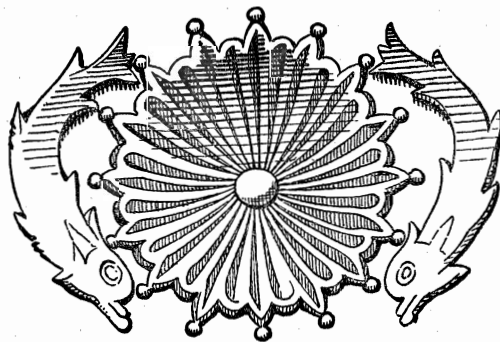


THE SEMI-DOMES OF THE RED MONASTERY
AT SOHÂĜ

BY

OTTO MEINARDUS

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In volume XX of this Bulletin I presented a description of «Some Lesser Known Wall-Paintings in the Red Monastery»⁽¹⁾, which are found on the walls of the small dark chamber north of the eastern apse of the Church of St. Bishoi. The location of those particular paintings justified the description of being «lesser known». With respect to the wall-paintings under discussion in this study the same cannot be maintained. The three semi-domes are obvious to every visitor to this monastery, and yet, no one seems to have attempted to describe these very heavily damaged paintings.

For the purpose of our study, the literature of the White and Red Monasteries at Sohāġ provides us with no significant help. Whereas two of the semi-domes of the White Monastery are described in some detail by W. de Bock⁽²⁾, G. Lefebure⁽³⁾, Monneret de Villard⁽⁴⁾, and Alfred L. Schmitz⁽⁵⁾, those of the Red Monastery have been ignored, if for no other reason than the fact that they are in such a severely damaged state. That this may well be the reason for the scholarly neglect is

⁽¹⁾ MEINARDUS, O., «Some Lesser Known Wall-Paintings in the Red Monastery at Sohāġ», *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, XX, pp. 111-117.

⁽²⁾ DE BOCK, W., *Matériaux pour servir à l'archéologie de l'Égypte chrétienne*. St. Petersburg, 1901, pp. 61-67 and plates XXI and XXII.

⁽³⁾ LEFEBURE, G., «Dair el-Abiad» in CABROL and LECLERQ, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*, IV, n°s 3662 and 3663.

⁽⁴⁾ MONNERET DE VILLARD, U., *Les Couvents près de Sohāġ*. Milan, 1925, vol. II, p. 132.

⁽⁵⁾ SCHMITZ, Alfred Ludwig, «Das Weisse und das Rote Kloster», *Die Antike*, III, 1927, pp. 326-350.

supported by the observation that none of the above-mentioned writers referred to the damaged northern semi-dome of the White Monastery.

The Semi-domes of the White Monastery.

It is well known that the eastern semi-dome of the principal church in the White Monastery is adorned with a monumental painting of the Pantocrator on His celestial throne within a beautifully designed aureole. The right hand of Christ is raised for the blessing, His left hand rests on a Gospel which is decorated with a cross. In the four corners of the Gospel there are four small crosses which are encircled. On either side of the aureole there are small portraits of the Holy Virgin (north) and the Forerunner (south). Additional small portraits of the Four Evangelists and the Four Bodiless Living Creatures surround the aureole. The winglike lines extending from the aureole may be designed to give the impression of the Ascension of Christ as the theme developed iconographically from the Vision of Ezekiel⁽¹⁾. As pointed out by Monneret de Villard, the inscriptions raise serious difficulties since they refer to two artists of the same name, namely Theodore, the one being an Egyptian of Terbide⁽²⁾, and the other being an Armenian. It is possible that this painting was begun by Theodore the Armenian after 1076, the year of the consecration of Gregory as Armenian bishop of Egypt, and that it was completed by Theodore the Egyptian in 840 A.M. or 1124.

The southern semi-dome of the White Monastery is also well-known, showing a cross in an aureole which is supported by two angels with the Holy Virgin and St. John on either side. The cross is without the Crucified, and only a white linen cloth, the Holy Shroud, hanging over the horizontal bars of the cross, symbolizes the Resurrection⁽³⁾.

The Problems of Identification.

Unfortunately, the paintings of the semi-dome of the White Monastery are of little help for an identification of the themes which are represented

⁽¹⁾ *Ezekiel I.*

⁽²⁾ *I.e.* Terbe or Tarfah.

⁽³⁾ A watercolour painting by Clédat of this semi-dome (1903) is published by MONNERET DE VILLARD, *loc. cit.*

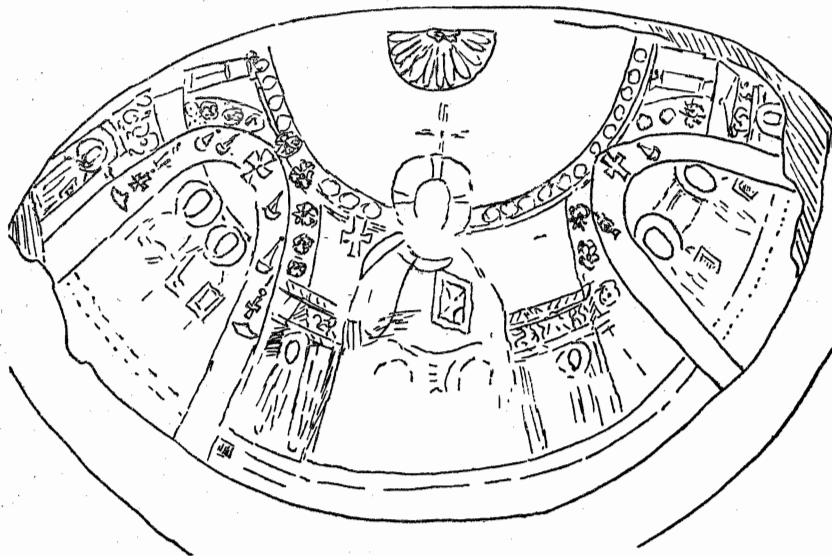
on the semi-domes of the Red Monastery. The similarities are very few. The semi-dome paintings of the White and the Red Monasteries show in the uppermost part of the respective designs a conch, which should be assigned to the period of the construction of the monasteries. In the case of the paintings of the White Monastery, this conch appears to have been covered at a later date, though subsequently the paint has fallen off. The three domes of the Red Monastery show the conch very clearly and in each case this is the only undamaged part of the paintings.

The problem of the identification of the themes of the three semi-domes of the Red Monastery is increased by the lack of iconographical standard types in Coptic churches at this given period. With regard to the Byzantine Church, it was Michael III the Drunkard (842-867), who established the official scheme of church decoration when he built the Church of the Holy Virgin of the Pharos at his palace in Constantinople. Thereafter, worshippers, whether they could read or not, could lift up their eyes in any church in the Empire and see all about them in precisely placed pictures the theology of their faith. In the Coptic Church, this minute process of iconographical standardization of locations in the sanctuaries has never taken place. True, there are many instances where we discover the Pantocrator portrayed in the eastern semi-dome as in the case of the Church of St. Antony in the Red Sea Monastery of St. Antony or in the principal church of the Monastery of St. Simeon at Aswân. The other monasteries, however, do not offer us pertinent guidance. In the Church of the Holy Virgin in the Monastery of the Syrians, Wādî 'n-Naṭrûn, the northern semi-dome is adorned with a painting of the Falling-Asleep of the Holy Virgin, the southern semi-dome with a painting of the Annunciation and the Nativity of Christ and the western semi-dome with the Ascension of Christ. The eastern semi-dome of the VIth century Church of the Transfiguration in the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai is decorated with the well-known mosaic of the Transfiguration. The mediaeval pilgrims to Egypt inform us that the apses of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus in Old Cairo were adorned with paintings of the Passion of Christ and the Holy Virgin. We have to recognize, therefore, that for the identification of the themes

of the semi-domes we cannot fall back on certain iconographical prototypes elsewhere.

The Southern Semi-dome.

The painting of the southern semi-dome is divided into three sections from the top to the bottom. The upper section is so severely damaged that the subject cannot be identified. The upper section is separated



Red Monastery, Southern Semi-Dome.

from the central section by an ornamented band of small closely attached circles. The central section is separated from the lower section by a relatively plain band. The principal theme of the southern semi-dome is the Pantocrator enthroned blessing with His right hand and holding in His left hand a Gospel. This Gospel is decorated with a geometrical design, probably a cross. On either side of His throne there are two small columns with elaborately decorated capitals. The kymatia appear to be of Lesbian design. Each column is adorned with a painting of a Saint. To the right and to the left of the columns there are two identical pointed arches, the ogives of which are adorned with crosses. The outer band of the arches is ornamented with small circles or flower designs.

The arches are decorated with several sanctuary-lamps, approximately six to eight, which are arranged to the right and to the left of the crosses. Inside the arches there are two Saints, each holding in their left hand a Gospel. We may assume that the two couples represent the Four Evangelists. On the furthest sides in the central and in the lower section there are small columns with capitals. The columns of the lower section are adorned with paintings of unidentified Saints, though the names of the Saints appeared on the capitals. On the right side, the word ΑΓΙΟC is legible. On the left side the letters ΠΑΡ can be read.

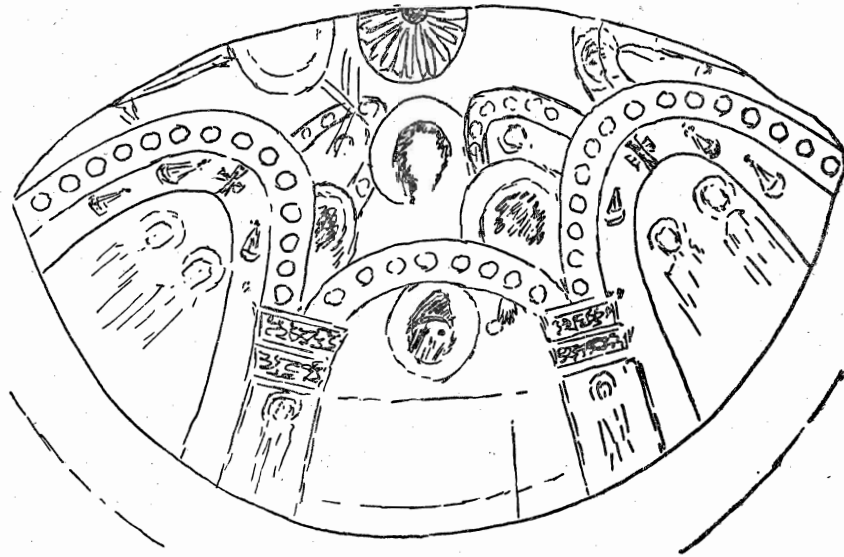
There is no question that the painting of the Pantocrator has undergone restoration by a second hand. Today, we can clearly identify two faces, the upper head with white hair and surrounded by the above-mentioned cross-nimbus and below this one, there is another head with dark hair. The eyes, the eyebrows, the nose and the mouth are clearly visible. It seems that the latter head was also surrounded by a nimbus, though only few traces of the same are visible.

The Northern Semi-dome.

The painting of the northern semi-dome is divided into two main sections. The upper one consists of several heavily damaged arches, the lower section consists of three large arches which are joined to two columns. Each column has an elaborate capital (calathos and volute) and is adorned with the painting of an unidentified Saint, the arrangement being similar to the two central columns of the painting of the southern semi-dome. The central arch is lower than the right and the left arches. The outer band of the arches is ornamented with small closely attached circles. The inner band of the right and the left arches shows the same ornamentation as that of the arches of the southern semi-dome, *i.e.* a cross and several sanctuary-lamps, which are arranged to the right and to the left of the cross. Inside the arches there are two Saints each. One cannot see whether they hold a Gospel in their hand. The upper section includes six small arches, at least two of which have the same band design as the larger arches of the lower section.

With respect to the identification of the theme of the painting we may conjecture that the original theme portrayed the Patron-Saint of the

monastery, St. Bishoi, attended by his ascetic contemporaries and successors, who occupied the spaces in the numerous arches. There are, however, only very few remaining parts of the original painting, *e.g.* the arches, the columns, a hermit, probably St. Bishoi looking upwards and wearing the traditional monastic habit, and a right hand reaching down. At a later time, the semi-dome was redesigned and the existing painting was covered with a painting of the Holy Virgin in the centre

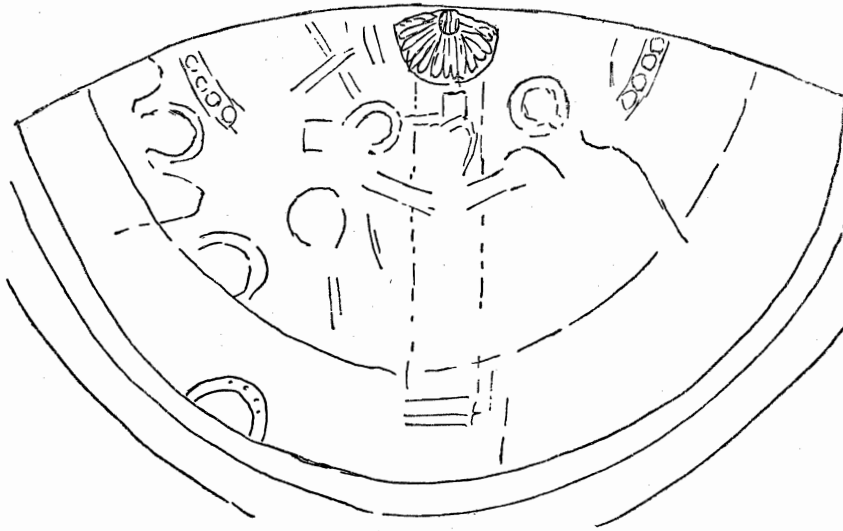


Red Monastery, Northern Semi-Dome.

attended by two Saints or two angels on either side of her. The state of this second layer is so poor that no further identification is possible.

There is no question that the original paintings of the southern and northern semi-dome were executed by the same artist, who employed for his division of the paintings ornamented bands and decorative arches. Moreover, the artist delighted in filling the space at his disposal with a large number of individual subjects of a hagiological and architectural nature. Thus, for example, in the case of the southern semi-dome we note at least nine persons and six columns; the northern semi-dome might have included even thirteen persons and nine arches. The arrangement, ornamentation, and the profusion of details are in sharp

contrast to the relative simplicity of the semi-domes of the White Monastery. The use of decorated arches in the paintings of the southern and northern semi-domes is not uncommon in the tradition of Christian art. In several ways these arches are quite similar to those of the IVth century mosaic in the dome of the Church of St. George in Thessalonica. There are also similarities to the Xth century outer-wall reliefs of the Armenian Church of Achthamar.



Red Monastery, Eastern Semi-dome.

The Eastern Semi-dome.

The painting of the eastern semi-dome of the Red Monastery is considerably more destroyed than those of the side domes and the reason for this apparently intentional destruction seems understandable in the light of its theme. Upon closer examination of the semi-dome one discovers traces of the Crucifixion of Christ with two attending persons (the Holy Virgin and St. John), or two angels on either side, though only the nimbi are visible. We should expect, however, the sacred Head of Christ bowed to the right, whereas the traces seem to indicate that His head is turned to the left. Since the representation of the Crucifixion

was considered the height of blasphemy to the Arab invaders, this painting suffered more severely to the point of its virtual obliteration. This means that any further identification is impossible.

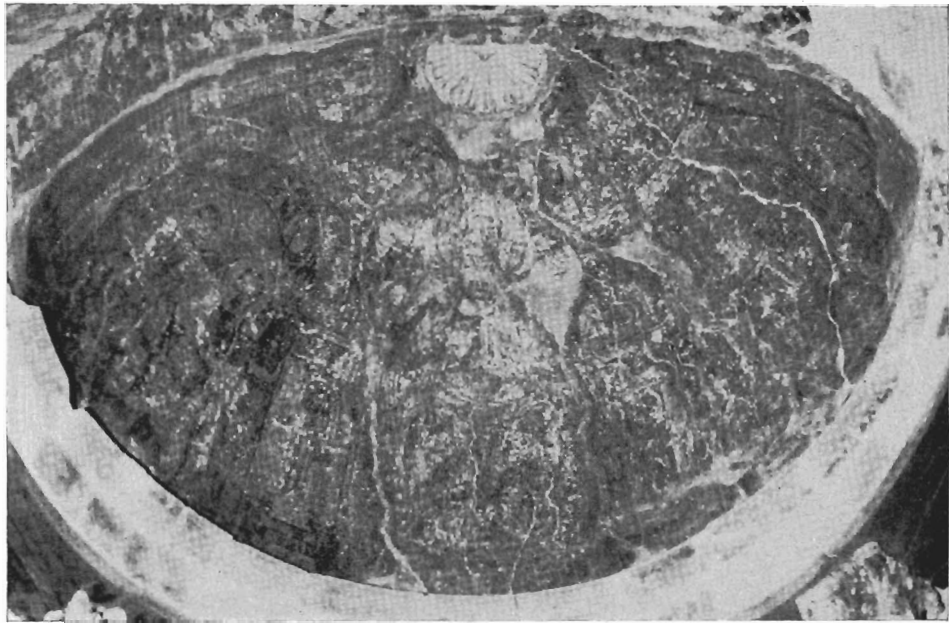
Since all three paintings are in such a dilapidated state it would be presumptuous to attempt to date the paintings. For the original paintings we may assign a *terminus a quo* between the VIIth and VIIIth century and a *terminus ad quem* probably not later than the XIIIth century. With respect to the second layer of paintings no date can be advanced.



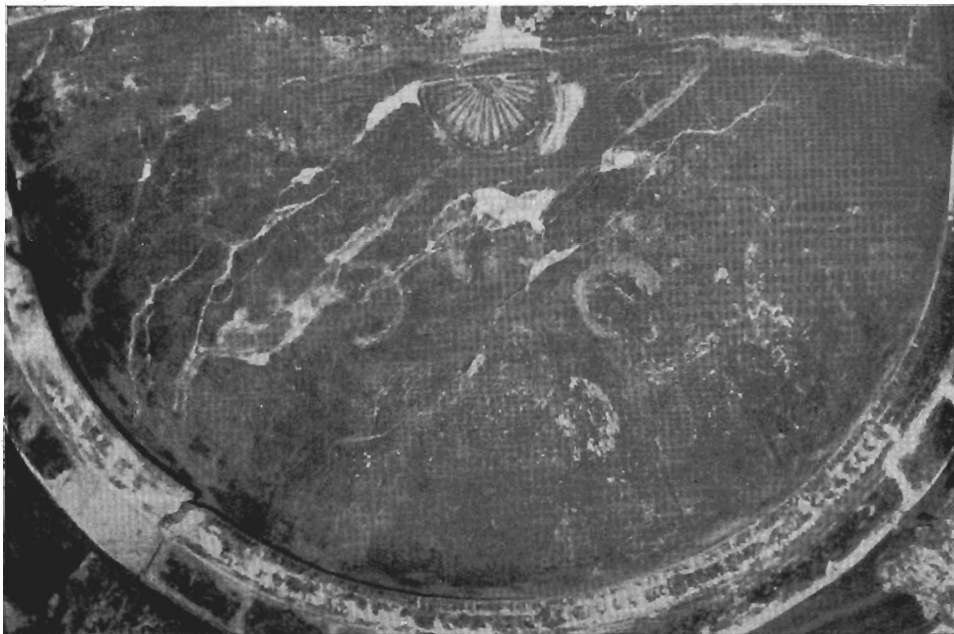
A. — White Monastery : Eastern Semi-Dome.



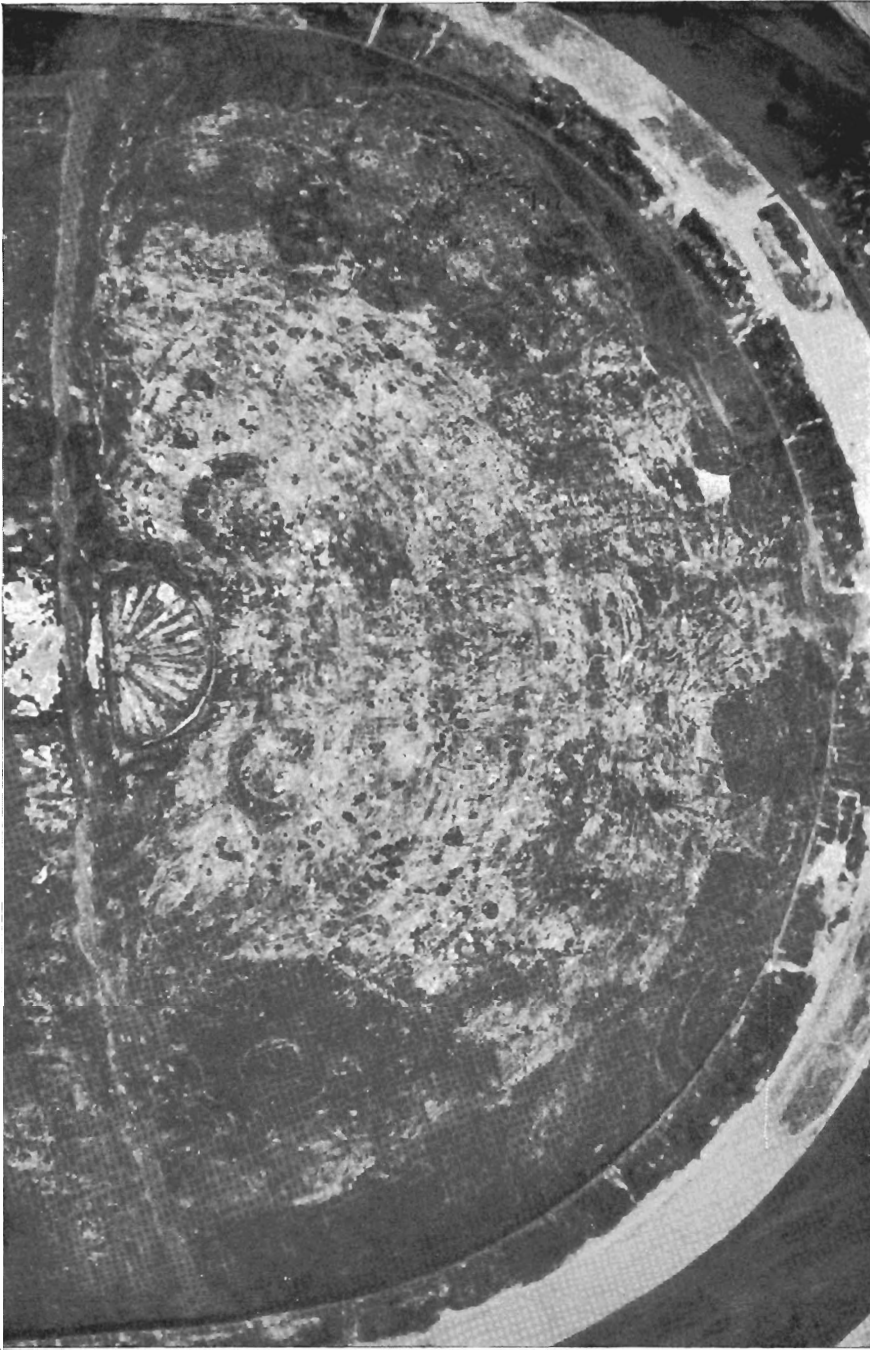
B. — White Monastery : Southern Semi-Dome.



A. — Red Monastery : Southern Semi-Dome.



B. — Red Monastery : Northern Semi-Dome.



Red Monastery : Eastern Semi-Dome.

