

Stefan Jakobielski

Old Dongola 1993

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 5, 115-128

1994

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

OLD DONGOLA 1993

Stefan Jakobielski

The 26th season of excavations at Old Dongola was carried out between January 28 and March 11, 1993. ¹ The program of work included exploration of Kom H, a monastery located on the site of Christian cemeteries (S. Jakobielski) and Kom A, the town fortifications of Dongola (W. Godlewski). Growing interest in the rocky area on the northern edge of the concession (Kom E), which the villagers of el-Gaddar consider a good building site, necessitated further work to prove conclusively its archaeological importance. Computer technology, particularly in geophysical and topographical surveying, was combined here with excavations to test its usefulness in archaeology (Messrs. K. Misiewicz and B. Żurawski took advantage of financial assistance from the Polish Government's Committee for Scientific Studies).

KOM H

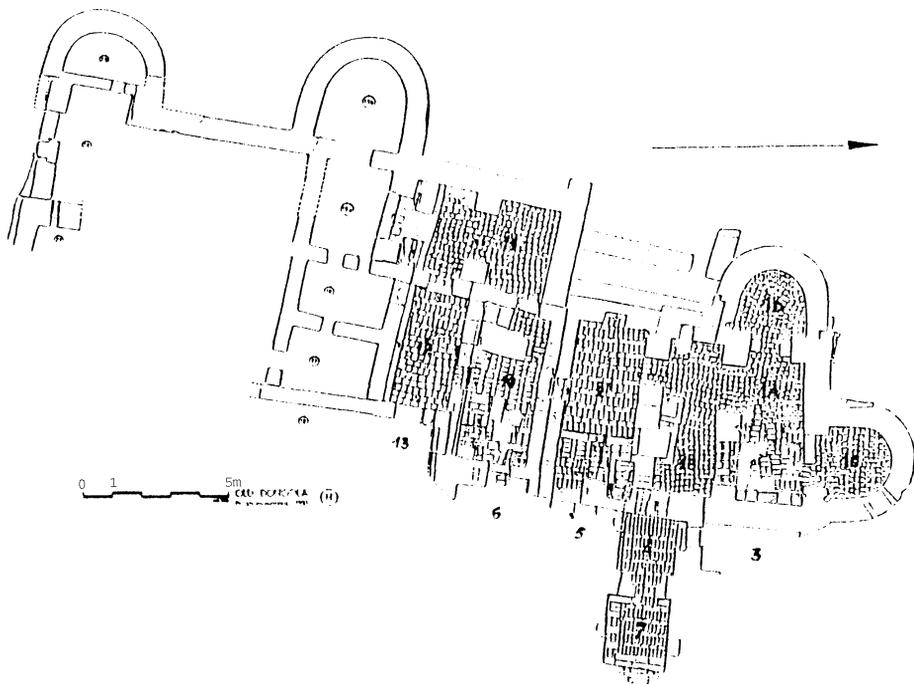
Work continued in the northwestern part of the mound where in the previous campaign several rooms of the main monastery building were identified. The floor level was reached in rooms 7 and part of 1A; in the remaining rooms a layer of debris 1-1.5 m

¹ The expedition included: Dr. Stefan Jakobielski, in charge; archaeologists Prof. Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski, Dr. Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, Dr. Bogdan Żurawski, Mr. Daniel Gazda; Dr. Krzysztof Misiewicz, geophysicist; Ewa Parandowska, conservator; architect Agnieszka Gryglewska; draughtsman Wojciech Chmiel; Dr. Jacke Phillips, art historian and ceramologist from the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada. Piotr Parandowski, archaeologist and author of film documentaries, joined the expedition for a while.

thick had been removed. Explorations now covered the western end of the site, that is the rooms which are located next to the outer wall of the monastery. The floor was reached in several rooms: 1A, 1B, apses 1C and 1D and rooms 2, 10, 11 and 12. New rooms opening in the southernmost part of the site were identified and the course of the exterior wall was traced up to the southwestern corner. Another semicircular tower was found at the corner on the west side, adjacent to the wall. In the southern section of the exterior wall a blocked entrance leading to the south was discovered (Fig. 1).

The plan of the western part of the monastery is the result of successive rebuilding of the interior. The differences are clearly seen in wall construction where different kinds of mud brick and mortar were used, and in the level and types of floors (which were of ceramic tiles or of fragments of red-brick). It would seem that rooms 1 and 11 were added relatively late, between the existing perimeter wall with semicircular towers of a kind set at intervals along it and the previously developed part of the monastery (i.e., the successively constructed rooms 16-17, 10, 2 and 12). Subsequent rebuilding of the part of the structure investigated this year was limited to changes in the communication system (blocking old entrances and introducing new ones as in rooms 10, 12, 16, 2) or in the function (room 12 was changed from an open passage into a closed vestibule and 10 into a staircase leading to the upper floor of the building). Some interesting changes of room function, possibly connected with the commemoration of the dead, are suggested by the decorative portals and a kind of pulpit added in rooms 2 and 1A, next to the blocked shafts leading to crypts under the floor. The location of the shaft in room 1A is easily discernible on the floor, in front of the eastern portal which was discovered in the previous

season, with obvious evidence of a removed stela. A podium (50 x 55 cm, 1 m high) of dressed sandstone blocks with three steps leading onto it was built against the eastern pilaster in the arcaded passage into room 1B on the southern side of the portal. Its function remains unknown; a person standing upright on it would be rather uncomfortable under the low arcade. The site of the presumed tomb has not been investigated as yet. Room 2 was fully excavated. Its eastern part is separated from the rest of



*Fig. 1 Plan of the excavated part of the Monastery on Kom H, 1993.
Drawing A. Gryglewska.*

the room by a thin partition wall with a portal entrance similar to those in rooms 1A and 1D. The ceramic tile floor is 12 cm lower than in the other rooms. In the northern part there is a kind of pulpit limited by a balustrade wall to the south. The podium (1.30 x 0.80 m, 1 m high) is partly let into a niche with semicircular vault in the east wall and is approached by three steps. Among the reused marble slabs of different color, which pave the steps and the podium, there is a funerary stele in Greek, set face up. The text has almost been obliterated. All that survives is the date - 786 A.M. (AD 1070), which provides the post quern date for the construction. Another marble stele had once been fixed in the east wall of the room and was found on the floor, broken into two pieces. The excellently preserved Greek text concerns the archbishop Georgios, archimandrite of the Holy Trinity monastery, who died in 829 A.M. (AD 1113) having lived 82 years, of which 50 as bishop. In the upper part of the wall, the previous campaign brought the discovery of a text written in ink in Old Nubian and referring to the same archbishop. In the debris immediately next to the wall, fragments of painted plaster with a representation of a Nubian dignitary under the protection of the Holy Trinity were discovered. This may have been a portrait of Georgios.

A pillar 1.55 m high, rectangular and plastered, was built against the southern face of the pulpit and the inner face of the eastern wall. In its rounded upper surface there is a depression some 18 cm in diameter which may have served the purpose of holding a jar. Next to the pulpit wall there is a deep cylindrical opening, 10 cm in diameter, presumably evidence of a vertical stone or wooden element which is no longer preserved (a cross perhaps).

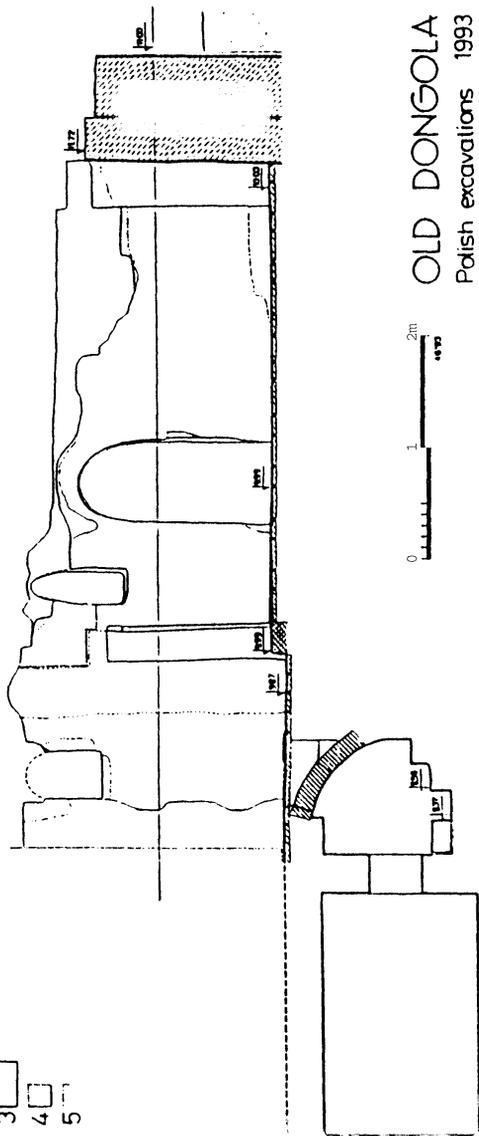
In the floor close to the southern wall there was a rectangular space, which featured a different arrangement of paving tiles. The 1.05 by 0.60 m rectangle marked the location of a shaft leading to a burial chamber. The quadrangular shaft was cut 70 cm into bedrock and covered with a semi-barrel vault of red brick. In the middle part of the vault some "moving bricks" were used, which had no mortar between them to allow their easy removal. The arched entrance in the east wall of the shaft (30 cm wide) led to the chamber, which was located below a doorway from room 2 to room 5. The opening was blocked with bricks and sealed with the sign of the cross made with a finger in the wet mortar (Fig. 2).

Inside the barrel-vaulted burial chamber (2.13 x 0.80 m; 1.70 m at the highest), there were five bodies buried. The atmospheric conditions largely helped in the preservation of the bodies, as well as the hair and shrouds wrapped around the bodies, including the heads. The bodies were found in two layers, one directly on top of the other, and were buried presumably at long intervals. There can be no doubt that Georgios was one of the individuals buried in the crypt,² because his stele had been set in the wall immediately above the entrance to the tomb. The crypt may have possibly served as the burial place of the archimandrites of the monastery.

The walls of the crypt were plastered with a yellowish-grey mud mortar and whitewashed. On this surface Greek and Coptic inscriptions, preserved in excellent condition, had been written in black ink (Fig. 3). The only larger loss of plaster is on the

² Anthropological examinations were not carried out this season. The contents of the crypt were recorded, but otherwise left untouched.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



section a-a

Fig. 2. The Monastery on Kom H, cross-section through room 2 and the crypt.
Drawing A. Gryglewska.

west wall; on the other walls there is only minute damage done by termites, not exceeding the space of a single letter. The texts are religious and magic in character, and this particular selection appears not to have any known parallels. In any case, it is the only tomb interior discovered so far in Nubia, which has this number of texts, encountered only sporadically in burial chambers in the form of invocations or fragments of the Gospel.³ Here also, on each of the walls there is a fragment of one of the four Gospels in Greek, consisting of its opening and closing phrase. Undoubtedly, this is a symbolical representation of the entire content of each of the canonical Gospels.⁴ The group of texts starting on the west wall (at the entrance to the crypt) was written by the same scribe. Beside the introductory invocation on the west wall: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost now and forever" and a seriously damaged and illegible text in Greek, there is the Gospel of Matthew (1,1-2 and the last verse 28,20), a text containing 38 signs in the magical alphabet, 24 Nomina Sacra in numerical cryptograms⁵ and a choice of

³ In one case it is the text of a funerary stele which was written on the wall of a tomb in Koja, cf. Ch. Bonnet, *Les fouilles archeologiques de Kerma (Soudan)*, Geneva, XXXIX, 1991, fig. 17.

⁴ The practice is common in Nubia, cf. e.g. the text of the Gospel of St. John from room 3 of House PCH.A in Dongola (S. Jakobielski, Dongola 1976, *EtTrav* XI (1979), pp. 241-242), and the texts in the Anchorite's Grotto at Faras.

⁵ Only eight of the cryptograms seem to have been satisfactorily read: Adonai, Eloï, Sabaoth, Mesias, Michael, Gabriel, Rafael and Uriel. See J.M. Plumley, Nubian Christian numerical cryptograms: some elucidations, in: P. van Moorsel (ed.), *New Discoveries in Nubia*, Leiden 1982, pp. 95-96.

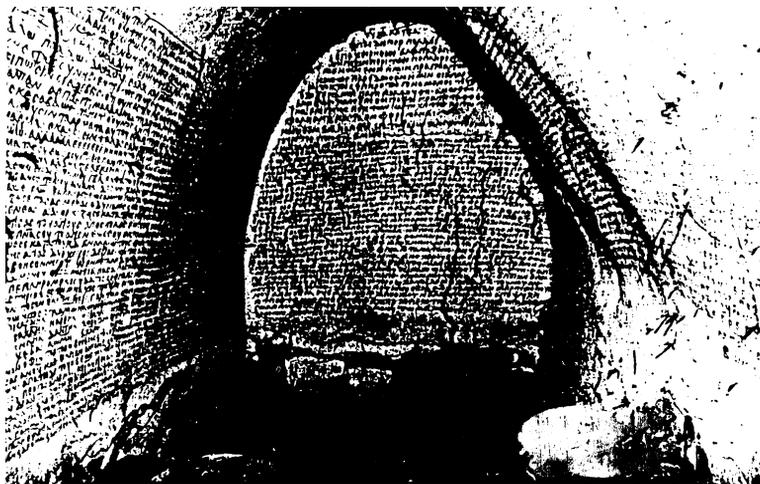
magical proper names. On the south wall there is a long text in Greek (56 lines), which contains beside many invocations and magical formulas (including vowels in different arrangements), the names of 24 Elders and 99 Angels,⁶ the text of the Gospel of St. Mark (1,1-2 and 16,20) and the palindrome: *sator-areto-tenet-opera*⁷-rotas, in a crossword frame (known as the names of the nails from Christ's Cross). On the east wall there is at the top the text of the Gospel of St. Luke (1,1-2 and 24,53) and an apocryphal Gospel in Coptic related to the Holy Virgin. Another unidentified as yet, extensive fragment of Coptic apocrypha takes up almost all of the south wall of the crypt; like the remaining texts, it seems to refer to the Gnostic tradition of thinking. On the same wall, the Gospel of St. John (1,1-3 and 21,25) is also to be found, together with a repetition of the already described palindrome in the same graphic arrangement.

Some of the rooms of the monastery were decorated with murals. Paintings discovered in the previous season in room 1B were once again uncovered in order to clean them and prepare drawings and painted canvas copies. On the south wall of this room, below the composition depicting a standing saint and a monk in an attitude of prayer, a small representation of a rider on horseback was discovered. On the west face of the recess in this wall there is a fragmentary representation of an angel. In room 2, beside the flying angel revealed on the south wall in the previous campaign and numerous fragments of painted plaster

⁶ Most of them given in version others than in the Coptic tradition, elaborated by C.D.G. Müller (*Die Engellehre der Koptischen Kirche*, Wiesbaden 1959).

⁷ Here *otera*.

from at least two other representations, the newly discovered paintings include a large damaged representation of a decorative cross in red set inside a shallow niche in the western wall.



*Fig. 3. Monastery on Kom H. The inside of the crypt.
Photo B. Żurawski.*

The decoration of room 11, noted in the previous season, was now uncovered completely. It is a narrative representation above a motif of a meander, which runs all around the northern part of the room. The two surviving scenes are on the jambs of the entrance to room 10 and belong to the last part of the cycle. On the southern jamb there is a half-naked man resting on a bed among bustling figures of men and angels. Above the bed there is a saint on horseback (as if appearing from heaven). The parallel scene on the northern jamb depicts a body lying on

a bed; the deceased is a white-bearded Nubian(?) wrapped in bandages, assisted by four angels and a figure in a crown. The scenes were accompanied by legends in Old Nubian, painted in white or black in the panels of the decorative band running around the room. The text is unfortunately almost totally obliterated. The scenes do not find a parallel in Nubian painting, neither in content nor in composition. The several hundred small pieces of painted plaster from the upper parts of compositions found in the debris in this room may turn out to be helpful in identifying the iconography. The southern part of the room, which was set apart, was decorated in a conventional fashion with single figures of the standing Virgin (on the pilaster in the entrance to room 12) and a saint in bishop's robes (sic!) trampling a dragon (southwestern pilaster, northern face). On the south wall one of the paintings was an unfinished painting of the Virgin and Child.

Fragmentary figural paintings were also discovered in room 13 (Virgin and Child) and 10 (Holy Trinity), but the best preserved and the largest painting (originally over 2.5 m in height) was revealed on the south wall of room 12. It depicts a royal figure with a crown in the left hand and dressed in a robe ornamented with eagles, each set in a circle (Fig. 4). A study of small fragments from the upper parts of the composition (largely reconstructed by now) indicated that the figure remained under the protection of the Holy Trinity, represented by three identical busts of Christ, as was the practice in Nubia. The painting is accompanied by a damaged text in Old Nubian, still awaiting conclusive interpretation. In terms of style, the composition may be dated to the first half of the 12th century and was painted by an artist other than the one who created the original decoration of this part of the monastery. The 48 graffiti and drawings which were found, scratched or painted on the plaster of the walls, were recorded. Several new pieces of painted and carved ceramic grilles were discovered in the debris; it is presently believed that the grilles were part of decorative partitions rather than windows. One of the pieces bears a splendid rendition of the



*Fig. 4. Monastery on Kom H. Mural representation of a royal figure.
Drawing W. Chmiel.*

head of a Nubian belonging to a reclining figure with a sword, composed inside a rectangular frame.

An extraordinary find was made in the layers of mud in the southwestern corner of room 2. The deposits are the result of rainwater pouring into the abandoned structure through a hole in the roof (presumably not earlier than in the 14th century). The pillaging of the monastery presumably left a considerable pile of loose, crumpled parchment codex sheets, mostly in Coptic, lying in this corner. The whole material was almost totally consumed by insects, but before this happened the wet mud partly absorbed the ink from the pages, leaving negative impressions of texts in the mud. Although it is impossible to identify the contents, we could determine the size of the sheets and make observations of a paleographic nature (texts written by 12 scribes in Coptic, two in Greek and one in Old Nubian were distinguished). The material, if it were not the product of the local scriptorium, should be considered remnants of a monastic library.

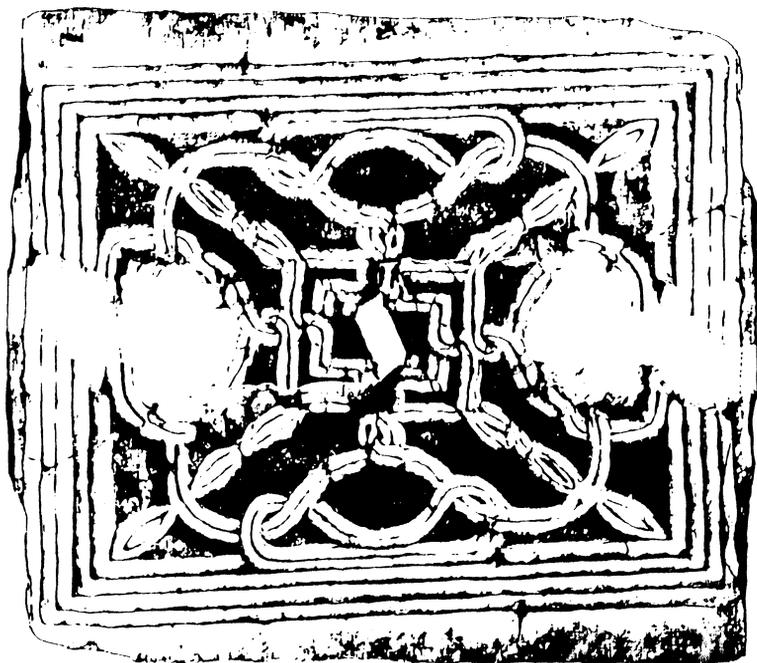
Having completed the recording, the expedition carried out the necessary preservation work: the painted and inscribed surfaces of the walls were protected with chemical means. In all explored rooms where the floors were reached (excluding room 1), the walls were raised to a uniform height of 2.90 m in new red brick, and rooms were covered with a roof typical of the region, made of palm leaves resting on palm trunks, covered with mud and manure mixed in. All the openings were blocked with brick.

KOME

Prior to starting excavations, B. Żurawski and K. Misiewicz, in charge of the work in this area, used a computer program to prepare a detailed contour map of the whole kom, showing in

outline the structures hidden inside it. After a series of test trenches and a surface survey, the northeastern part of the mound was chosen for in-depth exploration.

Remains of a church were discovered with walls preserved up to 1.5 m. The evidence consists of four cylindrical pillars constructed of dressed stone blocks standing on a floor of great slabs



*Fig. 5. Structure on Kom E. Stone slab with relief decoration. Hypothetical reconstruction.
Drawing W. Chmiel.*

of sandstone. The walls were made of mud brick faced with red brick on the outside. The building was rebuilt at least twice. At present, there is still no evidence for a sound dating of the original building of the structure, but considering the technique, which resembles the Meroitic building tradition, a time before or slightly after the official conversion to Christianity of the Dongolese court should be taken into consideration.

In the presbytery, there are remains of a geometric mosaic floor of black and white pebbles⁸ and a brick altar and traces of a completely dismantled tribune in the apse. A room in the southeastern corner of the church additionally supported by a buttress on the outside, contained a plastered, cylindrical baptismal basin sunk 1.6 m below the floor, with two steps leading to it from the west and north (*sic!*).⁹ The finds include pieces of stone architectural decoration, including a great slab of sandstone decorated in relief, featuring a very complicated design (Fig. 5). Numerous Late Christian oil lamps found on the floor level indicate that the church remained in use until almost the end of the Christian period.

Exploration of Kom E will be continued in the coming season.

⁸ A similar floor was discovered in the presbytery of the second phase (second half of the 7th century) of the Church of the Stone Pavement in Old Dongola.

⁹ The steps leading into the basin should have been on the west and east, but the east wall of the room left no space for steps on this side.