

The Altar Casket with a Representation of St Thecla *ad bestias* from the Vicinity of the St Menas Church in Selib (Northern Sudan)

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Abstract: The excavations in Selib have brought to light a few objects used in the liturgical practices performed in the local churches. Among a dozen or so fragmentarily preserved chalices, juglets and patens, there is a terracotta roundel provided with a circular aperture in the upper side. Made of pinkish red clay, it is decorated with a repeated stamped motif of a haloed orant figure shown *en face* with arms held parallel to the upper body. It is accompanied by figures of animals set in profile. The masterly execution of the animal figures enables the recognition of the images of lionesses. Consequently the orant figure in between two metopes with a lioness each could only be St Thecla.

The author suggests that the Selib roundel plausibly served as an altar casket placed on an altar to house a Eucharistic chalice. An alternative use would have been as a stand for a peculiar Nubian paten(?) with a depression in the bottom. Regardless of the real purpose, in the case of the Selib roundel the label of ‘altar casket’ is valid.

Keywords: St Thecla cult, altar casket, St Menas, Eastern liturgy, church architecture, Nubia, Christian altar, Holy Communion

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The village of Selib¹ sits on the right bank of the Nile, fifteen kilometres to the south-east – as the crow flies – from Old Dongola. Archaeological exploration of the site was started in 2008. Since then it has been excavated by the mission from the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw under the direction of the present author. Before 2008 the site was visited by F. Griffith in 1910,² in 1984 by K. Grzymski and his team³ and in 1998 by the present author.⁴

¹ On the excavations in Selib, cf. Żurawski 2014a: 890–900; 2011: 259–261; 2013a: 280–287; 2014c: 330–338.

² Griffith Institute, Griffith Manuscripts, Envelope No. 1, containing various notes on antiquities in the Northern Province, dated 20th March 1910.

³ Grzymski 1987: 9. It was registered as ROM 100. The present author was privileged to participate in the ROM Dongola Reach Survey when this visit to Selib took place.

⁴ Żurawski 2003: 166–170.



1. Aerial (kite) photograph of Selib 1 site taken after the 2014 season. The northern building is seen on the left of the smaller *peribolos* with the church inside (Phot. B. Żurawski).

Inland from the modern village, there are three archaeological sites consequently coded Selib 1, Selib 2 and Selib 3. Their location as compared to the main course of the river might have been different in the past. The oral testimonies recorded by Griffith in 1910 state that the Nile flowed near Selib 1, thus separating(?) it from Selib 2 and Selib 3.⁵

⁵ The geophysical soundings carried out in March 2015 revealed a shift in the course of the palaeochannel of the Nile. The river used to flow at the foot of the Selib 3 site, not in between Selib 1 and Selib 3, as Griffith's informant suggested.

The oldest of the three sites (Selib 2) was settled around the first century AD and abandoned before the fourth century. It lies close to the modern village which was settled in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, and since then inhabited permanently⁶ until the present day. Our visit to the site in 2008 was caused by the accidental discovery of a Meroitic settlement (Selib 2) during the marking out of the course of a gravel road connecting the Karima-Nawa tarmac with the village of Selib. The outlines of a couple of Meroitic houses were brushed out during this initial season.

In the same year, a small sondage was done on top of the elevated *kom* within a rectangular enclosure (called *murabba kebir* by the local inhabitants).⁷

In 2010, full scale excavations were carried out both at Selib 1 and Selib 2. The *kom* in the middle of the bigger *peribolos* appeared to contain a church (later identified as St Menas Church). In the same year, a trial pit was dug on top of the elevated *kom* of Selib 3, where an early Christian bicameral house was unearthed.

In the ceramic materials revealed so far during excavations at all three Selib sites there is no pottery typical for the post-Meroitic period. Nevertheless, a huge post-Meroitic tumulus field was found in 1998 two kilometres to the northwest of Selib 2, near Jebel al-Alim.⁸ Regular rescue excavations were carried out at this site by Al-Tahir Adam al-Nour on behalf of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (unpublished so far).

In the eighth/ninth centuries AD, the Christian settlement (and part of its Late Meroitic substratum) between Selib 1 and the Nile was swept away by a disastrous rain flood.⁹

The first church of a series of five, built each on top of the ruin of its predecessor within the bigger *peribolos* at the Selib 1 site, was raised in the early seventh century at the latest. Its construction was preceded by a residential structure on its northern side (**Fig. 1**). The relative chronology of both structures is fixed by a red brick basin made for slaking lime needed during the plastering of the walls of the first church. This basin was inserted into the already built complex.

The complex provisionally labelled the northern building (coded as Building 09–10/14; cf. **Fig. 2**) is constructed in a manner that is more characteristic for the houses in the nearby

⁶ The time span between St Menas Church falling into ruin (in the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries) and modern times has never been scholarly explored in Selib due to the lack of corresponding archaeological material and reliable oral testimonies. The oldest Islamic remains are said to be datable to the Shaiqiyya period at the earliest. It should be mentioned at this point that the village of Selib, now intensely modified, reveals the old plan of a compact village with narrow lanes separating densely built houses. It is a scheme typical for the oldest sites in the region.

⁷ In publications, the terms ‘bigger *peribolos*’ or *Selib 1 enclosure* for the *murabba kebir* and the ‘smaller *peribolos*’ for the bricked inclusion that only surrounds the church are used.

⁸ Cf. Żurawski 2003: 155–156 (registered as Banganarti 14 = Bng. 14); cf. also Grzymski 1987: 10 (registered as ROM 65).

⁹ There is a sort of depression made by the dunes that formed a barrier along the river, stopping rain flood waters coming in from the desert. Such rain flooding (known in Arabic as *siil*, cf. Tamis, Persson 2011) in 2014 caused severe damage in Selib and in the surrounding areas.



2. Plan of the oldest phase of the Selib 1 site (Drawing: A. Cedro).

Merotic settlement than for any other known houses from other early Christian sites. Its walls are one brick thick and are raised without foundations. At least the central room, with pilastered walls, is coated with a thin layer of lime plaster. The ceramics found within and beneath its walls belong to the earliest Christian horizon.

Another building that might have preceded the construction of the earliest church on the spot is a chapel-like structure which now sits near its southwestern corner (Building S/13, Fig. 2). The reasons behind the identification of this building, of an apparently religious character, as connected to the St Thecla cult will be given below.

The putative sanctuary of St Thecla reveals features very rarely encountered in church architecture in Egypt and almost unknown in the Middle Nile region. First of all, it is a building of reversed proportions, i.e. its width is larger than its length. It is also provided with an exterior apse (protruding from the eastern wall). A sort of analogy is provided by the North Church at Medinet al-Maadi (Narmuthis) in al-Fayyûm, dated by Grossmann to the fourth century.¹⁰ The only Nubian church with a projecting apse is the first church built on Kom D in Old Dongola.¹¹

¹⁰ Capuani 2002: 140, Fig. 62; Grossmann 2002: 419, Fig. 39.

¹¹ Dobrowolski 1988: 5, Fig. 1.

Apart from the plan it is built on, the main argument for such an early dating of this structure is the use of Meroitic *spolia* in its original construction.¹² The building was provided with a porch on the western side that was lined with a row of Meroitic columns.¹³ Last but not least, the putative Thecla sanctuary was originally paved with relief-decorated floor tiles. Some tiles of this kind were used as *spolia* in the last phase of the nearby St Menas Church. Three tiles with similar relief decorations were also found during excavations in House A/2015 in Banganarti in February 2015 (unpublished so far).

The proposed late sixth/early seventh-century date for the putative St Thecla chapel in Selib is consistent with the chronology of Thecla's cult in Egypt. It was a time of the decline and fall of Thecla veneration north of the First Cataract.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in the sixth century there was a street named after Thecla and a church dedicated to her in Arsinoe (Medinet al-Fayyūm).¹⁵ One or two sixth-century churches dedicated to Thecla are also attested in Oxyrhynchus.¹⁶ In Thebes, her name was scratched on the wall of a late sixth-century church.¹⁷

While there are some doubts as to whether the chapel-like structure outside St Menas Church could be attributed to St Thecla, the dedication of the Church itself should leave no room for any uncertainty concerning its attribution. The main argument is the foundation inscription cut into one of the columns that clearly says that King Zacharis gave this church to Saint Menas.¹⁸

A second argument is provided by an ostracaon and an inscription scratched into the flaring rim of an earthenware jar.¹⁹ The most important evidence, however, exists in the form of four visitors' inscriptions, all addressed to St Menas, written on the northern wall of the first church at the site. Interestingly, the first three inscriptions refer to the thrice-blessed Menas (*τρισμακάριος Μηνᾶ*), an epithet rarely encountered in Nubia in later times.²⁰

ALTAR CASKET

Coherent with the early context of the place of its discovery are the immanent features of the altar casket²¹ which occasioned this article, e.g. its fabric, paste and slip (Figs 3, 5a).

¹² It was extensively rebuilt; a part of an oven(?) incorporated into its northern wall was found together with a layer of bricks and half bricks laid above the pavement of relief decorated ceramic tiles.

¹³ The drums were brought from elsewhere and haphazardly reassembled with no regard paid to the relief decorations on them. Also, some of the bricks used in the southern entrance seem to have been dragged from a ruined Meroitic temple(?).

¹⁴ Her cult survived in Upper Egypt until the seventh/eighth centuries (Davis 2001: 173).

¹⁵ Antonini 1940: 170, no. 15.

¹⁶ Davis 2001: 173, n. 77; Antonini 1940: 179, no. 30.

¹⁷ Davis 2001: 174.

¹⁸ Żurawski 2013a: 284, Fig. 8; Deptuła 2015: 123, Fig. 1.

¹⁹ Deptuła 2015: 125, Fig. 3.

²⁰ Deptuła 2015: 126–128.

²¹ There are many alternative denominations for the object which we decided to term the altar casket (after Butler 1884: 43 – vol. II): *κιβωτός*, *arca*, *sedes calici*, *tabut*, tabernacle, chalice stand, chalice holder, chalice throne, chalice ark, ark, altar case. The Copts know it as *kursi al-kas*; cf. also Evelyn White 1933: 158; Burmester 1967: 24, 417, Pl. XVa; Graf 1938 used the term *Kelchthron*.



3. Altar casket WS1.145/11-12 from Selib (Phot. A. Cedro).

All are typical diagnostics of sixth/seventh-century ceramics. Equally important, it bears a close resemblance to a wide range of moulded and mould-decorated vessels and pottery objects which are more precisely dated to the seventh century or earlier.²² The features that point to such an early date of manufacture are the mastery of the execution, the veracity and the likeness of the relief images of the lionesses on the side walls (cf. *infra*, 211–212).

FORMAL FEATURES AND THE FUNCTION

The first small fragment of the altar casket (inv. no. WS1.145/11–12)²³ was discovered on the 17th of January 2012 in the northwestern corner of the smaller *peribolos* that surrounds the St Menas Church (**Fig. 1**). The next adjoining fragment was found in 2013, stuck in the northern wall of the red-brick chapel-like building south of St Menas Church, which we think was dedicated to St Thecla (cf. *supra*, 206 and **Fig. 2**). Four other fragments of the casket were excavated in between a huge mausoleum-type grave and the eastern wall of the smaller *peribolos*.

Altogether, the six fragments retrieved so far constitute *circa* two thirds of the object which – when complete – measured 35cm in diameter and 12cm in height. The diameter of the circular opening in its upper surface is 17cm. It is enough to have held, for example, the famous seventh-century chalice of Theophilos, which has a cup diameter of 14cm and a height of 15.2cm.²⁴ The fragments of chalices, made both of glass and pottery (**Fig. 4**), found in and around the St Menas Church, suggest the Eucharistic chalices of local manufacture were even smaller. The upper rim of the cups would remain flush with the upper surface of the casket.

The body of the casket was wheel made (**Fig. 5**). When the clay was still soft, the side relief decorations were moulded. Finally, the object was covered with reddish slip (shading to purple) and fired (the paste is orange-red). A conspicuous carbon core streak is observable in the section of the side walls and the upper roundel.

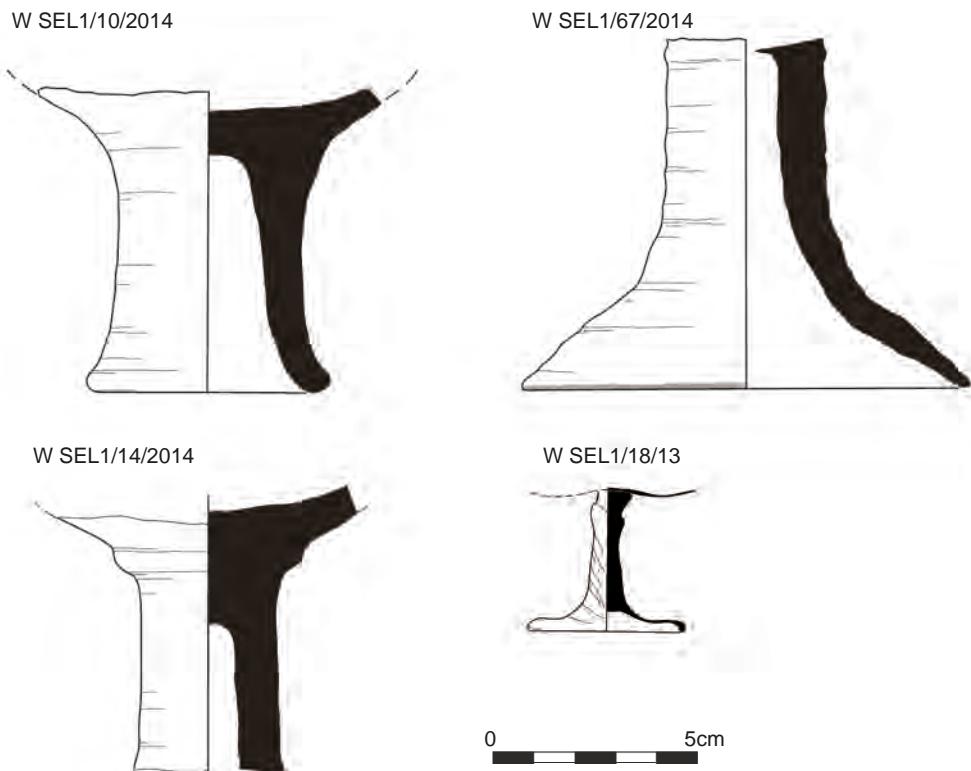
The angle between the upper roundel and the side wall is secured by triangular abutments which segment the underside into six sections (**Fig. 5b**). The inner rim of the round aperture in the upper roundel is thickened to form a roll; nevertheless, the upper surface of the object remains plain.

There are deep fingerprints on the inner side of the side walls of the body that provide some information about how the decorations were applied to the outside. As already stated above, soft clay was pressed with fingers into a mould held firmly against the other side of the casket's wall. Four different moulds were used to accomplish the whole decorative scheme. Two were used to impress the animal figures, one for the orant figure, and one for the central rosette. In its lowest part, the casket is encircled with a recessed plain band

²² Adams 1986: 76, 253.

²³ It was found together with objects labelled with an aggregated context as no. S1.75/11–12.

²⁴ Weitzmann (Ed.) 1979: 599, no. 531.



4. Fragments of Eucharistic chalices found in and around the St Menas Church. Object inv. no. W SEL 1/18/13 is made of glass (Drawing: A. Cedro).

painted with sticky, glossy paint of a dark purple colour that resembles a glaze. It contrasts with the upper body, which is significantly lighter.

There are no abrasion marks on the edge of the aperture in the upper roundel, which, if anything, might suggest the use of the object as a support for a vessel with a globular lower body.

The object has no bottom. It was intended to stand on its side walls (their lowest parts are mostly crumbled off). The lack of a bottom and the round aperture in the upper side are diagnostic features that limit to a minimum the possible purposes the object could have served. I think that only two functions can be taken into consideration seriously. Firstly, it might have been a holder for a Eucharistic chalice (or chalice and paten); secondly, it was perhaps a support for a peculiar Nubian type of paten.²⁵ Regardless of whether the first or second function was the case, the object deserves its name.

The option of chalice holder seems to be a better fit. It could have provided protection for a Eucharistic chalice, which was placed inside it through the upper opening, during

²⁵ A peculiar Nubian paten that aggregates the function of chalice and paten itself (cf. Żurawski 2013b: especially 780–781).



5. The Selib altar casket: a. oblique view; b. view of the underside (Phot. A. Cedro).

Mass. The paten (if any) could have been put on top of the chalice, flush with the upper surface or above it.

DECORATION OF THE ALTAR CASKET AND ICONOGRAPHY OF ST THECLA

The decorative scheme seen on the side walls is based on the principle that each metoped visualization of the orant saint is separated by two images of the lionesses in relief. The lionesses situated to the right of the saint are moulded into square-framed metopes and represented as squatting with their tails held upwards running along the course of their backs. The

tails end in hairy tufts.²⁶ In the upper right corner of each metope with a squatting lioness, there is an embossed rosette. Its purpose is unknown, while its decorative merit is problematic. The animals are masterly executed and the likeness to live animals is superb. They differ, however, in some details. The predator left of the orant saint, pictured as walking, has shorter legs and a shorter but thicker tail (with no tuft at the end). This last detail would suggest another animal, perhaps a bear, which is mentioned among the animals which menaced Thecla in the arena. The corpus, however, perfectly fits the image of a lioness.

The centrepiece of the Selib altar casket's body decoration is a metope bigger than the others. It is filled with an eight-lobed rosette with alternating pointed and rounded lobes, with the pointed lobes fitting into the metope's corners. The rounded lobe's endings are filled with dots. The need for symmetry would require another Thecla image left of the metoped rosette (which has not been preserved).

The orant saint is not menaced by the beasts; in fact, the lionesses looks rather friendly. The moment portrayed on the casket fits a scene known from the hagiography of St Thecla. After the beasts were led in procession to the arena at Antioch in Pisidia, where Thecla was to be martyred, she was bound to a fierce beast, *but the lioness, when Thecla was set upon her, licked her feet, and all the people marvelled (ATH, 28)*.²⁷

There are many other features (cf. *infra*, 213–215) which lend credence to the identification of the orant saint on the Selib altar casket as St Thecla.

The iconography of St Thecla cannot be understood without knowledge of some basic facts from her life. According to the second-century *Acta Pauli et Theclae*,²⁸ Thecla was a disciple of Paul. They first met in Iconium, Thecla's hometown, where Paul was visiting and preaching on the issue of a woman's chastity, among other subjects. His message, especially his 'discourse on virginity' had a tremendous impact on the young noblewoman Thecla, who listened to his preaching from the window of a neighbouring house.²⁹ She broke off the betrothal to her fiancé named Thamyris and abandoned her family. Thecla's uncommon behaviour led her mother Theoklia³⁰ and her fiancé to form a mob which dragged Paul to the governor, who imprisoned the Apostle. Soon after, Thecla joined him in prison and – following a short trial – she was sentenced to be stripped naked and burned alive at the stake for her disrespectful attitude toward the sacred institution of marriage (*ATH*, 22). However, she was miraculously saved by a sudden storm which extinguished the fire (this moment is illustrated by the wall painting in the chapel of al-Bagawat).³¹

²⁶ The lion's tail tuft is one of the most distinctive characteristics shared by both females and males.

²⁷ Another saint who is represented with lions (not lionesses) is Daniel.

²⁸ Cf. AASS, September: VI, 546–568; *ATH*. Carl Schmidt (Ed.) 1905 made an attempt to prove that the *Acta Pauli et Theclae* formed an integral part of the *Acts of Paul*.

²⁹ This episode is plausibly depicted on the mural from the Cave of Saint Paul in Ephesus, cf. Pillinger 2005: 56–62.

³⁰ Pillinger 2005: 56–62.

³¹ The scene from the Exodus Chapel in al-Bagawat resembles another episode in Thecla's martyrdom, when in Antioch's arena she was enveloped in a cloud of fire, so that neither did the beasts touch her, nor was she seen to be naked (*ATH*, 34).

She tried her luck and sought divine protection once again at Antioch in Pisidia, where she travelled with Paul. The reason behind her troubles was her beauty. A certain nobleman named Alexander was so captivated by her corporal splendour, paying less attention to the attractiveness of her soul, that he tried to rape her (first he wanted to purchase her from Saint Paul). As he was refused by both, and ridiculed in front of the town folk, he complained to the local governor who condemned Thecla *ad bestias* in the arena (for physically assaulting a nobleman). She was again stripped naked and menaced by lions, bears and bulls,³² and finally by ravenous seals (after she jumped into a pool to baptize herself).³³ After being freed from all these vicissitudes by the providence of God and help of local women, Thecla went to Myra in the guise of a man (this last episode was partly responsible for the resemblance of her representations to those of St Menas). From Myra she returned to Iconium where she continued to spread Paul's word, with the latter's blessing. She ended her pious life in Seleucia (in Cilicia), where a pilgrimage centre (Hagia Thecla) was located above her grave.

From Cilicia, Thecla's cult spread first through the cities associated with her life, such as Iconium and the neighbouring towns of Dalisandus, Selinus and Aigai. It soon reached Constantinople, where there was a sixth-century church dedicated to her. In spite of the fabulous character of her *Vita*, which caused more than one condemnation by the Church, she is honoured with the title of 'protomartyr'. Her cult in the East flourished between the fourth and the eighth centuries. In the fourteenth century, her veneration was revived in the West.³⁴

Her worship in the Nile Valley lasted until the seventh century. Did the cult of Thecla move to Nubia afterwards? If so, it must have been very restricted, both in terms of time and territory. Apart from the Selib find, her iconography is completely unknown in the Middle Nile.

In the Selib altar casket, three identical Thecla busts³⁵ are set within a square framed metope (**Fig. 6**). The metope's upper edge cuts off part of the saint's halo and her hair curls. Although there are some faults and differences between the imprints, there is no doubt that all were made with one mould (the differences between the imprints result from the difficulties in the execution of so many impressions on one object).

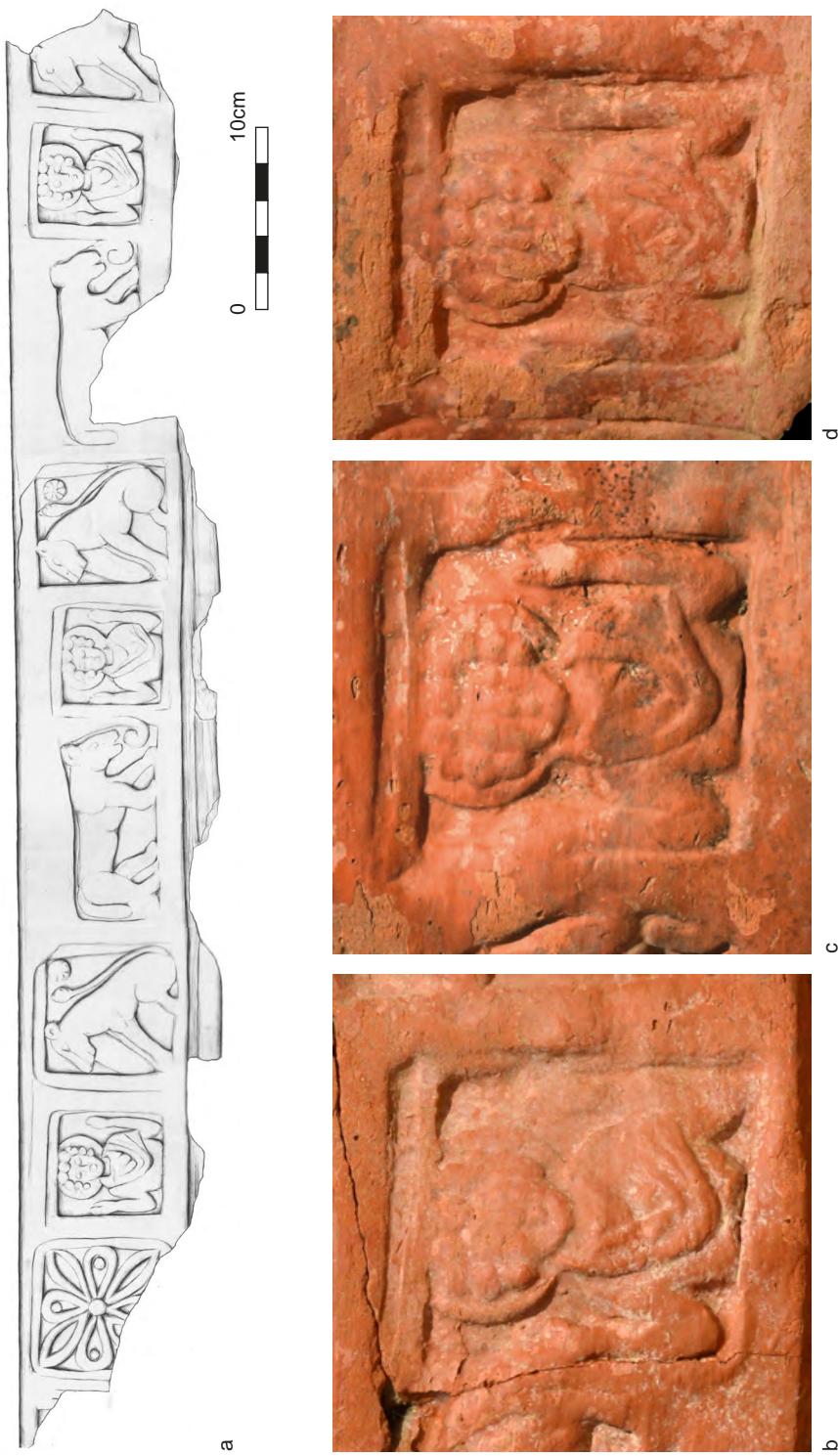
The style of Thecla's image, especially her haloed head and face, is reminiscent of the fifth-century representation of the female saint in the limestone roundel from the

³² The various beasts Thecla had to face in the arena in Antioch were frequently aggregated into a single scene of her martyrdom. Thecla's representations on the reverse of the Menas *ampullae* are the best examples of such an iconographic manner (cf. Nauerth 1982: 14–15, 16, Figs 1–2; Davis 2001: 118–119).

³³ Thecla *ad bestias* is represented among other representations also on the Menas *ampullae*. Characteristically enough, the *ampullae* with Thecla's image belong to the earliest produced at Alexandria (Kiss 1989: nos 5–6; Davis 1998: 303–339, n. 18 after Kaminski-Menssen 1996: 41f.).

³⁴ Leibbrand 1976: 433.

³⁵ Thecla's representations *en buste* are rare; cf. the sixth-century image of the saint in the St Euphrasius Church in Poreč (Istria). The roundel with a haloed Thecla is identified by the legend SCATECLA (Nauerth 1982: n. 8).



6. Decoration of the exterior wall of the Selib altar casket: a: fold-out of the decoration; b-d: three of St Thecla's busts in detail (Phot. and drawing: A. Cedro).

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City.³⁶ One of the best analogies to the Selib Thecla representation seems to be Thecla's sculptured image on a marble slab found in 2007 in Laodycea.³⁷

Thecla's iconography adopted in the Selib tabernacle follows the scheme known from the Menas *ampullae*. A haloed Thecla is shown in the orant posture with hands held upright, bent at the elbows with her forearms parallel to the upper body,³⁸ palms turned *en trois-quarts* towards the spectator, the thumb clasped with the forefinger. Her hair is set in curls, much in the style of contemporary St Menas representations. The reasons behind the visual resemblance of Thecla's images to that of St Menas are manifold. Thecla was in some ways Menas's female counterpart.³⁹ Her sanctuary was somewhere in Mareotis very close to Abu Mena.⁴⁰ On a dozen or so *ampullae* she is represented on one side, while St Menas is depicted on the opposite.⁴¹ The *ampullae* decorated with the portraits of St Menas and St Thecla are usually much bigger than those containing the images of only one saint.⁴² They might have been intended for use by more than one person, a man and his wife for example, as the dual iconography on these objects might suggest.

The Selib Thecla is clad in an over-garment thrown over the left shoulder.⁴³ This deserves a short comment; when discussing the dense draping around Thecla's upper torso in the gold pendant from Princeton University Art Museum,⁴⁴ Claudia Nauerth wrote that the saint *trägt eine Art Schal, der über ihre beiden Arme drappiert ist*.⁴⁵ It somewhat resembles the 'mantle' worn by Thecla on the ivory relief from Laodycea, which *wraps the figure over and across her chest and falls freely over the elbows to the back in vertical drapes*.⁴⁶

Her inner garment, if there is any at all, is narrow-sleeved. Although her likeness to St Menas is evidently underlined by the hair style and attire, her countenance is definitely female. Her round and youthful face is emphasized by a distinctive jaw and protruding chin. She is staring forward with eyes which seem to be wide open. The nose and mouth are rendered with more or less convex roundels. The artist ended her portrait with a line at the height of her elbows. The outline of her breasts is not even marked. According to the known episodes from her *Vita*, she concealed her femininity in some situations. Consequently, her gender was a fragile iconographic issue.

³⁶ Weitzmann (Ed.) 1979: 574, no. 513; for the illustration cf. *Nelson-Atkins Museum*.

³⁷ Şimşek, Yener 2010: 325, Figs 4–5.

³⁸ St Menas on the so-called Menas *ampoullae* is represented with arms spread wide, rather at a right angle to the body axis (cf. Kiss 1990).

³⁹ Cf. Davis 1998: 312–317.

⁴⁰ Davis 1998: 314–315.

⁴¹ Davis 1998: 335–339.

⁴² Kiss 1989: no. 5.

⁴³ The draping of the over garment does not preclude that she is tied with a rope. If so, the enigmatic rope endings at the mouths of the lionesses would make more sense.

⁴⁴ From Constantinople, fifth-sixth century, acc. no: y1968–136.

⁴⁵ Nauerth 1982: 16.

⁴⁶ Şimşek, Yener 2010: 325, Figs 4–5.

Some iconographic details of Thecla's iconography present in the Selib casket are difficult to explain on the grounds of her hagiography, e.g. the curious shapes that resemble the endings of a rope(?), which are being licked, rather than devoured, by the lionesses. This iconographic particular resembles the limestone roundel with the haloed Thecla bound to a pole in the Nelson-Atkins Museum. Here, the rope encircles Thecla's neck and becomes tangled up with her belt. Her hands are tied behind her back and the endings of the ropes touch the mouths of a lion and lioness standing beside her.⁴⁷

How and when the cult of St Thecla of Iconium was transmitted to Egypt has not been explained in details. It must be said at this point that Coptic liturgy knows two other saints with this name. Another Thecla, the daughter of Kyros the πολιτευόμενος of Siut, was sentenced to death by decapitation for 'following the sorcery of the Christians'.⁴⁸

THE CULT OF ST THECLA

In Egypt, Thecla's cult has been confirmed outside Alexandria, in al-Fayyûm and in the Western Desert, as early as the fourth century.⁴⁹ In al-Kharga Oasis, Thecla's painted representations appear during the same period. The Chapel of the Exodus, where Thecla was depicted surrounded by flames burning at the stake, belongs to the earliest on the huge necropolis of al-Bagawat.⁵⁰ Her image among those of St Paul, the Virgin, and other biblical figures in the Chapel of Peace is painted in the Byzantine style of the sixth century.⁵¹

Thecla was venerated in Upper Egypt at least until the end of the sixth century, when the last church dedicated to her was consecrated at Thebes. From Upper Egypt her cult could have penetrated into Lower Nubia and further south to the Debba Bend. Her appearance in Selib in the sixth/seventh centuries confirms to some extent her worship in the Middle Nile (although there is no other confirmation of her cult south of Aswan).

Thecla's imagery is generally restricted to minor arts, such as e.g. the Menas *ampullae*. Generally, the *Einzelbilder* represent her with accompanying animals as the Selib casket proves.⁵² Regardless of the medium and acolytes, she is depicted as miraculously delivered from the beasts in the arena, either with her arms tied behind her to a pole or held up in the orant posture.

The main problem with her iconography known from Egypt is the question of whether the saint depicted is Thecla of Iconium or one of the two Theclas known from the Coptic liturgy. Even if one of the other Theclas was intended, the iconography of Thecla of Iconium was usually applied.⁵³

⁴⁷ Weitzmann (Ed.) 1979: 574, no. 513.

⁴⁸ Till 1935–1936: 134; Davis 2001: 180–187.

⁴⁹ Davis 2001: 149, 172–173.

⁵⁰ Cf. Zibawi 2004: 27, Fig. 19; Davis 2001: 154; Zaloscer 1974: 150.

⁵¹ Bourguet 1991: 541. In the Chapel of Peace, Thecla is depicted seated in front of Saint Paul and writing down something the apostle is dictating to her (Zibawi 2004: 36, Fig. 28).

⁵² Cf. also Bourguet 1991: 541.

⁵³ Bourguet 1991: 541.

Thecla was considered to be particularly helpful in the case of eye diseases, which in Egypt and the Middle Nile were a real plague. In the collection of miracles wrought by her,⁵⁴ written by a fifth-century anonymous Basilius Seleucensis,⁵⁵ there are multiple descriptions of her miracles worked on behalf of people suffering from eye diseases.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the neighbouring pilgrimage centre at Banganarti dedicated to Archangel Raphael also specialized in eye diseases.⁵⁷ In her sanctuary at Seleucia, pilgrims underwent incubation, probably in the ‘incubatorium’ located south of the main church.⁵⁸

DATING OF THE ALTAR CASKET

A troublesome aspect of the hermeneutical analysis of the altar casket found in Selib (and its decorations) is its age. Needless to say, it precedes the next firmly dated known object of this kind by several centuries.

The chronology of the later altar caskets is also problematic. In 1884, Joshua Butler gave a compact description of the Coptic *kursi al-kas*: *It consists of a cubical box, eight or nine inches high; the top side of which is pierced with a circular opening just large enough to admit the chalice.*⁵⁹

In his description of the ancient specimen, which he discovered in the north aisle-chapel of the church of Abu al-Sifain, Butler made a grave mistake in the dating.⁶⁰ His reading of the date written partly in Coptic and partly in Arabic as AD 1280 was corrected by Graf to be AD 1564/5.⁶¹ According to Y.N. Youssef, object dates from the eighteenth century;⁶² however, he admits the scenes depicted on their side walls seem to have been copied from older examples.⁶³ Although the known altar caskets are datable to the sixteenth century at the earliest, the written testimonies confirming their use in the Coptic ritual reach back to the twelfth century.⁶⁴

The later Coptic *karasi al-kas* were made as square or polygonal objects. They were able to contain big chalices measuring 25cm or more. The differences in shape, height and mode of decoration between the round casket from Selib and the later caskets from Egypt made on a plan of a square or polygon are apparent at first glance. There are fair grounds however to assume that the smaller round objects were also used in the past. At least the

⁵⁴ *Vie et miracles.*

⁵⁵ The text is wrongly attributed to Basilius Seleucensis (*Vita ac miraculis*; cf. Dagron 1974: 5–11).

⁵⁶ Kötting 1950: 153.

⁵⁷ Żurawski 2014b: 241–242.

⁵⁸ Kötting 1950: 156.

⁵⁹ Butler 1884: 42 (vol. II). A more detailed description of the *kursi al-kas* from the church of Abu al-Sifain is contained in the first volume of Butler’s book (1884) on pages 109–110.

⁶⁰ Butler 1884: 109 (vol. I).

⁶¹ Graf 1938: 31.

⁶² Youssef 2011: 256 (based on Langen 1986–1989: 75–79).

⁶³ Graf 1938: 31; Youssef 2011: 256.

⁶⁴ Moorsel 1991: 302. He put forward an interesting hypothesis explaining the reasons which made the Copts use the *karasi al-kas* while the object is unknown in other oriental churches (Moorsel 1991: 302–303). According to Evelyn White (1933: 158 n. 2): *the chalice holder prevents the chalice from being accidentally overturned during the mass.*

altar caskets employed in the Ethiopian Church ritual were made on a plan of a circle.⁶⁵ The prayer that preceded the Canon in Ethiopian Mass was put into Latin by Renaudot as *Oratio super arcam sive discum majorem*.⁶⁶ What the *arca* (or a bigger roundel) was and what it was used for in Egyptian ritual, Renaudot explained in 1716: *Fortasse igitur arcam vocaverunt, aut arcuam ut Latini interpretes, vas majus aliquod, quo discus et calix continentur (...)*.⁶⁷ Butler attempted to answer the same question in 1884: *There can, I think, be no doubt that this tabernacle or altar-casket of the Copts is the mysterious “arca” which has puzzled liturgical writers from Renaudot to Cheetham*.⁶⁸ Renaudot quotes a prayer preceding the Ethiopic canon entitled “*Super arcam sive discum majorem*”, and thinks that the ark was a sort of *antimensium*. But the title is at once explained if we remember the Coptic practice of placing the chalice inside and the paten on the box, – a practice from which the Ethiopic was doubtless derived.⁶⁹

Contrary to Neale, who thought that the altar casket (*arca*) was used in the Ethiopian Church for the reservation of the blessed sacrament,⁷⁰ Butler assumed that *the ark at its dedication is intended not for the reservation but for the consecration of the host*.⁷¹ Cheetham argued that the tenor of the prayer which preceded the Ethiopian Canon suggested the *arca* was used for precisely the same purpose as the paten, inasmuch as in both cases the petition is that in or upon it may be perfected (*perficiatur*) the Body of the Lord.⁷² He thus contradicted Renaudot’s opinion, who rather sided with the hypothesis that the *arca* served as an *antimensium*.⁷³

The supposedly round Ethiopian *arca* is not the only analogy to the Selib altar casket. The *kursi al-kas* from the Monastery of the Syrians in Wadi al-Natrun, which according to van Moorsel belongs to the group of the oldest known altar caskets,⁷⁴ was originally round in shape.⁷⁵ It is also the lowest of all known Coptic *karasi al-kas*.⁷⁶

Apart from the accounts by Butler, Graf, and Johann Georg zu Sachsen,⁷⁷ there are some more recent studies on Coptic altar caskets.⁷⁸ In 1933, Evelyn White provided a compact

⁶⁵ Cf. Raible 1908: Fig. 12 on page 64 showing a diakon carrying *schüsselartigen Patene auf dem Haupte* (in Latin descriptions of their use the word *discus* was frequently employed by the translators or writers).

⁶⁶ Renaudot 1716: 501 (vol. I); cf. also Butler 1884: 43 (vol. II).

⁶⁷ Renaudot 1716: 525 (vol. I).

⁶⁸ Cf. Smith, Cheetham (Eds) 1876: 134–135 (vol. I), s.v. *arca*.

⁶⁹ Butler 1884: 43 (vol. II).

⁷⁰ *O Lord our God, Who didst command Moses Thy servant and prophet, saying, Make Me precious vessels, and put them in the tabernacle on Mount Sinai, now, O Lord God Almighty, stretch forth Thy hand upon this ark, and fill it with the virtue, power, and grace of Thy Holy Ghost, that in it may be consecrated the Body and Blood of Thine only-begotten Son, our Lord* (Neale 1850: 186).

⁷¹ Butler 1884: 44 (vol. II); cf. Renaudot 1716: 501 (vol. I).

⁷² Smith, Cheetham (Eds) 1876: 134 (vol. I), s.v. *arca*. It did not seem improbable to him that *this arca was an actual chest or ark, on the lid of which, the Mercy-Seat, consecration took place* (Smith, Cheetham (Eds) 1876: 135 – vol. I).

⁷³ Renaudot 1716: 525.

⁷⁴ *Leider konnte auch dieses zweifellos sehr alte Stück noch nicht datiert werden* (Moorsel 1991: 301).

⁷⁵ Moorsel 1991: 301.

⁷⁶ 16cm, cf. Moorsel 1991: 301.

⁷⁷ Johann Georg zu Sachsen 1914: 11–12.

⁷⁸ E.g. Moorsel 1991; Burmester 1967; Langen 1986–1989; Youssef 2011.

description of the altar casket he found in the main church of the monastery of Anba Bishoi: *The altar is covered with a rectangular marble slab measuring 1m by 83cm. Upon it stands a disused chalice holder which merits a word of notice. It is of wood, square in section, and its four sides have a marked batter; a circular opening in the top admits the chalice (...).*⁷⁹

The *kursi al-kas* from the Monastery of the Syrians (Wadi al-Natrun), with all four sides seen, attributed to the eighteenth century has been published by Capuani.⁸⁰

FUNCTION OF THE ALTAR CASKET

As said at the very beginning of our discussion, there are two possible interpretations of the object from Selib. The first and the more plausible (in the present author's opinion) understanding has been presented above, while the other will be presented below. It is based on one feature of the Selib casket which seems to be useless if the object was solely intended for storing a chalice (and paten) inside. What then was its flat spacious upper side intended for? It seems logical that such a broad and flat surface should serve a specific purpose. What could it have been?

It is possible to find an answer to the latter question if we assume that a peculiar Nubian paten with a bowl-like depression in the middle of the bottom was placed on top of the Selib casket in such a way that its lower protrusion fitted the aperture in the upper roundel. In 2013 the author of the present article argued, on the basis of some archaeological finds from Selib and elsewhere, that in a later period such patens used for the Communion of the congregation took on different shapes and sizes.⁸¹ All of them had a bottom depression for Eucharistic wine since these patens served for Communion by intinction.⁸² A huge paten (dated to the late period),⁸³ found in Selib north of the St Menas Church, was most probably placed on a hollowed capital located near the northern entrance to the church (**Fig. 7**). Needless to say, it was too big, too heavy and too late to fit the Selib casket.

Nevertheless, in earlier times these patens were smaller. The object found in the northern sacristy of the Lower Church at Banganarti, if put on the altar casket for consecration (atop the altar casket) would have fitted better.⁸⁴

The diameter of the Banganarti paten fits the diameter of the Selib casket. The latter's lower cup is slightly bigger than the diameter of the upper aperture of the casket.

⁷⁹ Evelyn White 1933: 158.

⁸⁰ Capuani 2002: Fig. 9. The same object, also in four views, has been published in colour by Skalova and Gabra (2003: Fig. 4).

⁸¹ Żurawski 2013b.

⁸² Żurawski 2013b: 780–781.

⁸³ Cf. Żurawski 2013b: 777.

⁸⁴ Żurawski 2012: 201–202. The remains of chalices and patens found in Selib are more than suggestive that a twofold manner of Communion was practiced there (at least in the later period); the clergy was communicated under two species from chalices and small saucer-like patens at the altar/altars and the communion was administered to the congregation also under two kinds but by intinction from big patens placed on stands near the entrance to the church.



7. Earthenware paten (inv. no. S1.117/2011) from Selib. The picture shows the *asteriskos* above the depression in the middle of the bottom that was found in 2014 (Phot. A. Cedro).

However, other Nubian patens, as e.g. the object known from al-Ghazali Monastery, fit perfectly.⁸⁵

As for the chronology of the Banganarti paten, nothing can be said for certain. It is undoubtedly earlier than mid-tenth century, when the Lower Church was ruined. Concerning the issues of how long it was used before the mid-tenth century and what its predecessors looked like, nothing can be stated at the moment.

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of its real purpose – as support for a Nubian paten for Communion by intinction or as a container for a Eucharistic chalice – the object found in the vicinity of the St Menas Church retains its designation as an altar casket. No doubt it is a liturgical object of a very early date. Its discovery confirms close contacts with Egypt in the sixth/seventh centuries or even earlier. It also confirms the character of the Selib enclosure as a pilgrimage place associated with the cult of St Menas. It was probably through the agency of the pilgrims from Egypt that the cult of St Menas and St Thecla was brought to Selib.

⁸⁵ Shinnie, Chittick 1961: Pl. XI. Described as a cruciform pottery dish.

The foundation inscription, mentioning King Zacharias as the commissioner of the St Menas Church in Selib, most probably refers to Zacharias I who ruled from 835 to 856.⁸⁶ The columns used for Zacharias's church were plausibly brought from a ruined church nearby.⁸⁷

It is impossible to avoid the assumption that the founding of the St Menas Church coincides with the fall of the Menas Sanctuary in Abu Mena in Mareotis, where Thecla's shrine was also confirmed. Was it the purposeful act of a Nubian king, who decided to move the cult of one of the most important Egyptian saints to Nubia and consolidate it in Selib, fifteen kilometres from the capital in Tungul/Dongola?

The history of St Menas's cult in Selib shows correlations with the events which took place in Egypt (and affected the cult of the Saint in the Lower Nile). The construction of the first church in Selib coincides with the general decline of Abu Mena after the Persian invasion and Arab conquest.⁸⁸ The commissioning of the second church by King Zacharias overlaps with the final abandonment of Abu Mena in the ninth century.⁸⁹ It is also worth noting that the plan of the first church at Selib reveals distinct traces of Egyptian influence, seen e.g. in the so-called return aisle (*Westumgang*) that was present in the earliest Egyptian churches.⁹⁰ Especially interesting is the example of the North Basilica in Abu Mena, which had a reception hall (provided with a kitchen) to its north and an atrium-like court to the west.⁹¹ All these features are present in the first St Menas Church in Selib.

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⁸⁶ Godlewski 2008: 277.

⁸⁷ It possibly stood in a village south of Selib 1, which was devastated by a rain flood at the corresponding time.

⁸⁸ Grossmann 1998: 297.

⁸⁹ Grossmann 1998: 298.

⁹⁰ Grossmann 1998: 295, 297; 2001: 18–19, 26. It is worth noting that the earliest St Menas Church in Selib was provided also with an *Ostumgang* (on *Ostumgang* in the earliest Egyptian churches, cf. Grossmann 2002: 26, 30–31, 108, 459, Fig. 76).

⁹¹ Grossmann 1998: 295.

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