

INTRODUCTION

The wall paintings from the cathedral discovered by a Polish expedition in Faras (ancient Pachoras) constitute the largest assemblage of murals ever found in Nubia and are widely regarded as representative of medieval Nubian art. The story of the discovery and rescue of the building and its painted decoration in the course of the UNESCO Nubian Salvage Campaign of the early 1960s has been told repeatedly, hence there is no need to extrapolate on it here. The early medieval fortified town known as Pachoras was the seat of the kings of Nobadia. After conversion of the kingdom to Christianity in the mid-6th century and the union with Nubian Makuria in the 7th century, the city remained an important administrative centre and an episcopal see. A magnificent cathedral was raised in the middle of the city and stood there for almost 800 years (see below, page 23). The walls were decorated with murals and more than 150, from different phases, were preserved. Most of them were taken down from the walls and treated by Polish restorers (see below, pages 20–21). In effect, two separate galleries of Nubian art were created, one at the National Museum in Warsaw, the only one in Europe, and the other in Khartoum. Both were opened in 1972. The collection from Warsaw, 66 murals, has been published in catalogue form (Michałowski 1974) and quite recently as a gallery guide book by Bożena Mierzejewska (2014), but despite half a century of scholarship and more than two hundred studies written by Polish and other authors, several of these murals remain unknown to the general and even scholarly public. The present volume goes a way to redressing this situation.

The compositions, some of which are featured in world art history textbooks, include scenes from the Old and New Testaments, numerous images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, archangels, angels and saints, as well as works of particular historic value, such as portraits of kings, local court dignitaries and the bishops of Faras (see below, page 54–55). More importantly, the paintings were present on successive plaster coats applied to the cathedral walls, thus enabling a general chronology to be established for this mural art. Further detailed studies of the compositions and their context have distinguished groups of works painted by individual artists or teams of artists.

Despite the years that have passed since the original excavation, the need to present the full assemblage, including unpublished material, is pressing. It is essential to be able to view the wall paintings in the broader context of murals already known from the extensive scholarship that has been done on individual paintings. A second, no less important reason is the progress made in the past 50 years in research on the Christian period in Nubia. There is need today to revise many of the commonly cited opinions, which had been based on sources then available, in reference to the original documentation of the day. Advances in studies of Nubian church architecture have led to a better understanding of the meaning and extent of rebuilding episodes in the interiors (Godlewski 2006a), their liturgical use as well as the iconographic programme (Scholz 1994; Zielińska 2010). In addition, discoveries of written documents in Qasr Ibrim (Plumley 1978; Browne 1989; 1991; Adams 1996: 213–252) and of late Christian paintings in Dongola (Martens-Czarnecka 2001b; 2005; 2006; 2011) and Baganarti (Łaptaś 2004b; 2008; Żurawski 2008a; 2012; 2014a; 2014b) have shed new light on the Faras murals of a similarly late period.

The present volume is a record of irrefutable archaeological evidence. Every effort has been made to shed ideas, which by dint of numerous repetitions have *nolens volens* acquired the status of historical fact. The same can be said of

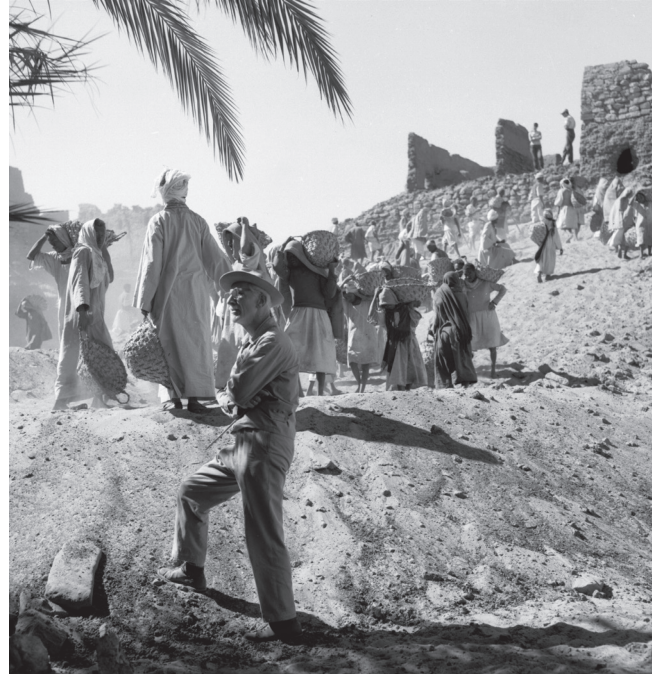
the catalogue, where ideas relating to the identification of painting theme and justification of the dating have been rigorously restricted to the commentaries. Care has been taken in the subjective attribution of paintings to a given school or workshop, or historical period, based only on principles generally applied in art history. Tables of the decorative patterns, originally presented in Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka's detailed study of the motifs and ornamentation in Faras paintings (1982a; 1982b), have been digitized, re-drawn and revised with the benefit of blown-up images of the murals analysed on the computer screen and compared with other evidence. Indeed, a thorough reappraisal of the evidence, as recorded in the photographic documentation of damaged paintings not removed from the walls of the cathedral at the time (hence lost), has resulted in a certain degree of progress being made in this field (as well as in that of identifying composition themes). The process of producing digitized drawings based on photographic records has resulted in the identification of many significant details that were overlooked by those compiling on-site descriptions, hampered by the field conditions there and pressed for time.

Work on the catalogue followed a general principle of assessing each artwork anew. This led to questioning previously held assertions whenever the iconographic evidence was found wanting. In several cases specific figure identifications have been replaced with more general designations: for example, an image hitherto cited in publications as "Archangel Michael" [Cat. 55, 121] is now referred to simply as an "archangel", whilst depictions of individuals commonly dubbed "eparchs" [e.g., Cat. 132, 136 or 143] have been reclassified under the more general term of "Nubian dignitary" (with the exception of Cat. 140, where the expression "eparch" was borrowed from the legend accompanying the mural; for a discussion of "dignitaries", see also below, Chapter 2).

The murals have also been dated with greater caution than before, archaeological evidence providing grounds for assigning them to somewhat broader time periods than before. Only in the instance where an atelier could be identified indisputably, for example, in the case of groups of 8th-century and late 10th- to early 11th-century paintings, was it feasible to narrow down their dating based on criteria provided by particulars of ornamentation preferred by the artist or by the graphic style evident in the texts (legends) describing the theme of the painting (see below, Chapter 2 on the chronology).

The texts discussed in the study are inscriptions intended by the artist as part of the composition; no graffiti or *dipinti*, sometimes visible in the paintings, were included. All the texts (referred to arbitrarily as inscriptions, although not entirely correctly as they are not engraved) were read first by the present author on the spot in Faras and published (only the legends) in part in descriptions of particular compositions (among others in Michałowski 1967; *Faras Exhib.*: Nos 1–21). Only those in the Polish collection were studied in greater detail (Jakobielski 1974); others (unless indicated otherwise) are presented here for the first time.

An issue that has sparked controversy in recent years (see Łaptaś 1996; Godlewski 1992c: 105–106) is the established use of style as a term to refer to groups of paintings from Faras originating from the same period and named after the dominant colour in these representations. Initially, researchers identified nine groups: A – violet style, 8th century; B – late violet style, 8th century to first half of 9th century; C – transitional style, first half of 9th century; D – white style, latter half of 9th century; E – yellow-and-red style, first half of 10th century; F – multi-coloured style I, late 10th century to early 11th century; G – multicoloured style II, latter half of 11th century; H – multicoloured style III, 12th century; and J – late style, 13th–15th century (see Michałowski 1964a; 1966; 1967; 1972; 1974: 28–30; Martens 1972; 1973; Martens-Czarnecka 1982a; 1982b; Jakobielski 1982a, and others). The notion of style is variously perceived by art historians and the term itself is increasingly often avoided. It has also been dispensed with in this volume in



Kazimierz Michałowski in Faras, 1961

favour of defining the murals according to the period in which they were painted or the particular school which produced them. The sequence of mural groups has remained largely unaltered, as the criteria have not changed, but the number of phases has been reduced to six. However, the colour-related terminology has been avoided in order to prevent any potential link being made between the colour of a figure's garments and the name of a group; this type of association was previously a common occurrence (see, e.g., Weitzmann 1970: 327–328; van Moorsel, Jacquet, and Schneider 1975: *passim*, attribution of 11th-century paintings to the 'white style'; for more on this issue, see also Martens-Czarnecka 1987: 262; Scholz 1994: 244; Łaptaś 1996: 2). Changes have taken place in the dating of individual groups of murals (mostly those of the late period) as a result of fresh interpretation of archaeological evidence, both from Faras itself and from other excavation sites where similar artwork has been discovered.

Iconographic information about individual paintings has been kept to a bare minimum in this work. It relates exclusively to the identification of the theme and the manner in which it was represented in the belief that each composition (or group of compositions of the same type) warrants separate and extensive iconographic analysis. Studies of this kind, both general in character (e.g., Gołgowski 1967; 1970; van Moorsel 1966; 1972; Weitzmann 1970; de Grooth 1971; Rostkowska 1971; 1972; Martens 1972; 1973; 1974; Dobrzeniecki 1974a; 1974b; 1987; 1988; Dinkler 1975; Gamber 1981; 1983; Innemée 1992; 1995; Kühnel 1992; Scholz 1994; 2000; 2001a; 2013; Łaptaś 1997; 2010; Restle 2005; Martens-Czarnecka 2012; Mierzejewska 1999; 2000; 2010, 2014; Woźniak 2014, and others) and dedicated to individual paintings (e.g., Gołgowski 1966; 1969; Kubińska 1976b; Łukaszewicz 1978; 1982; 1990; 1994; Górecki 1980; 1990; Martens-Czarnecka 1983a; 1992b; Galavaris 1986; Dobrzeniecki 1988; Vantini 1990; 1994; Łaptaś and Jakobielski 2001; Scholz 2001b; Mierzejewska 2001b; Łaptaś 2003; and others) were undertaken almost immediately after the discovery, but have thus far encompassed only a small percentage of the murals. It is to be hoped that the present publication of the entire assemblage of wall paintings from Faras will facilitate further research into the iconography and iconology of Nubian art.

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