

### **Early Wall Paintings for Jesus Christ Represented in the Red Monastery**

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#### **Abstract**

This research is entitled “Early Wall Paintings for Jesus Christ represented in the Red Monastery”. It dealt with the representations of Jesus Christ related to the early Byzantine period applied on the walls and apses of the Red Monastery especially its sanctuary. Marvelous wall paintings for Jesus Christ along his life stages were found in the monastery of St. Bishay which was known as the Red Monastery. This monastery is located near the Upper Egyptian city of Sohag, and about two and a half miles (3km) north-west of the White Monastery. The name of the monastery is derived from the color of its constructing material of its outside walls, which is Red in color (burnt) brick, resembling the ancient Egyptian temples in their outer shape. Among the scenes of Christ there; is his representation as a child suckling from his mother and also his representation in majesty sitting on his throne among angels and saints (Pantocrator). What is unique in the scenes; is its vivid colors. Much more representations will be discussed in detail through this research.

**Keywords :**Red monastery, Bishay, wall paintings.

#### **The Objective of the Research**

This research aimed to uncover wall paintings, related to the early Byzantine era, especially those representing Jesus Christ through his different life stages.

Giving more interest to the Coptic paintings related to the early Byzantine era, representing scenes for Christ found in the Red Monastery at Sohag.

Focusing light on the Red Monastery as a historical site.

#### **The Research’s Framework**

The research’s framework is an artistic study, for tracing the early scenes of Jesus Christ in the monastery of St. Bishay at Sohag related to the early Byzantine era.

#### **The Research’s Type**

The research combined in study between both the descriptive and analytical sides

#### **Introduction**

The Red Monastery can be defined as an extraordinary monument located in Upper Egypt, and one of the greatest achievements through the 5th century. It’s situated about 3 km north the monastery of St. Shenute near Sohag, within the village of Nag’ abu azizah. This monastery is known as the Red Monastery (Al-Dayr Al-Ahmar) (Gabra and Van Loon2007), and Dayr Anba Bishai and considered the heart of a large monastic community in a region known as an important center for the ascetic life during the 5th century, C.E. nothing remains from the monastery till today except the church (Gabra 2002).

The main building at the site is an early Byzantine church that has survived in a good state of preservation due to its thick, obscuring layers of soot and varnish. It is considered one of the most beautifully decorated of the surviving late antique churches in Egypt which has been largely overlooked by scholars. Also, it is unique with its decorations that stretch around eighty percent of walls, niches, columns, capitals, pediments and apses with its vivid colors. The building’s elaborate figural and ornamental paintings, combined with extensive sculpture and monumental architecture, make it the most important historical

church in Egypt. According to the abbot of the monastery Father Antonius, he said that “the church was the least known in Egypt, and now is destined to become one of the most famous” (Bolman2009).

Near the Red Monastery is the famous monastery of St. Shenute which is also known as the white monastery this was due to the white limestone which was used in its building. Both of them dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century. They both are similar in their exterior walls structure which are angled slightly inwards and flared at the top with a cavetto cornice that is much similar to the ancient Egyptian temples (fig.1). Within their walls their architects have constructed basilicas (fig.2) each one with a trefoil sanctuary rendered in the architectural spirit of the late Roman Empire, this type was seen in other late antique churches (Bolman 2006). The Red Monastery and the neighboring white monastery once belonged to a monastic federation that contained thousands of monks and nuns, controlled by the charismatic early monastic leader Shenoute of Atripe 346 – 465 (fig.3).

The work at the site was begun (churches at each of the two monasteries) in 2000. Where the attention was directed to them not just for their importance in the history of Egyptian monasticism, but also for their importance in the early Byzantine art and architecture. In 2002, the (World Monuments Watch) included the Red and White monasteries in their list of the "100 Most Endangered Sites”.

In the same year the (American Research Center) in Egypt, recognized the importance of their paintings then (The United States Agency for International Development) provided all of the financial support for this work. The project is directed by Dr. Elizabeth Bolman of Temple University. The Coptic Church has participated substantially in this project, offering hospitality and support (Bolman 2009).

### **History**

Information about the monastery’s history is rare. It is not accurate whether St. Bishai (known also as Bishoi) whose name the monastery bears, was actually the founder of the monastery or whether it was built in his honor. However; St. Bishoi was an older companion of St. Shenute (fig.1) when he was living with his uncle Pjol. Both saints and Pjol (Shenute’s maternal uncle), built three cells in the mountain and a church which they called Al-Raghamah. What is known that the church of the monastery dates from the second half of the fifth century about ca.525 (Gabra 2002). Many historians assigned to the monastery in their writings among of them are AL-Makrizi and Abu Al-Makarem (Gabra and Van Loon2007).

### **The Monastery Architectural Components**

At the beginning of the last century remains of the monastery’s enclosure wall were still visible, today they are almost completely destroyed, and only the church and the tower can be seen as the tower was constructed directly in front of the southern main entrance of the church and immediately assumed responsibility for the protection of the church. Presumably this tower dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, despite walls of the church and sanctuary, dates back to later period, perhaps the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> or even 6<sup>th</sup> century (Gabra 2002).

Many modern buildings occupy the area to the south west and the east of the church. A part of the monastery’s buildings is still uncovered. The exterior walls imitate the

appearance of ancient Egyptian temple walls, which are angled inwards, and surmounted by a cavetto cornice, where its interior, is in the form of a basilica with a triconch.

The church is much smaller than that of the white monastery, it is rectangular in shape measuring about 22.90 x 46.60 cm, but the plan and the architecture treatment of both are similar (fig.2). The structure treatment was originally of basilica type with two side aisles and a western return aisle. Like most monastic churches it has no narthex. There were several side rooms in the southern part of the church, but almost no traces of them remain. Two gamma-shaped side rooms flank the triconch sanctuary. The church's most interesting feature is the architectural sculpture of its trilobed sanctuary. The decoration in its medieval outer walls contains reused sculpture stone pieces that have been inserted into the later brick walls (Gabra 2002).

Among the survived parts of the Red Monastery church is its trilobed eastern end. This area originally was used as the sanctuary, while the courtyard takes the shape of the unroofed nave as preferred by the monastic community the façade was placed between the nave and the eastern end. The original sanctuary has three semicircular walls each of them has two tiers of architectural sculpture; on top of which rests a large semi dome. The church was famed by its various squared or carved niches, covered with pilasters, with half and full decorated columns, creating strong contrasts of volume, light, shadow, and texture. Now a day there is a modern dome, resting on a clerestory with late antique elements, covers the center of the trefoil (fig.4)(مسجدة 2004)

The attractive architectural decorations of the triconch sanctuary from the second half of the fifth century is uniquely preserved. Its walls are adorned with two rows of columns and between the columns niches are placed in two registers. Those of the lower row appear with rectangular central section covered with decorations, while the niches of the upper rows show further development; some of their pediments are decorated with crosses they are carrying architraves for the upper register and the semi dome (Gabra 2002). Two features make this sanctuary unique; first, most of the decorative sculpture is original to the church construction and the second the walls are painted with vivid colors. Several parts of the building, such as the pilaster shafts of many niches are decorated with paintings instead of sculpture. Almost all the column capitals are in the Corinthian style (Gabra and Van Loon 2007).

The significant architectural sculpture of this church must be divided into two areas: the original decoration in the eastern part of the naos and in the triconch; the architectural sculpture contained in the east wall of the naos and in the triconch can be described as unique. It is a representative ensemble that also allows insights into the relationship between homogeneity and variety of types and forms within a system of decoration. All the capitals are executed in stonework. The dominant form is the Corinthian capital. The two well-known entrances, the north door and the south door of the surrounding walls contain decorated stone material that may derive from the time when the church was built (Coquin, Martin and Severin 1991)

#### The Church's Wall Paintings

Conservation working at the Red Monastery, have revealed wall paintings that has made it possible to identify at least four separate phases of painting in the apses of the monumental triconch sanctuary, all of which date to the 6th /7th centuries. A few medieval paintings decorate part of the facade wall in front of the triconch, and some of the nave walls. The

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\* Variations of the triconch basilica type are known to have existed around the Mediterranean in the fourth and fifth centuries.

trefoil plan of the walls in the eastern end traces three deep curves each surmounted by a huge semi dome, above which is a row of windows at more than eleven meters from the floor. Two striking horizontal cornices sweeping from one lobe to the next frame the two registers of niches flanked by an array of columns and pilasters. Squared shafts allow the entry of light through the sanctuary (Bolman 2009).

The semi domes paintings show: Christ enthroned with the four living creatures, flanked by archangels (east); the nursing virgin enthroned accompanied by prophets, saints and angels in a richly decorated framework (north), and a similar architectural frame work with Christ enthroned, surrounded by St. John the Baptist and his father Zacharias, angels, evangelists and patriarchs (south) (fig.5) (Gabra and Van Loon 2007).

### **The Wall Painting of the Eastern Apse**

In the eastern semi dome of the archeological sanctuary there were four layers of paintings; the icon of the Ascension, the icon of Resurrection, the icon of the Holy Communion and the icon of Pantocrator (fig.6.a, b), then appear mural paintings with pharaonic shaped columns topped with Roman capitals, the archangels Michael, Gabriel and some gazelles and peacocks.

The icon of the Pantocrator in the eastern apse of the archaeological sanctuary showing the Christ lifts up his right hand in gesture of blessing. On the right of the throne the archangel Michael and various mural paintings. The scene of Christ Pantocrator was successfully restored to legibility and the cracks in the painted layer were filled. Comprehensive photographic and graphic documentation accompanied every stage of the work so that a record of conditions before during and after treatment now exist. Computer modeling of the image with different intensities allowed the conservators to plan the final result digitally (pl.1) (Ayad 2016).

The icon of the Holy Communion in the eastern apse of the archaeological sanctuary, showing Jesus Christ, the apostles flanking him from the two sides and on the edges of the icon appear the archangels Michael and Gabriel, the icon of annunciation and Joseph the carpenter.

### **The Wall Painting of the Northern Apse**

The Nursing Mary (the Galaktotrophousa) (fig.7a.b.c)

One of the best representation for the enthroned Virgin Mary suckling her newly incarnate Christ from her breast comes from the Red Monastery. This figure can be seen on the northern apse of the church's sanctuary. She is shown sitting on the throne, putting her feet on the footstool, holding her son on her left leg, nursing him with her right hand, while he is interested in his breast-feeding. The Virgin wears a long dark brown dress with long sleeves, and multiple folds, a shawl over her head with folds reaching her back and shoulders, and puts underneath a scarf with white color, and around her head is an illuminating yellow colored halo, while the baby Christ wears a white tunic, over which is a cloak with a light brown color, and around his head is an illuminating halo of yellow color (صالح 2011).

Both the Virgin and her child are flanked by four Old Testament Prophets, who prophesied about the incarnation, each of them is holding scrolls with passages from the Old Testament for announcing the coming of Christ to earth from the Virgin, and they appear to be inside a palace where the Virgin Mary sat in the King's Council (Bolman 2012).

The angels flanking the Virgin Mary are seen swinging vessels of incense similar to the censers used by the monastery priests during their rituals. Those containers carried rich metaphorical associations with the womb of Mary, which enclosed the burning cool of

Christ (Evans 2012). At the two sides of the throne are St. Peter and St. Paul, from the east side prophets Isaiah and Daniel, while from the western side are Ezekiel and Jeremiah whom predicted with the birth of Christ. At the sides of the painting are Prophet Moses with Salome, and from the other side are Elijah the prophet with Joseph the carpenter. At the top of the painting appear the archangel Michael and Gabriel the announcer (Gabra and Van Loon 2007).

The painting of the Galaktotrophousa, in almost dates back to the seventh-eighth century. The church itself has been dated between the late fifth to mid sixth century. This painting bears a certain similarity with both the western and the northern semi-dome of Deir al-Surian (Higgins 2012).

### **The Wall Painting of the Southern Apse**

The southern apse of the sanctuary shows the Christ sitting on the throne lifting up his right-hand fingers referring to (the Creed of Trinity). On the sides of the throne St. John the Baptist and St. Zechariah the priest. On the eastern side St. Mathew and St. Mark. On the western side St. Luke and St. John. On the edges of the icon pope peter the last of martyr and Pope Discorus the champion of the orthodoxy. The archdeacons Stephen and mark and two others in the niches of the middle register. St. Basil the great and St. John the Chrysostom in the niches of the lower register (fig.8)( شنودة 2016)

### **The Wall Painting of the Northern Aisle**

The northern aisle of the archaeological sanctuary showing the four living creatures and the four evangelists in the dome. On the southern wall, the icon of intercession (fig.9) in which Jesus the Christ is standing holding the gospel in his left hand and blessing by the other hand flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel lift up their hands in a gesture of intercession, he appeared with his crossed nimbus around his head. He is flanked by two arches under which are two sitting angels. The feet of the angel to the viewer cover the braid motif, except where the later paint has fallen off, over the centuries. On the western wall Moses, the prophet and the Virgin Mary and beside Moses is the burning bush which was a sign of incarnation of Jesus Christ from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary (Bolman 2007, 2009). The representation of the Christ flanked by two angels on the northern side room of the sanctuary may be the work of the painter Mercurius who inscribed his name there in1301 (Gabra 2002)

### **Conclusion**

The conservation project carried out by the ARCE in the Red Monastery, emerged to light rare treasures that were buried under the walls of the church of the monastery (PL.I); among of them are the marvelous wall paintings for Jesus Christ along his different life stages; he appeared as a baby child suckling from his mother, as a youth, and as a mature man on his throne (PL.II). Despite they are all not related to the same period and probably not related to the same artist but they are all reflects the degree of professionalism reached by the Coptic artist who approved his efficiency during that century resulting unique work that makes that church to be considered the most important one during the 5th century.

Pl. I: Parts from the conservation work carried out by the ARCE in the eastern apse of the Red Monastery.



Semi dome of the eastern apse before cleaning and conservation: existing conditions with a cleaning test on the upper left of the arch.



Semi dome off the eastern apse showing the result of the reintegration of the painting of the Christ Pantokrator seen from the floor of the alter.



Computer generated scheme for the eastern apse, showing the proposed integration of Christ Pantocrator based on photographic documentation of the cleaned painting.

After: (Ayad, 2016), figs.11.2, 11.5, 11.6

Pl. II: Jesus Christ during his different life stages as seen on the Red Monastery Paintings



المراجع العربية و المعربة و الموسوعات و الرسائل العلمية  
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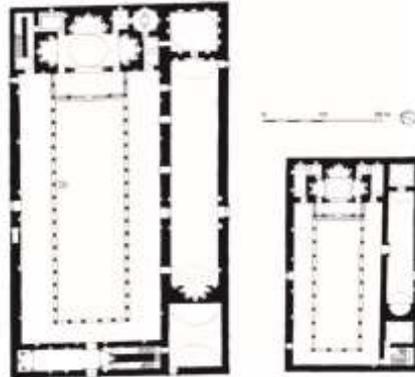
### Catalogue of figures

Fig.1A: the exterior view of the red monastery B: the exterior view of the white monastery



After: Bolman (2006), p. 3, 4.

Fig.2 White and red monastery churches plans drawn to the same scale (drawings: Nicholas Warner)



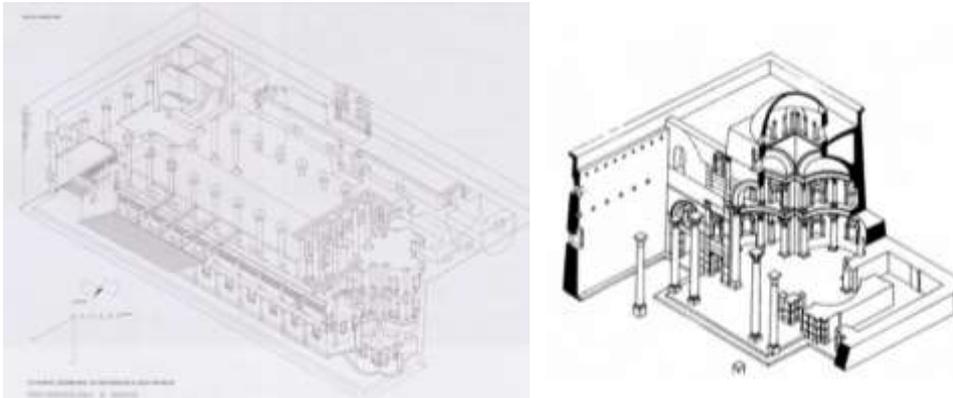
After: (Bolman 2006), fig.1;57 مسيحة, شكل

Fig.3 St. Shenoute of Atripe, north lobe middle zone, triconch, Red Monastery church  
photo: Patrick Godeau.



After: (Bolman, 2009), p.9.

Fig.4a. b: Historical reconstruction of the Red Monastery church. Isometric cutaway.



After: (Bolman, 2012), fig.26;(2004, مسيحية)

Fig.5 General view, triconch, looking up, with north (left) and south (right) lobes conserved and east (central) lobe, sixth to seventh or eighth century. Photograph; Patrick Godeau. Copyright; American research center in Egypt.



After: (Bolman, 2010), Pl. II.;

[http://maryjahariscenter.org/assets/blog/\\_featured\\_entry/Red\\_Monastery.jpg](http://maryjahariscenter.org/assets/blog/_featured_entry/Red_Monastery.jpg), march 2018

Fig.6.a Eastern hemisphere of the church with four times in different states of preservation. The first showing the Christian heaven (5th century) and the following three depicting the enthroned Christ (6-7th century).



After: Bolman, 2015, p. 125, fig. 134.

Fig.6.b Eastern apse of the church of the monastery showing the Christ as a Pantocrator on his throne.



After: <https://hensellek.wordpress.com/2013/02/09/the-red-and-white-monasteries-sohag-upper-egypt> (march 2018)

Fig.7.a General view on the north lobe, middle register, and semi dome with the Galaktotrophousa, Secco painting, ca. 7th century, northern sanctuary, Red Monastery church (Photograph Patrick Godeau; © ARCE)



After: (Bolman, 2006), p.8, pl.5.

Fig.7.b Maria lactans in the church of Anba Bishay, (seventh-eighth century CE)



After: (Higgins, 2012), fig.1.

Fig.7.c a detailed Figures for the Nursing Virgin, painted in the sanctuary of the Red Monastery Church, offers her left breast with her right hand, while Jesus sits on her left knee in a rare glimpse into the contemporary understanding of Christ's nature as the human son of a divine God.



After: (Bolman 2006), p.61.

Fig.8 South lobe, triconch, Red monastery, sixth to seventh or eighth century, Photograph; Patrick Godeau. Copyright; American research center in Egypt. ARCE.



After: (Bolman, 2010), PL.VI.

Fig.9 Christ and angels (south wall, angels and evangelists (ceiling), during conservation. Northeastern chamber, Red Monastery.



After: (Bolman, 2009), fig.5, 6, 8.