



The interior of the Cathedral, view of the northern aisle to the east, The Nativity at back, 1962





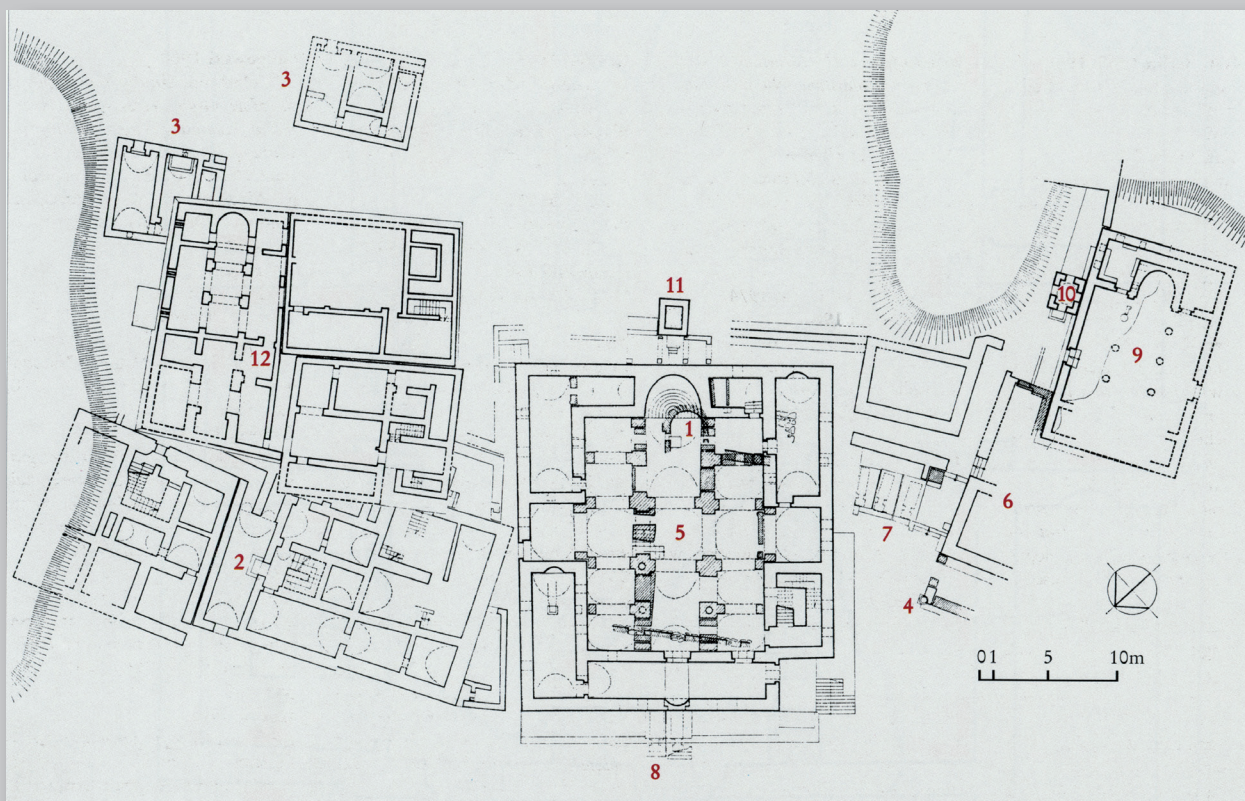
The kom in Faras, general view of the citadel ruins, 1961; the walls of the Cathedral reconstructed in colour inside the mound

## SITE AND EXCAVATIONS

Faras was an ancient and medieval town in Nubia on the west bank of the Nile, in northern Sudan near the border with Egypt, now underwater, submerged in Lake Nubia behind the Aswan High Dam. An important ancient Egyptian centre: a fort in the Middle Kingdom and a town with the temples of Egyptian gods built in the times of the New Kingdom. Meroitic *Phrs* acted as the capital of the province of Akin (1st century BC–3rd century AD). The so-called Western Palace and cemeteries were witness to this period. From the 4th century BC to the 6th century AD it was a fortified urban centre and most probably the seat of Nobadian kings. Officially Nobadia was converted to Christianity in 543. In the 7th century, it was incorporated into the kingdom of Makuria ruled from Tungul (Old Dongola) and was placed under the administration of an eparch

(governor of the province), who resided in Pachoras (Faras) or Phrim (Qasr Ibrim). The bishopric in Pachoras remained subject to the Monophysite patriarch in Alexandria from the beginning of the 7th century. The town flourished from this date, booming in terms of architectural development as well as cultural achievement. It began to decline in the 13th century. A citadel was raised on the ruins of the Christian complex sometime in the 16th or 17th century. It was still occupied in the end of the 19th century during the *Mahdiyya* in Sudan. A small village called by the Nubian name *Farasin-diffi* stood in the ruins of the citadel until modern times.

The site was excavated archaeologically in 1908–1909 by an American expedition from the University of Pennsylvania, directed by G.S. Mileham. The team explored the western part of the



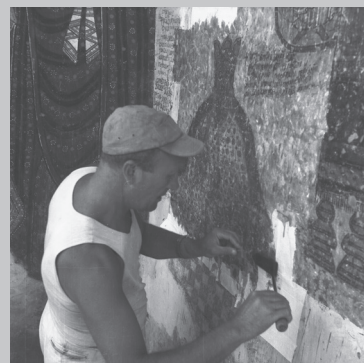
Faras. General plan of the kom excavated by the Polish Mission, 1961–1964  
 1 – Mudbrick Church, 6th century; 2 – “Northern Palace” and Old Monastery, 7th century; 3 – dwellings, 9th/10th century; 4 – Freestanding pillar and the South Gate; 5 – renovated cathedral, 7th century; 6 – Episkopeion(?), 8th century; 7 – Bishops’ tombs, 8th/9th century; 8 – Bishops’ tombs, 10th century; 9 – Church on the Southern Slope, 10th century; 10 – Tomb of Bishop Petros (†997); 11 – Tomb of Bishop Ioannes and his successors, 11th – 12th centuries; 12 – Residential Building with church on the upper floor, 12th century (called before North Monastery)

town with the North and South Churches from the 7th century, situated farthest from the riverbank. The results gave rise to the first published study on Christian Nubian architecture. From 1909 to 1912 a British expedition from Oxford University, directed by F.L.I. Griffith, uncovered Meroitic and Christian cemeteries, Egyptian temples, enclosure walls and some buildings within it, including the so-called Rivergate Church from the 6th/7th century. In 1960, W.Y. Adams prospected the site in preparation for the UNESCO campaign to rescue the monuments of ancient Nubia. His exploration of a pottery workshop attached to a monastery provided the basis for a provisional classification and chronology of Christian ceramics from Nubia. In 1961, a Polish expedition from the Archaeological Centre in

Cairo, directed by Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski, opened excavations, which ran through April 1964. Shortly thereafter the site disappeared in the depths of the artificial dam lake.

The investigations by the Polish team concentrated on an architectural complex in the city centre, comprising a repeatedly renovated cathedral from the 7th century, built on top of the Mudbrick Church from the 6th century, and neighbouring structures: Church on the Southern Slope from the 10th century, so-called Northern Palace and Old Monastery from the 7th century, as well as the purported *Episkopeion* from the 8th century, the Residential Building with a church on the upper floor from the 12th century (referred to previously as the North Monastery), dwellings from post-Meroitic times and from the 9th/10th century among others.





## SAVING THE WALL PAINTINGS

The operation of saving the wall paintings began almost immediately after their discovery. It was clear already in 1961, even as news about the discovery made the daily papers worldwide, that time for the excavators and for the conservators would run out quickly. By April 1964 most of the murals had been removed from the walls, preserved and packed in crates, waiting to be transferred to safety.

The challenge for conservators was to take down successive plaster coats one by one, separating up to three different layers of paintings. Altogether more than 120 murals were removed from the walls, the first four paintings by Stanisław Jasiewicz and the rest by Józef Gazy, both of them restorers from the National Museum in Warsaw. They were assisted by the whole team, especially by Marta Kubiak and Elżbieta Dąbrowska-Smektała, but it was their job primarily to develop methods to accomplish this task in extremely difficult field conditions. These methods had to be simple and cheap, but effective, minimizing use of chemicals (which could not be brought to Faras in sufficient quantities) and electrical power, while ensuring complete safety and at the same time, they had to ensure the preservation of the wall paintings and complete reversibility of the processes.

Murals were cleaned meticulously and the gaps in the plaster were filled with gypsum (later replaced by artificial plaster in the lab). To elasticize the coat of whitewash and paint a mixture of beeswax and some Venetian resin and colophony was pressed in through Japanese tissue paper with custom-made small copper irons on long handles. The handles were necessary to allow the irons to be heated easily on a kerosene stove. Several layers of gauze were applied to the paintings in the same manner and finally strips of cloth were pressed with an iron into the wax surface. Ropes were tied to the ends of these strips. These ropes were then attached to a fiberboard panel that was set up against the wall at an acute angle. This was the trickiest moment because the plaster had to be cut from the ground, from the bottom up, using knives and sometimes also saws mounted on long handles. If an earlier painting was observed underneath, extra caution was exercised separating the plaster coats. The restorer was white with the crushed and powdered plaster that fell on him but the plaster surface with the



Restorers at work in Faras; transport of the packed paintings up the Nile to Wadi Halfa, 1964

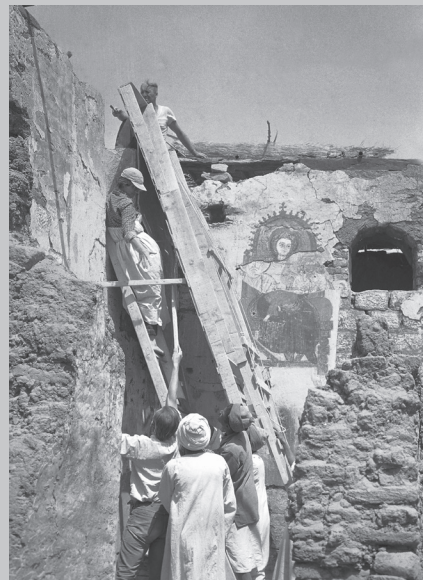


whitewash and paint remained intact. The heavy fragment of painted plaster hung suspended vertically on the ropes attached to the fiberboard screen until, overcoming the inertia of the ropes, it dropped suddenly a few to a few dozen centimetres. The next step was to move the piece of plaster slowly away from the wall, so that the painted surface fell face down onto the panel and was placed horizontally. In this position the backs of the murals were cleaned of excess plaster using metal files, the main objective being to reduce the weight of individual pieces and reduce the deleterious effect of migrating salts contained in the mortar. The paintings were then moved to wooden boards and stored in a makeshift storeroom in one of the interiors of the cathedral.

In April 1964, the packed paintings embarked on a long journey away from Faras. Some were to go to Khartoum, others even further – to Warsaw as part of the archaeological license agreement. The region around Faras had already been evacuated, so the expedition was forced to make the wooden crates by themselves. Each crate contained two paintings, matched by size and wrapped with specially made cotton duvets. The crates were moved on river boats to Wadi Halfa and from there, supervised by Józef Gazy and Stefan Jakobiński, they were taken by rail to Khartoum and Port Sudan. Scaled wooden models of the crates helped to prepare the logistics of the sea journey to Poland.

In Khartoum, Polish and Sudanese restorers – Józef Gazy, subsequently Stanisław Jasiewicz, and later Leonard Bartnik and Abdelrahim Hajj al-Amin – conserved the paintings left in Sudan. In Warsaw restorer Hanna Jędrzejewska (later Jerzy Kozłowski) and her team from the National Museum in Warsaw repeated the whole process in reverse. The back of the painted layer was cleaned of all remnants of plaster and a new ground of artificial plaster made of sand and chalk bonded with a special adhesive was applied. The mural was subsequently mounted on a framework reinforced with glass fiber. The protecting layers of wax with gauze and tissue were removed one by one, the surface cleaned, desalinated and sterilized. The paintings were returned to their original appearance, but never once were any additions or reconstructions made to the preserved substance, this in keeping with standard conservation procedures.

[SJ]







Interior of the nave, looking west, 1962