

Face of a Makurian warrior,
fragment of a mural from the Cruciform Building (CB.III)



COMMEMORATIVE MONUMENTS

Two of Dongola's church foundations were of exceptional nature, as much because of their unique architecture — cruciform plan with free arms — as because of the symbolic meaning that they carried. They were the Commemorative Building (CB) and the Cruciform Church (CC), both royal foundations commemorating the same important event in the political history of Makuria, that is, the defending of the town against the Arabs and the negotiation of a political and economic treaty, *baqt*, between King Qalidurut of Makuria and Egypt's governor 'Abdallah b. Abi Sarh in AD 651. The Commemorative Building (B.III) was undoubtedly connected with these events and was erected in the last years of Qalidurut's life or at the beginning of the reign of his successor, Zacharias. The other building, which was also Dongola's largest ever, the Cruciform Church, was founded already by King Zacharias, following the safe return of his son Georgios from Baghdad after six months of negotiations in AD 836. Zacharias had reason to be thankful because Georgios had negotiated successfully an extension of the *baqt*. By incorporating into

the new construction the ancient crypts of the presumed apostles, the church foundation also commemorated the Christianization of the Kingdom. The kings of Makuria rejoiced in the splendor of this structure, emphasized by inner colonnades and a grand central dome. We can only presume that the murals decorating the inside of the church were as splendid as those in the earlier Commemorative Building.

COMMEMORATIVE BUILDING

(B.III.1 = CB)

Erected as a small freestanding structure, it stood south of the river entrance to the "Palace of Ioannes" (B.I), just 4 m away from the facade. The bedrock here fell away gently to the south and was already covered with an occupational layer of varying thickness at the time of the construction (Godlewski 2004a: 200–204).

The red bricks used in it measured 31–32 x 17 x 7.5–8 cm and were bonded in mud mortar. Wall structure was regular with alternating courses of headers and stretchers in the bondwork, corresponding to courses of two rows of bricks set crosswise to the line



Commemorative Building (B.III.1) on the citadel,
view from the north



of the wall and courses of single bricks set crosswise between two outer rows of bricks lining the edge of the wall. The walls were 63–65 cm thick. The narrow walls closing the arms with the entrance arcades were 50 cm thick and featured a modified brick arrangement: one row lining the edge of the wall and the other row with bricks laid crosswise, alternating in position in successive courses, which resulted in alternating header-and-stretcher courses in the wall faces.

The foundation of the walls in the north arm, made of headers set on edge, was on the same level at either end. A foundation trench had been cut, partly damaging the south wall of the older building B.IV; the foundation bricks were laid on a layer of fill, approximately 15 cm thick, deposited on bedrock.

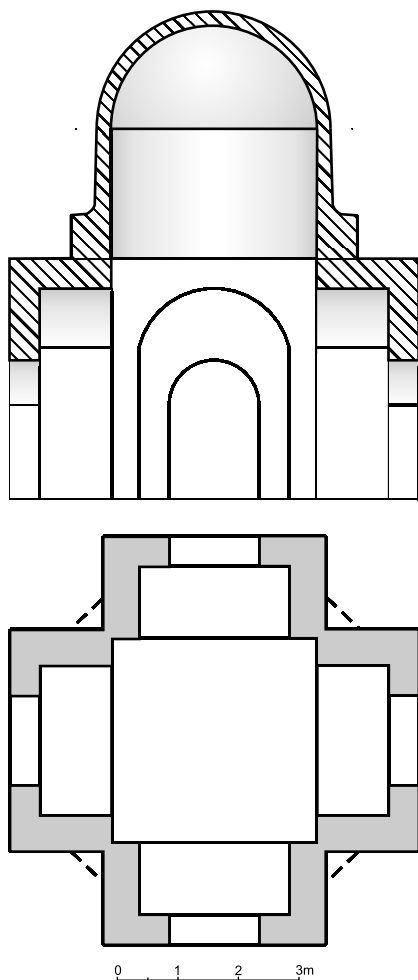
The outer dimensions of the building were 6.80 m by 6.80 m. Inside, the square central space measured 3.30 m by 3.30 m. The four arcades opening of this center-square were each 1.20 m deep and 3.35 m wide. The entrances in the end walls of each of the four arms also had an arcade that was 1.20 m wide and 2.50 m high. The highest that the walls of this building have been preserved was in the northeastern corner (up to 3.20 m above the floor), the lowest in the west and south (not exceeding 1.20 m in height).

The eastern arm, which is in the best condition, measured 1.20 m in length, 2.27 m in width at the outside, broadening to 3.25 m in two recessed steps toward the center of the structure. The eastern entrance in the central part of the arm, 1.22 m between the jambs, was blocked in the Late Period with a red-brick wall. A barrel vault covered the arm, the springing of the vault preserved on the south wall being approximately 2.70 m above the floor. The topmost point of the vault inside was most probably 3.85 m above the floor. The arcade on the inside must have been higher, but how much higher cannot be judged on the grounds of the present evidence.

In the outer, northeastern corner, where the northern and eastern arms meet, a block of sandstone was preserved, 14 cm thick and about 30 cm wide, squared and laid along the diagonal of the two joining walls, 3.34 m above the foundation level. It was structurally one with both walls and plastered on the outside like the entire structure. It must have been a kind of external support under the circular drum of the dome.

Based on the evidence of the full plan, the walls with the arcaded entrances in the

Commemorative Building (CB.III=B.III.1)



northern and western wings, the spring of the vaults and the stone support described above, a reconstruction of the building has been attempted. This small cruciform structure obviously had projecting vaulted arms and a central dome supported on a drum. The tentative total height of the structure was approximately 9.20 m.

The entire building was plastered on the outside, but the plastering is best preserved in the western part, especially on the north and south walls of the western arm, which were protected by screening walls of Building B.II with sand filling the gap. The lime plaster with coarse sand added as temper formed a thick coating, the surface was smoothened. In some sections, the plaster is peeling, revealing the presence of three coats (by the western entrance), which would suggest successive renovations of the outside walls, especially in the vicinity of the entrances.

On the inside walls, three successive coats of lime plaster have been noted, corresponding to successive renovations of the interior. Evidence of renovations has been preserved in the bottom parts of the walls, just above the original pavement and below the level of the late floor. It is not clear whether successive coats of plaster covered the entire interior or only the bottom parts of walls that were most exposed to damage in an open interior. The second coat of plaster was especially fine and very smooth. The entire interior was decorated with wall paintings, executed obviously by master painters in the tempera technique (Godlewski 2004a: 203, 214–215; Zielińska 2004; 2010). On the vault of the eastern arm of the building the first coat of plaster preserved a representation of Nubian warriors standing in a heavenly meadow. The bottom parts of the walls presumably had decoration imitating marble revetment and stuccowork, emphasizing the tectonics of the interior.

The original paving, obscured by a later cement floor, was cleared in the western,

southern and northern arms of the structure and partly in the center. It consisted of bricks (33 x 16 cm and 36 x 17 cm, thickness as yet unknown) laid flat in a regular arrangement. The bricks in the northern arm were arranged longitudinally, that is, parallel to the side walls. The southern arm presumably mirrored this arrangement. In the center and in the western arm, the bricks ran parallel to the side walls in this arm, that is, following an E–W orientation. This was presumably continued in the eastern arm. Thus, it seems that the bricks in the pavement of the original structure formed a cross, emphasizing the transverse arm with a continuous E–W alignment.

A coarse (sand with lime) cement floor, approximately 2 cm thick, was introduced on top of the pavement. The surface was smoothened and dark red in color. Two layers are in evidence, laid rather quickly one after the other, and the first layer was not smoothened.

Between the north facade of the building and the palace there was a courtyard with reused paving from the B.IV structure. As there was a difference in levels measuring about 35 cm between the Commemorative Building and the court, and the jagged edges of the south wall of B.IV were partly visible above its floor, the Commemorative Building was surrounded with a bench, recorded along the northern facade, but presumably running all around the building. This bench was 1.14 m wide, built of three courses of red bricks with a rubble, sand and stone core. In line with the entrance, on the outside of the bench, a step was discovered, also made of red bricks and measuring 0.85 m by more than 0.85 m (it must have been equal to the width of the entrance). This step made it easier to climb onto the bench.

No foundation stela has been discovered and there is no sufficiently well-dated foundation or under-floor pottery deposit to provide an independent dating for the structure. It was erected after B.IV had been

leveled to the floor, presumably shortly after the "Palace of Ioannes" (B.I) had been built. The suggested dating in the second half of the 7th century is very likely. Technological features, such as red brick used in its construction and the external plastering resemble materials used in the Third Cathedral (C.I), which is currently dated to the second half of the 7th century.

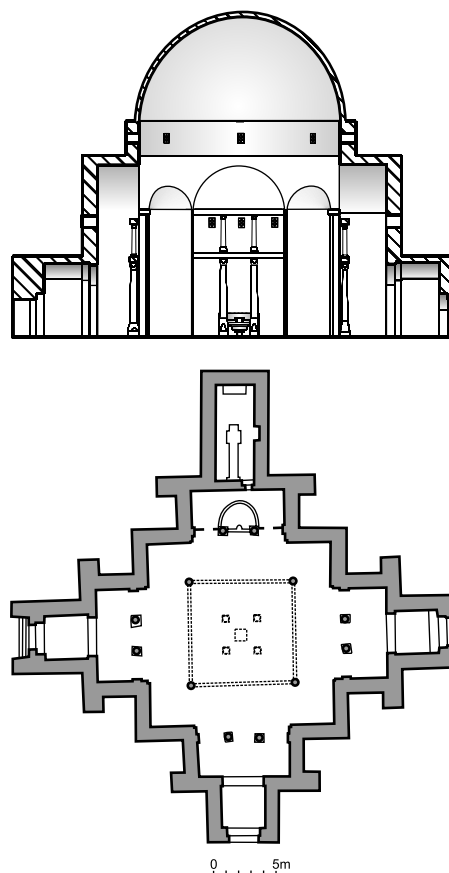
The importance of this building follows from its specific location: at the edge of a rocky elevation on the riverbank, above what is believed to be a private river harbor and in front of the entrance facade to the palace B.I. The small domed structure on a cruciform plan should not be interpreted as a strictly sacral building (it is open and has no recognizable interior furnishings). Nor should it be seen as a funerary monument (no tomb or sarcophagus identified anywhere inside the structure). It appears to have been a commemorative building marking an event of importance for the city and the residents of the palace B.I. The presence of representations of Nubian warriors in the vault of the eastern arm and the fine interior finishing, as well as repeated systematic renovations could suggest that we are dealing with a victory of some kind. The chronological horizon for the erection of the building, set in the second half of the 7th century, links the structure with the siege laid to Dongola by Abdullahi abu Sarh in AD 652, after which a *baqt* treaty was signed with the governor of Egypt. Thus, B.III.1 in its initial stage could have been a monument erected in honor of the defenders of the citadel and to commemorate the signing of the treaty.

CRUCIFORM CHURCH (CC): ROYAL AMBITIONS

The old cathedral, EC.II, was entirely dismantled, down to the level of the floor, which along with the basilica foundations became the building platform for the new structure, the Cruciform Church (Godlewski 1990), the biggest building discovered

in Makuria so far. Measuring 37.30 m by 34.80 m, it was built of red brick in the form of a cross, with a monumental dome over the central bay. At the core of the Cruciform Church was a central square bay (14 by 14 m), closed off on each side by a two-column portico (*triforium*). The cross was formed by arms radiating from the central part. Each of these arms was made up of two parts. The inner parts were wider (7.15 m) and had a portico opening into the central bay. The outer parts were narrower (3.40 m) and differed in function. The southern, northern and western outer sections formed entrances to the building, each arranged in a different

Cruciform Church (CC)



way. The eastern section was longer (7.40 m) and was separated from the building by a wall, in which there was a small doorway, giving access to the enclosed space.

It is very likely that the arms of the building were covered with barrel vaults, while the central part was domed. The total height of the building was most probably around 28 m. The red and grey granite columns used inside the building, in the *triforia* and central part, were *spolia* from the earlier buildings. Those of red granite could even have originated from the EC.I cathedral.

The partially preserved liturgical furnishings provided grounds for a functional reconstruction of the building. The interior was divided into two parts. The narrower part of the eastern arm was separated by a wall from the rest of the interior. This part of the eastern arm of the building formed a kind of commemorative chapel with an altar by the east wall and a structure in the shape of a Latin cross on the pavement over the crypts BX, containing most probably the tombs of the Apostles of Makuria, venerated in the previous buildings: BX, EC.I, and EC.II.

A large *ciborium* must have stood in the middle of the central bay, supported on the four granite columns found lying on the floor. Four composite columns (about 6.50 m high) at the corners of the central bay supported wooden beams from which lights were suspended around the *ciborium*. A *synthronon*, partly preserved, was located between the bases of the eastern *triforium* and the space on either side and behind the structure was set apart by wooden barriers placed between the columns and pilasters of the eastern portico. The position of the altar could not be identified.

The size and the exceptional form of the Cruciform Church suggest that it was a royal foundation. From Abu Makarim (Abu Saleh) we learn that (king – *augustus*) Zacharias commissioned the building of the church in Dongola as an expression of his gratitude to God for the safe return of his son Georgios from Baghdad in AD 835/6 (Vantini 1975: OSN 331). A keystone with an inscription (monogram), which can be read as “Georgios”, was found in the central part of the wall blocking the entrance through the

Cruciform Church (CC), views from the north (left) and from the south



western arm (see page 75); originally it must have been part of the arch of the western arm. It is very likely that the Cruciform Building was constructed in the middle of the 9th century.

The building belongs to a group of well known martyria and commemorative buildings constructed in the shape of a free-armed cross, scattered throughout Palestine, Syria and Anatolia. None of these, however, can be considered a direct model for the Dongolan structure, which demonstrates a whole spectrum of original features. A small cruciform building (B.III.1) had existed south of the palace on the citadel as early as the 7th century, which could have been model for this monumental building. It seems very probable that the monumental Cruciform Church (CC) was also an original achievement of the Dongolan architects' milieu. The penchant of the Dongolan architects

for buildings on central plans is particularly visible in the case of the 7th century new Cathedral (RC.I), as well as the Pillar Church dated to the 9th century.

The Cruciform Church (CC) performed several commemorative functions. The extended eastern arm contained a chapel over the tombs of the apostles of Makuria buried in the crypts of the BX church. The central part, under the *ciborium*, most likely housed a silver cross, taken by the Mamluk armies after a raid on Makuria in AD 1276 (Vantini 1975: OSN 472, 475, 534, 536); the cross may have contained splinters from the true cross. The entire building may have been a thanksgiving to God for the safe return of Georgios from Baghdad, and the renewed stable relations with the Abbasid caliphate, a fact of similar political and economic importance for Makuria as the *baqt* signed in AD 652.



Reconstruction of the interior of the Cruciform Church