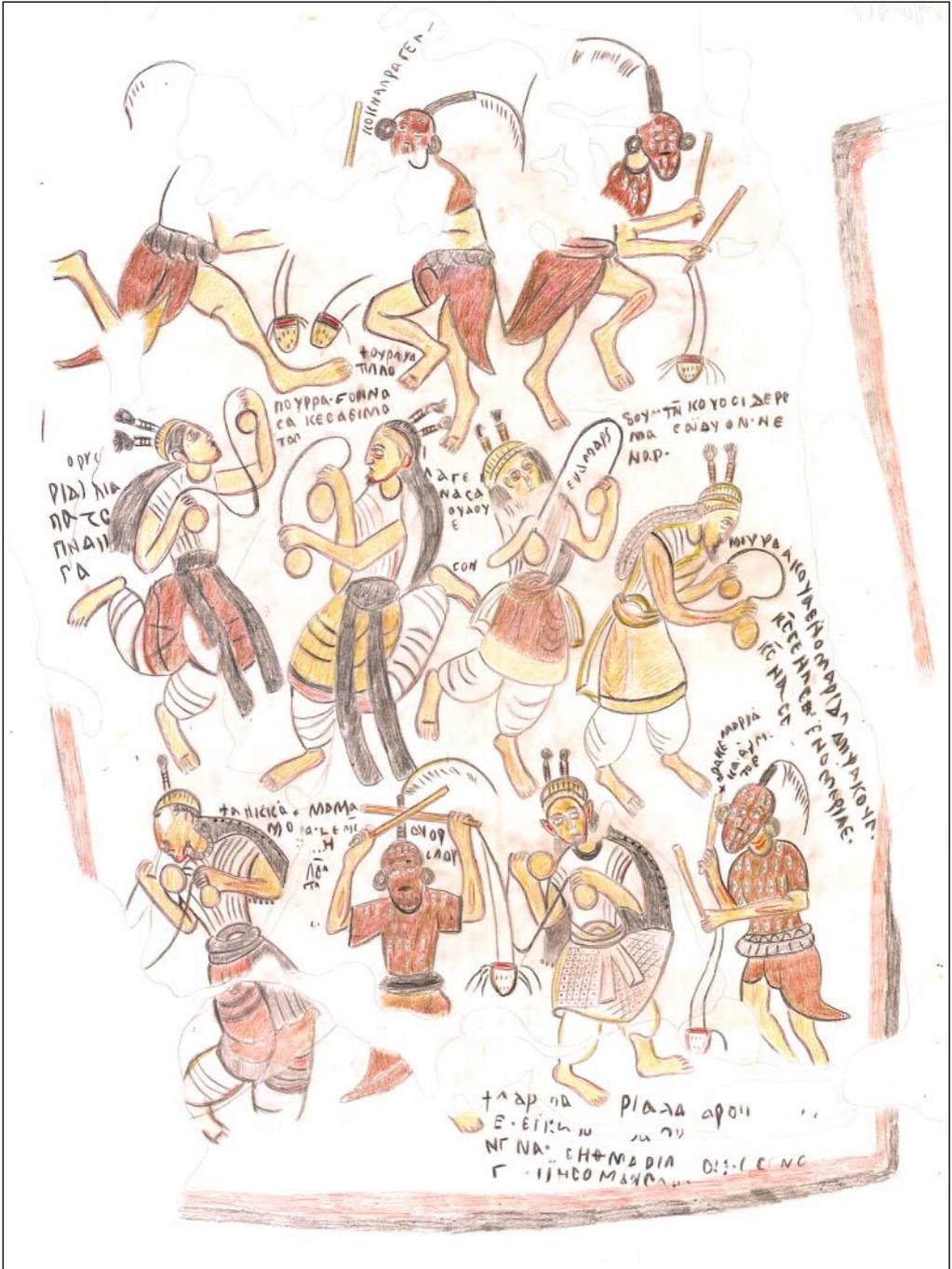


Fig. 7. Dancing scene from the north wall of room 5 in the SW Annex (Tracing M. Martens-Czarnecka)



Fig. 8. Two men sealing a financial deal, part of a scene painted on the south wall of room 6
(All photo M. Martens-Czarnecka)

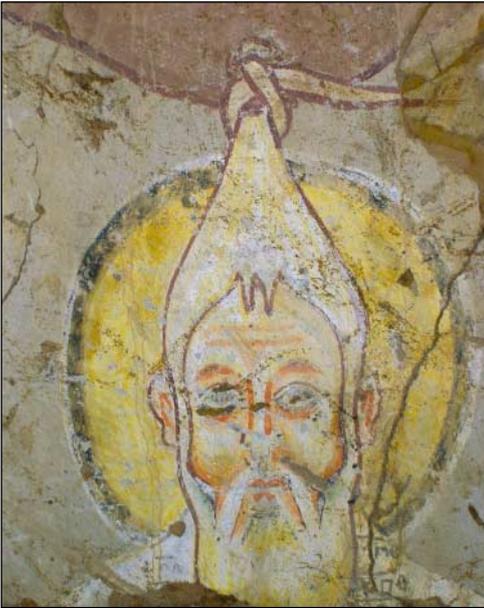


Fig. 9. Head of a saint from the south wall



Fig. 10. An archangel on the south wall

culture, where they are used in initiation ceremonies of tribes living in the Western Sudan.⁹ Batons are used to make music in ritual and war dances from central Africa.¹⁰ The tunic, skirts, trousers and headscarves with fillets are encountered in Arab tribal dress, and are seen frequently not only in local folklore, but also in illuminated manuscripts. Summing up, it should be said that this highly unique painting, combining two different folkloristic traditions, gives us an idea of the social differentiation of Nubia of the times. The question remains how to fit in this very secular representation with the other monastic paintings. Its direct neighborhood with the icon of the Virgin and Child, as well as its artistic homogeneity with the latter, could testify to a link between the two. Perhaps it was meant to depict some Marian feast, a festival of joy, thanksgiving to Mary, rainmaking? (Dances of this kind in Africa usually have something to do with rainmaking.) Unfortunately, until the texts are read, we will have to remain in the sphere of conjectures.

The dance scene is not the only one escaping identification and consequently interpretation. On the south wall of room 6, an equally mysterious depiction was discovered. It is composed of a number of episodes, but the key scene depicts a financial transaction of some kind (inv. no. P 39/SW6N). In an interior, which is revealed to our eyes behind curtains that have been drawn aside, we see two men sitting on a wide *angbareb* bed. One of the men holds a purse and is actually giving the other man a handful of gold coins. Standing between them, behind the bed, is a dark-skinned slave or servant, waiting for orders [*Figs. 8,11*]. To the left, another

servant is slaughtering a ram; the other animals are crowded in a round *zeriba* nearby. Right above the main scene, there is yet another man sitting on a semicircular couch, apparently addressing in greeting an approaching couple, a man and woman dressed in white.

The two sitting figures in the main scene appear to be differentiated intentionally by their skin color: one has red face and hands, the other is yellow-orange in color, as is also the third man on the couch. All three are dressed in similar fashion: caftans with characteristic collars and wide trousers and shawls. Thus, the dress needs to be classified as entirely Arabic in character. The men are seated cross-legged, underlining the folkloristic aspect of the representation. The approaching pair is also dressed in Arab manner: the man in a white *galabiyah*, the woman in a *top* covering her head.

What is the significance of this scene? Some financial transaction was undoubtedly intended: a sale of some kind or a purchase, perhaps marriage negotiations? The ram being slaughtered at the side suggests the transaction has been sealed. But what was the deal in question?

The room, where the mural was found, was part of a monastery. The murals found next to it and directly below it were of a different, religious content. Hence, this scene should have a similar intent; perhaps it is a Biblical scene, but it is too early to speak of any specific ideas on the subject. Nonetheless, this genre scene is very much like the dance scene discussed above in that it is full of expression and folkloristic elements, the style and composition betraying the same painter's hand.

9 R. Goldwater, in: Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan. The Museum of Primitive Art (New York 1960).

10 Africa. The Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music, 1, ed. R. M. Stone (New York, London 1998), 674-677; P. Cellaer, J. Elsner, "Nord Africa", in: Musikgeschichte in Bildern, ed. W. Bachmann (Leipzig 1983), 124, Abb. 119.

Directly below the above-discussed 'bed scene', a representation has survived showing the head of an ascetic-looking old man with a halo around it (inv. no. P 38/SW6N). The rest of the figure is destroyed, but enough of the hands survives to demonstrate that the saint had been shown as an orant. His long white hair is tied up in a knot, which appears to be attached to something that looks like a semicircular brown surface descending from under the bed in the scene described above [Fig. 9]. The saint is robed in a white mantle, the edges of which were lined with an ornament composed of three letters of the Greek alphabet constituting a numerical cryptogram of the archangel Michael.¹¹ There is no clue to the identification of this figure nor is there any idea as to the meaning of this saint in the painted composition as a whole. The position exactly in line with the axis of the transaction scene would argue for an intentional association of the two. The depiction of a saint tied by the hair to a wall brings to mind ascetic practices known from Coptic monasteries, such as the Abba Hatre monastery in Aswan (mistakenly designated earlier as St. Simeon), where there are still special hooks in the wall said to serve this specific purpose.

Directly next to the above described murals is a big and excellently preserved depiction of an archangel (inv. no. P 37/SW6N), already in the southwestern corner of room 6. His head reaches the top of the vault of the room [Figs. 10, 11]. He is shown standing *en face*. In his right hand, he holds a staff, in his left a shield; a sword is swung across his back, suspended from a leather belt crossing from his left shoulder across

his chest. The archangel's robes recall ancient dress: *chlamys* pinned with a fibula on the right shoulder, *dalmatica* and *chiton*. The shoulder-long hair is caught back with a *taenia*. Yellow-orange and ornament-less wings are folded on either side of the figure. The legend with the name of the archangel has not been preserved. One is again faced with the question what, if any, is the association between this depiction of an archangel and the other murals executed on the south wall of room 6. Is it merely by chance that the transaction scene turned up next to the archangel simply as the next scene in a row of representations, as was often the case in other monastery interiors?¹²

It was noted at the beginning that many of the compositions were preserved in fragmentary condition at best. Some that are still discernible on the walls present identifiable elements. For instance, the north wall of room 5 bore a representation of the archangel Michael (fragment of a wing decorated with stylized peacock feathers, inv. no. P 31/SW5N); next to it, a big book with richly ornamented cover (inv. no. P 32/SW5N), undoubtedly belonging to a figure of Christ or else a saint or bishop. The south wall presumably contained an image of Mary (purple fragment of a *maphorion* decorated with yellow rosettes set in a cross-like pattern of dots, inv. no. P 25/SW5S).

Most of the fragmentary murals, however, came from the south wall of room 6. This wall, very poorly founded and undermined by rainwater, had to be dismantled. Its decoration was composed of a scene of the Massacre of the Innocents (inv. no.

11 See mural depicting St. Jeremiah (inv. no. P 21/SW4N) from room 4 of the same annex, cf. Martens-Czarnecka, "Wall paintings", *op. cit.*, 276, Fig. 17.

12 See, for example, room 13 in the Northwestern Annex.

P 36/SW6S) [see *Fig. 10* on p. 267 above]. Very poorly preserved fragments reveal Herod seated on a throne, soldiers with raised swords and the bodies of the massacred "innocents".

The newly discovered paintings were evidently executed by the same painting workshop that was responsible for the murals in the rest of the Annex. A comparative analysis of the paintings leaves no doubt as to this. The highly linear, yet dynamic representations are paralleled in terms of iconography and style by other

murals in this annex. Indeed, paintings by the same 'hand' can be found also in the Northwestern Annex of the monastery. There, however, they were but a late addition to the earlier wall decoration, which was dated to the second half of the 11th century,¹³ while in the annex now being excavated they were the main and only painted decoration,¹⁴ executed in the 12th century, if the style is anything to go by.¹⁵ The composition of the figures, arrangement of heads, hands, wings speak in favor of this dating, as does the depicted motion



Fig. 11. Full view of the preserved murals on the south wall of room 6 in the SW Annex (Photo H. Pietras)

- 13 M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Suggestions on the dating of some murals from the Monastery in Old Dongola", *EtTrav* XIX (2001), 217-236.
- 14 Two and more plaster coatings could be discerned on some of the walls of rooms 2, 3 and 4 of this annex, yet they had all disappeared under the last coating bearing the discussed painted decoration.
- 15 Martens-Czarnecka, "Stylistic homogeneity...", loc. cit.

of the figures and related draping of the robes, always consisting of the same elements. A very elaborate decoration of the robes emphasizes the ornamental character of the murals. The painter uses templates on a wide scale to outline the heads, faces, hands and feet of his figures. In his compositions, he makes the associations between his figures apparent by establishing mutual eye-contact. The color palette is identical with the extremely characteristic

black contours enriched with a red line. Characteristic features of this painting can be traced to the Byzantine art of Komnenian times (11th-12th century), as well as to Islamic art as seen in manuscript illuminations. The folkloristic aspects betray strong African and Arabic cultural influence, mingling freely during this period in Nubia, and leading in effect to the development of a highly original local culture.