

# FINAL REPORT: 2005–2007



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION OF THE WHITE MONASTERY FEDERATION, NEAR SOHAG, EGYPT

**Project Director and Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Bolman**

**ON BEHALF OF:**

*The Consortium for Research and Conservation  
at the Monasteries of the Sohag Region (Egypt)*

*Fragment of a painted face, found in the Triconch Tomb Chapel,  
White Monastery, Sohag. Photograph: H. Badamo*

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*A longer version of this report was submitted to the NEH by Prof. Bolman.*

### **Archaeological and Multidisciplinary Investigation of the White Monastery Federation, near Sohag, Egypt**

**by Elizabeth Bolman, Project Director**

With the support of an NEH collaborative research grant (RZ-50431-05) and supplemental funds from the Yale Egyptological Institute in Egypt, American Research Center in Egypt, Dumbarton Oaks, and Wittenberg University, the results of our two years of work at the White Monastery Federation site have been extremely successful, and have exceeded our expectations. The settlement – a Federation of two men’s monasteries, a nunnery, and a group of hermitages – was founded in the fourth century CE and inhabited continuously until the thirteenth century. On behalf of a consortium of scholars from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, I applied to the NEH for funding to undertake one ambitious, but discrete, part of the consortium’s larger endeavor to transform our understanding of early monasticism through collaboration and extensive site work. I applied to the NEH to start an archaeological and conservation project that is central to our larger agenda. Our project included: 1) a regional survey of the area occupied by the monastic Federation; 2) commencement of systematic excavation of the White and Red Monasteries (at the heart of that Federation); 3) conservation and documentation of the White Monastery wall paintings; and 4) publication. We succeeded at these tasks, and were also able to generate a high-profile momentum in our work on site.

## Objectives and Accomplishments

### 1) Regional Survey of the Late Antique and Medieval Monastic Federation

We were able to survey the site to create an overall plan of the White Monastery (Dayr Anba Shinouda; near Sohag, in Upper Egypt), that maps the modern and known ancient buildings on site as well as the areas of our excavation (figs. 1–2). We have also undertaken survey work at the Red Monastery, and have plans to continue this endeavor.

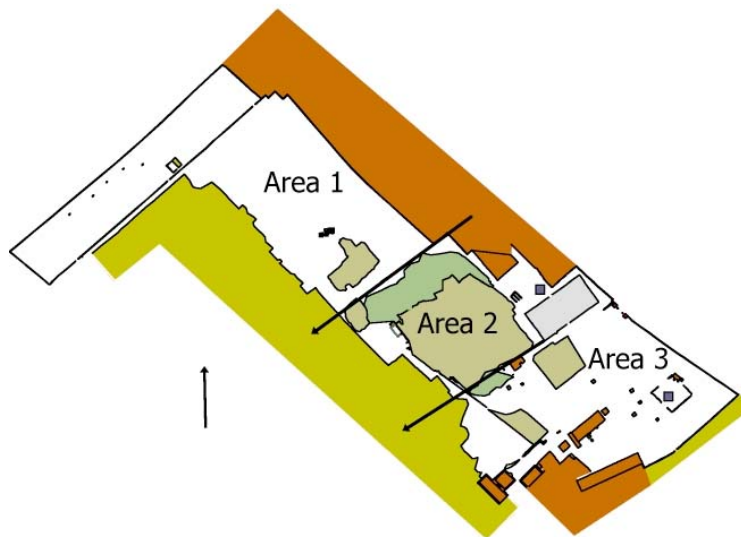


Fig. 1. General survey map of the White Monastery using Pythagoras software. The grey rectangle is the White Monastery church. The white sections represent areas not yet excavated or occupied by current monuments. The regions in orange-brown indicate the location of modern structures. The green regions reflect the spoil heaps of the previous excavations by the SCA, indicated in sage. The greenish-yellow indicates the extent of the Coptic cemetery. Map: Darlene Brooks Hedstrom.

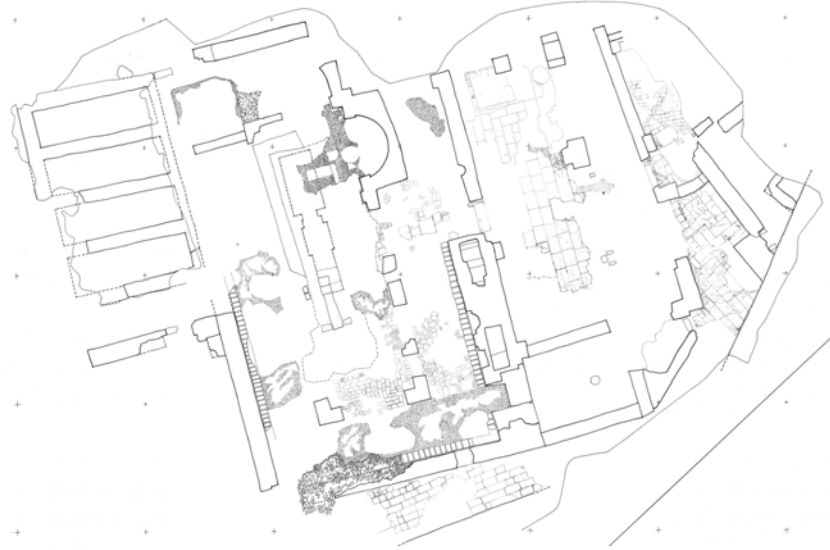


Fig. 2: Detailed survey of the Triconch Tomb Chapel, located in the southwest region of the site (area 2). This illustration is one example of the more extensive recording we have done in many areas of the site. Drawing: Nicholas Warner.

## **2) Commencement of Systematic Excavation of the White and Red Monasteries (at the heart of the Federation)**

Our efforts from 2005 to 2007 have produced results that demonstrate that in addition to its most famous, late antique phase, the monastery had a substantial size in the ninth century, a period that is often overlooked by scholars of Coptic monasticism. We have found evidence of continuing monastic habitation until at least the thirteenth century. Our excavations and studies of previously excavated remains have provided the basis for beginning a history of the settlement with several phases of rebuilding and modifications. We have used subsurface mapping to discuss with our Egyptian and monastic colleagues how to best protect the monuments still present at the site. The results of the magnetometry were less successful than anticipated, due to the large quantity of metal debris on site (e.g. soda bottle tops...). Accordingly, we switched to Ground Penetrating Radar at both the White and Red Monasteries, which yielded very interesting results, including the outlines of buildings below the current ground surface, and will inform our decisions about future areas of excavation.

The core of the archaeological material at the White Monastery lies between the modern village on the northeast and components of the Coptic monastery and cemetery on the west and south. In mapping the site we artificially divided the site into three numerical areas to reflect the different natures of the archaeological site. Units of excavations were labeled alphabetically (Units A-L). When an area was previously excavated and cleared by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, we considered the entire region to be examined as a unit or area of excavation. Thus, Units M, N and O all are large areas of exposed mud brick and/or limestone features that we examined as a solitary, but admittedly, arbitrary unit (fig. 3). Methods of documentation differed slightly from the excavation as we were given permission to clean, photograph and draw these units. All areas of excavation and documentation used unique loci for features, deposits and contexts and a Harris matrix was made to create a visual record of the stratigraphy. The excavated Byzantine deposits included several mud-brick walls, fragments of plaster with Coptic inscriptions and volumes of late Byzantine pottery,

specifically amphorae, coursewares, and fewer examples of fine Aswan Painted wares. We uncovered a surprisingly large amount of pottery, and were not therefore able to complete its documentation and study by the end of our last 2007 campaign. This work is being finished in September, October and November 2007, with funding from the Yale Egyptological Institute in Egypt (with Bentley Layton as principal investigator, and Darlene Brooks Hedstrom in charge of the archaeological work).

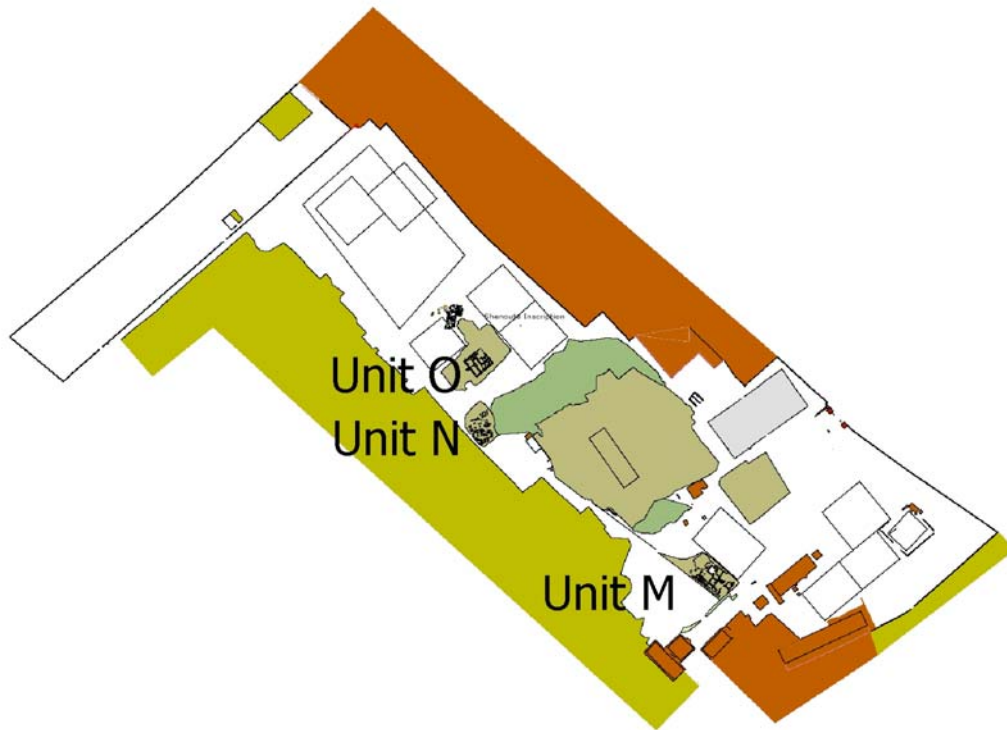


Fig. 3. Areas M-O with mapped wall and floor features. All sage regions represent the areas cleared and exposed by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in excavations from the 1980's and 1990's.

As part of the work in 2005, a trench was excavated on the north side of the church (area 2). We found a huge plaster dump, which we excavated in the Spring of 2006. The plaster was within a dump-like layer in the northern and eastern part of Square D, with the largest concentrated in the Eastern part of the square. Therefore, the initial Square G was laid out as a 5x5 meter expansion towards east of the backfilled square D. A 5x5 meter square was also laid out directly north of this with the intention of excavating the western half and thereby being able to establish the northern extent of the plaster dump. This aspect of the project is just one of many of our archaeological excavations, but is mentioned in more detail here because it yielded additional painted plaster. These fragments will be discussed in the next section.

While many years of work remain, due to the vast size and richness of the site, in two seasons from July 2005 – June 2007 we have created a solid foundation in our documentation of the White Monastery church and the archaeological remains to build upon for reconstructing the settlement history of the White Monastery Federation.

### **3) Conservation and Documentation of the White Monastery Wall Paintings**

Our initial objective was to document and protect the high-quality wall painting fragments (see illustration at the head of this file) that had been collected by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in 2003 and stored outside of their office building. We also planned to conserve the surviving paintings that are located in the Triconch Tomb Chapel (fig. 2). With the find of 1179 fragments (including 95 mortar fragments), many of which were painted, in the excavation at the north of the church in 2005, this aspect of the project grew considerably.

To date we have successfully documented and analyzed all of the painted plaster, both that found by the SCA and the finds in 2005. All are now stored in wooden trays, indoors. We have examined the characteristics of the walls inside the two areas with still surviving paintings on the site, namely the monumental White Monastery church and the small Triconch Tomb Chapel and its associated buildings. We found evidence in all parts of the White Monastery church of late antique and medieval plaster layers. The Tomb Chapel has three layers of painted decoration in the above-ground part of the structure, and one in the underground vault and entranceway, with a single area on which a later graffito figure of St. Shenoute was added. The data from the painted fragments, and the study of surviving in situ paintings, demonstrates considerable artistic activity in late antiquity, and then after something of a break, again in the medieval period (perhaps the 12<sup>th</sup> c., when the easternmost conch of the main church was repainted). We have stabilized and protected the above-ground paintings, and are considering the best solution for their future presentation. We have a first phase of conservation of the underground paintings scheduled for February 2008, with funding from the American Research Center in Egypt.

#### **4) Publication**

##### **A. Publication of Work Produced as Part of the NEH Project**

We have one article in press:

Elizabeth Bolman, Louise Blanke, Darlene Brooks Hedstrom, Mohammed Khalifa, Cédric Meurice, Saad Mohammed, Gillian Pyke, and Peter Sheehan. "Late Antique and Medieval Painted Decoration at the White Monastery (Dayr al-Abiad), Sohag," *Bulletin of the American Research Center in Egypt*.

We have two articles in progress, one on the paintings and the Triconch Tomb Chapel, and another on the larger archaeological survey, remote sensing, and excavations.

We have published one brochure on St. Shenoute and the White Monastery Federation, in English, for the monks to give visitors to the site, authored by Bentley Layton. He also gave the monks a CD with the file of the brochure, in case they want to produce more of them, or translate the text into Arabic.

##### **B. Publication of Work About the White Monastery Federation 2005–007, Supported With Alternative Funding**

Bolman, Elizabeth. "Chromatic Brilliance in Upper Egypt: The Red Monastery Church," on the Metropolitan Museum webpage: Christianity's First Centuries in Africa, posted in 2007: [http://www.metmuseum.org/education/er\\_lecture\\_archive/sam\\_cia/index.asp](http://www.metmuseum.org/education/er_lecture_archive/sam_cia/index.asp)

Bolman, Elizabeth. "Conservation of the Red Monastery, Sohag," a volume being published by the American Research Center in Egypt on its conservation projects. Cairo: American University

in Cairo Press, forthcoming.

- Bolman, Elizabeth. "The Red Monastery Conservation Project, 2004 Campaign: New Contributions to the Corpus of Late Antique Art," in: *Interactions: Artistic Interchange Between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. Colum Hourihane. Princeton: Index of Christian Art, 2007. 260-281.
- Bolman, Elizabeth. "Late Antique Aesthetics, Chromophobia, and the Red Monastery, Sohag, Egypt," *Eastern Christian Art*. v.3 (2006): 1-24.
- Emmel, Stephen. "Shenoute." In: *Encyclopedia of Religion* 12:8318–20. 2d ed. 15 vols. Detroit etc.: Thomson Gale, 2005.
- Emmel, Stephen. "Al-anbā Šinūda raīs l-mutawaidīn: ayatuhu wa taālīmuḥu" [Apa Shenoute the Archimandrite: His Life and His Teachings]. in: *Dirāsāt ābā'īya wa lāhūtīya* [Patristic and Theological Studies; Orthodox Patristic Centre, Cairo] 18 (July 2006) 45–50; 19 (January 2007) 40–46. [Translated by Noss-hy Abdel-Shahid Botros.]
- Emmel, Stephen. "Coptic Literature in Byzantine and Early Islamic Egypt." In: *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Emmel, Stephen. "Shenoute of Atripe and the Christian Destruction of Temples in Egypt: Rhetoric and Reality." In: *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, edited by Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World. Leiden: Brill, in press.
- Emmel, Stephen. "Shenoute's Place in the History of Monasticism." In: *The Sohag Symposium, February 1–5, 2006: Proceedings*, edited by Gawdat Gabra. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, in press.
- Layton, Bentley. "The Ancient Monastery of St. Shenoute at Sohag: The White Monastery/Dayr Anba Shinuda," brochure for distribution by the monks at the monastery, privately printed.

##### **5) Objectives Accomplished with Other Funding Sources**

The momentum obtained by the NEH funding inspired other individuals and institutions to become involved in the work. A prominent example of this is one of the members of the Consortium, Prof. Bentley Layton, who is a member of the Egyptology faculty of the Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University and a specialist in the Coptic language, Shenoute, and early monasticism. He recognized that the monks inhabiting the monastery today are making substantial modifications to the fabric of the monumental, late antique church of the White Monastery, and determined to undertake a complete photographic survey of it. He obtained support from the Yale Egyptological Institute in Egypt for work in 2005–2007, organizing a professional photographer who specializes in architectural and archaeological photography, and an architectural historian, to assist him. Last winter, they completed a total photographic survey of the church, and are now working on publishing all of the photographs. Layton also hopes, with support from the Yale Egyptological Institute in Egypt, to expand our archaeological activities, for example sifting the SCA's excavation heap to find evidence they may have overlooked, for example ostraca and other small finds.

Our relations with the monks are so positive that when they noticed large cracks in the interior walls and domes of the White Monastery church, they contacted us and asked for help. Layton raised

funds to hire a structural engineer who has experience working with historic buildings, to evaluate the danger to the monument, and to propose steps to counter the cracking. This specialist, Sam Price, will be coming with Layton in December 2007 to undertake his survey.

Dumbarton Oaks has also been a regular contributor to our documentary and archaeological work on the site, dating from 2001.

The other massive endeavor being undertaken as part of the larger goals of the consortium, but as a self-contained project, is the wall painting conservation at the Red Monastery. Three major campaigns of work have happened in the last two years, and we have funding for two more in hand already. This funding comes from USAID, which has invited us to apply for funding to complete the entire project, including a publication of it.

## **Audiences**

Our project has multiple audiences, local and international, of both genders, and our publications (finished and in the planning stages) address them with different formats and assumptions.

### **1) The Monks Who Live in the Monastery and Who are Transforming It on a Daily Basis**

We spend a great deal of time talking to the monks, and showing them what we are doing. We have also been working hard to meet their needs. We have developed a strategy to: 1) give the monks information about the history of the site and the significance of the physical remains: orally; with brochures (in English, published, and planned Arabic versions); and with large signs (planned); 2) document and back-fill some areas of the exposed site to demonstrate to the monks that excavation does not mean that they are never permitted to walk or build on that spot again (with the assumption on our part, due to the strong feelings involved and the massive pace of construction by the monks, that we are undertaking rescue archaeology); 3) select higher-profile areas of the site, like the Triconch Tomb Chapel, for conservation and presentation to the public, in an effort to give the monks something to be proud of and to show to visitors.

Our efforts have been yielding results, and we have excellent relations with the monks and the bishop in charge of the monastery, but we still have a considerable amount of work left to do.

### **2) The Local Inspectors from the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA)**

We have worked very hard to develop a collaboration with the excavating SCA inspectors, which we achieved a year and a half ago. Since that time, we have been working together, and we are in the process of developing an Arabic translation of our field manual for their use. Many of them are very interested in learning more about how we excavate, just as we are attentive to their excavation methods. We have also begun publishing the results of our work, including their names as coauthors.

### **3) Visitors to the Site: Local Copts and Foreign Tourists**

As mentioned above, we have prepared one brochure on the White Monastery, printed it, and given it to the monks for distribution and translation into Arabic. At the Red Monastery, which is part of the larger Federation, with USAID funding, we have now printed our second brochure (4000 in English and 4000 in Arabic) for distribution on site. With funding from the American Research Center in Egypt, we will be developing a three-dimensional rendering of our vision for the future of the site, and will be displaying it in a small structure, along with informational text in English and Arabic. We

will also be publishing brochures in English and Arabic. In the more distant future, we hope to have a sizeable visitor's center, which will present information in several languages, with numerous photographs and drawings. No Arabic publication longer than a brochure exists to inform the monks and inspectors about the site and its history. As part of the Red Monastery project, with USAID funding, a small paperback with essential information for a non-specialist audience is envisioned as well.

We periodically lead tours of the site for interested but non-specialists groups, such as those organized by the American Research Center in Egypt. Foreign visitors include women and men from around the world, most numerous the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. We also give talks for the general public about our work. Local visitors to the site are mostly Copts who visit for church services, the annual month-long festival in honor of St. Shenoute, and for counseling and spiritual guidance from the monks. Both genders and all ages are amply represented in this group, but it rarely includes anyone from outside of the local area, except perhaps for the festival (moulid).

#### **4) Scholars and Students**

We address scholars in training (students) and professionals in a several different ways. First and foremost, we are publishing the results of the work in scholarly venues. We also give specialists and students special tours of the site (e.g. the forty or fifty scholars and students who were on site for a symposium on the White and Red Monasteries were given several site tours, and students from the American University in Cairo's Coptic Studies program were given extensive tours of the sites.) We have involved several graduate and undergraduate students of Coptic studies and archaeology in the archaeological work, both years of the NEH project. This work is on-going. Several of them are becoming dedicated and skilled members of the team. We developed a field manual to assist them in their learning process, and also give them tours of the nearby antiquities to expand their frame of reference. Scholars and young professionals include both women and men, foreigners and Egyptians. We have given numerous scholarly talks on the Federation project in the last two years, at venues as diverse as the White Monastery itself (which hosted an international symposium), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### **Continuation of the Project**

After June 2007 our NEH funding came to an end. We have nevertheless been successful elsewhere in obtaining funds, from the Yale Egyptological Institute in Egypt, American Research Center in Egypt, Dumbarton Oaks, Wittenberg University, and USAID.

Thus far, we have specific work plans on various aspects of the Federation site which stretch into 2012 and perhaps beyond. The most developed aspect of the plan focuses on the completion of wall painting conservation at the Red Monastery, and the multi-disciplinary publication of it. We are working on developing a vision for long-term excavation work, resulting in an impressive final appearance of the White and Red Monastery sites which accommodates the needs of the antiquities, the inspectors, the monks, and visitors.

### **Long-Term Impact**

We have drawn considerable attention to the Federation site in scholarly circles, and have raised awareness in the local area about its importance. The Sohag region, of which the Federation

antiquities are a part, is currently being developed by the local governorate for tourism. Plans are underway to open an airport, and to construct a road between Sohag and Hurgada, a major tourist location on the Red Sea. We have been in touch with local officials in Sohag, and plan to meet with the governor, to discuss future plans for the touristic presentation of the White Monastery Federation.

We fully expect that the results of the excavation, documentation, and conservation already completed, with NEH and other types of support, will assist us in transforming our understanding of not only this rich and very important site, but also of the genesis and development of monasticism in Egypt. We are able to have such confidence because of the large scale of our multidisciplinary collaboration, and the wonderful momentum we have established, due to the generous support of our grantors.