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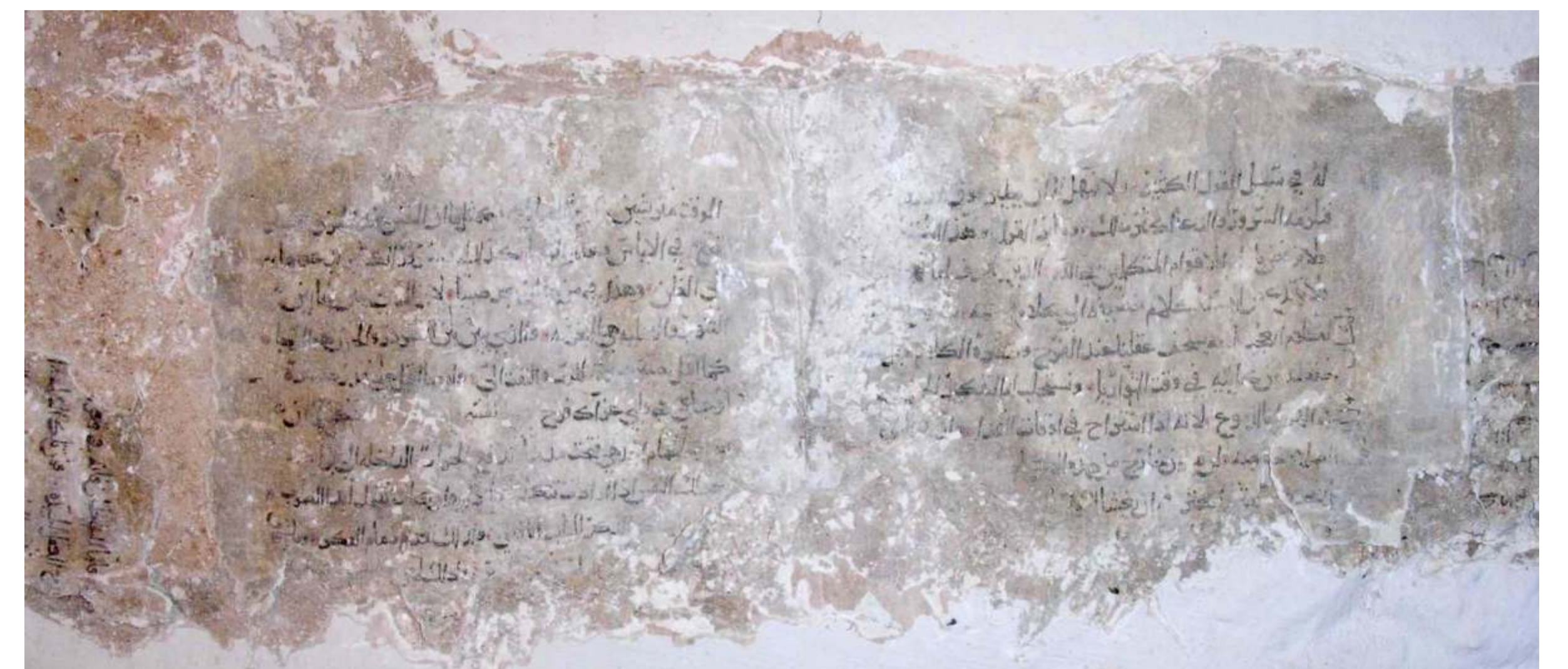
1. Introduction to the project

During repairs in early 2003, manuscript fragments were discovered glued to the walls of an alcove in the west wall of Cell 31A in the western range of the monastery. This discovery led to a project, financed by the Ruth Breakwell Memorial Fund, to remove the manuscript leaves and also some fragments of early paper from the late 17th-century wooden partition. The work made it possible for repairs to be carried out on the barrel vault of the cell that had been damaged by leaks from a bathroom in the guest room above.

The manuscript leaves, all written in Arabic in the 11th or 12th century, but coming from more than one manuscript, had been stuck to the walls immediately above three wooden shelves (the lowest of which had been removed). When conservators got access to the alcove with proper lighting, they discovered that the two remaining shelves had also been lined on the top surfaces with more manuscript leaves, in places three layers thick. The discovery of this material meant that extra hands were needed, and fortunately Jane McAusland, who repaired the Achtnames for the new museum in 2001, and Maria Kalligerou, who had already taken part in many survey visits, were brought into the team.



The upper level of fragments showing the extensive mould growth.



Some parchment leaves after removing the whitewash.

2. The alcove

The first job was for Maria Kalligerou and Nicholas Pickwood to remove the whitewash from the manuscript fragments so that they could be properly examined, photographed and mapped on polyester film. The latter procedure was particularly important as the removal of the whitewash revealed that some leaves had been badly eaten away by insects, leaving only small scattered fragments of parchment on the walls. The cleaning also revealed that the leaves had been stuck to the fresh, unpainted plaster with an animal glue, creating a strong bond which prevented the conservators from separating the complete leaves from the plaster in situ, though they were able to lift the smaller fragments.

With Father Daniel's permission, the decision was taken to cut the plaster off the walls under the larger fragments, which proved to be dirty and demanding work in the hot and airless alcove. Fortunately the plaster came away from the granite walls of the alcove relatively easily, though the severe mould damage found on the western end of the topmost row of leaves (caused by the water leaking from above) prevented the saving of all the small, mostly blank, fragments of parchment from that area. It was possible, however, to save at least 95 percent of them. The laminated layers of parchment on the shelves meant that it was necessary to dismantle the shelves and remove them entirely. This was done with great care to make sure that all the pieces were properly recorded so that they could be reconstructed and returned to the alcove after the parchment is lifted from them.

All the fragments were then labelled and boxed for safekeeping until such time as they can be lifted and separated them from the plaster and shelves.



Removing the parchment fragments by lifting the plaster under them.



Nicholas Pickwood and Maria Kalligerou with detached pieces of parchment.



The parchment fragments safely stored.

3. The wooden partition

While this work was being carried out, Jane McAusland was carefully removing the overlying paint layers from the paper fragments on the wooden partition. Her work revealed that the woodblock print was too fragile and fragmentary to be safe to lift from the panel, as was the piece of paper with what appears to be nineteenth-century Greek manuscript on it. These fragments were consolidated in situ and covered with a layer of Japanese tissue paper to protect them under whatever decorative treatment may be applied to the partition during repairs and redecoration. However, Jane did uncover and was able to lift the almost complete drawing of the upper part of a Byzantine saint.



Jane McAusland working on the wooden partition.



Figure of a saint discovered on the wooden partition.