

An ‘Enigmatic Man’ in the *Anastasis* Scene from the Lower Church in Banganarti An Attempt at Identification

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is twofold: to identify an ‘enigmatic man’ represented on the right side of the Banganarti *Anastasis* painting as Abel and to exclude the identification of the figure as ‘Moses at the Burning Bush’. The ‘enigmatic man’ is young and he holds a stick in his hand, which seems to be the shepherd’s crook. Such an attribute is typical for images of Abel (a younger son of Adam and Eve killed by his brother). The absence of the *Manus Dei* and sandals makes the identification of the figure as ‘Moses at the Burning Bush’ a bit unlikely. In Banganarti, Abel is set in a separate field, what makes this image unusual. Solitude of Abel brings to mind an apocryphal Ethiopic Book of Enoch. In this text the lonely spirit of Abel cries and awaits for the Resurrection and condemnation of Cain’s offspring. The image from Banganarti allows to state that some apocryphal texts had an impact on Nubian painting and for this reason several murals are unique on the background of Byzantine art.

Keywords: Abel, *Anastasis*, iconography, Banganarti, Nubian painting, Byzantine art

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One of the most interesting paintings discovered in the Lower Church in Banganarti is the *Anastasis* scene (**Fig. 1**), dated to tenth/eleventh century.¹ An extensive article by Bogdan Żurawski about this painting was already published in *Études et Travaux XXI*.² Afresh, the painting has been widely discussed in the monograph on the Lower Church in Banganarti.³ In the latter publication Bogdan Żurawski payed considerable attention to the man painted on the right-hand-side of the composition (**Fig. 2**), dedicating him a separate subsection, entitled ‘The right panel man enigma’.⁴ The scholar presented several possible interpretations of this figure: *The range of possibilities for the identification of the “right*

¹ Żurawski 2012: 288.

² Żurawski 2007.

³ Żurawski 2012: 291–300.

⁴ Żurawski 2012: 291–300.



1. The *Anastasis*, the Lower Church in Banganarti (Copy, painting on canvas: W. Chmiel, Phot. B. Żurawski).

panel Man" is great. The many parallels indicate St John the Baptist whereas the demands of theological (Christological) coherency would suggest rather the Saviour. Nevertheless other choices are also eligible, e.g. one of the prophets who foretold the Last Judgement and Descent of Christ into Limbo, such as Elijah and Isaiah, an Old Testament king who prophesied the resurrection of Christ, Moses (who was a Prefiguration of Christ); or any prophet or saint associated with visions of light and fire. In addition to these possibilities, Bogdan Żurawski drew attention to yet another one, but considering it a less certain: *It is not possible to preclude the presence of Abel here (albeit a rather rare and late addition to the scene) associated with the Anastasis.*⁵ Ultimately Bogdan Żurawski chose to identify the 'enigmatic man' as Moses.⁶

To my mind, the identification of this man as Abel is the most probable. In this paper I would like to demonstrate this thesis at the same time explaining why I exclude the identification of this image as 'Moses at the Burning Bush'.

The painting of *Anastasis* from Baganarti consists of two scenes comprised within a common frame decorated with S-shaped motifs running antithetically (**Fig. 1**). The scene on the left presents the *Anastasis* proper, whereas the scene on the right shows only one, isolated figure (**Fig. 2**). The *Anastasis* scene is rendered against a dark blue background. A dominant figure of the composition is Jesus Christ, treading on a personification of Hades. The Saviour is facing the progenitors. He pulls Adam with his right hand, while wielding a *crux hastata* with the left one. The edge of the *crux hastata* spears the head of Hades. The ruler of the underworld grasps Adam's right leg, trying to pull him down into the depths of the Hell. However, the Saviour firmly holds Adam's hand and Hades is doomed to lose the fight. Eve rendered behind Adam embraces him, holding his left hand. The progenitors are naked and the colour of their skin is bright. Apart from them there are fourteen figures sunk into Hell's depths (**Fig. 3**). These figures are also naked, and their skin is dark or bright. Most of them raise hands up towards the Saviour, others have their hands tied behind their backs. The composition is dynamic, based on diagonal lines. The figures are shown in motion: the narrative is vigorous, gestures dramatic and robes dispelled. To the contrary the second scene is peaceful in character (**Fig. 1**). Here the background is light, divided by a horizontal line into two areas. The lower one has an orangish tinge, whereas the upper is bright reddish. Against this background is only one figure – a young man, standing in slight *contrapposto*. He is rendered frontally, with his head three-quarters turned towards the scene taking place on his right-hand side (**Fig. 2**). The man has a round face with full cheeks. His hair is short and wavy over his forehead. In his left hand he holds a long stick. The gesture of his right hand is not clear: probably he touches his chest with it. The man is clad in a white garment: a long, round-neck tunic and a coat draped over it, whereas his feet are bare. On the left-hand side of the *Anastasis* (from the viewer's perspective), there is one more scene preserved. Here a holy warrior

⁵ Żurawski 2012: 294, n. 17.

⁶ Żurawski 2012: 300.



2. An 'enigmatic man' of the *Anastasis* scene, Baganarti (Phot. and drawing reconstruction: W. Chmiel).



3. The Condemned, detail of the *Anastasis* scene, Baganarti (Phot. B. Żurawski; drawing reconstruction: W. Chmiel).



4. The *Anastasis*, the Lower Church in Banganarti (Phot. W. Chmiel).

trampling a black-haired, naked woman is shown (**Fig. 1**). He has been identified as Sissinios, spearing a female demon.⁷

Unfortunately, all the three scenes were discovered in poor condition (**Fig. 4**) ‘due to having lost both cohesion and adhesion to wall’.⁸ In the upper part there were numerous losses of a paint layer and plaster. Apart from that, the paint layer on the whole surface was worn off to some degree. As a result, not all figures are clearly readable. For example, the upper part of the Christ figure is missing. As for Hades, just the outlines of the figure are preserved. Also the gesture of the right hand of the young ‘enigmatic man’ is not quite clear.

In attempt to identify the figure shown on the right-hand-side of the *Anastasis* scene, one should pay attention to such elements as the age of the man, the scenery in which he is placed and the attribute he holds in his hand. The lack of a beard, dark hair and full cheeks suggest that the man is young. The scenery, which consists of an unrealistic reddish-orangish background and two bushes, appears to refer to the Paradise. However, the presence of a bush may equally bring to mind the scene of Moses at the Burning Bush (*Ex* 3: 1–6), although some elements do not fit such an interpretation, in my opinion. First of all the bushes are relatively small in comparison to the large bushes represented, for instance in the *Dura Synagogue*⁹ or the Monastery of Saint Catherine at *Mount Sinai* (**Figs 5–6**).¹⁰ Secondly, in the Banganarti scene lacks the sandals and the *manus Dei*, which symbolises God’s intervention. The young man from Banganarti holds a simple crook, and not a codex or a *rotulus* – distinctive attributes held by prophets announcing events of the New Testament.¹¹ This attribute can, of course, be interpreted as a wand (*rabdos*, *virga thaumaturgica*) of Christ or Moses.¹² However, the straightforward interpretation is that it is a crook of Abel.

The story of Abel is described in the Book of Genesis (4: 2–8). Abel and Cain were the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, the older son of the Progenitors farmed the land whereas Abel was a shepherd. When the two brothers presented their offerings to God, Abel’s sacrifice was accepted while Cain’s was rejected. Angry, Cain attacked his younger brother and killed him. Abel suffered an undeserved death even before the death of his parents. For committing the murder Cain was condemned by God.

The appearance of Abel in *Anastasis* scenes is currently documented in Byzantine art since the eleventh century.¹³ Yet it is worth mentioning that, in contrast to his parents, Abel

⁷ Żurawski 2012: 305–307.

⁸ Moryto-Naumiuk, Piekacz 2010: 339. Originally, the mural was painted on the southern wall of the nave in the Lower Church. Because of its bad preservation state the painting was removed from the wall and transported to Poland for restoration: Żurawski 2012: 339–341.

⁹ Kraeling 1956: 229, Pl. LXXVI; Weitzmann, Kessler 1990: 34, Fig. 41.

¹⁰ Forsyth, Weitzmann 1973: 15, Pls CXXVI–CXXVII.

¹¹ Gamillscheg, Talbot, Cutler 1991.

¹² Mathews 1993: 54–91.

¹³ Der Nersessian 1975: 322; Kartsonis 1986: 209. *One of the earliest examples, in which he [Abel] stands next to Eve, is the miniature of the Lectionary of Lavra, of the beginning of the eleventh century* (Nersessian 1975: 322).



5. Moses at the Burning Bush, Dura Synagogue (Kraeling 1956: Pl. LXXVI)

is not always included in these scenes.¹⁴ Among the examples in which his figure is well exposed one can mention four compositions. The first is a miniature from *The Liturgical Homilies of Saint Gregory of Nazianzos* (*Sinai, gr. 339, fol. 5r*), dated *c.* 1150.¹⁵ In the headpiece of the folio Christ strides over the broken-down doors of Hell. The two groups of the Just, emerging from sarcophagi, are flanking him. Christ, holding a cross in his left hand, grabs Adam with his right one. Eve, standing behind Adam, raises her hands covered with her clothing. Behind her stands a young man with dark hair, clad in light-coloured, round-necked tunic. He holds a stick in his left hand. These three figures stand in one sarcophagus, so one can assume that the young man depicted next to Adam and Eve in their common tomb is their son. Abel is not a prominent figure in this scene; however, in other examples he appears as a more distinctive character. One of these examples comes

¹⁴ At least not before thirteenth century (Nersessian 1975: 322).

¹⁵ Evans, Wixom (Eds) 1997: 109–110, cat. no. 63, Fig. 63.



6. Moses at the Burning Bush, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai (Forsyth, Weitzmann 1973: Pl. CXXVI).

from the church of St. George in Kurbinovo, dated to 1191 (**Fig. 7**).¹⁶ Abel is so prominent in this scene that he seems almost equal with his parents. Christ standing on the Hell's broken door, turns to his left, towards four figures: Adam, Eve, Abel and John the Baptist. The Saviour holds a cross in his left hand, while pulling Adam from the Hell with his right one. Eve is slightly shifted toward the right edge of the painting, thereby uncovering her son. Abel holds a curved stick in his left hand and points with his right hand towards Christ. Abel is clad in a round-necked shepherd's tunic woven from thick wool. The next example is an *Anastasis* scene from Protaton Monastery on Mount Athos (**Fig. 8**). This painting is assigned to Manuel Panselinos and dated to c. 1290.¹⁷ The group of figures

¹⁶ Hadermann-Misguich 1975: 96ff.; Acheimastou-Potamianou 1994: 225–226, cat. no. 58.

¹⁷ Kalomairakis 1989–1990: 205; Acheimastou-Potamianou 1994: 237, cat. nos 103–104.



7. The *Anastasis* (detail). Church of St. George, Kurbinovo (Acheimastou-Potamianou 1994: Fig. 58).

standing to the left of Christ includes, among others, John the Baptist. Adam kneels in the foreground, while Christ pulls his left hand. Behind her husband there is Eve, inclined in a humble posture with her hands covered by her garment, as a sign of respect. John the Baptist emerges above Eve. He can easily be identified thanks to his long, shaggy hair and unkempt beard. His head is surrounded by a large halo.¹⁸ The Forerunner observes the Saviour and points to him, at the same time making a gesture of blessing with his right hand. Behind him stands Abel, shown as an adolescent with a round face, brownish hair

¹⁸ Bogdan Żurawski has noted that 'a right panel man' from Baganarti has no halo (Żurawski 2012: 291). It should be stressed that in the scene from *Protaton* Church only John the Baptist, in contrast to Adam, Eve and Abel, is represented with a halo.



8. The part of the *Anastasis* scene: Adam, Eve, St John and Abel. Protaton, Mount Athos (Acheimastou-Potamianou 1994: Fig. 104).

and bangs falling on his forehead. In his left hand he holds a curved stick. He is clad in a white, round-necked tunic with short sleeves. His face expresses long-awaited hope.

The last example to be mentioned here is a famous apse mural from the *parekklesion* of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (Fig. 9).¹⁹ In the middle of the composition there is Christ standing between two sarcophagi from which he pulls out the Progenitors. At his feet are the broken gates of Hell and a prostrate personification of shackled Hades. Behind Adam and Eve there are two groups of the Righteous. The group on the right-hand side of Christ is led by John the Baptist, while the one on his left is led by Abel. In fact Abel stands in the same sarcophagus from which his mother emerges. He holds a crook

¹⁹ Underwood 1966: 192–195.



9. The *Anastasis*, *Parekklesion* of the Chora Monastery, Constantinople (Acheimastou-Potamianou 1994: Fig. 127).

in his right hand, touching it with his left one. His gaze is not turned to the Saviour but towards the viewer. He is shown as a young man with fair hair and regular face features. His elegant, white tunic no longer resembles a shepherd's attire. It is decorated round the neck, at the hem and on the sleeves, with a wide, ornamented, golden band. Its shape resembles a *sticharion* and the stick held by Abel looks more like a pastoral staff than an ordinary crook. These references to liturgy are certainly not accidental: Abel is here not an ordinary shepherd, but the shepherd of the Righteous who, like a priest, leads them and cares for them.

In above-mentioned examples Abel is always represented next to his parents, while in Banganarti he is set in a separate field. Undoubtedly such a form of composition had a profound meaning. Abel is rendered against a reddish-orangish background, which contrasts with the dark depths, from where the naked figures emerge. The lively, bright background against which Abel stands, with two bushes, may symbolise the Paradise. Thus Abel would be an example of a martyr, who for his innocent and undeserved death ascends to the Paradise. He becomes a model to follow for all who want achieve Salvation. In the New Testament Abel is mentioned as the one whose innocent blood was shed. In Gospel of Matthew Christ says to the Pharisees: *so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar (Mt 23: 35).*²⁰ In the Letter to the Hebrews the sacrifice of Abel is described as a precious offering to his faith:

²⁰ All Scripture quotations are after *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice offering than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks (Heb 11: 4).

In this text Abel was defined as a messianic type and a prefiguration of Jesus Christ.²¹ Such perception of Abel is based upon the series of similarities between these two characters. Abel 'was keeper of the sheep' (*Gen 4: 2*), whereas Christ described himself as a 'Good Shepherd' (*Jn 10: 11, 14*).²² Abel was righteous as well as was Christ (*1 Jn 2: 12*). Abel's offering announced the 'offering of the body of Jesus Christ' (*Heb 10: 10*). Abel was envied by his brother (*Gen 4, 5*) and Christ was hated by his flesh brethren – the Jews (*Jn 15: 24–25*).²³ As an innocent man Abel suffered an unjustified, violent death from his brother's hands (*Gen 4: 8*) and Christ was crucified by his flesh brethren (*Acts 2: 23*). This obedience to God led him to death, while Christ 'became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross' (*Phil. 2: 8*). The blood of Abel 'is still speaking', however 'the blood of Christ speaks better word than the blood of Abel' (*Heb 12: 24*). Such comparisons were further extended in biblical exegesis.²⁴ Cyprian of Carthage named Abel a *protomartyr* and treated him not only as a prefigure of Christ but also other Christian martyrs (*De dom. or. 24; 105*). Epiphanius of Salamis wrote that Abel recalls the Resurrection of the Dead.²⁵

In the composition from Banganarti, Abel is placed antithetically to Christ descending into Limbo to save the deceased. In a context of what has been said above such an arrangement of these two characters seems intentional. Abel awaits the Resurrection of the dead which will occur with the Second Coming of the Saviour. Christ is juxtaposed here with his Old Testament type represented by Abel. In Early Christian and Early Byzantine art Abel was represented while offering his sacrifice to the God. He usually held a lamb, whereas his brother wielded the crops.²⁶ In such a way Abel and Cain were rendered in Catacombs of Dino Campagni²⁷ and on the Early Christian sarcophagi²⁸ and mosaics.²⁹ In the presbytery of San Vitale in Ravenna Abel holds up the lamb.³⁰ The depiction of Abel in the presbytery and the juxtaposition of his sacrifice with the offerings of Melchizedek

²¹ This subject has been recently widely discussed by Rev. Stanisław Kobieliński in his new book (Kobieliński 2013: 33–36). See also comment on this excerpt: Daniélou 1956: 43.

²² Subsequently Christ is also named a 'Great Shepherd' (?) (*Heb 13: 20*) and 'the Chief Shepherd of the sheep' (*1 Pet 5: 4*).

²³ Dahan 1982: 66.

²⁴ Daniélou 1956: 39–54; Dahan 1982; Glenthøj 1997; Kobieliński 2013: 33–36.

²⁵ *But they are altogether refuted on the subject of resurrection. First because of Abel, since his blood conversed with the Lord after death. But blood is not soul; the soul is in blood. And God did not say, 'The soul crieth unto me,' but 'The blood crieth unto me,' proving that there is hope for a resurrection of bodies* (Epiphanius, *The Panarion 1: 9 3,1*; transl. 31).

²⁶ Less common are images of cycles including scenes starting with the nursing of two brothers and ending with the slaying of Abel by Cain, e.g. the one from the Ashburnham Pentateuch (fol. 6r). Cf. Weitzmann 1977: 118, Pl. 44.

²⁷ Ferrua 1990: 60, Fig. 56.

²⁸ Ulrich 1981: 17–50; Schrenk 2001: 964. See also: *RCS 1: 25, 22, Pl. 8; 61, 58, Pl. 19; 183, 114, Pl. 44; 188, 116, Pl. 45; 215, 129, Pl. 49; 360, 171, Pl. 171; 935, 389, Pl. 149; 965, 404, Pl. 155; 1010, 422, Pl. 163.*

²⁹ Stern 1958: 172–173.

³⁰ Deihmann 1976: 148; Deliyannis 2010: 244.

and Abraham connect this image with the Eucharistic context.³¹ The lamb held by Abel symbolises not only the sacrifice offered to God but also *Agnus Dei* – Christ himself. In the Middle and Late Byzantine art Abel was depicted in *Anastasis* scenes not at the moment of making offerings, but after his death, as a spirit awaiting the Resurrection.³² This is the way he was rendered in Baganarti.

An interesting element of the Baganarti composition is the isolation of Abel from the group of the Righteous, among whom he is present in Byzantine art. Abel's solitude brings to mind a description from the apocryphal Ethiopian Book of Enoch. One passage relates to the moment when Enoch, led by the archangel Raphael, arrives at the place where the souls are kept, waiting for the Judgement Day. Enoch asks Raphael: *whose is this spirit whose voice thus reaches heaven and complains?*³³ And Raphael explains him that *this spirit is the one which came out of Abel whom Cain, his brother, killed. And he will complain about him until his offspring is destroyed from the face of the earth, and from amongst the offspring of men his offspring perishes.*³⁴ The same text could be at the origin of choice of the orangish-reddish colour to symbolise the Heaven: *This burning fire whose course you saw, towards the West, is the 'fire of all the lights of heaven'.*³⁵ Abel standing alone, dressed in a white garment, awaits justice, the vengeance of his death and condemnation of Cain's offspring.³⁶ To his right comes Christ, leading the souls of the Just. At the same time the souls of the condemned try to get out of Abyss in vain.

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To sum up, the image from Baganarti is a unique figuration of the Anastasis subject. Moreover, it seems to predate other known similar examples in Byzantine art. In my opinion there are two reasons for this. Firstly, our knowledge of Byzantine art is incomplete as a result of the state of preservation of monuments from this period. Secondly, Nubian painters often used apocryphal texts as sources of their images.³⁷ In the case of the 'enigmatic man' from Baganarti, the closest known source appears to be the Ethiopic Book of Enoch.

³¹ Abel is listed next to Abraham and Melchizedek in some liturgical texts, cf. Cabrol 1907: 62–66; Hennig 1946: 130.

³² Of course, apart from the *Anastasis* context Abel was presented in other scenes at that time, for example as a shepherd amidst his flock, cf. Kominko 2013: 136; or within some cycles Demus 1984: 79; Wessel 1978: 718–722.

³³ 1 *En* 22: 16–17; transl. 211.

³⁴ 1 *En* 22: 19–21; transl. 211.

³⁵ 1 *En* 23: 5; transl. 213.

³⁶ In the apocryphal *Testament of Abraham* Abel is presented as a judge of all souls: *... do you see the terrifying man who is sitting on the throne to judge every creature? He is the son of the first man Adam, and is called Abel, and he was killed by the wicked Cain. He sits here to judge every creature, examining both righteous and sinners, because God has said, 'it is not I who judge you, but by man shall every man be judged'. For this reason he has committed judgement to him, to judge the world until his own great and glorious Coming* (*TAb* 13: 3–7, transl. 412).

³⁷ The best example of this principle is a mural from the Northwestern Annex of the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola (Room 13), presenting the crowning of Archangel Michael by the Holy Trinity. This unique painting is, in my opinion, based on the text of the *Liber Institutionis Michaelis*, cf. Łaptaś 2010: 679. On this phenomena, see also Łaptaś 2008: 79.

Nubian painters were innovative in creating images based directly on the apocryphal texts. Due to this approach some of their masterpieces were original and independent from the Byzantine patterns.

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