

# Bogdan Żurawski

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## Banganarti: The 2006 Season

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# BANGANARTI

## THE 2006 SEASON

Bogdan Żurawski

*The Banganarti expedition completed a season of fieldwork at the site between 17 January and 20 March 2006.<sup>1</sup>*

*The excavation and clearing work, which proceeded in five main areas (cf. Fig. 1) was paralleled by a restoration program focused on converting the Upper Church into a site museum (the official opening is scheduled for 2009). This involved extensive cleaning and conservation, as well as building restoration activities. A number of discoveries of previously unknown murals and inscriptions were made in consequence.*

*Specialist study programs this season included a geodetic survey of the neighborhood of Banganarti; calibration of the original Upper Church plan; aerial (kite) photography; documentation and revision of epigraphic material; iconological studies; pottery documentation and studies (see report by D. Bagińska in this volume); anthropological and archeobotanical examination.*

*An ethnographic survey of the site's environs carried out the author, brought a collection of oral testimony on the most recent history of the region, especially the early 20th century Funj/Shaiqiya settlers.*

1 Banganarti mission staff in the 2006 season: Bogdan Żurawski, Project Director; Adam Łajtar, epigraphist; Tomasz Płóciennik, epigraphist; Magdalena Laptaś, iconologist; Magdalena Woźniak, archaeologist/iconologist; Anna Błaszczuk, Mariola Orzechowska, Agata Rak, archaeologists and draftspersons; Dobiesława Bagińska, archeologist/ceramologist; Marta Momot, draftsperson; Mariusz Drzewiecki, Ada Oleś-Niedzielska, archaeology students; Karol Piasecki, physical anthropologist; Lisa Hildebrandt, palaeobotanist; Tadeusz Badowski, restorer; Dorota Moryto-Naumiuk, restorer; Ryszard Szemraj, technical assistant, restorer and building engineering supervisor. The geodesic team comprised Roman Łopaciuk, Wiesław Małkowski and Łukasz Moczulski. The NCAM was represented by senior inspectors Ayasha and Fathiya Abder Rahman.

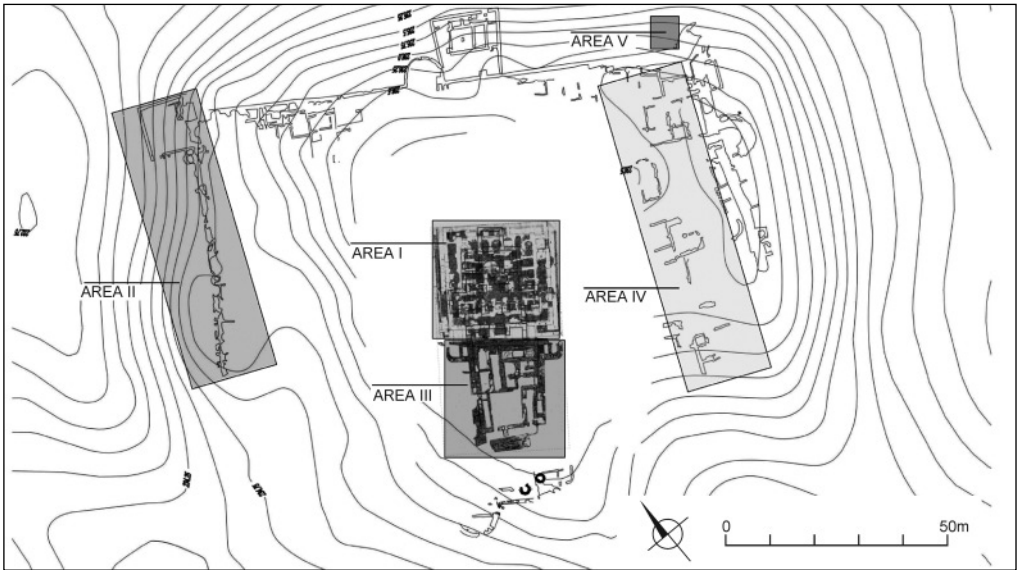


Fig. 1. *Banganarti after the 2006 season, marking location of areas of excavation*  
(Drawing R. Łopaciuk)



Fig. 2. *Aerial view of Banganarti site after the 2006 season*  
(Orthophotomap B. Zurawski)

## EXCAVATION AND CLEARING WORK

Excavation and surface clearing proceeded in five main areas [Figs 1, 2]:

– I and III covering the church complex and Western Building, where some additional clearing and documentation work was completed;

– II, following the section of the enclosure wall northwest of the church, from about the middle of its length to the northwestern corner including the corner tower;

– IV, habitation district inside the enclosure wall to the east (clearing the tops of walls for the sake of kite photography and geodetic surveying);

– V, outside the girdle wall, north of the southeastern corner tower (planned as a pottery trench for stratigraphic study)

## AREAS I AND III

The late blockages between the supports of the Western Portico were pulled down [Fig. 3], exposing two longer Greek inscriptions of a dedicatory nature and an abundance of graffiti, as well as scratched – some not without artistic mastery – representations of animal and human figures. Exceptional among these drawings is a portrait scratched on the southern face of the western portico pillar, executed presumably at some time in the 12th century. It depicts a man in profile, feeling his way with a short, pastoral staff (see Fig. 1 on p. 399 and A. Łajtar's report in this volume). A graffito in Arabic, but written in Greek letters, identifies this figure as Ali, a *def* or guest, meaning visitor to the church.

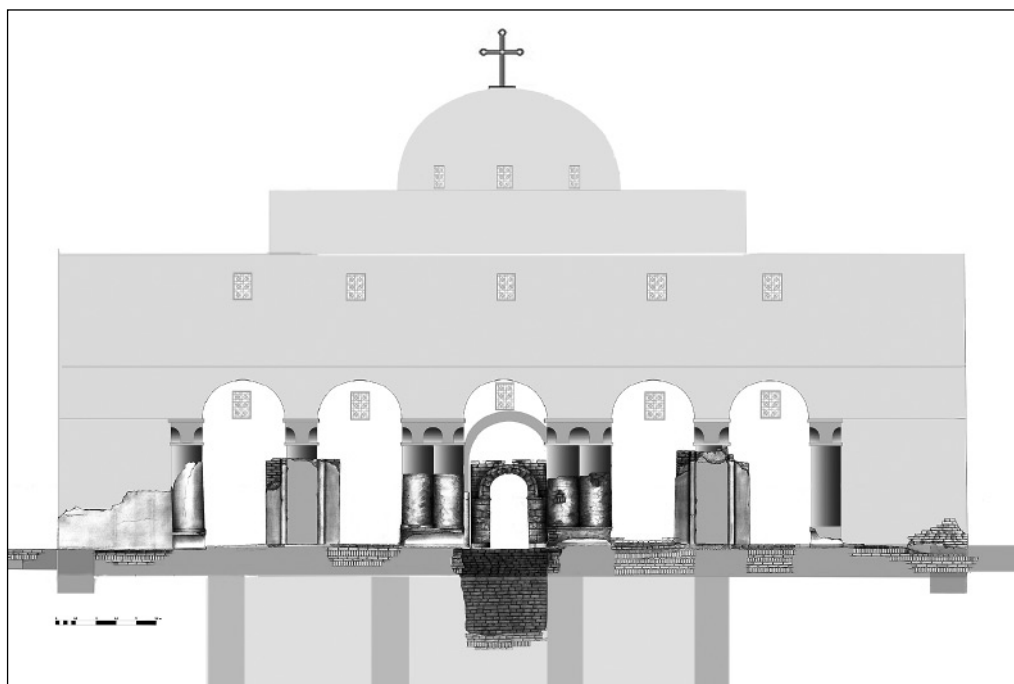


Fig. 3. Reconstruction drawing of the original appearance of the main western façade of the Rhabaelion (=Upper Church) (Interpretation B. Żurawski, drawing M. Momot)

Ali must have been a Muslim drawn to the Christian sanctuary by its thaumathurgical renown, not unlikely in the hope of finding a cure for his illness.

Three trial pits were dug from the ground level of the Upper Church, cutting through the Lower Church deposits down to culturally sterile sand (which has been tested for at least 0.50 m for the sake of

certainty) [Fig. 4] The first was a northward extension of a trial pit dug already in 2004 (Żurawski 2005: 300) in front of the blocked door to the prothesis of the Lower Church. It now exposed the east wall of the northern aisle and part of the north wall to where the northern extension begins. Faint traces of painted decoration (unidentifiable, possibly standing figures?) in yellow ocher,

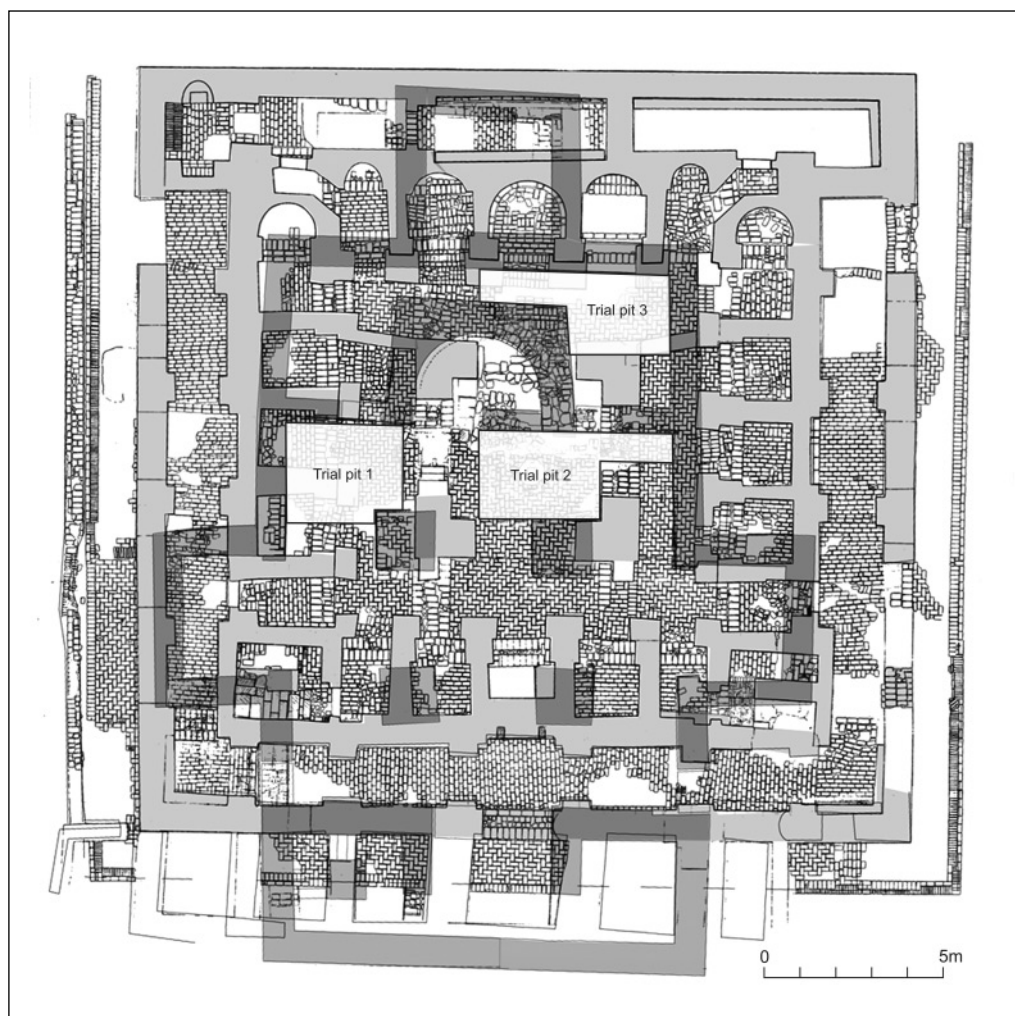


Fig. 4. Outline of the Lower Church marked on a plan of the Upper Church, indicating position of trial pits dug in 2006 (Drawing R. Łopaciuk)

applied generously on a weak lime/mud plaster ground were detected on the latter wall. The plastering was treated and the test pit walls reinforced with corrugated-iron sheets and piping in order to display a fragment of Nubian history in a natural stratigraphical setting.

Overlying the sterile sand at the bottom of the trial pit was a layer of broken 7th-century amphorae and jars with flaring necks, possibly imported from Alwa (see below, Banganarti pottery report by S. Bagińska in this volume). This layer is a stratigraphic unit that has been found at matching depth in all of the test pits excavated within the walls of the Lower Church. The sherds must have accumulated concurrently with the existence of the first Lower Church and were used as a leveling layer under the second church when it was built on top of the earlier walls (replacing among others the original stone columns with masonry piers). One theory for such a magnitude of broken Early Christian amphorae being found in the deepest layers is that water for the baptismal ceremonies which took place in the baptistery of the Lower Church I (see below) may have been brought in earthenware vessels, which were dumped afterwards outside the church walls.

The second trial pit was dug in the southern part of the *baikal* area of the Lower Church, exposing also the southern half of the apse. On the west, the testing reached the southeastern pier of the Lower Church and exposed the southeastern corner of the southern aisle on the south, thus joining the 2005 trial pit (S.3) in which the *Anastasis* mural was found (Żurawski 2007: 309-312). The excavation revealed evidence of brick foundations under the stone walls of the Lower Church and a specific manner of construction of the four central piers on a substructure of dismantled stone voussoirs originating

from the original columns of the LC 1 building. A similar technique (apparently of Meroitic origin as the Ammon temple in Begrawiya might suggest, was encountered also in an early church on Kom E in Dongola, near el-Ghaddar (Żurawski 1995; 1997: 182). The stones turned out to bear murals, some of the earliest ever recorded in Upper Nubia (painted probably shortly after the first of the Banganarti churches was built). The wall paintings were executed on a hard lime mortar background with extensive use of purple, white and yellow [Fig. 5]. An examination of a dozen or so painted voussoirs identified equestrian saints and archangels among the subjects.

Traces of a mural were also discovered on the east wall of the southern aisle, to the right of the apse and left of a door leading to the southern sacristy (*diakonikon*) in the Lower Church. It was an illusionary rendering of ashlar masonry in purple paint, applied on a lime-plastered stone wall [Fig. 6].

The last trial pit dug inside the southern sacristy and in the passage behind the apse of the Lower Church exposed a baptistery [Fig. 7]. The lower one of the two masonry basins, a typical Nubian “keyhole” font provided with two approaches stepping down into the basin from east and west, was found with no base at all. Baptism must have been accomplished by aspersion rather than immersion and the baptismal water poured over neophytes standing on a layer of pure sand was inevitably soaked into it. This tank was in use when the Lower Church was still covered with a flat wooden roof supported on the four stone columns described above. A baptismal basin of red brick bonded and plastered with a hydraulic lime mortar was built on the original floor in the corner of the earlier baptistery [Fig. 8]. The lower tank may have still been used at this time.



Fig. 5. *Holy rider (?) painted on lime plaster on a stone voussoir from a column belonging to the first Lower Church (Photo B. Żurawski)*



Fig. 6. *Imitation asblar masonry painted on the east wall of the south aisle of the Lower Church (Photo B. Żurawski)*

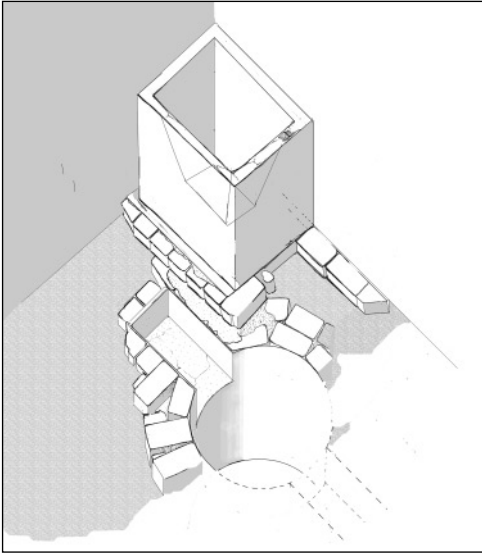


Fig. 7. Axonometric view of the two baptismal fonts (Drawing B. Żurawski)

The baptistery was lavishly decorated with murals representing elongated, static saintly figures wearing slender pointed boots similar to the earliest portraits from the Faras cathedral and the Bawit chapels. As a point of interest, the smallest representation – a figure of an archangel [cf. Fig. 9] – was found on the southern wall of the baptistery. Simultaneously, the figures (of apostles?) on the east wall, reconstructed as at least 2.50 m high, belong among the biggest discovered so far in the church.

The eastern annex, entered from the passage behind the apse, could have served as a *consignatorium* (where confirmation with the chrism took place as an integral part of the baptism). It has been extensively tested for burials and other diagnostic features, but with no result.

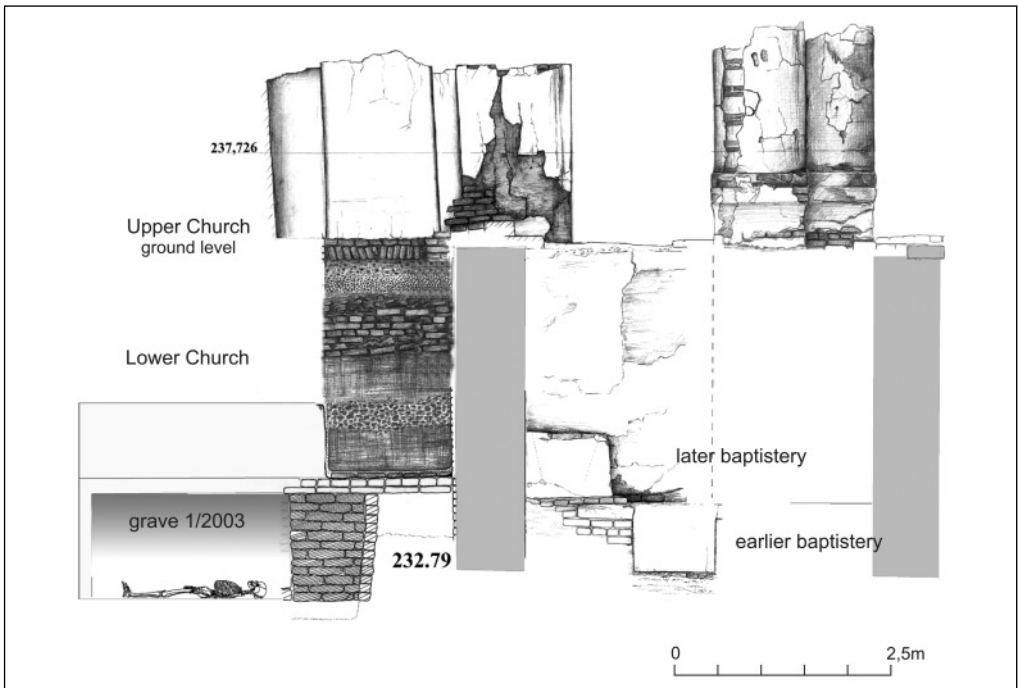


Fig. 8. Latitudinal section (looking south) through the baptistery; walls of the Lower Church marked in grey; on left, grave explored in 2003 (Drawing M. Momot & B. Żurawski)



Following up on a comprehensive investigation of the Western Building in Area III (Żurawski 2007: 304-307), archaeological testing confirmed the existing assumptions concerning building phases in this area. Excavations revealed an elaborate staircase in the southern part of the Western Building and drainage holes cut in the walls for removing excess water from the central courtyard and the rooms west of it.

### AREA II

Fieldwork on the site of the enclosure wall northwest of the church complex uncovered a stretch of the fortifications, running from about midpoint of this side to and including the corner tower. A 3 m wide trench was dug (and a huge sand dune accumulated north of the wall removed), uncovering the mud-brick structure of the wall, as well as habitation units on either side, dated securely by a collection of 11th-12th century ceramics. A chronology of subse-

quent reconstructions and extensions beyond the walls was established, although with gaps due to the heavily disturbed stratigraphy (for a discussion of the fortifications, see below, contribution by M. Drzewiecki in this volume). The Banganarti fortifications have thus been confirmed as a peculiar form of combined defensive and domestic function, the latter expanding with time. In the 13th/14th century, the northern peribolos was turned into a living quarter, its defensive function totally forgotten. The huge corner tower was dismantled and a square enclosure was built instead, its walls no wider than half a meter.

A necklace of carnelian and rock crystal beads [Fig. 10, see also Fig. 3 on p. 406] was discovered west of the tower, already outside the enclosure wall.<sup>2</sup> It was found next to a cooking pot with damaged bottom, a stone basin and a fragmented ceramic toilet seat, in context with broken kitchen pottery dated to the 11th /12th century.

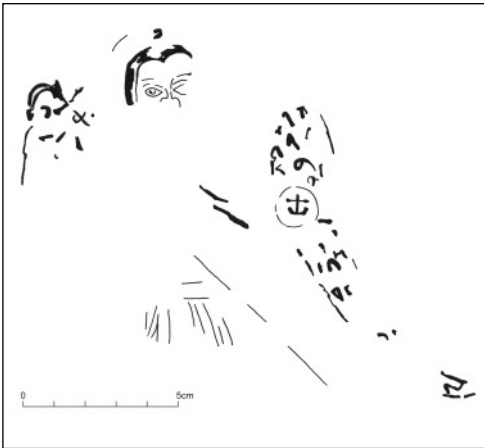


Fig. 9. *Miniature painting of an archangel* (Drawing B. Żurawski, W. Chmiel & A. Rak)

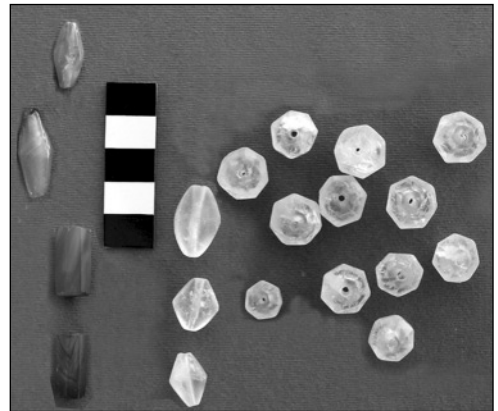


Fig. 10. *Carnelian and rock crystal beads from a necklace, 11th/ 12th century context* (Photo B. Żurawski)

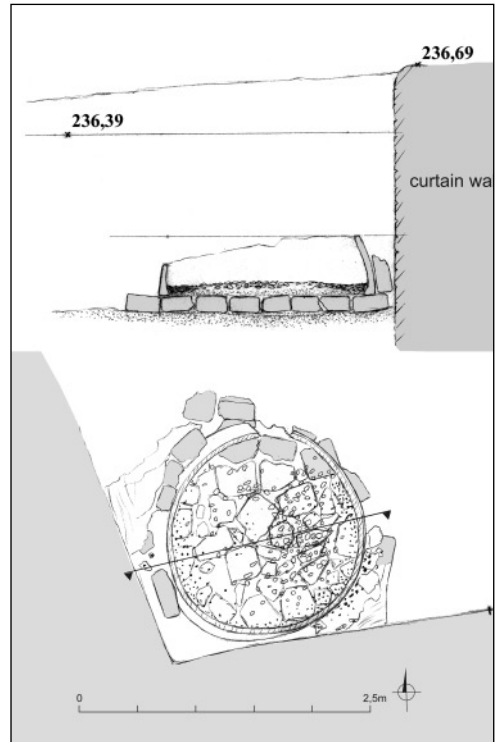
- 2 Puzzling evidence of a "global" economy in this period in the form of a virtually indistinguishable rock crystal and carnelian bead necklace from an 11th century grave in Dziekanowice in Great Poland, has been brought to the author's attention by Jacek Wrzesiński, to whom I am indebted for this information.

## AREA IV

The combined surface cleaning and surveying of this area have uncovered and recorded a group of mud-brick dwelling units lining the enclosure wall on the inside of a huge semicircular feature, also of mud brick, located on the outside of the wall [cf. *Figs 1, 2*]. The stratigraphy in this area is much disturbed due to modern *maroq*-digging and the finds from the surface layers are a mixed bag indeed.

## AREA V

Digging in the 'pocket' outside the enclosure wall, just west of the southeastern corner tower, was expected to provide a pottery sequence covering a period from the 8th to the 11th century. The medieval practice of dumping kitchen waste, ceramics included, outside the fortifications had already been tested as an informative source on ceramic stratigraphy and site chronology in earlier trenches of the kind dug in 2003 and 2005 (Żurawski 2007: 307-309). The discovery of a bread oven [*Fig. 11*] with contents intact, including grains, charcoal and kitchen wastes interrupted the work until flotation could be done.



*Fig. 11. Plan and section looking south through a bread oven found in Area V (Drawing M. Momot and B. Żurawski)*

## STUDY PROGRAMS

A detailed contour plan of Banganarti and vicinity, now cultivated, was produced by a team of surveyors using reflectorless total-station technology.<sup>3</sup> It was integrated with the previous documentation of the churches, the rasterized traditional drawing of the Upper Church being calibrated with the digital layer by the 130 references points measured inside the churches. Correlation was completed using

AutoCad Map software with a Raster Design extension module. The traditional drawing was imported to the digital plan as an image (bitonal jpg with 300 dpi resolution) and scaled to the archaeological object boundary, calculating total correlate error. Each of the 130 points from the traditional drawing was defined as a source point and redefined as a destination point measured with a total station.

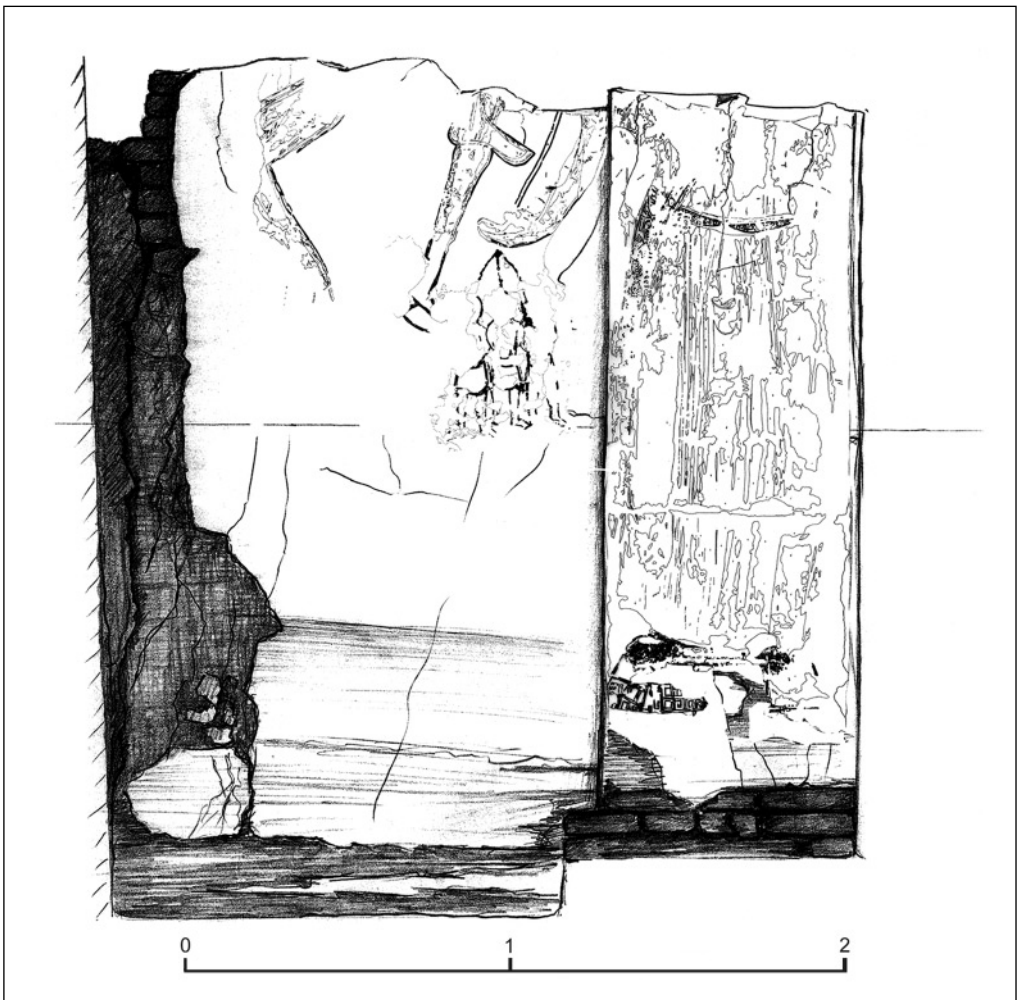
<sup>3</sup> Remarks contributed by W. Małkowski.

Low-altitude photographs of the church and the fortifications were taken as part of the aerial (kite) photography program successfully implemented in Banganarti since 1998. Some 500 aerial photographs were digitally assembled to create an orthophotomap of the site [cf. *Fig. 2*].

The pottery study program included, beside current documentation, also the

drawing, photographing and analysis of ceramics collected during previous MDASP operations (in 2004 and 2005) on Saffi Island and in Dar el-Arab.

Iconologists continued their study of the murals, including documentation of newly uncovered examples, e.g. the mural in Room 20 [*Fig. 12*]. The same was done for the inscriptions, the epigraphic 'revisiting' resulting in the uncovering of



*Fig. 12. Three captives led on a rope by a horseman, next to a standing figure of a saint (?) on the west wall of Room 20 of the Upper Church (Drawing M. Momot & B. Żurawski)*

much new data, especially in the Lower Church and on the columns and piers of the western portico of the Upper Church. The new inscriptions were ink copied and photographed, and preliminary translations provided (for a study of new finds, see below, contribution by A. Łajtar in this volume).

Studies and conservation of the murals in the westernmost room of the Lower

Church with the mural of St Mercurius spearing Julian Apostate were completed, following which the area was backfilled with sand in order not to endanger the east wall of the Western Building which partly overlaps the west wall of this room. The *Maria Orans* mural was detached its place on the wall and taken to Khartoum for conservation (for this work, see report by D. Moryto-Naumiuk in this volume).

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