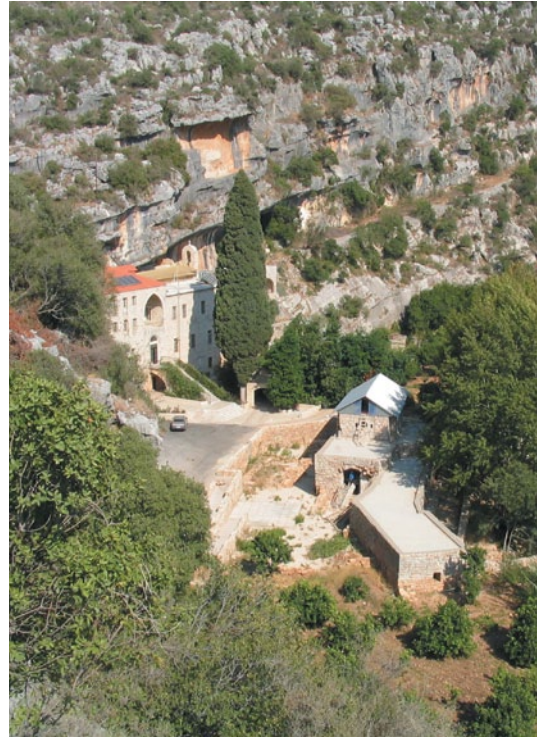


# Kaftoun

The Greek Orthodox monastery in Kaftoun stands at the foot of the picturesque valley of the River Jawz. Nuns reside in the monastery building which clings to the side of a high cliff. Though it is modern in its present-day appearance, the oldest extant parts of the building date from the early medieval period. The monastery chapel houses Lebanon's oldest surviving icon – a 13th-century work painted on a wooden panel; it depicts the Virgin and Child on the obverse and the Baptism of Christ on the reverse. Next to the monastery stands a small, stone church with adjacent utility rooms, where remnants of mill installations that had been powered by the mountain river were found. The three-aisled church, featuring a narthex and a presbytery terminating in an apse, was raised at the time of the Crusades and shows certain traits inspired by Western medieval architecture. Dedicated to Saints Sergius and Bacchus it gradually fell into ruin, ceased to be used for liturgical purposes and was abandoned. The north aisle collapsed and the destabilised exterior walls became overgrown with plants.



View looking down onto the monastery buildings.

Part of the secured painting prior to conservation.

The face of the Theotokos after conservation treatment.







In 2003, when the nuns resolved to restore the church and reinstate it as a place of worship, building and renovation work led to the discovery of some poorly preserved fragments of wall paintings. Polish conservators undertook the task of securing this important find and examining the rest of the church interior to see if any other remnants of art were concealed beneath the crumbling plaster. The first season of conservation work in 2004 revealed that damaged but highly valuable medieval wall paintings had survived in the upper part of the apse.

◀ The Archangel Gabriel, detail of the Annunciation scene.



Church entrance seen during rubble clearance and renovation work.



Conservation student retouching a wall painting.

The face of St Bacchus. ▶







These wall paintings continued to be uncovered and secured in subsequent years, after which they underwent painstaking conservation treatment. Ultimately, of the original painted decoration that no doubt adorned the walls of the entire church, those fragments which have survived include a Deesis scene depicting Christ enthroned accompanied by standing figures of the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, a scene of the Annunciation above the apse, two small fragments of a scene of the Communion of the Apostles, a figure of St Lawrence with an angel and a bust of an archangel set within an oval medallion on the walls of the nave, and figures of saints in the arcades between the aisles, including depictions of the church's patrons – Sergius and Bacchus. They were executed in the fresco technique, in which dry pigments were applied onto wet plaster. The paintings were executed in the 13th century, their style drawing on Byzantine art with local influences. It is confirmed by extant fragments of inscriptions written in three languages – Greek, Old Syriac and Arabic.



Work at the church continued until 2009, during which time the north aisle was rebuilt, the church interior was replastered and the surrounding grounds were put in good order. Today the church is once again open to worshipers and pilgrims, and its salvaged wall paintings are considered among the most highly prized in the whole region.

Church interior after conservation treatment and furnishing as an active place of worship.

Deesis scene and Annunciation scene after conservation.