

# KAFTOUN

## CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF THE MAR SARKIS CHURCH MURALS INTERIM REPORT

Krzysztof Chmielewski and Tomasz Waliszewski

*Rehabilitation of the Greek Orthodox Monastery at Saidet Kaftoun, situated in a deep valley some 7 km to the east of the Chekka promontory, revealed an important medieval monument, the Church of Mar Sarkis.<sup>1</sup> The stone building has since been cleared of the earth burying it and an effort is being made to restore it to its liturgical function (Fig. 1). Once traces of wall paintings were observed on the walls in 2002-2003, a number of people of good will intervened, inviting Polish restorers from Warsaw, working at the time in Lebanon, to undertake the restoration. Having received stamp of approval from the Greek Orthodox Archbishopric of Mount Lebanon and the Direction Générale des Antiquités of Lebanon, the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology mounted the first season of work in 2004, between August 12 and September 10.<sup>2</sup>*

*The team started with the conservation of two fragments of painting uncovered and protected in 2003. Probes through the layers of plaster found on the church walls revealed a number of other murals, leading to a systematic uncovering and protection of further sections of painted decoration. This work, which will be continued next year, coincided with a program of archaeological and architectural investigations, intended to provide the necessary data for the proper rehabilitation of the ruined building.*

- 1 For an outline of monastery history, see R.J. Mouawad, "Les mystérieux monasteres de Keftun au Liban à l'époque médiévale (XIIe-XIIIe siècles): maronite et puis melkite?", *Tempora* 12-13 (2001-2002), 95-113. The rehabilitation program was undertaken in 1977 by the Archbishopric of Mount Lebanon.
- 2 Institutionally, the project is supported by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The staff comprised: Dr. Krzysztof Chmielewski, director of the project and restorer; Dr. Tomasz Waliszewski, co-director and archaeologist; Mr. Andrzej Karolczak and Mrs. Izabela Uchman-Laskowska, restorers; Ms Agnieszka Wielocha, Ms Marta Banaś, students of restoration; Mr. Karol Juchniewicz, student of archaeology; and Ms Jolanta Górniak, student of architecture. We would like to express our gratitude to the persons and institutions that have made the campaign possible and highly effective. We thank the nuns from the Monastery of Saidet Kaftoun, and their superior M. Antonina especially, for their warm support and interest in the progress of the work. We thank also Mme Maud Nahas for the perfect organization of our stay. The Deir el Nourieh monastery offered us very comfortable accommodations. We address our thanks also to those who carried most of the burden of difficult decisions linked to the project: Archbishop Georges Khodr and Mr. Frédéric Husseini, Director General of the General Directorate of Antiquities; without their support the project would not have taken off. We also recognize our debt towards Prof. Leila Badre, who first thought of inviting us to Kaftoun and who followed the project through its different stages. Architect, Mr. Saba Sabbagha, and engineer, Mr. Aziz Rachkidy, were instrumental in preparing the ground for our activities.

## IN SEARCH OF MURALS

Secondary plaster on the church walls varies in thickness from 0.6 to 1.9 cm. Originally white, this lime plaster is now gray and green (due to fungi and mould deterioration) and more or less disconnected from the underlying layers in many places. Probes, ranging from 10 to 20 sq. cm, were executed through the plaster on all the walls and on the vault of the church. Knives, scalpels, chisels and hammers were used for the purpose. Whenever traces of painting were revealed, the probes were enlarged. Long and narrow probes will be executed across all of the walls and vaults to ensure that no further murals remain undiscovered [Fig. 2].

The following paintings were uncovered in due course. They have irregular contours because of the poor state of preservation of the church decoration as a whole.

1. Two fragments on the wall of the arch above the apse (known already last year). The face of the Archangel Gabriel on the left, the lower part of the figure still hidden under later plastering (maximum width 0.88 m, maximum height 0.50 m). On the right, the Virgin Mary (also only partly visible). Mary is dressed in a red robe. She is holding a spindle in her left hand. Behind Mary, a fragment of red-roofed building with arcades. Two monograms of the Mother of God written in Greek: ΜΠ on the left side



Fig. 1. *The Church of Mar Sarkis in Kaftoun, state in 2004*  
(Photo T. Waliszewski)

and OY on the right. (Maximum width 1.30 m, maximum height 0.80 m.)

The fragments likely belong to the same composition, a scene of the *Annunciation*, but more of the vault needs to be uncovered to understand the relation between the figures.

2. Two fragments of paintings on the left and right side of the wall above the arch of the apse, but below the vault. Still not cleaned, they should nonetheless be considered as the lower parts of the above-described figures preserved above the vault, the Archangel Gabriel on the left and the Virgin Mary on the right.

3. Upper part of the apse in the aisle above the cornice. *Deesis* – Christ as Pantocrator enthroned, the Book of the Gospel held open in his lap, right hand raised in blessing. On his right, a standing Mother of God, on his left, Saint John the Baptist. A figure of a Seraph holding the *labarum* visible between Christ and the Mother of God. Greek inscription partly preserved on the pages of the book in Christ's lap, another one to the right of Saint John the Baptist. (Maximum width 3.60 m, maximum height 2.10 m).

4. North wall of the nave, paintings on the cornice and below [Fig. 3]. Originally, both walls of the nave bore murals, including an inscription in Arabic running along the cornice from right to left, some scenes and a few single figures of saints or angels, all placed within border frames of deep claret color. For the moment, there are three fragments of painted plaster known from the northern wall. First from the west is a small fragment of Arabic inscription on the cornice, approximately midway along the length (maximum width 0.775 m, maximum height 0.245 m).

Between the above fragment and the end of the wall, a bigger fragment preserving

part of the inscription in Arabic on the cornice, a medallion with the bust of an angel, and a scene of what was likely a *Communion of the Apostles*. The latter consists of seven standing robed figures with halos around their heads, facing the first figure from the east, identified as Christ dispensing communion. Three Syriac inscriptions preserved above the heads of three of the figures. (Maximum width 3.83 m, maximum height 1.18 cm.)

A third, smaller fragment, situated below the above-described second fragment (between the end of the nave arch and the end of the wall close to the apse). Two fragmentary standing figures: a winged angel (on the left) and saint *Laurentios* (on the right); between them an inscription in Greek. (Maximum width 0.67 m, maximum height 1.07 cm).

5. South wall of nave, just below the cornice (opposite the *Communion of Apostles*). Two fragments preserved, presumably a continuation of the *Communion of Apostles* scene, including Christ and six other figures, most likely the Apostles. Christ depicted standing to left; behind him, IC in Greek and a fragment of *ciborium* (?). (Maximum width 0.48 m, maximum height 0.52 m).

On the other, bigger fragment, outlines of five standing figures facing Christ. Inscriptions in Syriac visible above their heads. (Maximum width 0.71 m, maximum height 0.70 m).

6. Inner surfaces of the arches and pillars (north and south aisle). Traces of murals have been revealed in probes in five spots. All that can be said before the fragments are cleaned is that a standing figure can be traced on one of the pillars in the south aisle.

7. Other small fragments of decoration, including a small part of the Arabic inscription on the cornice in the main apse.



*Fig. 2. Church nave looking east, state during conservation work in 2004  
(Photo T. Waliszewski)*



*Fig. 3. North wall of the nave with uncovered traces of murals, state during conservation in 2004  
(Photo A. Karolczak)*

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON STRATIGRAPHY AND DATING

Some observations concerning the building of the church in Kaftoun and the wall paintings decorating it can be presented here even while the preservation and restoration of the church and its murals is ongoing.<sup>3</sup> The church was a typical apsed basilica, quadrangular in plan, with a cistern on the building's axis. The vestibule and narthex were added to the main body, and the aisles also appear to have been extended westward in two separate stages of construction. Following the partial ruining of the church, the building was reconstructed, blocking being introduced in the arches between the nave and northern aisle. At this time, the northern façade of the upper part of the church and the narthex was probably repaired, introducing the vault above the apse.

All the walls and pillars of the nave were decorated with paintings, which were executed apparently in two separate stages. The older parts are in the apse (*Deesis*) and on the wall above (*Annunciation*). Damages regardless, there can be no doubt about the monumental character of the decoration, its artistic merits and quality of execution. Composition of the figures is flawless, the painting of the details of hands and faces skillful. Facial coloring (especially the better preserved parts of Christ) and drawing

of the features (especially Saint John) point to an experienced and talented painter [cf. *Figs. 1-3* on pp. 354-355]. The murals have been dated provisionally to the second half of the 13th century.

The other fragments of the decoration from the nave (face of angel in a medallion and two scenes of the *Communion of Apostles*) are painted in smaller scale and are simpler in terms of shape and colors, suggesting another painter at another time. The actual dating will be possible only after the final cleaning, as well as technological analysis of the plaster and historical examination.

A stratigraphic analysis of plaster on the church walls has shown the presence of a priming layer (approx. 0.3 cm thick), underlying a thicker (approx. 0.5 cm) lime plaster layer (not everywhere) under the painted plaster. The coating bearing the painted decoration is from 0.5 to 1.0 cm thick. Secondary plaster coatings consisted on the whole of a thick layer (approx. 0.5 - 1.5 cm) that filled the hammer marks in the original plaster (in the apse, for example) and a surface layer covering all the walls (approx. 0.3-1.5 cm).

Samples of the paintings and the plasters will be analyzed for further information on the technology, still the technique applied seems to have been Byzantine fresco on lime plaster.

## STATE OF PRESERVATION OF THE MURALS

Overall, the painted decoration has suffered serious damages, although the condition in different parts of the church depends directly on the state of the building. The figures in the apse and the Archangel Gabriel above

the vault are in the most serious condition, having been continuously exposed to rain and humidity once the roof had collapsed. Also, in rainy winters the nearby river repeatedly flooded the building.

3 For preliminary remarks on the iconography of the paintings as well as color illustrations, see contribution by M. Immerzeel and N. Hérou in this volume.

The plaster is cracked in many places, some cracks being over 1 m long (in the apse, for example). The original layers are disconnected from the stone walls, mainly due to plant roots growing behind the plaster. The structure of the plaster in many areas is weak and the edges of damaged fragments fragile. Hammer marks are visible on the surface of the painted plaster.

The surface of the murals is dirty and damaged, and in need of consolidation. In some areas, the dirt is very strongly consolidated with the painting layer because of salt crystallization on the surface. Minor losses of the layer neighbor with larger missing parts of the composition. Even if the cohesion of the paint layer in many places is good, some colors (especially red) need reinforcement.

## CONSERVATION TREATMENT

The uncovered paintings were reinforced and protected, the entire process being documented on digital camera. The structure of the original layers of plaster was reinforced at the edges with synthetic resin in a water dispersion and protected with mortar. Disconnected fragments were consolidated with the same synthetic resin, slaked lime mixed with crushed marble and a mineral plaster preparation for the purpose of consolidation.

The painting layer was cleaned of dirt, lime and salt, both mechanically and chemically. The surfaces were disinfected against fungi and mildew. Weakened and crumbling parts of the painting layer were reinforced with a weak synthetic resin. In some areas (e.g. on the walls of the arches) gauze and synthetic glue were applied to

counter further detachment of the plaster. The same methods were used for protecting detached fragments of plaster during the uncovering of the paintings.

The uncovering, reinforcement and protection of the murals will continue concurrently with architectural conservation work carried out on the church by the Lebanese side. Important restoration dilemmas need to be resolved: whether to reconstruct the northern aisle, raise the once lowered vault, and effectively insulate the walls of the building against humidity. Only after these works have been executed will it be possible to take decisions concerning the aesthetic arrangement of the church interior, taking into account the uncovered murals and the extent and form of their retouching.