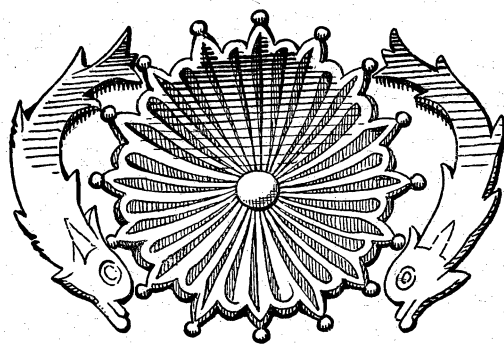


SOME LESSER KNOWN WALL-PAINTINGS
IN THE RED MONASTERY AT SOHÂG

BY
OTTO MEINARDUS

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The two monasteries west of Sohâg, the White Monastery or the Monastery of St. Shenute (Dair al-Abîad) and the Red Monastery or the Monastery of St. Bishoi (Dair al-Aḥmar) have been repeatedly visited and studied by students of history, art and architecture ⁽¹⁾. For obvious reasons, however, the White Monastery has attracted considerably more ecclesiastical and scholarly attention than its sister monastery, the Red Monastery, which is situated three kilometers north of it. For that

⁽¹⁾ BOCK, W. de, *Matériaux pour servir à l'archéologie de l'Égypte chrétienne*. St. Petersburg, 1901, pp. 61-67, figs. 54-79. BUTLER, Alfred, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*. Oxford, 1884, vol. I, pp. 351-359. CURZON, R., *Visits to Monasteries in the Levant*, London, 1849, pp. 130-137. DEICHMANN, F. W., « Zum Altägyptischen in der koptischen Baukunst », *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Instituts für Ägyptische Altertumskunde in Kairo*, VIII, 1939, pp. 34-37. DENON, V., *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte*, Paris, 1802, p. 120. EVERS, H. G. and ROMERO, R., « Rotes und Weisses Kloster bei Sohag, Probleme der Rekonstruktion », *Christentum am Nil*, Recklinghausen, 1964, pp. 175-199. EVETTS, B. T. A., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and some neighbouring countries, attributed to Abû Sâlih the Armenian*, Oxford, 1895, pp. 104-106, 235-239. FERGUSSON, J., *A History of Architecture*, London, 1893, vol. I, pp. 510-511. GAYET, A., *L'Art Copte*, Paris, 1902, pp. 138-152. LEFEBVRE, G., « Dayr el-Abiad », in CABROL and LECLERQ, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*, IV, cols. 459-502. MEINARDUS, O., *Christian Egypt Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, 1965, pp. 290-294. MONNERET DE VILLARD, U., *Les Couvents près de Sôhâg*, Milan, 1925. PEERS, C. R., « The White Monastery near Sohag », *Archaeological Journal*, 1904, pp. 131-153. POCOCKE, R., *A Description of the East*, London, 1743, vol. I, pp. 79-80. VANSLEB, J. M., *Nouvelle Relation en forme de Journal d'un voyage fait en Égypte en 1672 et 1673*. Paris, 1677, pp. 372-377.

matter, we may justifiably state that the Red Monastery has always existed in the shadow of the White Monastery.

The wall-paintings of these monasteries have not been systematically described. True, Monneret de Villard referred to several wall-paintings in the White and in the Red Monasteries, but he selected merely a few examples for his study. In this context, he did mention one of the wall-paintings in the northern chamber of the Monastery of St. Bishoi, namely, the painting of Christ between two kneeling persons, of which also a sketch is provided ⁽¹⁾.

In the literature about the Red Monastery, I have discovered only one further reference to these wall-paintings. W. de Bock states that « at each side of the central apse at the eastern extremity of the church, there are — as in the case of the White Monastery — two small chambers, which are adorned with wall-paintings, and which are covered with groined vaults, in the middle of which are placed around sculptured stones » ⁽²⁾. The wall-paintings under discussion adorn the dome and the upper south and west wall of the small chamber north of the central apse of the Church of St. Bishoi in the Red Monastery (Fig. 1). This chamber, which is completely dark, is referred to by the parish priests ⁽³⁾ as « the former library », and, indeed, at one time, this room may well have served this particular purpose.

We shall distinguish two kinds of wall-paintings. First of all, there are the paintings which adorn the dome; and secondly, there are the paintings, which we find on the upper south and west wall of this chamber. The fact that the wall-paintings of the dome and the side-walls are severely damaged, makes a more detailed reconstruction of the theme almost impossible.

The paintings of the dome show four angels, each quite different from the other (Fig. 2, Pl. I, A & B) ⁽⁴⁾. Their faces are oval-shaped and sur-

⁽¹⁾ MONNERET DE VILLARD, U., *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 132, fig. 216.

⁽²⁾ BOCK, W. de, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁽³⁾ QUMMUS BĪLUS SHENŪDAH and QUMMUS WISSA FAHĪM.

⁽⁴⁾ A similar arrangement of the four Archangels and the four Evangelists is also found on the ceiling of the archepiscopal chapel in Ravenna. Here, however, the Evangelists are portrayed by their symbolic creatures.

rounded with black hair and a nimbus. Apparently they had no wings (?). They are clothed in a white robe over which they wear a black mantle. In their right hand they hold a staff, which may have been surmounted by a cross. The angel in the south-east corner holds in his left hand a decorated orb with a six-pointed design, in the centre of which

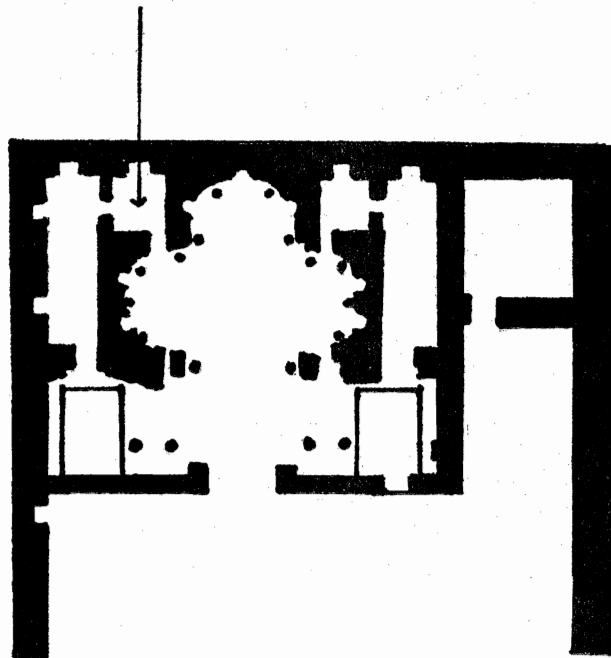


Fig. 1. — The Church of St. Bishoi in the Red Monastery, Sôhâg.

there is an *ankh*. This angel is probably St. Michael (Pl. II, A). The angel in the north-west corner holds in his left hand a smaller orb without any design (Pl. II, B). With respect to the other two angels, it is impossible to determine whether they hold anything in their left hand.

Between the four angels, there are four large medallions. Each medallion is surrounded by a decorated circle, which is divided into small sections. The figures, which are portrayed in these medallions, represent the Four Evangelists, and each of them shows distinct characteristics. In the lower right hand corner of these medallions we see two

dark lines, one horizontal and one vertical, which are the upper left corner of the Gospel, which the Evangelists are holding in their left hand. Similar representations of the Apostles or Saints with the Gospel

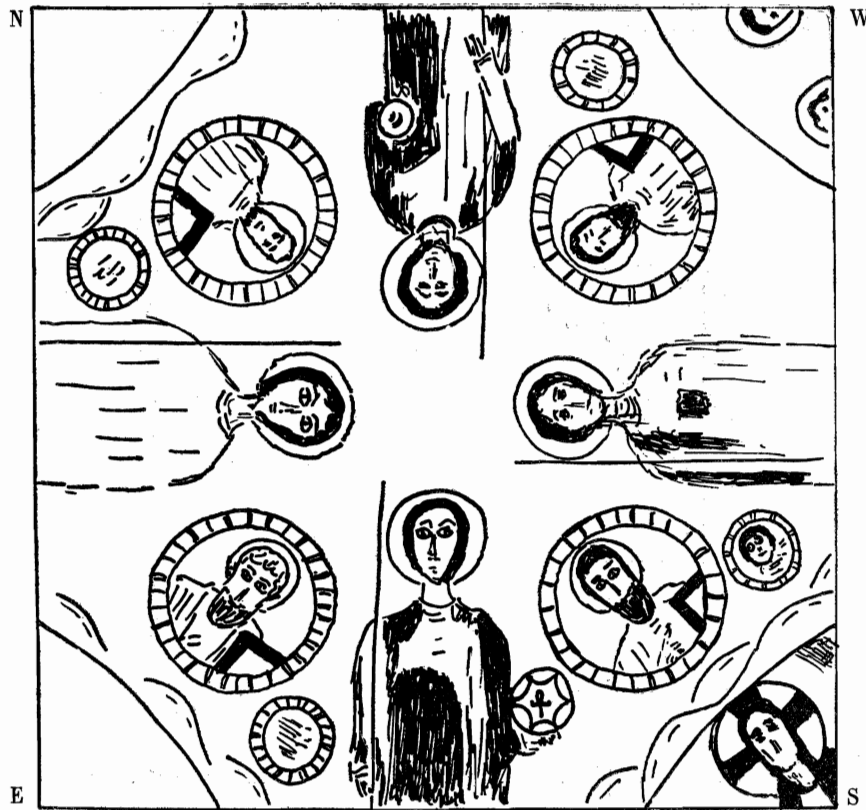


Fig. 2.

are found on the wall-paintings of the Monastery of St. Jeremiah at Saqqara⁽¹⁾ and of the niches of the Monastery of St. Apollo at Bâwît⁽²⁾.

The Evangelist in the southern medallion is best preserved. He has a distinct long-shaped face with black hair and a long black beard.

⁽¹⁾ Cf. QUIBELL, J., *Excavations at Saqqara*, Cairo, 1908-1912, vol. 1908, Pl. XLIV.

⁽²⁾ Cf. CLÉDAT, J., *Le Monastère et la Nécropole de Baouît*, Cairo, 1904-1906, 1909, 1916.

The eye-brows are very pronounced, and so are the round eyes. With the index-finger of his right hand he points to the Gospel. To the left of the nimbus, one can see the letters IO, probably [ΑΓ]ΙΟ[Σ]. To the right of the nimbus, there are the letters ΜΔΡ (?). To the right of the large medallion, there is a smaller medallion also surrounded by a double circle, which is divided into small sections. Within this medallion, there is the face of a person with dark hair and large oval-shaped eyes. To the right of the head there is the letter Α. The Evangelist in question is St. Matthew, and the person in the small medallion is the Angel, the symbol of the first Evangelist (Pl. II, A).

The Evangelist, who is represented in the eastern medallion, has also the typical long face, though with white hair and a long white beard. He has large oval-shaped eyes and pronounced eye-brows. His cloak shows stiff folds. With the index-finger of his right hand he points to the Gospel. There are no letters on either side of the nimbus, which would identify the Evangelist. To the right of the large medallion, we see traces of the upper rim of a smaller medallion. If we follow the standard iconographical arrangement, we should expect that this Evangelist is St. John, which is supported by the fact that his old age is represented by his white hair and his white beard (Pl. III, A).

The face of the Evangelist in the northern medallion is in many ways similar to that of the other Evangelists, though we notice a short beard and the absence of any hair on his head. With the index finger of his right hand he points to the Gospel. The mouth, the nose and the eyes are damaged. To the right of the large medallion, we see only very few traces of the rim of a smaller medallion. We should expect that this Evangelist is St. Mark (Pl. I, A).

The Evangelist in the western medallion is severely damaged. He has white hair and a long white beard. His right hand is raised in the orans position. To the right of the large medallion we see traces of the upper rim of a smaller medallion. We should expect that this Evangelist is St. Luke (Pl. II, A).

On the upper south wall, there is a painting of Christ standing and holding in His left hand the Gospel and blessing with His right hand. His head is surrounded by a cross-nimbus. The Gospel is adorned with

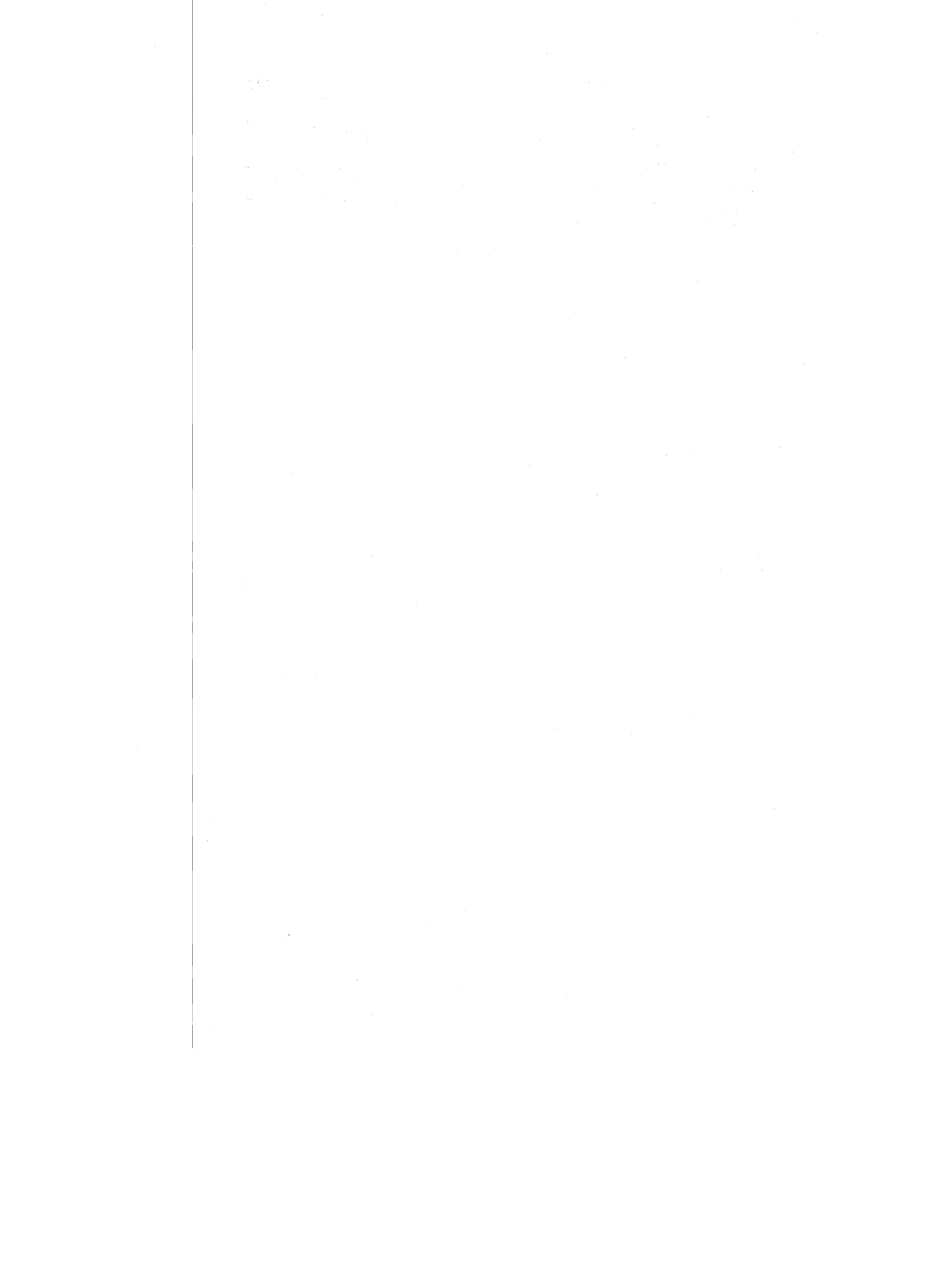
a large Cross. On either side of Christ there is a worshipping angel bent in adoration. The faces of the angels are slightly turned to the front. The garment of the angel on the left is beautifully decorated with a design of large dots. The folds of the lower garment are clearly marked. The painting of the angel on the right is severely damaged and we must assume that he was similarly portrayed as the angel on the left (Pl. III, B).

On the upper west wall, above the western entrance to the chamber, there is a wall-painting, which portrays two persons. The person on the left, who is a female figure (?), is possibly the Holy Virgin with her hands raised in front of her in the orans position. The person on the right is a saint with a white beard and short white hair. Also his hands are raised in the orans position, *cf.* St. Apollo, the wall-painting of the Monastery of St. Jeremiah (Pl. IV, B). On his left shoulder, the cloak is adorned with a Tau Cross, indicating perhaps, that this saint is St. Antony the Great (Pl. IV, A).

The wall-paintings of the northern chamber of the Church of St. Bishoi are typical examples of Coptic art. In many ways, the faces of the Evangelists show greater similarities to those of the Fayyûm portraits than to the almost square-faced saints of the Monastery of St. Jeremiah. The heavily pronounced eye-brows, the oval-shaped almost round eyes are neither Pharaonic nor Byzantine. In fact, these paintings are good illustrations of an indigenous art-form, which emerged in the Nile Valley from the VIth century onwards. They are of the same style as those heads of saints, which are portrayed in the northern and southern apses of the church. Whereas the *terminus a quo* for these paintings should be assigned to the VIth or the VIIth century, the time of the construction of this church, the *terminus ad quem* should be no later than the Xth century. For that matter, the highly individualistic representations of the Evangelists would justify a relatively early date, perhaps the VIIth or the VIIIth century⁽¹⁾. While we stressed the indigenous character of these paintings, we must recognize at the

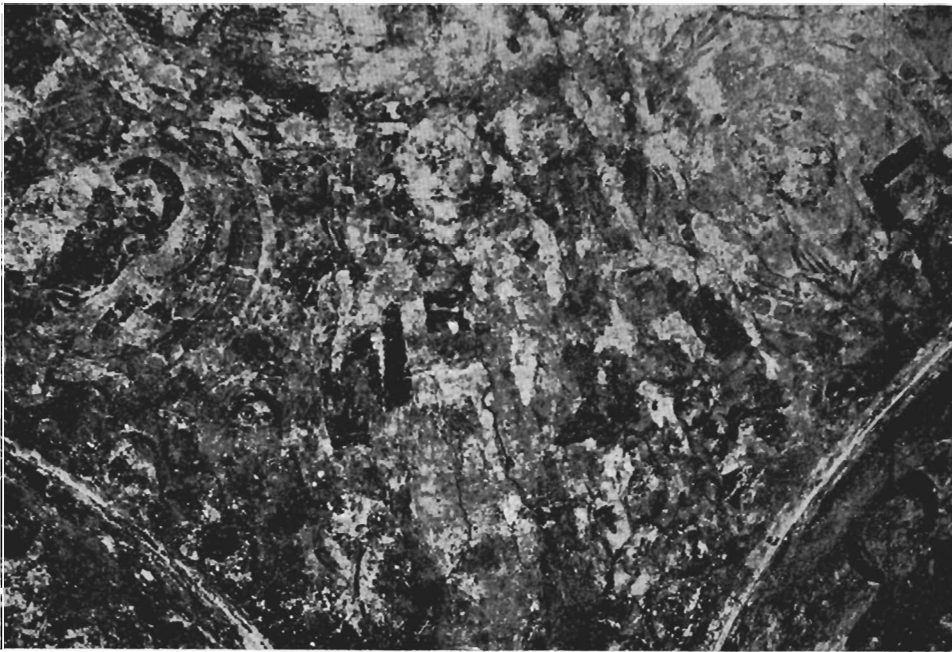
⁽¹⁾ In spite of the Coptic inscription quoted by Monneret de Villard, which refers to a painter Mercurius and the year 1301 A.D. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *loc. cit.*

same time, however, that the artist was also well acquainted with the standard themes of the imperial art, as it is evident from the arrangement of the Evangelists, but especially from the painting on the upper south wall, representing Christ, Who is worshipped by two adoring angels.

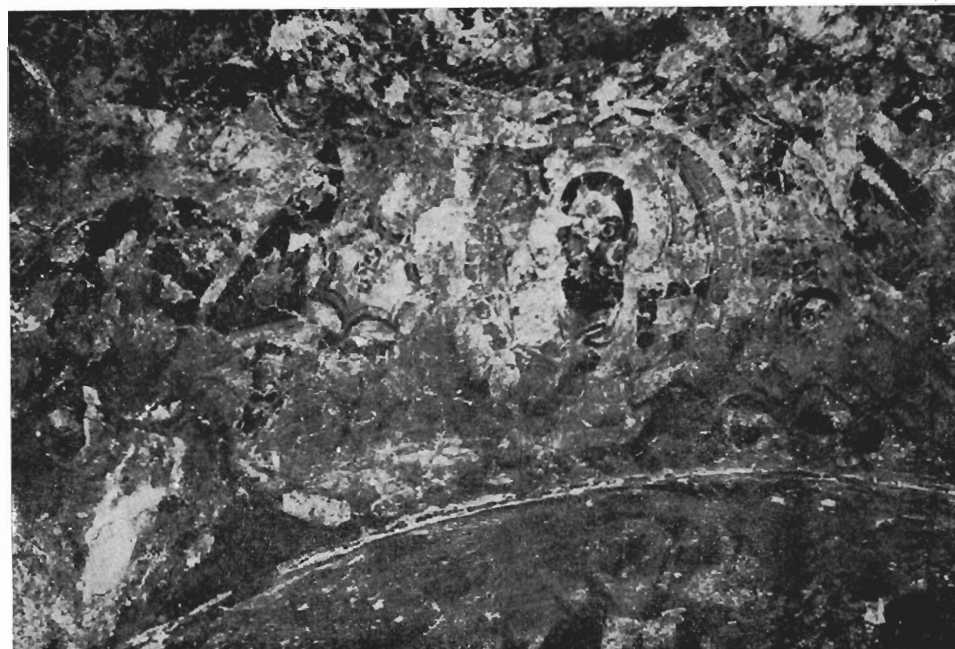




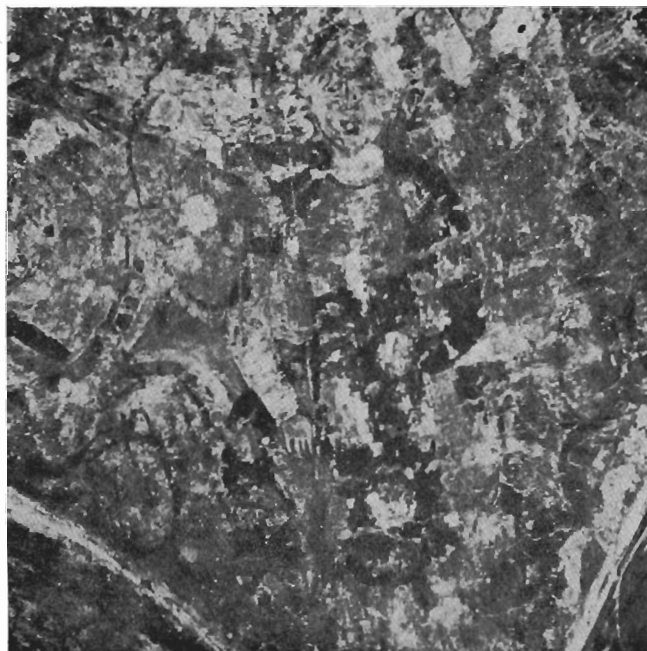
A.— Angel in the north-east corner.



B.— Angel in the south-west corner.



A.— Southern medallion.



B.— Angel in the north-west corner.



A.— Eastern medallion.



B.— Painting of Christ on the upper south wall.



A.— Wall-painting on the upper west wall.



B.— Wall-painting of the Monastery of St. Jeremiah.

