THE ITALIAN-EGYPTIAN PROJECT OF STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF THE MONASTERY OF ABBA NEFER, MANQABAD (ASYUT) FIRST AND SECOND CAMPAIGN

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Premise

The Conservation Project at the so-called “Monastery of Abba Nefer the Hermit”, located in Manqabad (ancient Mallīdis), about 7.30km West of Asyut, is a joint project promoted by the Embassy of Italy in Egypt and based on the collaboration of the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, “Sapienza” Università di Roma, the Italian Consortium Omnia Servizi and the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt (hereafter SCA).

The project is directed by the writer, with the scientific collaboration of Paola Buzi and Ezzat Salib (General Director of Museums’ Restoration of the SCA); and the technical support of the experts of Omnia Servizi.

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The site consists nowadays of several building units surrounded by an extensive roughly square walled precinct, adjoining a modern village and a cemetery; although it includes what is very likely a monastery and some churches, as well as documents (coins and cufic inscriptions) from the early Islamic period, and it was certainly founded as a reoccupation of a previously abandoned Roman settlement.

The research activities were carried out up to 2010 and were limited to the excavation: a complete topographic survey, a detailed plan and a thorough study of the complex are still lacking, while a restoration project is

\[1\] This paper contains a synthesis of the report of the first campaign (Pirelli, Buzi 2013; Pirelli, Buzi in press) and of the results of the second campaign.
urgently needed, in order to save the structures still existing and the extraordinary paintings that characterize several of its buildings.

**Previous investigations**

After its accidental discovery in 1965, the site was investigated by Egyptian equips in 1976, then between 1984 and 1986, again from 1990 to 1992, and from 2000 to 2010, but no reports have been ever published. The large amount of interesting findings are mostly kept in the storehouse of el-Ashmunein, while the large deal of coins from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods are actually kept between the storehouses of Asyut and el-Ashmunein, while a small part should be in the Museum of Mallawi. However only a few notes and some short papers have been published at date on the site (Gabra 2004; Grossmann 1991a, 1991b; Khorshid 1998).

**First Campaign**

The first fieldwork season of the Italian-Egyptian project was carried out at the end of April 2012: it was very short due to the general situation of the country, yet it was very important as it allowed one to verify the general condition of the structures and to plan the first urgent interventions.

The total dimensions of the site are not easy to define, but certainly it was larger than we can infer from the surface remains; a part of the ancient wall - and precisely of its eastern side - (Fig. 1), for instance, is still standing just on the external edge of the road, dividing the same site from the modern village, and we could not yet ascertain if more quarters have been covered by the modern village.

Within the highlighted area, we were able to identify most of the remains already brought to light and recorded by previous investigations.

The partially preserved surrounding wall is clearly visible beyond the road that separates the site from the modern village, but other parts of its

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2About the actual location of the numerous findings, we have only indirect information obtained during some meetings with the local inspectors and the director of the Coptic Museum in Cairo.
perimeter are still recognizable under piles of sand and debris on both the northern and western side; some alterations and reinforcements are also detectable on the western side.

On the northern side of the perimeter, several mud-brick housing units (Fig. 2) on two floors were discovered in the past years: they are characterized by plastered walls with elegant wall paintings (Fig. 3). From the architectural point of view, these buildings can be compared with those of the town of Jeme, originally located inside the surrounding wall of the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramses III in Medinet Habu and now disappeared. The wall paintings - mostly consisting in geometrical and floral elements - may be tentatively dated between the 6th and the 8th centuries AD. Both the wall paintings and the layout of the rooms on the ground floor are comparable with those of the semi-anchoretic site of Kellia.

The central sector of the site is occupied by a Roman bathhouse of remarkable size. The two floors of the calidarium - separated by a series of little arches made of red bricks (suspensurae) (Fig. 4) - and the basilica hall of the frigidarium were uncovered in 1986 and are still well identifiable (Fig. 5). The latter room is characterized by the presence of several rectangular basins located all around the wall of the room, which should contain cold water; they were separated from one another by columns decorated with Corinthian capitals.

In different sectors of the site, numerous churches were scattered, which show to have undergone changes during time. Most of them are characterized by the presence of niches and windows; the apse is usually included between two small rooms (pastophorium and diakonikon) (Fig. 6). One of the best preserved churches has a khūrus (choir) in front of a three-room presbyterion.

A large subterranean vaulted structure of fired bricks (Fig. 7) in the central area, South-West of the bathhouse, is probably to be identified as the foundations of a qasr or tower, the multi-storey building with massive walls, generally located at one of the entrances or in the middle of the monasteries, which had a defensive and refuge function for the inhabitants during the incursions of the Bedouins.

Finally, a building with large rooms graced with several wall paintings (Fig. 8) could be identified with the or one of the refectories or dining halls, while several ovens, tubs and granaries, document a very articulated production activity.
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The short unpublished reports of the previous excavations (summarized to us by the colleagues of the local inspectorate) and several photos also informed us of a large amount of interesting findings, among which it is worth mentioning several funerary *stelae* in Coptic, different types of complete jars, *amphorae*, and decorated vases, as long as a large deal of coins from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods.

*Second Campaign*

The second campaign of the Italian-Egyptian Mission was carried out from September 15th to 24th 2013. The Italian-Egyptian team was composed by R. Pirelli (Director, Egyptologist), R. Giunta (Islamic Epigrapher) both from UNO, and E. Salib (General Manager of Museum Restoration, MSA).

The campaign was planned to and received permissions for (Permanent Committee approval of April 30th 2013):

1. continuation of the archaeological survey, including surface collection, in order to verify the date of occupation of the site through the analysis of materials and structures;
2. a complete topographical survey and drawings of the archaeological site;
3. cataloguing and studying previous findings kept in the storehouse of el Ashmunein, in the museum of Mallawi and in the Coptic Museum, Cairo;
4. typification of building materials, including stone masonry, painted plaster, unpainted plaster;
5. photographic documentation of the *status quo* and of restorations.

As the recent events in Egypt prevented the mission to carry out the scheduled fieldwork, we decided to focus the work of this season on the study of the findings, starting from a first survey in the store-rooms of the Coptic Museum in Cairo.
Preliminary consultation of the inventories of the Coptic Museum

From this first consultation, it came out that only two findings from Manqabad are registered in the inventory of the museum: a mural painting of the Roman period and an ostrakon with a Coptic inscription.

The two findings, currently stored in the store-rooms, were analyzed in detail, photographed and drawn for the study.

Study of some categories of findings and initial results

Starting from the photographic documentation and other information gathered during the first mission, the study of the following categories of findings was successively started:

**Coptic funerary stele**

Funerary stelae with inscriptions in Coptic were found in an excellent state of preservation, re-used in the Islamic era in the floor of one of the rooms of the complex (Fig. 9). The stelae, almost all complete and legible, contain, after the opening words dedicated to the Trinity and some saints, the date of death of the owner of the monument that will be particularly important to try to establish a chronology of the site. The stelae, datable, on a first paleographical analysis, to around the 6th Century AD, were compared with a series of inscriptions unearthed in 1915 by the Egyptian explorer Ahmed Bey Kamal in the “necropolis north of the ancient city of Manqabad” (Ahmad Bey Kamal 1911, 3-39; 1915, 177-206).

**Arab inscriptions (by R. Giunta)**

The two inscriptions in Arabic language and Kufic script, painted on the walls of two rooms in the complex, contain commemorative and religious texts (Fig. 10). After a preliminary paleographic examination, the inscriptions may be attributed at the time of the Abbasid caliphs’ control of the Egyptian region, most likely at the second half of the 9th century. We stress the importance of these two inscriptions, given the small number of monumental inscriptions of this phase of the Abbasid caliphate.
Coins (by R. Giunta)

Of the numerous coins (over 2000 items between Roman, Byzantine and Islamic), which came to light during the excavations, we are currently in possession of only two drawings and three photographs.

Photos and facsimiles (of mediocre quality) refer only to material from the Islamic era of a wide time span: three bronze can be attributed to the early stages of Islam, while a fourth golden exemplary bears the name of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II (early 19th century).
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REFERENCES


FIGURES
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Fig. 1 - The eastern sector of the precinct wall

Fig. 2 - A Housing unit
Fig. 3 - Wall painting from a housing unit

Fig. 4 - Suspensurae from the calidarium of the Roman bath
Fig. 5 - The Frigidarium of the Roman bath

Fig. 6 - The apse of one of the churches
Fig. 7 - Subterranean vaulted structure of fired bricks in the central area of the site

Fig. 8 - Wall painting from refectory (?)
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Fig. 9 - Funerary Coptic *Stelae* reused in a floor

Fig. 10 - Arab inscription in Kufic