KEYNOTE ADDRESS:
MURAL PAINTING IN EGYPT,
PROBLEMS OF DATING AND CONSERVATION

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Egyptian churches preserve paintings from the first centuries of Christianity when Egypt was a leader in church affairs, as well as from later periods that show the continued vigor of Egyptian (“Coptic”) Christianity long after the Arab conquest of Egypt. These paintings have often suffered from neglect, and paradoxically the current revival of monasticism and of pilgrimage sometimes creates conditions that further endangering them. This lecture will present the current achievements of the conservation project at Deir al-Suriani (the Monastery of the Syrians), discussing the problems of conservation, dating, and interpretation when there are several superimposed layers of painting. It will relate this situation to that in other sites, particularly the so-called Red Monastery in Upper Egypt.

Introduction: Christian painting in Egypt

The last 20 years have seen a renewed interest for Coptic painting. The paintings of the Red Sea monasteries were published and subsequently projects for their cleaning and conservation were started. In the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun a number of discoveries were made that have added to our knowledge. Nevertheless we have to admit that our map of Christian painting in Egypt still has large white spots. This was evident when in 1991 the meanwhile well-known painting of the Annunciation was discovered by a French-Dutch team in the church of the Virgin in Deir al-Surian (figs. 1, 2). Soon after its discovery a discussion about its dating, its iconography and the identity of the painter started, a discussion that has not yet died down. In 1994 a small symposium with an international group of scholars was held at the Sorbonne in Paris to discuss these questions. The outcomes were surprising, especially the differences of opinion concerning the dating. The earliest proposed date was early 8th century; the latest dating was late 12th century. Others proposed a dating to the 10th or 11th century. A similar situation in, for instance, Italian painting would be unthinkable. Art-historians have refined toolkits to make distinctions of decades or even years. To confuse a Renaissance fresco with a Baroque painting would be symptom of sheer ignorance. If, then,
specialists are centuries apart in dating a Coptic mural painting, it can only mean that the study of Christian art in the Near East still has a long way to go. On this way there are certain handicaps. One of these handicaps is the accessibility of the material. Some paintings are no longer in situ and have been transferred to museums, like the paintings from Saqqara, Bawit, and Nubia in the Coptic Museum. They have been saved, but can no longer be studied in their archaeological context. This put a certain limitation, but far worse is the situation where the paintings have been abandoned in situ. In Saqqara and Bawit the majority of the paintings excavated in the first decades of the 20th century were left behind without any protective measures. From the black and white photos taken by the excavators the fragile state of some of them is evident. These photographs and the watercolours taken of some paintings are probably the only evidence that is left. The Louvre and the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo will resume the excavation and re-excavation of Bawit, and doubtlessly we will be confronted soon with remains of the paintings excavated by Clédat and his successors and other still unknown murals from the 6th-7th centuries.

Deir al-Surian: common case or exception?

The symposium in Paris was one of the triggers to continue the research in the church of Deir al-Surian. In 1995 Ewa Parandowska, restorer at the National Museum in Warsaw, and the author undertook the first campaign to investigate the possible presence of other paintings under later layers of plaster. After a number of soundings it was evident that at least three layers of decorated plaster were present under the last layer of undecorated plaster. In the following years a team of restorers has been working to uncover this stratification of paintings. In 1998 it became clear that this stratification consisted of four phases. It was also evident from an early stage that much more than only mural paintings were coming to light. Apart from paintings there are inscriptions of several kinds and in four different languages on the subsequent layers of plaster. Some of these inscriptions contain dates, which makes them even more useful as a means of dating some of the paintings. Furthermore, there is evidence concerning the architecture of the building, such as walled-up windows and niches, remains of wooden beams and other material that helps us to reconstruct the original shape of the church and changes and renovations that have taken place in the course of the centuries. This situation gives us the rare chance to follow the development of the church building and its decoration from its construction till the present day. The paintings are an extremely important, but not the only aspect in this research and conservation project. On the basis of the evidence found so far, we can distinguish the following stages in the development of the architecture and decoration of the church.

1. The church must have been built in the time of Patriarch Benjamin I (626-665) and it seems that the first paintings have been done soon after the completion of the building (Fig. 3). These early paintings, as far as they are visible now, have a rather preliminary character: they consist of simple decorative patterns and crosses, executed in red and yellow ochre (Fig. 3).
2. Not long afterwards, presumably around 700, a more monumental programme of paintings was begun. The span of time between layer 1 and 2 cannot be more than a few decades at most, since the first layer shows almost no traces of dirt and damage. For this reason it was sufficient to whitewash the paintings of first layer. In other parts the second layer of paint could be applied directly on the still blank plaster. It seems that one of the first elements of layer 2 was a dado-decoration throughout the church. This dado, a painted imitation of marble incrustation and stone columns, went up to a height of about 2 metres; the higher parts of the wall were reserved for figurative paintings (Fig. 7). On the northern, southern and eastern walls of the khurus, the area over the dado has been filled with representations of several saints. Here we find a number of unusual representations, such as the scene of a holy doctor performing an eye-operation. Most probably this is a painting of St. Collouthos, well-known as an eye-doctor (Fig. 8). Also on the half-columns in this part of the church saints were painted, the most prominent being the Virgin Galaktotrophousa on the column right of the entrance into the haikal (sanctuary) (Fig. 9). The half-dome in the northern and southern parts of the khurus are now dominated by the paintings of the Annunciation, Nativity (south), and the Dormition of the Virgin (north), belonging to layer 4 and in all probability to be dated to the early 13th century. But underneath there are paintings belonging to layer 2. It has been established recently that the northern half-dome carries a painting of the Nativity, the scene following the Annunciation in the western half-dome. This can be considered as a proof for the fact that the Annunciation, discovered in 1991 is part of an iconographical programme, more specifically the decoration of layer 2.

One of the important questions is the dating of layer 2, and this brings us back, implicitly, to the question of the dating of the Annunciation. Here we have a number of criteria that we should examine critically before applying them. In the 1994 symposium on the Annunciation scene each contributor had his or her own criterion for dating and each method seemed perfectly valid, but nevertheless they led to entirely different outcomes.

Many art-historians are inclined to use style as a criterion for dating. In the case of the paintings of layer 2 this confronts us with several problems. In the first place the Annunciation scene contains stylistic reminiscences of late antique painting, but this is of course beyond any doubt a matter stylistic revival. So far we are not able to find stylistic parallels in Christian painting in Egypt, while in Byzantine painting parallels could be found in paintings from the 6th/7th and the late 12th century. Another complication is that the paintings of layer 2 are not stylistically homogenous. In the paintings in the khurus at least four different hands can be distinguished, each one using a different style and technique of painting. This confronts us with the question why so many different painters have been working on a relatively small surface. Does it mean that the decoration of the church had to be finished as quickly as possible and that
therefore a group of artists was employed? Or should we rather choose the opposite possibility, that is that the paintings have been made over a stretch of time that could be as long as a century? To rely on style only means building on quicksand in this case.

If we turn to the possibility of iconographical analysis in order to come to a dating, another traditional art-historical approach, we have to be cautious as well. Lucy-Anne Hunt proposes a date in the late 12th century for the Annunciation on the basis of the representation of incense in the scene⁶ (Fig. 2), while Athanassios Semoglou sees the theme of the prefigurations of the incarnation in the same painting as a characteristic of the early 10th century, the time of Moses of Nisibis.⁷ The painting of the Virgin Galaktotrophousa, also belonging to layer 2, has close iconographic parallels in a number of paintings from Saqqara and Bawit, dating back to the 7th century.⁸ In other words, relying solely on the iconographic approach will not give us much certainty either.

At first it seemed as if the technique used in the paintings of layer 2 could give us evidence for dating. A careful look with the naked eye suggests that the paintings were done in the encaustic technique and laboratory tests have confirmed this. Although some of the paintings have been done in a mixed technique involving tempera, the encaustic technique, using bee-wax as a medium for the pigments, is predominant. It is generally thought that this technique, which was widely used in antiquity, ceased to be practised in the course of the 8th century. This would then be a strong piece of evidence to date these paintings to the first half of the 8th century. This presumed evidence turned out to be less solid, when it was discovered that layer 3 had also been executed with several parts in encaustic technique, in other words, this particular way of painting must have been practised at least for one century longer than was generally accepted so far.

One of the most reliable ways of establishing dates so far has been the use of dated inscriptions and graffiti on the walls of the church. In the case of layer 2 there is one text on the northern wall that may prove to be quite useful. This text, written in Syriac and consisting of 15 lines, mentions that a certain Mattay and Yacqub have ‘built and constructed this monastery’ in the year 818/19 A.D.⁹ This inscription, the oldest dated Syriac text found on the walls so far, is of course not referring to the founding of the monastery, that must have been there already since the 6th century. It rather seems to refer to the re-occupation and restoration of the monastery after it had been raided and sacked by Berbers a few years earlier. In an indirect way this document makes sense for the dating of layer 2. The southern wall of the church had a row of windows on ground-floor level and when the paintings were made the frames of the windows were incorporated in the decoration. After the construction of the perimeter wall of the monastery, built directly against the southern wall of the church,
these windows lost their function. The building activities of Mattay and Yacqub probably refer to, among other things, the construction of this outer wall. The monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun were not yet surrounded by walls before the 9th century and the violent attacks of this period must have been the reason for their construction. In this case the inscription in combination with the paintings surrounding the blocked windows could be a reason for dating layer 2 to the period before 818 A.D.

3. In the next phase parts of the decoration of layer 1, the higher parts of the church were plastered over. This was done to extend the iconographical programme of the ground-floor to the dome and the upper walls. Two main themes can be distinguished in this upper zone: the conversion of foreign peoples and the death, assumption and glorification of the Virgin. We find, for instance, the conversion of the Chamberlain of the Candace (Fig. 6), the apocryphal story of St. Andrew and the cannibals (southern wall) (Fig. 10), and the conversion Constantine the Great (Fig. 11) and King Abgar of Edessa (on the eastern wall) (Fig. 12). These conversion scenes may have been meant as an addition to a scene of Pentecost, a representation that is likely to be found in the southern half-dome, under the later Annunciation and Nativity of layer 4. The sequence of scenes representing the Dormition and Assumption has been added slightly later, judging from the overlap with the lower edge of the scenes with Abgar and Constantine (Fig. 12). When it comes to criteria for dating layer 3 we have again a similar situation as with layer 2: iconographical and stylistic characteristics of the paintings are difficult to compare with those of paintings known so far. Some of the subjects depicted are even unique to Christian iconography so far. The architectural context and inscriptions could give us more reliable evidence. We know that the eastern part of the church was renovated by the Syrian abbot Moses of Nisibis in the beginning of the 10th century. The sanctuary was apparently completely rebuilt and a set of wooden doors was made between the *khurus* and the *haikal*. The commemorative inscription in Syriac on the lintel of this door bears the date of 913/14 A.D. The Coptic inscription running around the dome over the *khurus* has not yet been completely uncovered, but it mentions, among others a certain Moses, who was *hegoumenos* and *oikonomos* of the monastery. It is clear that this inscription has been done together with the conversion-scenes (Fig. 3). It is also clear that the windows in the eastern upper wall were still open when the paintings of Abgar and Constantine were made and that they lost their function after the new *haikal* was built. It is tempting to think that the Moses of the inscription is Moses of Nisibis. This would mean that he first ordered the addition of layer 3 to the iconographical programme of the church decoration and that only afterwards the rebuilding of the *haikal* took place. This would as a consequence mean that the conversion-scenes of layer 3 were done before 913. We do not know exactly when he became abbot, but this was probably not before 900.
4. The last episode in the decoration of the church consisted of the complete refurbishing and repainting of the interior. Windows that had lost their function because of the construction of buildings around the church were blocked and plastered over, some wooden beams were replaced or supported by extra beams, like under the half-domes in the khurus and finally the interior was plastered and repainted. This operation may have taken place at the beginning of the 13th century, although there is no solid evidence for dating the paintings of layer 4. Jules Leroy proposed a date in the beginning of the 13th century, a dating that has not yet been convincingly contradicted so far. Lucy-Anne Hunt is quite outspoken in her dating, not only of the Annunciation scene of layer 2, but also of the paintings of layer 4, for which she proposes the years around 1225 A.D.\textsuperscript{11}

5. Finally the interior of the church was renovated and plastered again at the end of the 18th century. This can be deduced from the fact that in 1498 A.M., i.e. 1781/2 A.D. the church was reconsecrated\textsuperscript{12} and that none of the many graffiti on this most recent layer of plaster is older than 1781. By then several of the paintings on the columns were completely or partially covered by the masonry piers that had been constructed (in the 14th or 15th century?) to support the barrel-vault over the nave. The process of renewing the plaster has caused considerable damage to the stratification of paintings. Before applying the new plaster the older layers have been hammered off as far as they were easily removable. This leaves conservators with a cross-section through the paintings of several centuries, a situation that is both fascinating and problematic, as we will see.

**Sohag: decoration of a monumental building**

There is an enormous difference between the churches of Wadi al-Natrun and the monasteries of Sohag. One of the most important differences is the size of the buildings. The communities of the Red and White Monasteries were organised according to a Pachomian model and had from an early moment the means and the infrastructure to build churches like the two that have survived the centuries in spite of the fact that the communities have ceased to exist. The economy of the monasteries must have allowed the employment of skilled architects, masons and artists to erect and decorate a church like the one of Deir Anba Bishoi, better known as the Red Monastery. The differences in architecture are considerable: the scale and quality of the church of the Virgin in Deir al-Surian is dwarfed by the monumental structures near Sohag. In spite of this there a similarity between both churches when it comes to the painted decoration of the interior. In both cases we have wall-paintings with a stress on the eastern part of the building. And also in Deir Anba Bishoi the paintings have been renewed several times, leaving us with a stratification of paintings. Similar problems of interpretation and issues of conservation arise in both.\textsuperscript{13}
1. The first layer of rendering must have been applied shortly after the completion of the triconch. Its painted decoration, mostly consisting of geometrical patterns, is visible in only a few places where layers of later plaster have flaked off, such as in the supporting arches of the conches of the haikal. The colours used here are mostly light yellow, red, blue and green. Especially the light blue pigment occurs frequently in this layer and hardly in later paintings. This layer must have comprised paintings in the half-domes as well. The strongest indication for this is the design in red for a painting of the Ascension in the eastern apse. This design appeared after the collapse of later paintings on top of it (see below). It is likely that in the northern and southern half-dome there are still paintings belonging to layer 1, underneath the later paintings.

2. The first layer of paintings has been plastered over, for reasons and in a period that are still difficult to determine. On this lime-plaster a second layer of paintings has been made. Only on a limited number of surfaces is this layer clearly recognizable; in most places it has been covered again by later paintings. The most characteristic element in this layer, as far as we can see, is the bright yellow background for the paintings. The paintings of layer 2 can be seen in a more or less original state:
   - in the decorative patterns between the niches in the eastern apse;
   - in the paintings of gazelles and sheep over the niches of the upper level in the eastern apse;
   - in the niches of the upper level of the apse and in the separation-wall, decorated with painted imitations of curtains;
   - in the decorative patterns on the architraves in the conches;
   - in the yellow-red decoration visible in some of the pediments;

The three conches have also been redecorated in this stage. Although all three semi-domes have been covered and repainted again later, we can see enough of layer 2 that is still shimmering through to guess that the subjects and basic compositions of the three conches have stayed the same. The northern half-dome had the Virgin Mary enthroned between two angels, while opposite in the southern conch there was a Christ enthroned. The eastern conch had a figure of Christ appearing in apocalyptic glory.

3. The backs of the niches in the curved walls of the triconch were decorated with painted imitations of drapery as part of layer 2. Some of these niches in the northern and eastern conches have been painted over with representations of patriarchs and archimandrites. Of these paintings, few are recognizable, since they have been painted over again later. In the niches on ground-floor level in the eastern apse two angels were painted. Although covered by layer of dirt nowadays, these angels are still well-preserved.
4. One of the niches under the southern conch has the half-figure of St. Mark. On either side of him there is a standing figure. Both figures have been painted over with a pattern of black lines with touches of green, meant to imitate marble. It is difficult to say when this decoration has been added; maybe it was simultaneous with layer 6, maybe independently in an earlier stage.

5. Most of the paintings in the haikal have been retouched or ‘freshened up’ at a certain moment. This has been done by adding touches of bright green and pinkish red, especially on the paintings of the stucco decorations. These paintings were originally done in black lines with some yellow accents and must have been a rather quiet framing of the niches. The colourful impression that the interior of the haikal gives nowadays is mainly due to the additions of phase 5.

6. The plaster of layer 2 in the apse collapsed one day, possibly by the end of the 13th century. This must have been the main reason for renewing the paintings in the haikal. After the plaster of layer 2 had fallen down, it must have left large parts of the painting of layer 1 exposed. The normal procedure should have been to apply a new plaster and repaint the half-dome, but instead only the edges of the fragments of plaster that had remained in place were fixed and smoothed. The painted surface of layer 1 was removed until the underlying design in red appeared. A new painting was then applied on top of this design. The theme of the collapsed painting, an apocalyptic figure of Christ, was repeated directly on the remains of layer 1, while in the lower part of the apse, where the plaster of layer 2 had remained in place, the painting of layer 6 covers layer 2. This basis for the painting of layer 6 has proved to be inadequate. Most of it has flaked off, revealing again the design in red of layer 1, and parts of layer 2, especially where this layer was retouched in bright green (layer 5). As a result, from a distance hardly anything can be recognized of any of the three paintings.

Also the other two conches were repainted and here as well the same theme was repeated, albeit with the addition of an architectural frame of arches and columns. These two paintings have survived much better than the painting in the apse. In the northern half-dome the angels flanking the Virgin were painted over and replaced by an architectural framework with four Old Testament prophets (Fig. 15). The figure of Christ in the southern half-dome corresponds more or less in position to the Christ of layer 2, but here there is no evidence of what is underneath the architectural framework around him. In the final layer there are four evangelists represented (Fig. 16). Also the figures in the niches under the northern and southern conches were repainted, most probably repeating the same representations.

The characteristics of this final layer of painting are rather thick black contour lines, linear and schematic representation of figures and faces, and a domination of dark,
brownish colours. These paintings may be attributed to the painter Mercurius, whose name is found in a number of inscriptions on the walls of the church and who must have been active around 1300 A.D.

Apart from the paintings that are visible from ground-floor level, a number of paintings have been discovered that were previously unknown, due to their poor visibility from below. One of these is a cross on the separation wall between nave and haikal, over the entrance to the northern room. On the upper parts of the walls in the central part of the haikal, on the eastern wall just under the (modern) dome, a scene was found that can possibly be identified as Moses receiving the tablets of the Law and a representation of the Burning Bush. Together with the ornamental friezes in this area of the church, these paintings should belong to layer 2, judging from the yellow background.

Methods of dating

A number of possible ways of dating a painting have been discussed above. Analysis of style and iconography are well-accepted art-historical methods, but when it comes to dating they have considerable limitations. The main reason, in my opinion, is that our knowledge of these aspects of Coptic painting is still too limited. This is a direct consequence of the relatively limited quantity of Christian mural painting known in Egypt. Reliability of statistics increases with the quantity of the material. Our map of Coptic painting has still too many white spots. The newly discovered mural paintings in Deir al-Surian contain several themes that have no parallel in Coptic or even in Christian iconography. Does this mean that the paintings in this church are of an extraordinary character or do they simply seem to be because we have a lack of material for comparison? The same applies to the painting technique. Were encaustic paintings between the 7th and 10th centuries in Egypt exceptional or common? Apparently we lack the necessary material to answer this question.

The most basic questions, i.e., the dating, the identity of the artists, and the sources of their iconography, will have to be answered in a more archaeological way. The stratifications of painting layers in Deir al-Surian and the Red Monastery near Sohag are comparable to a horizontal stratification in an excavation and give us a unique opportunity to investigate a relative chronology and where possible an absolute chronology. Dated inscriptions, and a direct link with datable elements in the architecture can give us hard evidence.

An archaeological approach at the same time can bring us in conflict with the interests of the conservator. Archaeology is basically a destructive method of research and if we compare a conservator to a plastic surgeon, the archaeologist is an autopsist performing a post-mortem. The archaeologist is interested to see cross-sections, not in the first place in preserving and restoring the object. In the case of Deir al-Surian there is fortunate situation,
seen from the archaeological perspective, that none of the subsequent layers of plaster and painting has been left undamaged. This means that we have access to all of the layers in one way or the other and that there is no need to cause more damage for research purposes.

The only dilemma is the question whether in certain cases layers of painting should be separated or not. The Venice Charter, a professional code for conservators, prohibits the removal of mural paintings unless it is the only way of securing their survival. This was the case with the painting of the Ascension under which the Annunciation was discovered. The 13th century painting of the Dormition in the northern half-dome will also have to be separated from the Nativity underneath, since both paintings are partially at the point of collapse. The only remaining half-dome then, the southern one, is in good condition and that would mean that here we should use other methods to investigate the nature of the painting underneath the present 13th century painting.

This brings us to the question of destructive and non-destructive methods. In the case of the church of Deir Anba Bishoi (the Red Monastery near Sohag) the state of preservation is much better, apart from the heavy loss of paintings in the apse. In this church non-destructive methods will be necessary in order to investigate the stratification in places where it is not visible with the naked eye. Oil-paintings can be analysed with X-ray, infra-red and ultra-violet, but in the case of paint-layers separated by lime-sand plaster the transparency to these methods can be limited. As in the recent case of the paintings of St. Anthony’s monastery, cleaning of the surface can bring a lot of evidence to light, but also here a close cooperation between researcher and conservator is indispensable. Removal of dirt or later additions to a painting can be for the benefit of its appearance and preservation, but at the same time it is removal of evidence. Dirt and damage are also part of the history of an object and need documentation.

An important question in a process of conservation is the aesthetics of the final result. In these cases we are dealing with churches that are still in use and this poses certain problems. In the case of Deir al-Surian the monks required a final result that can not be realised by the conservators: reconstruction of missing elements such as heads and faces so that the paintings can function again as religious images in the liturgy and prayers. Retouches have been made to meet such requirements as much as possible, but it remains a compromise. The conservator also has his responsibility to show the painting as an object with a history, including its damage. Whether this is compatible with re-integration of an object for modern use, is a question that has to be considered in each individual case.

Whatever questions are still open, it can be said without exaggeration that the churches of Deir al-Surian and Deir Anba Bishoi constitute two extremely valuable documents for the history of Christian painting in Egypt. Their stratifications of paintings give us literally a cross-section through the development of painting-technique and iconography. Their research and conservation is an important task, still far from finished, but with important results in store.
Endnotes

*This paper was the opening address of the Symposium. Although some information, notably on the Red Monastery, is now (2009) outdated, the paper remains a unique and invaluable statement of the various methodological problems involved, first, in the dating and interpretation of Late Antique painting in Egypt and, second, in balancing the claims of various disciplines and audiences. On these issues now see also: Karel Innemée, 2006. “Deir al-Surian (Egypt)- Conservation, restoration, reconstruction, daily use: how far should we go?” Pp. 304-305 in Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August 2006, II. Aldershot, GB: Ashgate.[ed.].

4. The proceedings of the symposium, reflecting the diversity in opinions, have been published in Cahiers Archéologiques 43 (1995), 117 sqq.
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