The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste
A unique wallpainting fragment preserved through international co-operation

A brief history of the monument
The foundations of the church of Saints Peter and Paul were probably laid in the Lusignan reign of Peter I (1358 – 1369), and funded by one third of the profits made on a single trip to Syria by a merchant of Famagusta, Simon Nostrano. After 1571 it was transformed into a mosque which is why the structure is still almost completely intact, though at the same time the interiors would have been plastered and the paintings hidden. This wall plastering and decoration was then lost permanently when the building was ‘cleaned’ during the British period and used as a storage space. The fragment depicting the Forty Martyrs survived because it was hidden by the mimbar (a pulpit for the delivery of sermons) which was built against the wall. In recent years the monument has served as a library and concert hall, and might soon be used as a municipal museum.

The legend of the Forty Martyrs
The scene is set in the Armenian town of Sebaste (now Sivas in Turkey) during the reign of Emperor Licinius in 320 A.D. who issued an edict stating that those who followed Christianity would be tortured and put to death. Forty Roman soldiers, who had openly confessed themselves Christian, were condemned to be exposed naked upon a frozen lake on a bitterly cold night so that they might freeze to death. Among the confessors, one yielded and, leaving his companions, sought the warm baths near the lake which had been prepared for any who might renounce their faith. One of the guards who saw a band of angels coming down from heaven and placing crowns on the heads of the dying saints, at once proclaimed himself a Christian, threw off his garments, and joined the remaining thirty-nine.

The wall painting
The painting is tentatively dated to the 15th century. Only fourteen of the forty martyrs can be made out on the fragment and so it is likely that the scene once covered the entire width of the bay wall. What remains of the painting is a masterly painted preparatory drawing, first sketched with a thin yellowish colour and then finished with elegant dark red lines. This drawing was done ‘a fresco’, that is when the lime plaster was still fresh. The actual painting, of which only traces of blue, green, yellow and red remain, was made on dry plaster by adding an organic binder, which is a much more perishable painting technique.

The condition before conservation
About 40% of the painted plaster had lost its adhesion to the masonry and some areas, especially along the edges of the fragment, were at risk of collapse. The surface was covered by various deposits such as dust, bird droppings and residues of the plaster which once covered the entire fragment. Fills made in more recent years with cement containing mortars were aesthetically detracting and hiding parts of the original colour. Numerous nails had been hammered through the surface, some holding an electric cable that was installed across the painting.

The conservation treatment
The painted plaster was stabilized through injections of a liquid mortar. All deposits covering the painting were removed, mainly by mechanical means. Nails were cut and/or removed with a micro grinding tool. The paint layer was cleaned with distilled water. All cement fills were replaced with a lime mortar imitating the colour and texture of the stone masonry. Smaller holes in the painting were filled with a light coloured lime plaster and kept slightly below the level of the painted surface. Small losses in the paint layer, standing out as white spots were toned back with neutral water colour glazes.

The conservation - restoration of the wall painting was undertaken in 2012 with the assistance of the Municipality of Famagusta, the World Monuments Fund, New York and the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore