

Literacy in Christian Nubia: perspectives from the Polish mission in Dongola¹

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Literacy, i.e. the ‘capacity to communicate using inscribed (. . .) signs or symbols for representing language’² was widespread in Christian Nubia. This is suggested by a large number of textual records dating from the Christian era in the Middle Nile Valley. The internet *Database of Medieval Nubian Texts (DBMNT)* created and maintained by Grzegorz Ochała³ contains roughly 3000 entries, to which a similar number of unpublished texts should be added. The texts produced by Nubian Christians were executed in both durable writing materials, such as stone, terracotta, bricks, rock faces, plastered walls, ceramic, etc., and non-durable ones, such as papyrus, parchment, paper, leather, textiles, etc. Both groups involved different kinds of media, the most popular being stelae, walls of buildings, manuscripts, and pottery vessels; others, like metal and wooden objects, jewellery, and textiles, are found only occasionally. Not surprisingly, the durable materials are by far more prevalent than the non-durable ones: for example, the *Database of Medieval Nubian Texts* includes 991 stelae and 977 wall and rock inscriptions compared to 324 manuscripts on perishable materials.

These texts are composed in three languages: Greek, Coptic and Old Nubian, of which the first two were ‘imported’ languages, and the third an indigenous one.⁴ Greek is attested almost throughout the entire existence of the Christian Nubian state and culture, from the 6th until the 14th century. It is found mostly in religious texts, both literary and paraliterary, by which I mean texts that came into existence in connection with religious practices and preserve characteristics of the literary language, such as liturgical and private prayers, epitaphs, dedications of buildings and paintings, mementos left by pious visitors in cult places, and so on. It is extremely rare in a non-sacral sphere; the only examples known to me are documents connected with the transportation of goods, written mostly on ostraca, and the addresses of letters. Coptic occurs in texts datable to the period between the 6th and 12th century. It is the language of religious texts, both literary and paraliterary, with the exception of liturgical prayers; this sphere of literacy was obviously reserved for Greek.⁵ Coptic is also the language of documents and correspondence, both private and official. Old Nubian appeared for the first time as glosses in Greek texts dating from the end of the 8th century.⁶ It received the status of a full-fledged language of written communication somewhere around the year AD 1000 replacing Coptic in this function, and retained it until the wane of the Christian Nubian culture towards the end of the 15th century. The texts composed in Old Nubian are roughly the same as in Coptic: literary and paraliterary texts (with an almost complete lack of epitaphs),⁷ documents and letters.

Textual finds have been made throughout Nubia, from the 1st Nile Cataract in the north to the confluence of the two Niles in the south. Some sites are especially important as the source of inscribed material with respect to both the number of finds and their variety. Here one must first mention Qasr Ibrim. Situated on the east bank of the Nile, more or less midway between the 1st and 2nd Nile Cataracts, Qasr Ibrim, called Phrim in Greek and Coptic, and Silmi in Old Nubian, was a major religious, commercial, administrative, and military centre, which, at least temporarily, fulfilled the functions of a capital for Nobadia, first as an independent kingdom and later as a province of the Kingdom of

¹The present paper is a modified version of the Kirwan Memorial Lecture given at the British Museum on 16th September 2019. I would like to thank Neal Spencer and Julie Anderson for the honourable invitation to hold the lecture and the hospitable reception in London.

²<https://www.britannica.com/topic/literacy>.

³<http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl>.

⁴For the linguistic situation in Christian Nubia, see Ochała 2014a; Łajtar and Ochała forthcoming.

⁵A notable exception is a fragment of a parchment from the Qasr el-Wizz monastery with a prayer of the baptismal liturgy in Coptic (information provided by Alexandros Tsakos).

⁶The oldest of them is the epitaph of priest Stephanos (Istephanou) from Dongola dating from AD 797; for full publication of the epitaph, see Łajtar and Twardecki 2003, no. 110. The occurrence of Old Nubian glosses towards the end of the 8th century does not mean that the language reached its written form only at that time. This was probably created much earlier, perhaps already during the Christianisation of the Nubian kingdoms in the 6th century, but the Old Nubian texts from the early period (second half of the 6th–first half of the 8th century) have not been preserved.

⁷Apart from Old Nubian inclusions in Greek epitaphs, the only Old Nubian epitaph known to us is that of King Georgios (died AD 1157) found in the Wadi Natrun in Lower Egypt; for the most recent publication of the epitaph, see van Gerven Oei 2011.

Makuria.⁸ It was a bishopric see from the time of Christianisation in the 6th century until, at least, the last quarter of the 15th century. Located on a rocky outcrop rising c. 60m above the level of the Nile, it remained safe from inundation by the waters of Lake Nasser or Lake Nubia created by the Aswan High Dam, which enabled archaeological investigations to be carried out there by the Egypt Exploration Society until 2008. The textual finds from the excavations were abundant. The hallmark of these discoveries was a rich collection of literary texts with Biblical, apocryphal, patristic, hagiographic, and liturgical contents, written on perishable materials – papyrus, parchment, and paper – in all three languages of Christian Nubia – Greek, Coptic, and Old Nubian.⁹ Most of them were found in the cathedral, spread over its floor, or in the immediate neighbourhood of the cathedral, thrown into the tombs in the cathedral cemetery or mixed with other objects in the fill of adjacent houses. One assumes these finds are remains of the cathedral library, which, at a certain point of time, possibly during the sack of Qasr Ibrim by the Egyptian troops of Shams ed-Dawla in 1172-3, was fragmented and dispersed (Adams 2010, 242). Another exceptional find was a collection of over 120 documents in Old Nubian, mostly legal deeds, lists of different kinds, and letters, which came to light in several clusters, so-called ‘archives’, from private houses.¹⁰ In addition, there is an interesting set of tombstones in Greek and Coptic, including nine epitaphs of bishops of Phrim and other Nobadian sees who were obviously buried in the Qasr Ibrim cathedral cemetery.¹¹ Finally one has to mention the collection of over 150 visitors’ graffiti on the rocks of the so-called Gebel Maktub c. 2km east of the town of Qasr Ibrim.¹²

Another important source of textual finds, especially over the last twenty or so years, has been Dongola, the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria, situated at the northern extremities of the so-called Debba Bend of the Nile, more or less midway between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts. The town of Dongola was founded *in cruda radice* probably towards the end of the 5th century and was conceived from the beginning as a capital. This was expressed in the name of the town, which read Toungoul in Nubian, meaning ‘the place of belly’, in the sense of ‘the place of the centre’.¹³ In addition to being the royal capital, Dongola also became the seat of the head of the Makurian Church after the kingdom was Christianised in the 6th century. It retained its position as both the civilian and religious capital of Makuria until as late as the second half of the 14th century.

The town of Dongola was located on a rocky plateau dominating the east bank of the Nile valley, which becomes very narrow in this place (Figures 1 and 2).¹⁴ The core of the town was its citadel enclosed within massive defences rising to a height of 8m above ground level. The citadel was accompanied by unwalled settlements to the north and east, and probably also to the south. The eastern extension boasted a massive two-storey mud-brick building interpreted as a throne hall of the kings of Makuria.¹⁵ It was turned into a mosque at the beginning of the 14th century, which allowed it to be preserved in a relatively good condition until our time. To the east of the town, there were extensive cemeteries with graves cut into the rocks on the edge of the desert. Between the graves and on top of the hills rising in the alluvial plain stood churches and monasteries, including the so-called Northwest Church, the only Christian monument visible in Dongola before the start of regular excavations.

The Polish archaeological mission began working in Dongola in 1963 and has continued on a yearly basis ever since. Very little has been unearthed in the citadel. The only discoveries worth mentioning here are three neighbouring structures located in the southwestern part of the citadel and which together form a complex connected with the state and royalty. These are: a spacious residential building, perhaps a royal palace, constructed in the 6th century;¹⁶

⁸ Generally for Christian Qasr Ibrim, see Adams 1996; 2010.

⁹ Literary texts in Old Nubian are published in Plumley and Browne 1988 and Browne 1989 (nos. 12-20); see further Browne 1991b, 289-291; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Ruffini 2009; 2015. Texts in Greek were published in a rather unsystematic way. The most important publications are: Frend 1982; 1984; 1986; 1989; Frend and Dragas 1987; Frend, Dragas and Kontoyiannis 1992; Frend and Muirhead 1976; Roberts and Plumley 1976; Hammerstaedt 1994; 1999, nos. 6-9; Łajtar 1996; 2014a; Lucchesi 2008, 165-171. Texts in Coptic largely remain unpublished; their publication is being prepared by Joost Hagen; preliminarily, see Hagen 2009; 2010; 2012. Of rare publications, one can mention: Kuhn and Tait 1991; Hagen and Ochała 2014.

¹⁰ For the publication of the documents, see Browne 1989, nos. 21-29; 1991a; Ruffini 2014.

¹¹ The inscriptions discovered during the work of the EES Mission are published in Łajtar and van der Vliet 2010.

¹² Except for one item, the graffiti remain unpublished. They are being studied by the present writer in collaboration with Jacques van der Vliet. For an overview, see Łajtar and van der Vliet 2013.

¹³ For the name of the capital of Makuria in the native tongue, see Łajtar 2013. Greek and Coptic sources use the name Timikleos; see Łajtar 2015.

¹⁴ Generally for Dongola, its history, topography, and culture, based on the results of the Polish Mission see Godlewski 2013.

¹⁵ For this building, see Godlewski 2013, 42-47 (with an earlier bibliography).

¹⁶ Godlewski 2013, 26-29 (with earlier bibliography); Godlewski, Danys and Osypińska 2015.

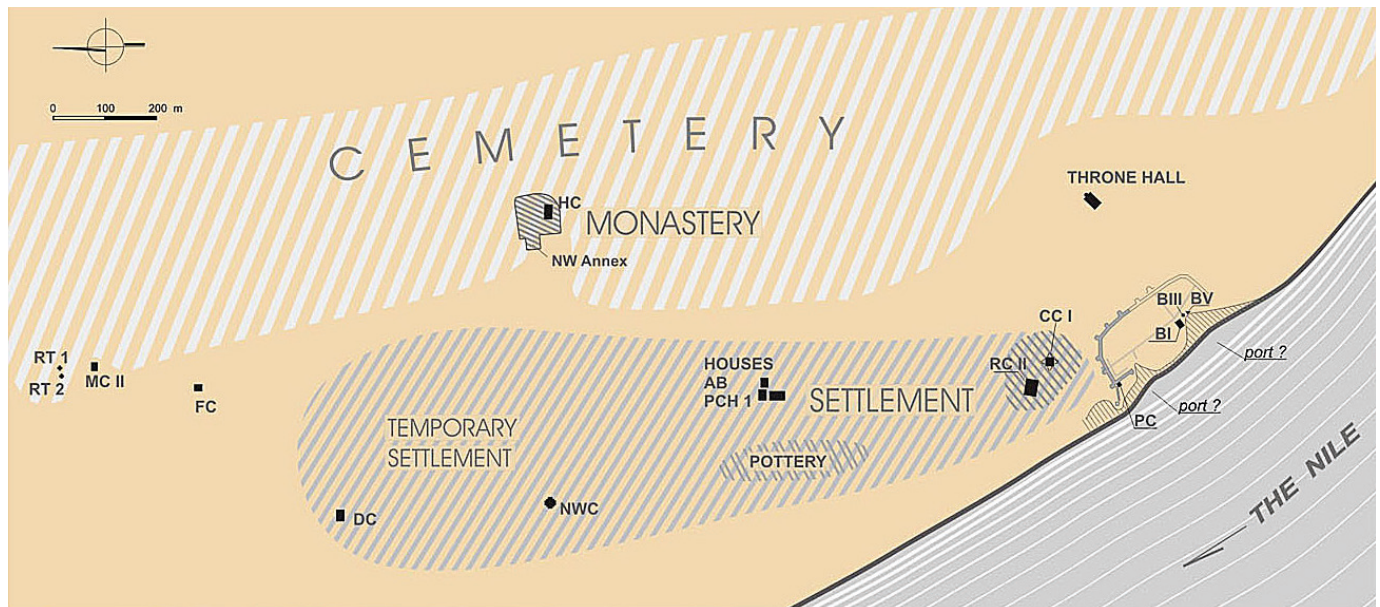


Figure 1. Plan of the Dongola site in the 12th century (produced by Dobrochna Zielińska after Godlewski 2013, 18).



Figure 2. Aerial photo showing the Dongola site from the north. In the foreground are the Church of Granite Columns and the Cruciform Church. On the right, the citadel of Dongola; the corrugated iron roof marks the location of the Church of Raphael (B.V). In the middle, the Throne Hall converted into a mosque (photo by Szymon Lenarczyk, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

a small cruciform building, probably of 7th century date, which was turned into a church at a later stage of its use (Zielińska 2010; Godlewski 2013, 35-39); and a monumental church apparently built in the late 8th-early 9th century and dedicated to the Archangel Raphael (Godlewski 2018a). Excavations of the northern extension yielded two large churches, the Church of Granite Columns, apparently from the 7th century, and believed to be the cathedral of Dongola,¹⁷ and the Cruciform Church, built perhaps by King Zacharias in the mid-9th century as a votum after the safe return of his son Georgios from a diplomatic visit to Baghdad.¹⁸ Still further to the north, are excavated portions of

¹⁷ For the cathedral of Dongola and its transformations, see Gartkiewicz 1990 (summarised in Godlewski 2013, 48-57).

¹⁸ For the Cruciform Church, see Godlewski 1990 (summarised in Godlewski 2013, 39-41).

residential quarters with rich suburban houses, some provided with a sophisticated hydraulic system.¹⁹ However, the most spectacular discovery made by the Polish Mission was a monastery hidden under the so-called Kom H located c. 1km northeast of the town.²⁰ The monastery has not yet been fully excavated, though the main elements of its spatial organisation had been established (Figure 3). These include: the monastery church (Godlewski 2018b), another smaller church with beautifully preserved wall paintings,²¹ a commemorative church of the holy monk Anna located in his former dwelling (Godlewski 2013, 82-83; 2014, 275-280), service areas (Żurawski 1994; Dzierzbicka and Deptuła 2018), and two annexes abutting the monastery wall on the west and called the Northwest Annex and Southwest Annex respectively.²² The annexes were apparently liturgical spaces, possibly of commemorative character, accessible to both the monks and believers from the outside world. The monastery on Kom H was probably founded shortly after the conversion of Makuria to Christianity and may have functioned until at least the mid-14th century.

Each of the sites listed above yielded textual finds; however, the richest crop was obtained from the monastery. Altogether we may have hundreds of texts, perhaps even close to a thousand. Looking at this collection one immediately observes that, in contrast to the Qasr Ibrim corpus, it is almost completely lacking in texts written on perishable materials. The only finds of this kind worthy of mention here are two fragments of parchment leaves found in the mosque (i.e. the throne hall of Makurian kings) which contained portions of two Old Testament poetic compositions, namely Psalm 103 and Ode 8, in Greek and Old Nubian (Browne 1987) (Figure 4). The lack of texts written on parchment and paper among the Dongola finds is frequently explained by the presence of termites (Sudanese Arabic: *arda*), which eat everything organic. I do not know if this explanation is correct; perhaps we have not simply been lucky in our work so far and discoveries of manuscripts await us.

The paucity of manuscripts is compensated for by the great number of texts written on other media. Firstly, one has to mention inscriptions on the walls of cult places. They can be divided into two large groups from the point of view of their function, technique of execution, and contents.

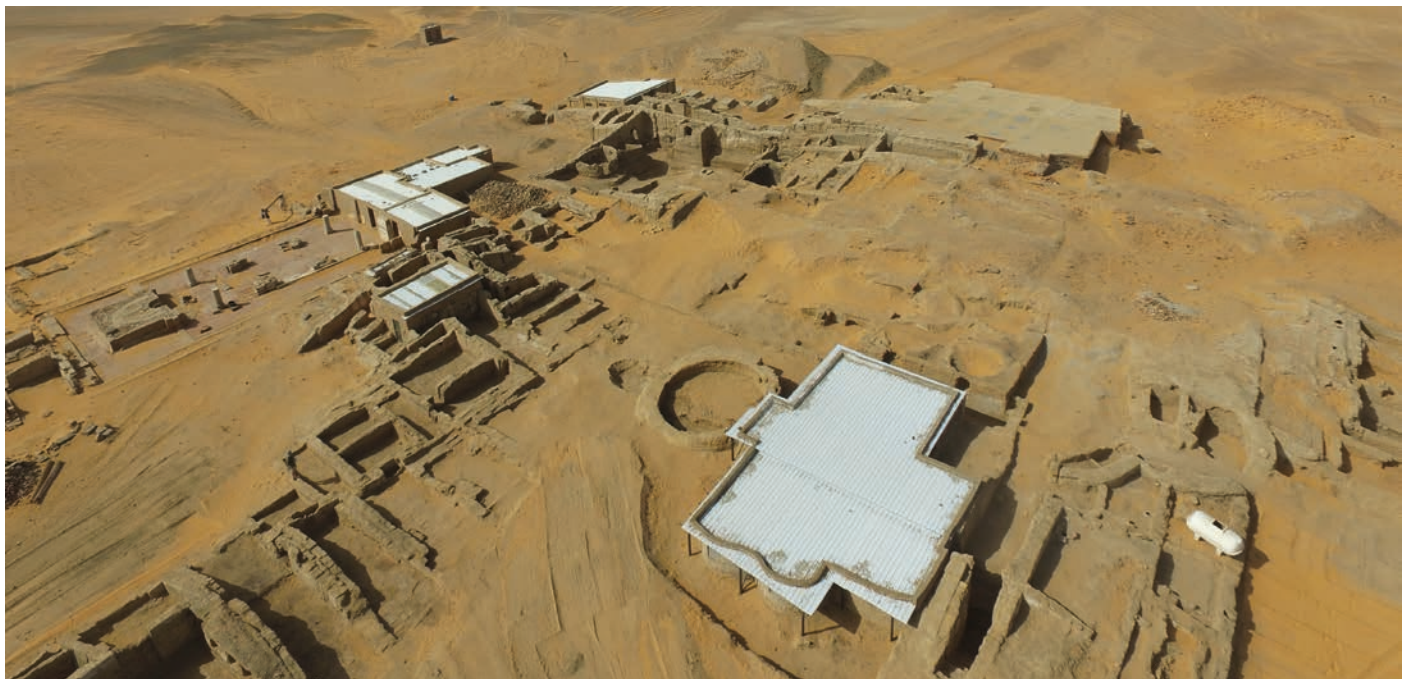


Figure 3. Aerial photo showing the monastery on Kom H from the north. In the foreground the North Church. In the background the monastery church and the commemorative church of Saint Anna. On the right, the Northwest Annex and the Southwest Annex (photo by Szymon Lenarczyk, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

¹⁹ Godlewski 2013, 101-107 (with earlier bibliography).

²⁰ Generally for the monastery on Kom H, see Godlewski 2013, 78-91. The name of the monastery is a matter of controversy, either the '(Great) Monastery of Antony' or the 'Monastery of Holy Trinity.' Both names occur in textual sources discovered on the site.

²¹ The church was only discovered in the 2017/2018 season of work of the Polish Mission, and its discovery has not yet been reported in print.

²² For the Northwest Annex, see Jakobielski 2001; Godlewski 2013, 85-91; 2018c. For the Southwest Annex, see Godlewski 2013, 91. For the painted decoration of the Annexes, see Martens-Czarnecka 2012.

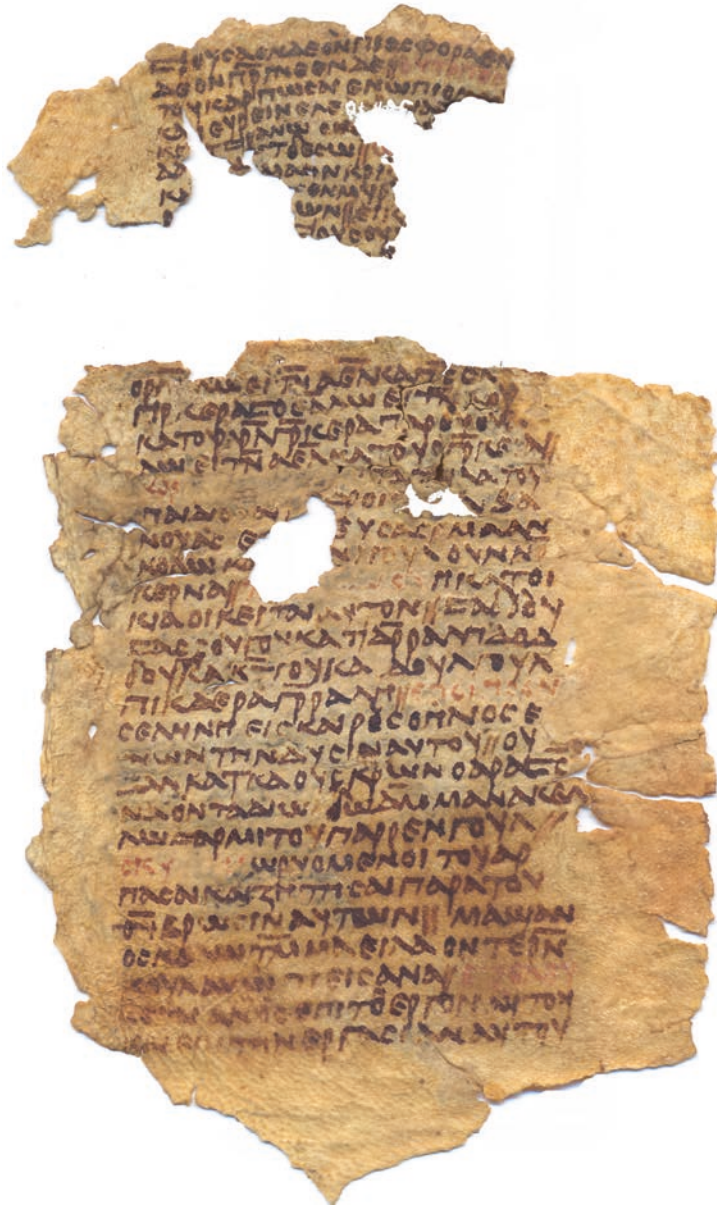


Figure 4. Fragments of parchment leaf with Psalm 103.15–31 in Greek and Old Nubian found in the mosque at Dongola (© National Museum Warsaw).

The first group consists of inscriptions belonging to the original ‘decoration’ of buildings such as painting captions, painting dedications, quotations from Holy Scriptures and Church Fathers, dogmatic texts, liturgical prayers, hymns, and so on. Inscriptions of this group, were, as a rule, painted black, more rarely brown or violet, by professional scribes commissioned by the Church. Here are some examples:

- captions for the painted representations of Jesus Christ and apostles on the east end of the north and south walls of Chapel 13 of the Northwest Annex;²³
- an inscription in the open roll held by the prophet Ezra represented on the west wall of Room 2a of the Southwest Annex and giving the title of the work: ‘Prophecy of Ezra’;²⁴
- acclamations and prayers in Old Nubian emanating from the mouths of dancers performing in front of an icon showing Mary with Child; painted on the north wall of Room 5 of the Southwest Annex (van Gerven Oei 2017);
- a dedication of the painting of Saint John the Baptist in the south sacristy of the Church of Raphael in the citadel; the text contains a prayer for the protection of a certain Mesi who must be considered as the donor of the painting;²⁵
- three inscriptions accompanying a representation of Jesus trampling a dragon, lion and snake, which decorated the wall of a private house (perhaps a private chapel) in the north suburb of the town; the texts, all in Greek, include: the caption ‘sun of justice’ placed next to Jesus’ head; a quotation from Psalm 91.13 (‘You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample

underfoot’) near Jesus’ body, above the heads of animals; and the beginning and the end of the gospel according to John in a round frame above Jesus’ head (Jakobielski 1979, 241–244);

- sixteen fragments of plaster found in the monastery church, which, when joined together, give an almost complete text of the Constantinopolitan creed in Greek (Figure 5);²⁶
- a prayer for the Church in Greek, overtaken from the intercession part of an unknown anaphora of Egyptian type inscribed on the south wall of Room 29 of the Northwest Annex, next to the representation of the apostolic college;²⁷

²³ The inscriptions in question were never the object of a separate study. They are partly visible on the photos published in Martens-Czarnecka 2012, 202 (bottom), 203 (bottom), 205 (centre left), 211 (bottom right). They are rather clumsily executed with big upright majuscules. All of them display the same form: ‘† name of an apostle + the word ‘apostle’ in Greek’.

²⁴ The inscription was never studied as a separate item. For a photo, see Martens-Czarnecka 2012, 132 (bottom left).

²⁵ The inscription has not been published yet. For a photo, see Godlewski 2018a, 128, fig. 10.16.

²⁶ Łajtar 2018. It should be observed that the Constantinopolitan Creed in Greek (only fragmentarily preserved) is the first part of an inscription in a niche in the west wall of Room 20 of the Northwest Annex. In addition, the inscription contains a series of requests to God of Michael in Old Nubian and the Lord’s Prayer in Greek. For this inscription, see Łajtar forthcoming (b). Another inscription in the Northwest Annex has the text of a creed similar to the Constantinopolitan one, but displays a highly developed anamnestic part in the second paragraph. For the publication of the creed, see Jakobielski and Łajtar 1997.

²⁷ The inscription remains unpublished. It was briefly mentioned in Jakobielski 1998, 163. The same prayer is inscribed on a piece of plaster found in the fill of Room 13 of the Northwest Annex, which also awaits publication. Preliminarily, see Catalogue Warsaw 2006, 57, no. 18.

- two inscriptions in Room 7 of the Northwest Annex containing prayers of the Liturgy of the Presanctified in Greek;²⁸
- a big fragment of plaster found in the fill of Room 6 of the Southwest Annex with the text of Psalm 29 in Greek and Old Nubian (Łajtar and van Gerven Oei 2020);
- an otherwise unattested hymn based on Ode 8 in Greek inscribed on the front of the apse of the Church of Raphael in the citadel;²⁹
- hymns to the Archangel Michael in Greek accompanying his painted representation on the east wall of Room 13 of the Northwest Annex (Figure 6).³⁰

One wonders what the function was of inscriptions belonging to this group. The answer is obvious in the case of captions and dedications of paintings. Their role is, respectively, to provide information about the subject of the representation and to comment upon it, and to reveal the identity of the donor and to pray for him or her. The situation is not as clear with inscriptions not related directly to paintings, especially those that contain liturgical texts such as prayers or hymns. I have sometimes encountered the opinion that they served a practical function as an aid for clergymen celebrating the liturgy. I rather disagree with this opinion. First, one observes that a priest or deacon standing in front of a wall and reading from it would have looked ridiculous to the congregation. Second, numerous inscriptions of this group are located in spots which are difficult to access, or are written with very small letters, less than one centimetre in size, which would make them barely readable from a distance. I suggest that these inscriptions have only a symbolic function: they underline the sacral character of the location and indicate that the texts they contain were recited or sung in this place during liturgical celebrations.

To the second group belong inscriptions that came into existence as a secondary element of the sacral space, as a result of pious visits paid to the place by believers. Inscriptions of this group were primarily carved in plaster by visitors themselves or by persons commissioned by them, i.e. they are graffiti in the proper sense of the word.³¹ They can be divided into several types depending on their structure. The simplest give only the name of the visitor,

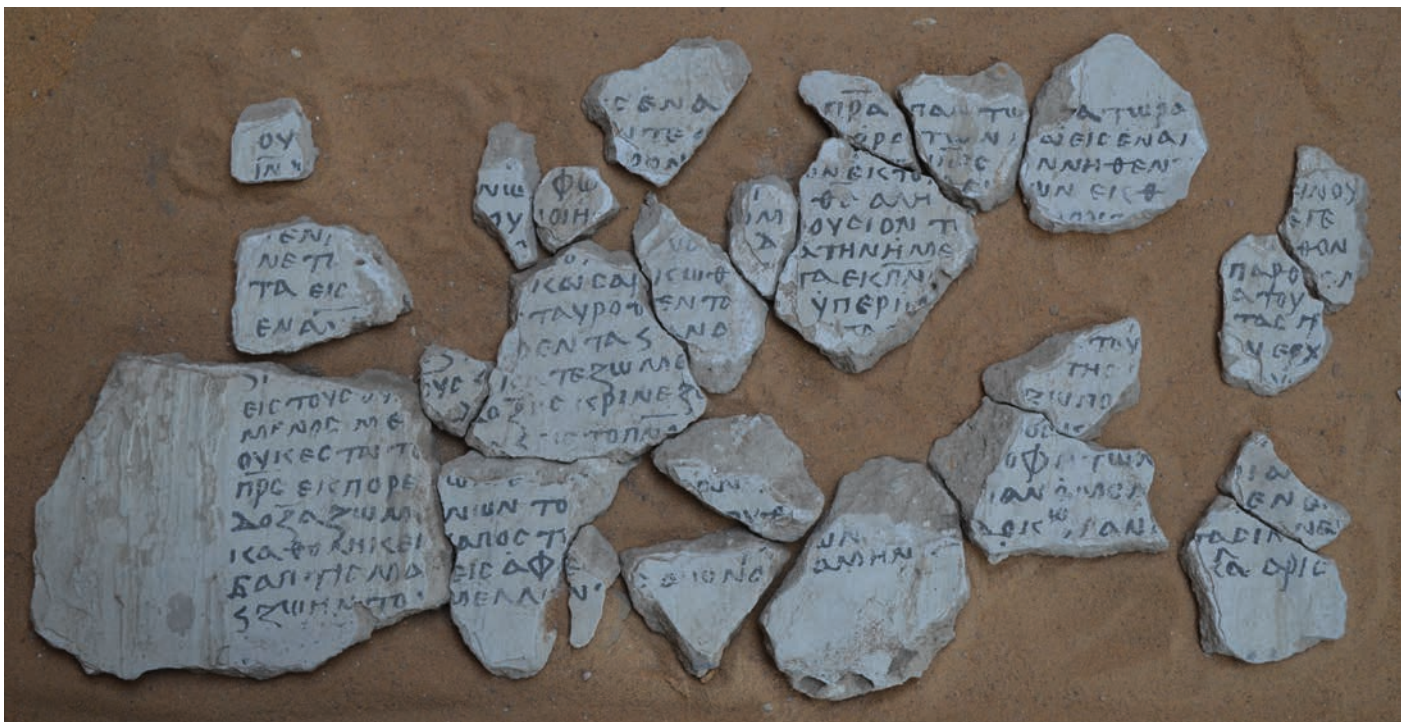


Figure 5. Fragments of plaster with Constantinopolitan creed in Greek found within the monastery church (photo by Włodzimierz Godlewski, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

²⁸ Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, no. XXXVa-b. Prayers of the Liturgy of the Presanctified are also inscribed in Room 27 of the Northwest Annex (two inscriptions containing one prayer each) and the north pastophorium of the Church of Raphael (B.V) on the citadel of Dongola (three inscriptions containing one prayer each). The two latter sets remain unpublished. For a brief presentation, see Łajtar and Zielińska 2016, 441.

²⁹ Unpublished. The publication is being prepared by the present author in collaboration with Tomasz Derda and Agata Deptuła.

³⁰ Unpublished. For a good photo, see Martens-Czarnecka 2001, pl. XLIII.

³¹ Generally for visitors' graffiti in cult spaces in Christian Nubia, their form and function, see Łajtar forthcoming c.



Figure 6. Hymns in honour of Archangel Michael in Greek accompanying his painted representation in the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola (© Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

in honour of Archangel Michael;

– an inscription in the North Church within the monastery on Kom H written on the base of the furnace in a scene of Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace, reading: ‘Blessed be the Lord, who saved the Youths unharmed in the furnace and preserved the Birthgiver as virgin after childbirth. I, Ishai, deacon of the Great Church of the Holy Trinity and also Lord of Elders, wrote this’.³⁴ Here again the presentation of the visitor, a certain clergyman Ishai, is connected with a literary quotation, which might be identified as a stanza of the hymn for Three Youths written by Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople in the first half of the 8th century.

Some visitors’ inscriptions lack a personal identification and contain only a pious acclamation, invocation of a holy figure, or a short prayer. The most frequently invoked holy figures are archangels, especially Michael, whose name appears dozens of times inscribed either in *scriptio plena* or in the form of a monogram or as the numerical cryptogram $\chi\theta\epsilon = 689$ (μ [40] + ι [10] + χ [600] + λ [1] + μ [8] + λ [30]). A particularly rich collection of such invocations is found on the east side of the passage between Rooms 4 and 3 of the Northwest Annex. It consists of six invocations of Michael (four in the form of a monogram and two as the numerical cryptogram), two invocations of Raphael (both

sometimes provided with other elements of personal identification, such as father’s name, place of residence, civilian or religious designation, and so on. More complicated are those constructed according to the pattern: ‘I, so-and-so, wrote this’, or ‘I, so-and-so, was here’. The most elaborate combine the presentation of the authors with a pious invocation, a prayer, or a quotation from Christian literature, especially from liturgical poetry. As an illustration one can cite the following items:

- an inscription in the commemorative church of Saint Anna in the monastery reading: ‘I, Gourronga, archpriest and archimandrite’ (Figure 7);³²
- an inscription by an anonymous woman on the east wall of Room 2 of the Southwest Annex requesting from God through the intercession of Mary the birth of a son (Łajtar and van Gerven Oei 2018);
- an inscription on the south side of the entrance to Room 29 of the Northwest Annex combining a quotation from Heb. 5.4 with information about the author, a certain cleric Paule (Łajtar 2001b);
- an inscription in the North Church within the monastery on Kom H reading: ‘I, Doureri, of the Great Church of Jesus, wrote this. Hail Michael, commander of angels, because you, having the freedom of speech at the throne, supplicate the merciful one for the world’ (Figure 8).³³ Here information about the visitor is obviously coupled with a literary quotation, most probably a hymn

³² Unpublished. Preliminarily, see Łajtar 2014c, 289–290 with fig. 2. The same Gourronga also left his memento on the east wall of Room 1a of the Northwest Annex; cf. Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, 33–35, no. XIII.

³³ Unpublished; known to me in autopsy.

³⁴ Unpublished; known to me in autopsy.

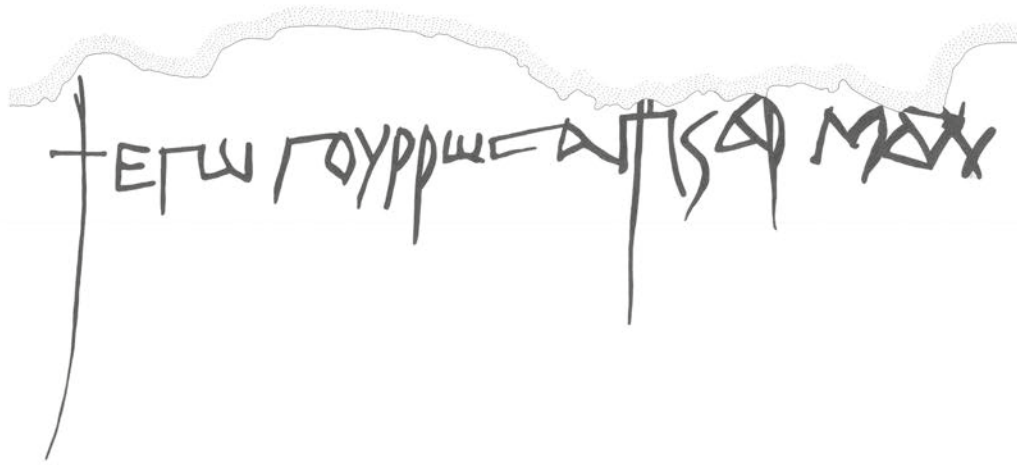


Figure 7. Inscription of Gourronga on a wall of the commemorative church of Saint Anna (drawing by Adam Łajtar).

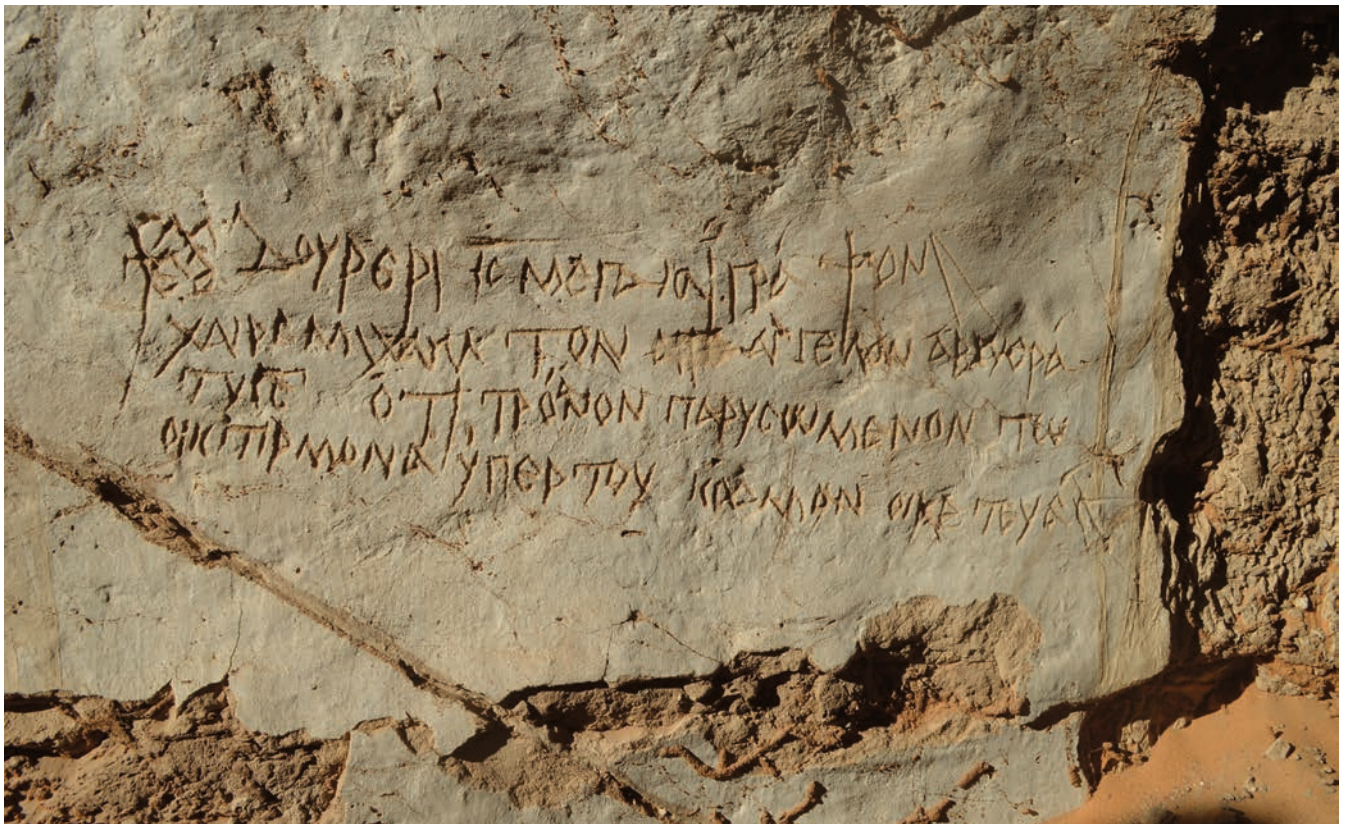


Figure 8. Inscription of Doureri on a wall of the North Church within the monastery on Kom H (photo by Włodzimierz Godlewski, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

written in the form of a monogram), and an inscription imitating the scene of *Maiestas Crucis* (acronyms of the names of Four Apocalyptic Beasts written in between arms of the cross formed by the appellation ‘Jesus the Christ’) (Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, 42-48, nos. XXIII, XXV-XXVII, XXIX-XXXIII) (Figure 9). In rare cases, names of archangels occur near each other to form a list. One such list with seven archangelic names (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Ourouel, Iael, Anael, Zedekiel) preceded by the appellation ‘Jesus the Christ’ is found on the west wall of Room 6 of the Northwest Annex,³⁵ another one, with the same archangelic names but without Jesus Christ, is on the north wall of Room 41 of the same Annex.³⁶

An interesting feature of the visitors’ inscriptions is that they tend to occur in clusters. For example, the newly discovered North Church within the monastery on Kom H yielded over 60 items of this kind of text concentrated near the paintings of Three Youths in the fiery furnace and of a Makurian king under the protection of Jesus Christ.

³⁵ Unpublished. Known to me in autopsy.

³⁶ Unpublished. Known to me in autopsy.

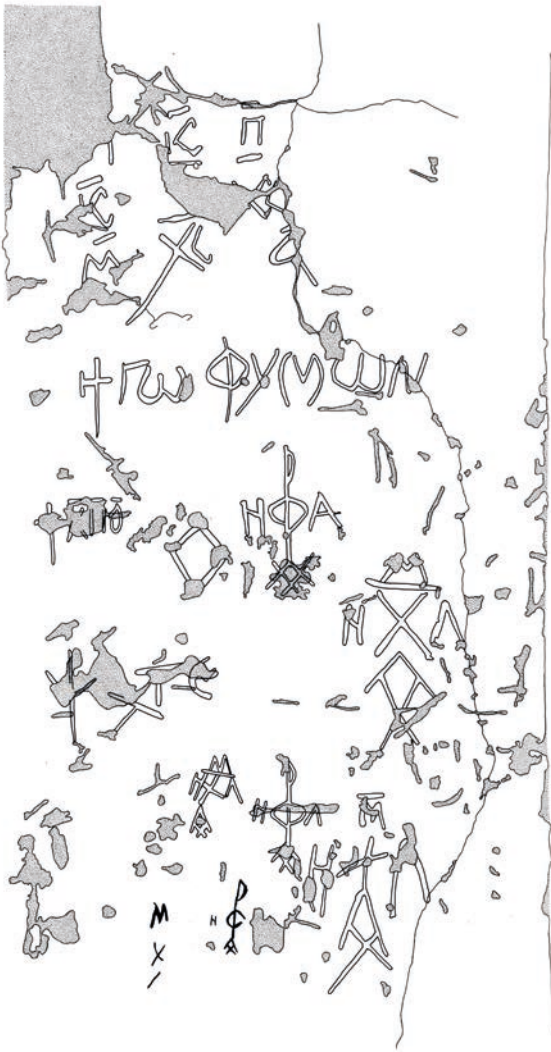


Figure 9. Monograms and cryptograms of Michael and Raphael, and imitation of Maiestas Crucis written on the east side of the passage between Rooms 4 and 3 of the Northwest Annex (drawing by Adam Łajtar).

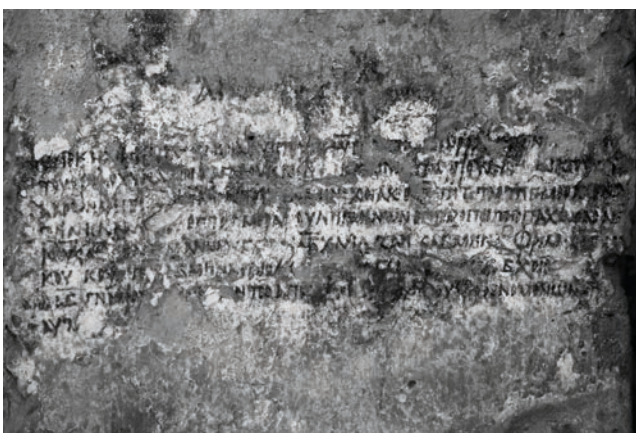


Figure 10. Inscription commemorating the consecration or renovation of the church of Raphael (photo by Tomasz Derda, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

Similar clustering is generally observed for visitors' graffiti through space and time; it is the nature of these texts that the action of writing by someone provokes a similar reaction or behaviour by others. In her study of visitors' inscriptions in Paneion at el-Kanais in the Egyptian Eastern Desert, Rachel Mairs called this phenomenon 'a repetitive self-producing practice reinforced by constant performance' (Mairs 2011, 158).

The inscriptions left by visitors in cult places are sometimes regarded as acts of vandalism. This is essentially false as it is based on modern presuppositions. Writing on the walls of a cult place is not sacrilegious. Quite the contrary: the clustering of these inscriptions indicates and reinforces the sacral character of the place and is testimony to its cult activity. Visitors' inscriptions are religious texts par excellence. They may be designated as private prayers, for which the written format grants permanence. They perpetuate an individual before the divinity in order to establish his/her eternal worshipful presence in the cult place and to grant for him/her the blessing of God.³⁷

Some wall inscriptions do not fit the classification presented above. Such is the case with a graffito on the north wall of the commemorative church of Saint Anna in the monastery on Kom H, which states that the feast of Anna falls on the 10th of the month of Tybi (6 January) (Łajtar 2017, 94-96; see also Łajtar 2014c, 292 with fig. 5). Similarly problematic is a Greek text painted in black on the west wall of the south sacristy of the Church of Raphael in the citadel. It commemorates either the initial consecration or renovation of the church in question, as accomplished by the efforts of the archbishop of Dongola, Aaron, during the time of King Georgios (probably the first quarter of the 9th century) (Derda and Łajtar 2020) (Figure 10). The consecration of the church was apparently attended by all the bishops of the Makurian church, and a list including their names and the names of their sees, occupies the entire second part of the inscription. In contrast to our previous knowledge, according to which the Makurian Church had seven bishoprics, this list has ten entries, thus casting new light on the organisation of the Christian Church in the Middle Nile Valley. Interestingly the beginning of the text is three metres above the floor level, which means that the inscription was not designed for reading, but had only a symbolic purpose.

The most spectacular example of wall inscriptions discovered so far in Dongola comes not from a cult place, but from a burial vault. The vault in question is situated under

³⁷ For the function of visitors' graffiti in cult places, see van der Vliet forthcoming (with relation to Christian Egypt); Yasin 2015 (with relation to the Latin West in late antique and medieval times).

Room 5 of the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H. It most probably was prepared for Georgios, archbishop of Dongola, who died in 1113 as we learned from his tombstone immured in the wall above the tomb (for a short presentation of the tombstone, see below). The internal walls of the vault are densely covered with ink inscriptions containing 17 textual and paratextual units, obviously arranged as a set (Figure 11).³⁸ The set started on the west wall, which is the wall with the entrance, and continued clockwise through the north, east, and south walls. The elements of the set are as follows:

On the west wall, from top to bottom: (1) Invocation of the Holy Trinity in Greek; (2) Colophon, i.e. information about the author and his work, in Greek; (3) Magical signs; (4) A Trinitarian formula ('In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit') in Greek; (5) A series of numerical cryptograms; (6) A list of divine names; (7) A magical circle; (8) The beginning and end of the gospel according to Matthew in Greek.

On the north wall: (9) A composite text in Greek consisting of a prayer of Mary, a seal of Solomon, and a prayer of the virgin Justina from the legend of Saint Cyprian; (10) A Sator-Square, which is a word square containing a five-word Latin palindrome; (11) The beginning and end of the gospel according to Mark in Greek.

On the east wall: (12) The beginning and end of the gospel according to Luke in Greek; (13) The prayer of the Virgin Mary in the hour of her death from the apocryphal work 'On the Holy Virgin Mary' ascribed to Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, in Coptic; (14) A list of apostles.

On the south wall: (15) The beginning and end of the gospel according to John in Greek; (16) The Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin from the apocryphon 'On the dormition of the Holy Virgin Mary' ascribed to Evodius of Rome, in Coptic; (17) A Sator-Square.

All of the inscriptions were the work of one scribe, a certain John, who left his signature as many as three times at the end of the main textual units on the north, east and south walls. In the colophon, he says that he 'inscribed this rock (Gr. πέτρα) with his own hand as a phylactery (Gr. φυλακτήριον) against every infirmity (Gr. μαλακία)'. This phrase gives explicit information about the nature and the purpose of the inscriptions: they are texts of great power written to protect the vault, the body buried in it and the soul of the deceased in the liminal moment of the passage from this world to the eternity.

Next in importance after wall inscriptions are funerary inscriptions, as a rule written on slabs or plaques of stone or terracotta for insertion in the wall of a tomb, and in one instance immediately on the external wall of a tomb. The inscriptions are mostly in Greek, more rarely in Coptic. The texts are usually composed of ready formulae, probably borrowed from the funerary liturgy of the Makurian Church. Of the hundred or so items discovered,³⁹ two objects deserve special attention. The first is a sandstone slab found broken into several fragments at the southern end of the altar screen of the monastery church. It carries a bilingual, Graeco-Coptic text, inscribed within a raised border that follows the outline of an expanded, almost square cross (Figure 12). The text commemorates Joseph, bishop of Aswan in Upper Egypt, who died on 28th April 668 (or 670) (Jakobielski and van der Vliet 2011). In highly sophisticated language, it addresses the deceased and proclaims his merits first as a young man, comparable to his Biblical namesake, and then as the shepherd of a Christian community, from which he was separated at death. The second object is a simple marble plaque found broken into two parts in the fill of a room over the inscribed vault. Originally it must have been inserted in a wall over the entrance to the vault, where a square cavity may be observed with dimensions corresponding more or less to the dimensions of the plaque. The plaque carries an inscription in Greek, which was partly painted red to form a Greek cross. The inscription commemorates Georgios, who was archbishop of Dongola for 50 years, and who died on 29th June 1113 at the age of 82 (Łajtar 2002; see also Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, 18–22, no. 1). The rather formulaic text is distorted by an unusual element, namely a highly sophisticated eulogy of the deceased who is described as 'loving the Church, loving mankind, hospitable, the one who was conscientious about God's monastery, loving the poor, and even better, the one who cared about the entire world, who was of cheerful countenance, the mildest father of orphans, the good shepherd'. The eulogy, together with the fact that Georgios became archbishop of Dongola at a very young age, namely 32, allows us to consider him as an outstanding

³⁸For a complete publication of these inscriptions, see Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017.

³⁹The majority of Greek epitaphs from Dongola are presented in Łajtar 1997a and 2011. Other publications: Łajtar 2001a; Łajtar 2014b. For Coptic epitaphs, see van der Vliet 2011; 2018.



Figure 11. Burial vault under Room 5 of the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H inscribed with literary and paraliterary texts in Greek and Coptic, general view (photo by Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

personality, and also to understand why such a remarkable tomb, as the one presented above, was prepared for him.

Another interesting category of inscribed finds are ostraca. Ostraca, i.e. sherds of ceramic vessels used secondarily as a medium for a text, should be distinguished from inscribed pottery, which I shall discuss further on in my paper. Ostraca are relatively rare in Christian Nubia. The Dongola collection, which amounts to dozens of items, is the largest of this kind in the Middle Nile valley. Texts written on ostraca are of various kinds, the most common being those connected with magic and education. The latter category will be described with some details in the final part of this paper, but here are a few words about the former. An ostrakon of apparently late Christian date found in a private house in the citadel carries a text in Greek, which starts with the Trinitarian formula ('In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'), continues with the middle part of the rotasator palindrome, and ends with the request 'deliver your servant Ariñji' (Łajtar and van der Vliet 2011) (Figure 13). Ariñji means 'small bead, especially for necklaces and bracelets' in Dongolawi, the vernacular Nubian used in the area of Dongola, which suggests that the protagonist of the text was a woman. The text is obviously a prayer seeking supernatural help for the well-being of this woman. The ostrakon can be identified as the personal amulet of Ariñji, carried around by her in the folds of her clothes or else deposited under the threshold of her house or near her bed-side. A similar amuletic function can perhaps be ascribed to another ostrakon from the habitation quarters in the citadel, containing the Trinitarian formula and the beginning of Psalm 23 ('The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want'), both in Greek (Łajtar 1997b). Apart from magical ostraca, one finds ostraca with letters and receipts. As an illustration one can cite an ostrakon with a very

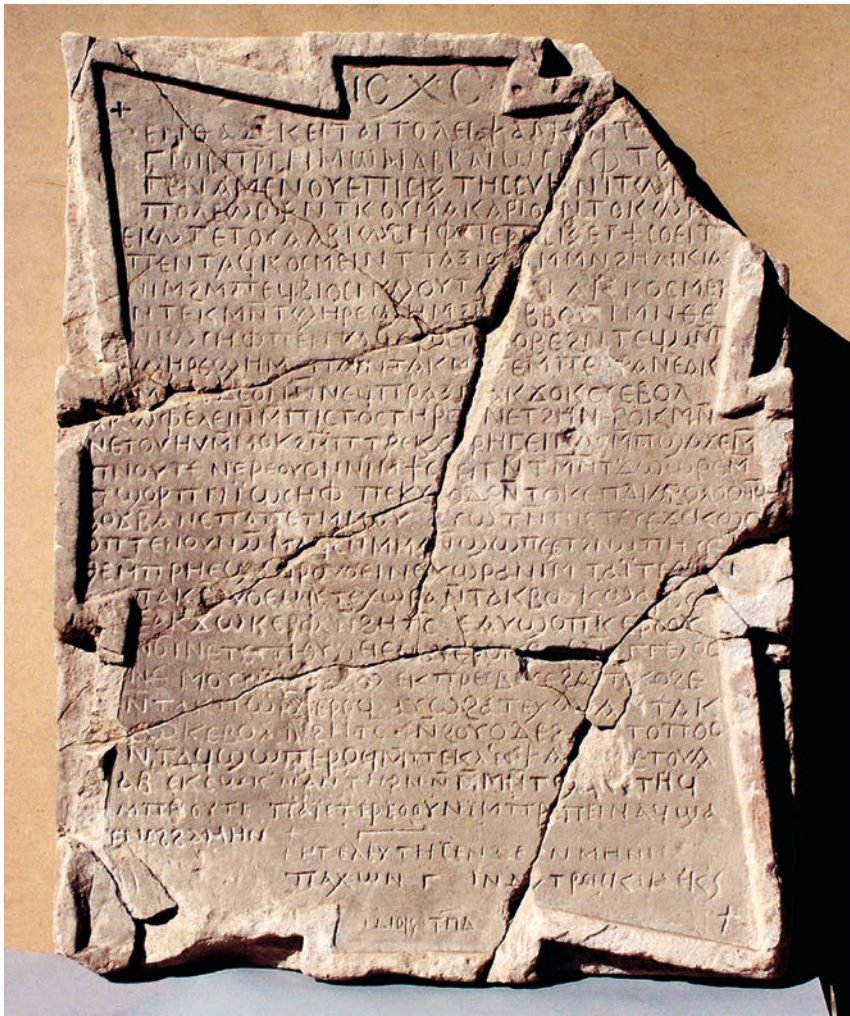


Figure 12. Epitaph of Joseph, Bishop of Aswan (died 668 or 670), found in the monastery church (photo by Wojciech Chmiel, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).



Figure 13. Magical ostracon with a prayer for protection for the woman Ariñji (photo by Włodzimierz Godlewski, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

short letter in Old Nubian, containing only the words: 'I pay homage to your fathership through God',⁴⁰ and another one with a receipt for quantities of corn and black grapes measured in bushels in Greek.⁴¹ The letter was found in the monastery and is rather late in date, perhaps from the 12th-13th century, while the receipt comes from the citadel and can be dated as early as the 7th-8th century.

It is not clear to me how to classify a ceramic artefact covered with an ink inscription that was preserved in several fragments found in the monastery on Kom H.⁴² It was either a large ostracon or an inscribed vessel. The text in Old Nubian was apparently a list of people and commodities measured in unidentifiable units as suggested by a fragment, which has the names Tine or Gine and Moses followed by the number 'one'. Similar lists are known from Qasr Ibrim, where they are written on parchment, and from Faras and Sonqi Tino, where they assume the form of wall inscriptions.⁴³ They have been interpreted as registers of donors, for example to the Church, or, alternatively, those who receive something, for example in the framework of Church charitable activity. A similar ambiguous interpretation holds true also in our case.

A very big and interesting group of textual finds are inscribed pottery vessels. They can be divided into three subgroups: (1) producers' marks; (2) owners' marks; and (3) tags.

Inscriptions in the first subgroup were carved in the wet surface of vessels before firing. As a rule they are very simple consisting of anepigraphic signs, such as chevron, cross, pentagram or something like that, and single letters, perhaps acronyms of the producers' names or numbers (either marks of capacities or

⁴⁰ Unpublished. Studied by the present writer in collaboration with Vincent van Gerven Oei.

⁴¹ Unpublished. Studied by the present writer in collaboration with Tomasz Derda.

⁴² Unpublished. Studied by the present writer in collaboration with Vincent van Gerven Oei.

⁴³ Generally for Nubian lists of people and goods, see Ochała 2014b; see also Łajtar and Ochała 2015.

production series). Only rarely does one find complete words, mostly producers' names or the names of holy figures that functioned as a means of protection.

Inscriptions of the second subgroup were carved in the hard surface of vessels after firing. They gave the name of the owner, sometimes supplemented by other elements of personal identification, such as 'priest' or 'deacon', and frequently a holy name was added, obviously for apotropaic purposes, as a mean of protection against holy spirits who could have attacked the owner whilst eating or drinking. In many cases, a holy name is found alone, without any mention of the owner whatsoever. Similarly as with the visitors' inscriptions, the most frequently encountered holy name is that of Archangel Michael who was a beloved figure of popular piety among Christian Nubians. Pottery vessels with owners marks abound especially in the monastery, where they tend to occur in clusters. For example, a refuse dump in one of the rooms of the Northwest Annex yielded two table sets, each consisting of ten or so pots, belonging to two archimandrites with the names Lazaros and Stephanos (Łajtar and Pluskota 2001) (Figure 14). We also know of a plate with the signature of the archimandrite Christophoros.⁴⁴

Inscriptions of the third subgroup are painted on transport containers, amphorae and big jars, and provide information about their contents and the addressee (alternatively the sender). Amphorae with *tituli picti* have been found in both habitation quarters in the citadel, including the royal palace and private houses, and in the monastery on Kom H. Those from the former site are mostly dated to the 6th-8th centuries and carry inscriptions in white or yellow paint, those from the latter are from the 12th-13th century and are inscribed in black.⁴⁵ An excellent illustration of these late monastery finds are sherds of amphorae with the inscriptions 'wine of (the monastery of) the Holy Trinity' and 'wine of King Toskoña'.⁴⁶

The need to transport liquids, mainly wine, explains a very special category of inscribed find commonly referred to as 'mud stoppers'. 'Mud stoppers' played the role of plugs in amphorae filled with wine. A lump of wet mud was put on the mouth of a vessel, formed into a hemisphere and stamped with a stamp of the wine producer. The stamps could have been either anepigraphic or have contained an inscription. The custom of using stamps with inscriptions was especially common in Early Christian Nubia, up to the 8th century, as demonstrated by finds in the royal palace in the citadel (Dzierzbicka 2015). Later it was abandoned as testified to by the material from the monastery.

Apart from inscribed pottery other inscribed objects are rather uncommon. Among ten or so items, three artefacts deserve a separate mention. The first is a bronze censer found in the cathedral and decorated with figures of Jesus Christ and three male saints, most probably apostles (Wyżgoł 2017). Above them is an inscription in Greek with some Old Nubian intrusions stating that the censer is an offering for the Church of the Apostle Peter. The bowl of the censer imitates an import from somewhere in the Mediterranean, perhaps from Syria, but the inscription is an original Nubian addition. The second is a terracotta window grille found in several fragments in the rubble fill west of the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H.⁴⁷ The grille was decorated with a representation of two birds flanking a column, and on the arched frame above it carried a painted inscription mentioning 'abba NN (name not preserved) *archipresbyteros* and *archistylites*', obviously the donor of the object. The third is a fragmentary wooden icon freshly discovered in the Church of Raphael in the citadel (Godlewski, Kusz and Łajtar 2018) (Figure 15). It carries a representation of the reclining Virgin Mary and below it a dedicatory inscription in Greek containing a prayer for protection for a certain Proimos who is designated as *joknashil*, a title of unknown meaning but otherwise attested in Dongola, perhaps connected with the royal court.

The above clearly shows that the literacy in Dongola in Christian times was essentially held in two languages: Greek and Old Nubian; Coptic is rare and occurs only in the monastery. Obviously Nubian monasticism was under the strong influence of Egyptian models but this was apparently not necessarily the case with other manifestations of religious and cultural life. The use of two languages at the same time and in the same contexts inevitably led to their interaction, which resulted in mixed-language texts and code-switching. Code-switching, that is the 'use of more than one language in a single communicative episode' (Heller 1988, 1) is very common in visitors' inscriptions,

⁴⁴ The find remains unpublished. For a photo, see Jakobielski 2008, 289, fig. 8 (top).

⁴⁵ An example is an amphora with the inscription '*archipresbyteros* Psate' found in House A106 in the citadel; cf. Godlewski 2013, 99.

⁴⁶ The sherds remain unpublished. Their photos may be found in: Jakobielski and Scholz 2001, pl. 3 and 4; Jakobielski 2008, 289, fig. 8 (bottom).

⁴⁷ The object has not received a full publication yet. For a brief description and a photo, see Jakobielski 2003, 213-214, with fig. 2; 2008, 293 with fig. 15. The grille was probably originally inserted in a window of one of the rooms of the upper storey of the Northwest Annex.

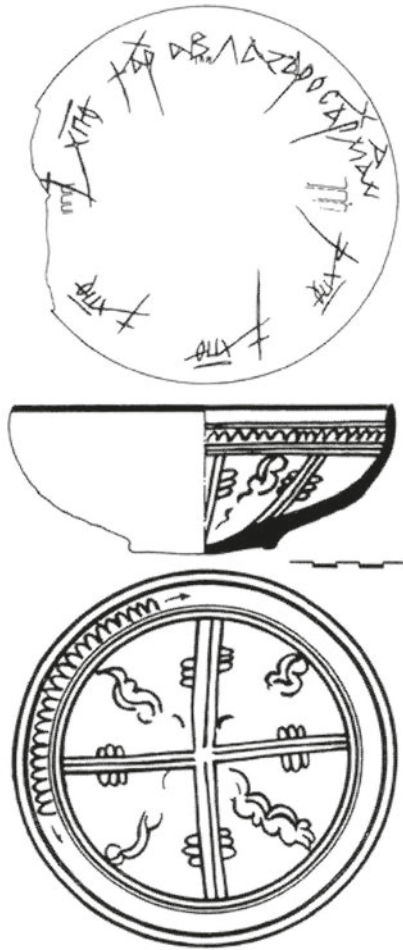


Figure 14. Bowl with the signature of Abba Lazaros, an archimandrite, and the cryptogram xno (= Michael) repeated four times (drawing by Krzysztof Pluskota).



Figure 15. Fragmentary wooden icon with a representation of the reclining Virgin and a dedicatory inscription (photo by Maciej Wyżgoł, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

especially those constructed according to the pattern 'I, so-and-so, wrote this', 'I, so-and-so, was here'. In them, the personal pronoun (the subject) in Greek may be connected with a verb-form (the predicate) in Old Nubian and inversely. Mixed-language texts occur among the wall inscriptions with literary contents. Thus an inscription in a niche in the west wall of Room 20 of the Northwest Annex consists of the Constantinopolitan creed in Greek, a series of ten requests to God sent through the intermediary of Michael written in Old Nubian, and the prayer 'Our God who art in Heaven' in Greek (Łajtar forthcoming b). An inscription painted on the wall with the putative place for Archbishop Georgios' epitaph has Psalm 129 ('Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord') in Old Nubian combined with the acclamation 'many years to Archbishop George' in Greek (Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, 22-25, no. II). I previously mentioned an inscription from Room 5 in the Southwest Annex with Psalm 29 in Greek and Old Nubian. Two other inscriptions of this kind, one containing Psalm 96 and the other Psalm 127, are found in two neighbouring rooms within the Northwest Annex (Łajtar and van Gerven Oei 2020). The two latter inscriptions are fully bilingual, i.e. their verses are given, one after the other, in two languages, the former, however, is semibilingual, i.e. its verses alternate linguistically (the first is in Greek, the second in Old Nubian, the third in Greek, the fourth in Old Nubian, and so on). This bilingualism and semibilingualism is probably reminiscent of the performance of psalms by two choirs of which one sung in Greek and the other in Old Nubian.

The finds from Dongola but also from Qasr Ibrim and other Christian Nubian sites, such as Banganarti, which yielded almost one thousand visitors inscriptions on the walls of a single church,⁴⁸ and the monastery at Ghazali, which

⁴⁸ For a complete publication of these inscriptions, see Łajtar forthcoming a.



Figure 16. School exercise on a wall of the monastery church (photo by Dorota Moryto, © Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

are exercises in declension, whereby the word used, rather unexpectedly, is the adjective ἄβροχος, ‘not inundated’. One also finds ostraca with so-called ‘chains’, artificial words containing all 24 letters of the Greek alphabet repeated only once each. In the church itself, the preserved lower part of the east wall of the south aisle is entirely covered with inscriptions of a similar kind, including, in the first line, alphabetical lists of words. The largest of these inscriptions has as many as 12 lists, covering the letters from *lambda* to *psi* (Figure 16).⁵¹ Each list consists of seven entries arranged according to the vowels of the Greek alphabet. Two similar lists were found inscribed on the walls of the commemorative church of Saint Anna.⁵² Finally one must mention an ink inscription in the Northwest Annex with an adaptation of one of the sentences ascribed to Menander, a Greek poet of the late 4th- early 3rd century BC (Łajtar 2009). The text says that those who know script, perhaps in the sense of (Holy) Scripture, have a better understanding than other people. The exercises listed above correspond with the successive steps of literary education in the Greek style, from learning letters through to constructing words and memorising vocabulary, followed by style training. They are attested in exactly the same form in Greek papyri and ostraca from Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Antique Egypt,⁵³ and also from elsewhere. This means that the literary education in Christian Nubia followed paths which had been established in the Greek and Greek-influenced world for nearly two millennia. In this respect, the Christian culture of Middle Nile was a direct heir of Graeco-Roman civilisation.

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⁴⁹ Finds made during the work of the Sudan Antiquities Service Mission in the 1950s were presented by John W. B. Barns in Shinnie and Chittick 1961, 69-94. Later finds made by the Polish Mission are being studied by Grzegorz Ochała; preliminarily, see Ochała in Obluski and Ochała 2016, 69-77.

⁵⁰ The ostraca were discovered only in the last seasons of the Polish Mission’s work and have remained unpublished. They are known to me in autopsy.

⁵¹ The inscriptions remain unpublished. Photos of the wall showing the position of inscriptions are published in: Jakobielski 2008, 289, fig. 9; Gazda 2010, 50, fig 21; Godlewski 2018b, 27, fig. 1.14.

⁵² The inscriptions remain unpublished. Preliminarily, see Łajtar 2014c, 293-294, with fig. 4.

⁵³ For a Greek-style education in Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Antique Egypt, see Criboire 1996; 2001.

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