

# WALL INSCRIPTIONS IN THE SOUTHWEST ANNEX TO THE MONASTERY ON KOM H AT DONGOLA: REPORT ON WORK IN THE 2013 SEASON

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**Abstract:** The article offers an overview of wall inscriptions from the Southwest Annex to the Monastery on Kom H at Dongola documented in the 2013 season. The collection consists of 49 items. They can be divided into two categories: integral elements of the original decoration of the Annex and elements that were introduced when the Annex was in use, mostly by lay visitors. The two categories are described and the most interesting items are presented in greater detail. Information derived from the inscriptions is discussed in the context of Christian Nubian culture.

**Keywords:** Christian Nubia, Dongola, wall inscriptions, visitors' graffiti

The Southwest Annex to the Monastery on Kom H at ancient Dongola is a structure abutting from the west the southern part of the western girdle wall of the monastery and attached to the southwestern gate from the south. The Annex was constructed probably in the 10th–11th century and was subsequently reshaped in the 12th–13th century (Jakobielski 2010: 76; a different opinion, moving the date forward by one or two centuries, Godlewski 2015: 237–239). Ultimately, it consisted of two series of rooms, eastern (rooms 6, 5, 4) and western (rooms 2a, 2b, 2c), preceded by an entrance vestibule (room 1) [Fig. 1

top left]. To the north, it was connected with the so-called Southwestern Building through a corridor-like room 7 and the stairs 8. The Annex boasted rich painted decoration of clearly religious character, suggesting a liturgical space, further corroborated by the presence of an altar in room 5. The paintings included representations of archangels, among them Zedekiel and Raphael fighting the devil personified as a rhinoceros, Old Testament scenes and figures (the prophets Jeremiah and Esdra receiving a revelation, Three Youths in a Fiery Furnace), New Testament scenes (Annunciation, Nativity, Massacre of the

Innocents, as many as four representations of Mary and Child, including a unique figure of Mary spinning and nursing Jesus), Christian saints, especially military figures. Two murals merit attention because of

their unusual content: a ritual dance scene, most probably honoring the Virgin, presenting two groups of performers, one clad as giraffes and the other as hyenas (see most recently Martens-Czarnecka 2011) and



Fig. 1. Inscription with a quotation from Saint Basil's "Homily on the Fast", in the vestibule of the Southwest Annex, above the door to room 2a; top left, plan of the Southwest Annex; top right, painting of the Archangel Gabriel above the doorway connecting rooms 1 and 7 (Photos D. Zielińska; plan S. Maślak, PCMA UW)

a narrative cycle, most probably of a Biblical subject, its essence being a financial transaction of some kind.<sup>1</sup> The walls of the Annex carried a number of inscriptions, both painted and scratched.

The Annex was excavated by a Polish team working under the direction of Stefan Jakobielski in 1995–1996 and 2004–2006 (Żurawski 1997; Jakobielski 2005; 2008: 295–298; 2010: 73–82). After the necessary conservation and documentation, the Annex was fitted with a provisional roof, which required urgent replacement in 2013 (see Godlewski 2015: 237–239). The neighborhood of the Annex was cleared of recently accumulated sand, the old roof was removed and a new one, made of corrugated sheets, was installed. At the same time the old door to the Annex was replaced with a new one and windows made of acrylic glass were introduced. The change of roof prompted a full photographic documentation of the murals by Dobrochna Zielińska and an epigraphic survey of the inscriptions by the present author.

The survey of inscriptions revealed 49 items. Legends accompanying individual scenes of painted decoration were counted as one item. Inscriptions occurred throughout the structure, including the entrance room and the corridor-like room 7. The texts are mostly in Greek with a few in Old Nubian. From the point of view of their function (and also content), the inscriptions can be divided into two groups:

- (1) integral elements of the original decoration of the Annex, and
- (2) inscriptions introduced when the annex was in use, mostly as a result of visits by believers.

Inscriptions of the first group were all written in black or violet paint. The group included the following categories:

(a) Dedications of paintings (three certain and one doubtful), in Greek and assuming the form of a prayer for intercession for the donor, typical of this kind of texts in Christian Nubia. One of these inscriptions, accompanying the large figure of an archangel on the east wall of room 6, commemorates a certain abba Marianos (or Marianou), perhaps a bishop of Dongola or archimandrite of the neighboring monastery.<sup>2</sup> Another one, situated on the south wall of room 2a, refers to a woman whose name was not preserved,<sup>3</sup> but whose sex could be recognized by the feminine endings of the article and the noun.

(b) Legends to paintings, encompassing two subcategories: (I) legends accompanying and identifying figures represented in painting, (II) inscriptions being an integral part of the painted representations. Inscriptions of the first subcategory comprise two types, simple and developed. The simple inscriptions consist of single names, written as a rule in small letters near the figures they refer to. Such are the legends to the protagonists in the scene of the Nativity situated partly on the north wall and partly on the east wall

<sup>1</sup> Interpreted by Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka (2007; 2010: 705–708; 2011: 121–125) as illustrating the story of Tobias, but this interpretation is not entirely certain.

<sup>2</sup> This is suggested by the man's title "abba", which was confined to monastic circles, from which the bishops issued. For the use of the title "abba" in the Christian culture of the Nile Valley, see Derda and Wipszycka 1994.

<sup>3</sup> A small figure of this woman who donated a mural in the southern part of the east wall of room 2 (No. 87 in Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka's inventory of paintings) was found nearby in fragmentary condition (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 225).

of room 5 (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 135–145). They include the names of the magi (Melcheion, Taddasias, Patousora),<sup>4</sup> shepherds (Arnias, Lekantas),<sup>5</sup> the female servant of the Virgin (Salome), animals (Peio, Peimaase),<sup>6</sup> and Herod's soldiers (Dionysios of the king, NN of the king).<sup>7</sup> Inscriptions of the second type added further information about the person represented, such as his/her epithets or descriptions of his/her qualities. Inscriptions of this type can be written in big letters placed over or around the head of the person in the murals, as if it were a title for the painting. Of this nature are the inscriptions accompanying four representations of the Virgin and Child, located appropriately on the south wall of room 2c, the southern and the northern side of the passage between rooms 2c and 4, and the north wall of room 5 (paintings Nos 94, 97, 98, 108 in Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka's inventory of murals, see Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 168–179), all of them having the same wording: "The Holy Mary, a Virgin, Mother of Christ". Another inscription of the same character is the one accompanying the representation of Archangel Raphael fighting a rhinoceros-headed demon found on the

east wall of room 2c (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 197–199 with Fig. 98). The text qualifies Raphael as *empsychos*, something like "animated, most full of vital fluid".<sup>8</sup> Noteworthy are two inscriptions accompanying representations of military saints, Theodoros and Merkurios, situated respectively on the north and west walls of room 2a. Both of them were constructed according to the same pattern: "Saint NN, martyr of Christ", with the non-classical form *martyros* for "martyr".

An interesting detail of a technical nature can be observed with relation to legends of the second type. Five of them, those accompanying the four figures of Mary and Child and the Archangel Raphael, were definitely done by the same hand, writing big irregular majuscules of the Nubian type. Importantly, the paintings in question were also the work of one hand.<sup>9</sup> This leads to the conclusion that the inscriptions were either executed by the painter or the painter cooperated with the same scribe.

The second subcategory of legends is best represented by a series of Old Nubian inscriptions with acclamations of the Virgin Mary written around the participants of a ritual dance (possibly a feast in

<sup>4</sup> The same names, with some graphic variants, occurred in the Nativity scene in the Petros cathedral in Faras; see Michałowski 1967: 147 with Pls 64–65.

<sup>5</sup> The same names, with a variant reading for the second one (Lekotes), are found in the Nativity scene in the Petros cathedral in Faras; see Michałowski 1967: 146 with Pl. 63. In the Nativity scene at the church at Kulubnarti, only the name of the first shepherd (Arnias) has been preserved; see Adams 1994: 158. An opposite situation occurs in the Nativity mural of a church arranged in a small commemorative building (B.III) on the Citadel of Dongola, where only the legend to the figure of the second shepherd remains. The partly reconstructed name can be read as Legantes; see Zielińska 2004: 222.

<sup>6</sup> As far as I am aware, the animals that worship the newborn Child are given names only in Nubian wall painting. Both names are probably onomatopoeic and may be an invention of the Dongolese milieu.

<sup>7</sup> Legends unparalleled in Nubian wall painting.

<sup>8</sup> The same epithet is ascribed to Raphael in an inscription accompanying his figure in a scene of Jesus with Michael and Raphael situated on the north wall of the prothesis of church B.V on the Citadel of Dongola. The mural was discovered in the 2014 season and has yet to be published.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the stylistic homogeneity of these murals, see especially Martens-Czarnecka 2005.

honor of the Virgin) painted on the north wall of room 5 (see Martens-Czarnecka 2011). The placement of the inscriptions, the way of their being written and their contents demonstrate that these are shouts or songs pronounced by the protagonists of the scene. An analogical character can be ascribed to seven inscriptions with various parts of the Trishagion in Greek, written obliquely at the eastern end of the south wall of the same room 5. It is near to certain that they came out of the mouths of singing individuals, possibly angels (not preserved) praising the newly born Child whose Nativity is represented nearby. An interesting example of an inscription being an integral part of a mural is the one written on the roll held by the prophet Esdra, shown painted on the west wall of room 2c (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 130–133).<sup>10</sup> The Greek text reading: “Esdra. Apocryphs of the prophet Esdra” must be the title of the book of which Esdra was the author; in other words, Esdra is holding in his hand his own book with the title shown.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, the subcategory here discussed comprises also the famous cryptogram of Archangel Michael (ⲭⲛⲞ = 689) repeated 16 times on vertical stripes running down the front of the prophet’s garment (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 133–134;

mural pieced together from fragments discovered in the fill of room 4).

(c) Lists. There are three inscriptions of this category or, rather, one inscription in three parts ([A], [B], [C]). The text is written on the fiery furnace from the scene of Three Youths in a Fiery Furnace, situated on the west wall of room 2c (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 125–130, No. 90 in her inventory of paintings, with Figs 51 and 53, middle right). Its part [A] and [C] gave the names of the Youths (Ananias, Azarias [reading uncertain], Misael) supplemented by the name of Jesus Christ, and part [B] the names of seven Archangels according to the Nubian tradition (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Ourouel, Iael, Anael, Zedekiel).

(d) Literary texts. They are distinguished by their small and regular handwriting, resembling that used in manuscripts. The category includes two items, on the north and east walls of room 6 respectively.<sup>12</sup> The former is an unidentifiable text in Greek, the latter Psalm 29 written in a peculiar manner, alternating a verse in Greek with a verse in Old Nubian. This manner is well attested in Christian Nubia, both in inscriptions on the walls of cult places<sup>13</sup> and in manuscripts, for the poetic books of the Old Testament (psalms, odes).

<sup>10</sup> Some letters of the inscription, especially *phi*, show traits proper to a manuscript rather than a wall inscription. Obviously, the person painting the inscription on the roll tried to emulate manuscript writing.

<sup>11</sup> The same text, preceded by the name of the Archangel Michael, is repeated to the left of the figure of Esdra, level with the roll held by the prophet. This second inscription is executed rather clumsily and in a peculiar manner with the text starting in line 5 and continuing throughout lines 4–3–6–7–1–2.

<sup>12</sup> The inscription from the east wall was preserved on a large piece of plaster found in the fill of the room. For a photo of the inscription, see Jakobielski 2010: 81, Fig. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Two inscriptions of this kind are found in the southern part of the Northwest Annex to the Monastery on Kom H at Dongola (unpublished). One with Psalm 96 is situated on the north wall of room 29, the other with Psalm 127 on the south wall of room 31. An analogical arrangement is shown by two fragmentary leaves of parchment with Ps. 103.15–31 and Dan. 3.31–34 and Dan. 38–40 respectively, found in the so-called Throne Hall (later turned mosque) at Dongola; for a publication of the parchment, see Browne 1987; see also Browne 1989: 72–74 (Greek and Old Nubian text on even pages, English translation on odd pages) and 92 (grammatical commentary).

Recently Heinzgerd Brakmann suggested (personal communication) that alternating Greek and Nubian verses of poetic texts could reflect the performing of these texts by two choirs, one singing Greek and the other Nubian. To my knowledge, Alexandros Tsakos independently came to the same conclusion.

(e) One inscription forms a category of its own. It is a text inscribed with big letters by a nice and practiced hand on the south wall of room 1, over the door leading to room 2 and further on into the interior of the building [Fig. 1]. It contains a quotation from Saint Basil's "Homily on the Fast" (*De jejunio, homilia prima*) reading: "Do no fast unto judgment and strife but loose every chain of injustice",<sup>14</sup> followed by a dating formula. This nice and well visible inscription must have played an important role in the decorative program of the Annex, being probably a kind of instruction for all those who entered it.

Inscriptions of the second group are either scratched in the plaster or, more rarely, painted black. Their form is in agreement with that of visitors' inscriptions known from Dongola and other Nubian Christian sites, including Banganarti, Faras, Qasr Ibrim, Sonqi Tino and others. The simplest of them give only

the name of the visitor. The more complicated ones add optionally the name of his father, his origin, his function(s) or other elements of personal representation. The information about the visitor may be preceded by the personal pronoun "I" and/or followed by the verb "wrote (this)" in Greek or Old Nubian. The most elaborate items contained additionally a prayer for the visitor. This last category was represented by only one inscription scratched on the east wall of room 2a, across a painted representation of a human figure.<sup>15</sup> The text in Old Nubian ends with a formula in Greek reading "whose name God knows", this being an expression of man's anonymity and modesty in front of the Lord.<sup>16</sup> It should be observed that the formula under consideration is nonsensical in this particular case, as the author of the inscription, a certain Eiri, indicated his name earlier in the text. The people mentioned in visitors' inscriptions from the Southwest Annex bear mostly indigenous Nubian names, including Añen, Appou, Gerkouda, Kerti, Ongkoda, Eiri, Silosi. The first five of these names are well attested in Nubian onomastics,<sup>17</sup> the last two are new. Among the visitors three were ecclesiastics: one in a Church of Jesus,<sup>18</sup> one in a Church or a Monastery

<sup>14</sup> For the text, see PG XXXI, 164, ll. 16–17. The sentence is composed of two expressions taken from Isaiah 58, namely, Is. 58: 4 and 58: 6.

<sup>15</sup> This figure, No. 87 in Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka's inventory of murals (Martens-Czarnecka 2011), was identified by her as Saint Epiphanius, but this identification is doubtful.

<sup>16</sup> On this formula in Greek inscriptions, mainly from Asia Minor and the Syro-Palestinian area, see Roueché 2007. The formula is attested in visitors' inscriptions from Christian Nubia without being common.

<sup>17</sup> Appou and Kerti occur frequently in wall inscriptions in the upper church at Banganarti (unpublished). The Banganarti epigraphic material also yields the name Gerkouda (written Gerkyda). Ongkoda (written Oungkouda) is found in an inscription painted on a local amphora discovered on the Citadel of Dongola (Danyś-Lasek and Łajtar 2011). The name Añen is attested at Qasr Ibrim (Browne 1991: No. 31, l. 12).

<sup>18</sup> Meaning most probably the Church of Jesus in Dongola. Sometimes called "The Great Church of Jesus", this sanctuary is mentioned frequently in various sources, especially in visitors' inscriptions originating from all over Makurian territory and dating from the 12th–14th century. It should probably be identified with the so-called Cruciform Church

of the Holy Trinity,<sup>19</sup> and one in a church at Dau.<sup>20</sup> One man (Kerti) was apparently a civil official.

Inscriptions scratched by visitors to the Annex include items deprived of elements of personal representation. As examples of such inscriptions one can mention the word *phos*, “light”, written on the west wall of room 2a, and the cryptogram of Michael (ΧΠΘ) shown standing on the south wall of room 4. The first of these inscriptions is probably a kind of acclamation, the second may also be acclamatory or supplicatory.

An inscription written on an earlier layer of whitewash of the west wall of room 2c gave a date according to the Era of Martyrs, unfortunately the number of the year was not preserved.

The epigraphic material from the Southwest Annex to the Monastery on Kom H at Dongola is not exceedingly rich, but is both multifaceted and interesting. It illuminates various aspects of social and cultural life of the capital town of the Kingdom of Makuria in the late period of its existence.

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in Dongola, which, according to a plausible hypothesis of Włodzimierz Godlewski (1990: 136), played the role of the Dongolese cathedral in that period.

<sup>19</sup> A Monastery of the Holy Trinity is frequently on record in sources coming from the Monastery on Kom H at Dongola. This prompted Stefan Jakobiński, the first excavator of the Monastery on Kom H, and his team, to call it the “Monastery of the Holy Trinity”, however, this identification is not indubitable. The one thing certain is that the Monastery of the Holy Trinity was located in Dongola or in its immediate neighborhood.

<sup>20</sup> This Dau seems to be qualified as a town, Old Nubian *dip(p)*. It is possibly identical with Daw, an important urban settlement in Lower Nubia that was frequently mentioned by Arabic authors in their accounts of Christian Nubia, and commonly identified with Gebel Adda in modern scholarship, see, e.g., Adams 1977: 511, 526, 528, 530–532, 536. If so, the man in question came to Dongola from the far north.

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