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## The Southern Dongola Reach Survey Project, 2002

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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 14, 237-252

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2003

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# DONGOLA REACH

## THE SOUTHERN DONGOLA REACH SURVEY PROJECT, 2002

Bogdan Żurawski

*The fifth season of the Southern Dongola Reach Survey lasted from January 16 until March 23, 2002.<sup>1)</sup> The expedition focused on the excavations at Banganarti, but even so SDRS subteams continued the survey and digging in various parts of the concession area and beyond.*

*The immense scope of restoration and preservation activities carried out at Banganarti during the fifth SDRS season was possible thanks to generous assistance from Heidelberg-Poland Company Ltd., which has committed itself to sponsoring the reconstruction and restoration of the Banganarti church in the coming four seasons.*

1) The expedition staff comprised Dr. Bogdan Żurawski, archaeologist, project director; Dr. Mahmoud El Tayeb, archaeologist, who once again shared his time between two missions: the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum's mission to Hamadab and the SDRS; Dr. Marcin Wiewióra, archaeologist-architect; Dr. Adam Łajtar, archaeologist, epigraphist; Mrs. Magdalena Łaptaś, Ms Dobrochna Zielińska, archaeologists, iconologists; Mr. Piotr Osypinski, archaeologist, lithics specialist; Ms Marta Gauza, archaeologist, palaeozoologist; Mrs. Ewa Parandowska, Mr. Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka, restorers; Mr. Wojciech Chmiel, restorer, mural documentalist; and Mr. Jacek Poremba, photographer. The staff was accompanied by two graduate students from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń: Ms Magdalena Raciniewska and Ms Dorota Zak. The NCAM was represented by senior inspector Ms Nahla Hassan.

After four years of absence, Mr. Piotr Parandowski returned to the SDRS stage to film in superb fashion the first season of excavations in the Banganarti church. (The film entitled "The Nile's way" was produced with financial assistance from the Polish Academy of Sciences and the TVPartner Film Production Company).

## THE MEROWE DAM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE PROJECT (MDASP)

Acting upon the request of Dr. Salah Mohammed Ahmed, MDASP Field Director, members of the SDRS staff<sup>2)</sup> went to Jebel Kulgeilli in the Fourth Cataract region to assist a NCAM team excavating a Post-Meroitic tumuli field as part of the salvage operations. Aerial photographs from a kite were taken, scanned and assembled as a bitmap of the site. The area upriver as far

as the double fortress of Jebel Kalidob *alias* Suweiqa was also inspected. The lithics and the palaeozoological material from the Neolithic site of Battereen E, explored by NCAM as part of the salvage project, were given to Mr. Piotr Osypiński and Ms Marta Gauza to be studied over the course of the season. Their report has been submitted to the NCAM.

### ABKUR

Testing in the fortress of Abkur (Istabel) in 2002<sup>3)</sup> was part of a general investigation into medieval Nubian defense architecture. One of the objectives was to uncover the entrance to the fortified complex where the Linant de Bellofonds report had located it. This involved cleaning the lowermost part of the fortifications. Trenches were also dug to study the construction phasing and

chronology of the fortress (most of the work was done near the outer walls where the foundation courses of the walls were revealed). Finally, the presumed site of the fortress church (identified in aerial photographs) was cleared of sand and construction debris. The church was found to be destroyed to the level of the brick pavement (*Fig. 1*).

### DIFPAR

The testing and high-density survey of Ed Diffar fortress<sup>4)</sup> had as an objective the reconstruction of the chronology of the site which had been occupied from Early Christian times throughout the post-medieval period. Fieldwork in 2002 greatly elucidated certain aspects of military architecture and the building process of medieval fortifications on the Middle Nile.

The most rewarding trench was dug through the earth and sand deposits in the

northeastern part of the fortress around a fallen granite column. A capital (the diameter fitting the upper diameter of the fallen column) was found buried in sand in a test trench dug to reach the foundation courses of the girdle wall (*Fig. 2*). (This was plausibly the capital seen and sketched by John G. Wilkinson in 1848). Testing in the uppermost part of the kom evidenced the building sequence in the central part of the fortress (the upper castle).

2) Dr. Mahmoud El Tayeb, Dr. Bogdan Zurawski and Mr. Piotr Osypiński.

3) The work was carried out by Dr. Marcin Wiewióra assisted by Ms Dorota Żak and Ms Magdalena Raciniewska.

4) Carried out by Dr. Marcin Wiewióra and his team.



*Fig. 1. Site of the Abkur (Istabel) fortress church  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 2. Granite capital from the church in Diffar with the fallen column in the background  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 3. The outer girdle wall at Old Dongola (the Mosque is visible to the far left)  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 4. Lowest courses of the walls and foundations of the northeastern corner of the church within the "Great Enclosure" of Dongola (Photo B. Żurawski)*

## OLD DONGOLA

Work at Abkur and Ed Diffar was followed by high-intensity surveying and testing on the outskirts of the so-called Abandoned Village of Old Dongola, but still within the outer fortifications of Old Dongola (*Fig. 3*).<sup>5)</sup>

Two important trenches were dug on the plateau south of the El Ghaddar. In the middle of the area encircled by a defense

wall (the so-called Great Enclosure of Old Dongola) a hitherto unknown church was identified. The trench uncovered the northern pastophorium with foundations of the outer wall, a stone altar and red brick pavement (*Fig. 4*). Another trench was dug near the outer wall of the enclosure, providing a section through the fortifications and some structures associated with them.

## MAGAL AND EZ ZUMA

The medieval site of Magal had been visited by the SDRS team on several occasions between 1998 and the present. In 2002, a complete topographical plan of the site was drawn. Some testing and surface cleaning brought to light the stone relicts of a church that had been missed during previous visits. Preliminary work was also

conducted on the Ez Zuma tumuli field. A set of aerial (kite) photographs covered the entire site. Special attention was paid to the dismantled tumulus in the northern part of the cemetery. Since it had been selected for excavation in the coming seasons, the "mound" was carefully measured and photographed from the kite.

## EXCAVATIONS AND RESTORATION WORKS IN BANGANARTI

Testing at Banganarti (Kom Es Sinada) in 2001 had revealed a fortified enclosure around a central building, convincingly identified as a church (*Fig. 5*).<sup>6)</sup> The complex was provisionally dated on the evidence of the pottery to the 8th-13th century, with the *floruit* falling in the 9th through 11th centuries (most of the ceramics are dated to this period). At the close of this period, the church was embellished with the first and still surviving layer of murals. Sometime in the late 10th or in the 11th century, the collapse of the north wall of the church necessitated

a remodeling that included new murals on the re-erected north wall and a second layer of paintings superimposed on earlier decoration in the other parts. Considered additionally in the light of the abundance of inscriptions and graffiti, this masterpiece of Nubian art and architecture was thought to be unparalleled in the repertoire of ecclesiastical buildings from Nubia as far as layout is concerned (*Fig. 6*). Now it seems that the sole parallel are two Soban churches coded in the excavation report as Buildings A and B.<sup>7)</sup> The apparent similarity of the Banganarti and Soba churches sheds new

5) Again the work was supervised by Dr. Marcin Wiewiora.

6) For the results of the previous season at Banganarti, cf. B. Żurawski, *PAM XIII, Reports 2001 (2002)*, 221-226.

7) D.A. Welsby and C.M. Daniels, Soba. Archaeological research at a medieval capital on the Blue Nile, *BIEA Memoir* 12, 33-80, fig. 2. I owe this reference to Dr. Derek A. Welsby, director of the Soba excavations, and to Mr. Michael Mallinson, architect to the Soba Mission.



*Fig. 5. Vertical low-altitude (kite) aerial photograph of the Banganarti site in 2002  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

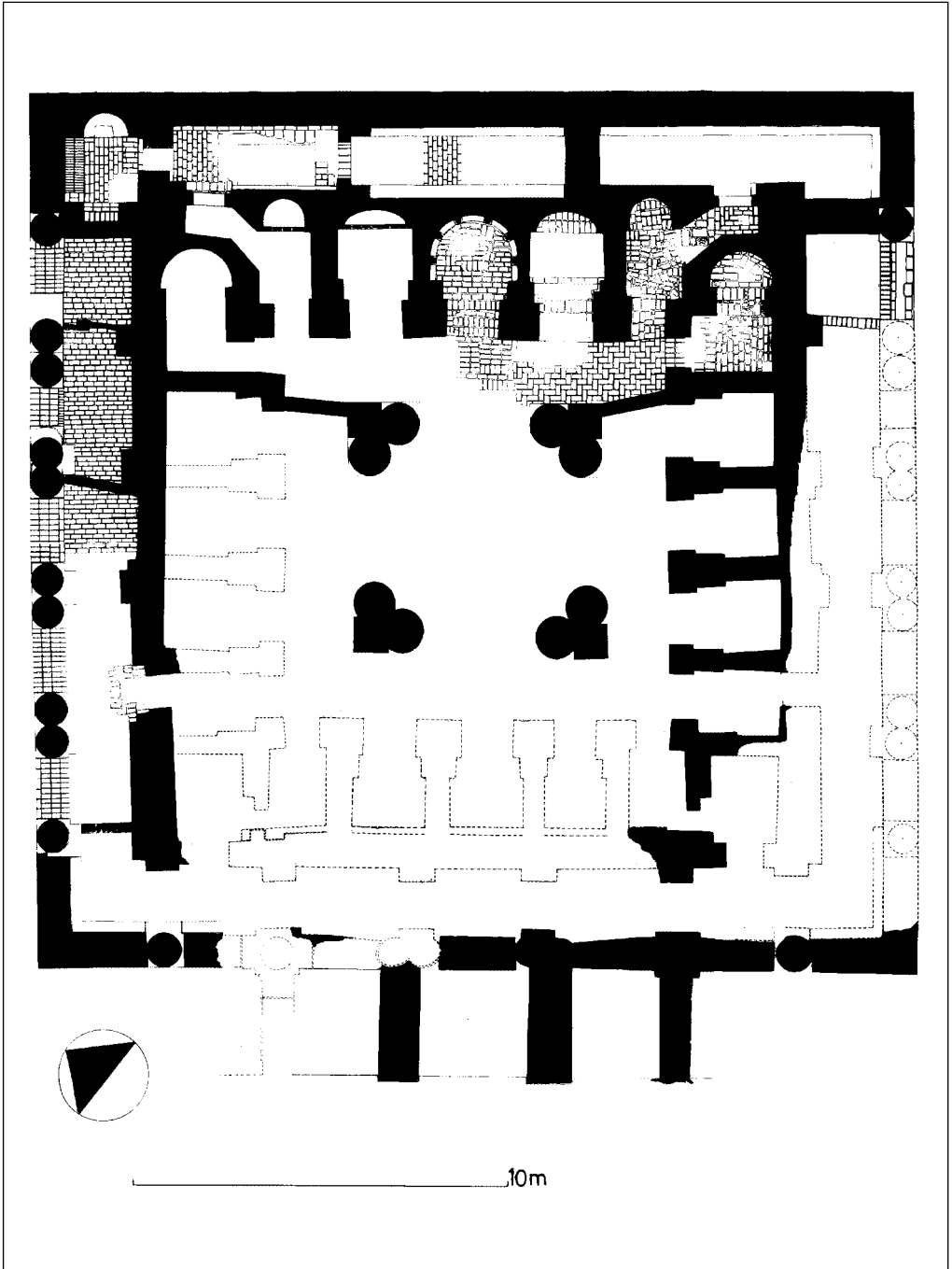


Fig. 6. The reconstructed plan of the Banganarti church (excavated parts are marked in black) (Drawing SDRS Expedition)



light on the union of Makuria and Alodia, which has been evidenced so far only in the written sources. Significantly, the construction of the first church at Banganarti dated to the 10th century came at a time when two separate sources (Ibn Hawqal and Mas'udi) actually confirmed the union.<sup>8)</sup>

Fieldwork in 2002 revealed that the Banganarti church was in fact a square structure, rising around the central four supports. The original stone foundations of the church from phase one were reinforced at vulnerable points (near the corners) with mastabas made of stone and red brick. These precautions were taken apparently to counter a tendency for the alluvial ground to subside. The risk was indeed considerable, resulting at least once in serious damage when the north wall of the church collapsed, presumably in the late 10th century. The rebuilding that followed involved erecting thicker mud brick walls that fitted the original plan. Another catastrophe came in the next century, this time resulting in a complete dismantling of the church down to the foundations. Only the piers supporting the central dome were left in place (and they are the only elements in the church where three layers of plaster have been found).

The reconstructed church followed the same general plan but with some modifications. The porticoed outer section was rebuilt in reinforced form with some of the columns being doubled and pilasters being erected to buttress the original double columns. A new layer of murals embellished this restored building, designated as the Phase II church.

Test pits conducted in 2002 suggest the presence of an Early Christian burial ground at least beneath the eastern part of the church building. The graves were probably grouped around a bigger structure whose shape and appropriation remains a mystery for the moment (there are grounds to believe that it could have been the church). This earlier structure was desperately kept in use against encroaching sand, as well as accumulating debris and was overbuilt ultimately with a memorial church that was adroitly planned to provide each hypogeum with an aboveground chapel. The strati-



*Fig. 7. Two apostles flanking the king's portrait on the left (Chapel 3)  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

8) Ibn Hawqal, who visited Alwa in the latter half of the 10th century, stated that the Kingdom of Dongola was under the authority of the king of Alwa (G. Vantini, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Heidelberg and Warsaw 1975), 166; Mas'udi, however, claimed (in the mid-10th century) that the king reigning in Dongola controlled both Makuria and Alodia (Vantini, *op. cit.*, 130).

graphical sequence clearly proves that the lower would-be church in the last stage of its existence was entered through an entrance located more than three meters below the walking level.

The Banganarti church continued as a pilgrimage center well into the 13th-14th century as the murals, ceramics and inscriptions found there convincingly suggest. The last murals were painted in the late 13th-14th century and the last inscriptions were scratched on the walls in the mid-14th century.

The iconographical program of the decoration in the apsed eastern chapels turned out to be the same in all cases. A ruler was depicted standing, clad in full-blown regalia with royal purse, robes of honor, etc., wearing a crown and holding another one in the left hand, while grasping a peculiar type of scepter in the other hand. The scenes included figures of the apostles pictured on both sides of the ruler and an Archangel standing in back. At least in one mural (in Chapel 3, *Fig. 8*)

the archangel was shown investing the king with an object that could be a sumptuous fastening of a royal *girba* that streams from the king's right shoulder over his left forearm.

The iconography of the mural representations (twelve royal portraits found so far), the top quality of the masonry, exquisite layout and master execution of the edifice definitely suggest a royal milieu. The plethora of graffiti, on the other hand, proves that the site was perceived as a pilgrimage center of special importance.

The superb iconographical program of the royal chapels provides much information on the political theology of Makurian kingship. For instance, portraying Nubian rulers between the apostles (*Fig. 7*), in position usually occupied by the image of Christ was, from the 12th century onwards, a reflection of the evolution taking place in Byzantine political theology with its stress on *christoumimesis*. It strengthened the authority of the Makurian dynasty by emphasizing the divine aspect of kingship.



*Fig. 8. Ink copy of the wall decoration in Chapel 3 (Drawing SDRS Expedition)*

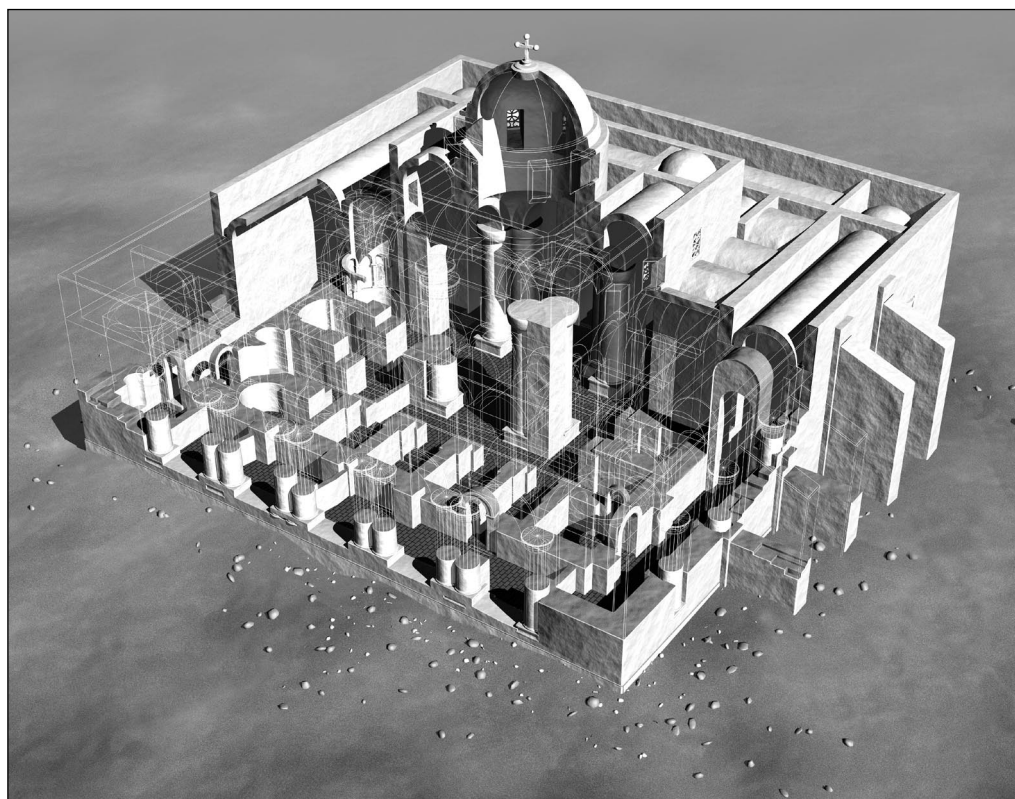
Many of the inscriptions from the church mention the Archangel Raphael. It is he who is the most common addressee of invocations and prayers, including the longest one on the lower part of the wall in the main chapel in which Raphael is designated as the one who was sent by God to save sinners from the devil's net. This may suggest that the Banganarti church was dedicated to this archangel.

The general layout of the church can now be reconstructed following the clearing work and testing conducted over the course of the last two seasons. The basic unit is a square space. Indeed, the entire interior between the four central dome supports and

the outer walls was arranged as a set of 18 chapel-like spaces (*Fig. 9*).

In all eight rooms uncovered so far (only Chapels 1 to 4 have been explored to floor level) the royal portrait occupies a position of paramount importance in the center. In the heavily rebuilt and reconstructed Chapel 4, this royal portrait was repainted at least twice. The king with the archangel behind him was painted between two pilasters of the central intercolumnium, whereas the accompanying apostles occupied six other intercolumnia, two figures in each of the spaces.

The portraits of royals or other high ranking dignitaries were also painted in the



*Fig. 9. A 3D reconstruction of the Banganarti church  
(Rendering B. Żurawski)*

lateral rooms. A dignitary stands alone, depicted on the southern wall of Chapel 1, unaccompanied by the apostles and apparently without the protection of an archangel (*Fig. 10*). The clouds within a frame symbolizing heaven painted above his shoulders parallel a roughly contemporary royal portrait in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity at Old Dongola. In both cases, the portraits were accompanied by long inscriptions.

Most of the inscriptions and graffiti are found on the unpainted pillars extending the walls dividing the eastern chapels and on the screening walls that were introduced in the 12th century at the earliest to

separate the eastern chapels from the rest of the building (probably after the dome had collapsed). Graffiti also exist on the outside walls, wherever the plaster has survived.

Undoubtedly, the Banganarti church was one of the most important pilgrimage centers in Nubia. It was used throughout the decline and fall of the Makurian kingdom until the building itself collapsed irrevocably in the second half of the 14th century.

In February 2002, a test pit was started in front of Chapel 3, where the brick pattern of the floor appeared disturbed and some of the bricks had been removed. A wall was exposed going down, its foundation courses



*Fig. 10. Royal portrait in Chapel 1  
(Drawing SDRS Expedition)*



*Fig. 11. Trial pit in front of the threshold to  
Chapel 3 (Photo B. Żurawski)*

lying 4 m below the church pavement. Curiously enough, the wall was set in clear sand, a most unusual thing on a Nile island formed of alluvium (alluvial stratigraphy has been shown to reach a depth of more than 8 m). At a depth of 1.15 m below the church pavement, the voussoir bricks of an arched entrance were noted (*Fig. 11*), apparently left behind by robbers who promptly abandoned the idea of breaking through this way (they had probably removed and disturbed the pavement above).

Two layers of plaster were identified on the wall, the first of lime and the second of lime mixed with mud. Murals and inscriptions were recorded on both layers. Significantly enough, the entrance (or niche ?) had been blocked before the first layer of plaster was introduced.

The figures of saints painted on this very first layer of plaster (*Fig. 12*) were rendered in less rigid stance than their Faras counterparts, wearing, however, the same slender black-colored boots that are a distinctive feature of early Christian painting in Nubia. They are accompanied by the very earliest Greek inscriptions known from Makuria. One inscription requests love (*agape*) for an individual who is addressed as *hierous*. On the second layer of plaster a tondo with Christ(?) or a saint (the *omophorion*-like scarf is problematic, as is also the *alpha* and *omega* around the tondo) was painted, along with a series of new inscriptions, tentatively dated to the 7th-9th century.

A 7th-9th century epigraphical and iconographical horizon for the structure in question (tentatively labeled Chapel 3a) was confirmed by a thick homogenous layer of



*Fig. 12. Ink copy of the painted decoration on the wall beneath Chapel 3 (Drawing SDRS Expedition)*

broken Aswan Pink Utility Ware known to have been imported to Nubia at this time. More than 800 pieces from a dozen or so vessels were found in this layer which was some 60 cm thick. Other vessels were represented only in insignificant quantities.

The theory that the eastern chapels had been raised above tombs to venerate individuals buried beneath was validated when a trial trench dug in the corridor behind Chapels 5 and 6 revealed two standardized Nubian-type mastaba graves on the same level as the flooring in the space under Chapel 3 (Fig. 13). The grave under Chapel 6 had a huge solid mastaba covered with a hard creamy lime-plaster coating. A similar layer of broken Aswan Pink amphorae was found corresponding in level to that in the space below Chapel 3. The grave found behind the eastern wall of Chapel 5 was built prior to its northern neighbor. Its plastered superstructure was still protruding above the surface when the first-phase church was erected, so it had to be pulled down flush with the church pavement.

Many traces of tunneling down to the graves below, apparently by robbers, were found, constituting rare evidence in Nubia of instances of robbing Christian graves. Violated tombs appear to have been resealed carefully with mud bricks. Convincing archaeological and artefactual evidence indicates that inhumation burials continued at Banganarti until the end of the mausoleum church. The inscription of a Nubian who held the unknown office of *epirshil* to the king (*basileus*) Siti (who reigned during the first half of the 14th century) in Dotawo provides evidence that the Banganarti church was visited until the very end of the Christian kingdom in Nubia.

Excavations in the easternmost areas of the church yielded abundant ceramic finds. An intact chalice and paten found in the northeastern corner (labeled *prothesis* for the sake of convenience, Fig. 14) were accompanied by plenty of fragmented liturgical paraphernalia. The intact jar found in the southern pastophorium was accompanied by numerous oil lamps scattered abundantly throughout the eastern part of the church (most of them belong to the latest period of liturgical use in the church).

An altar mensa or rather top of a brick altar was found incorporated into the late pavement in the so called *prothesis* (Fig. 15). It should be dated to the 11th century or later on paleographic grounds.<sup>9)</sup>

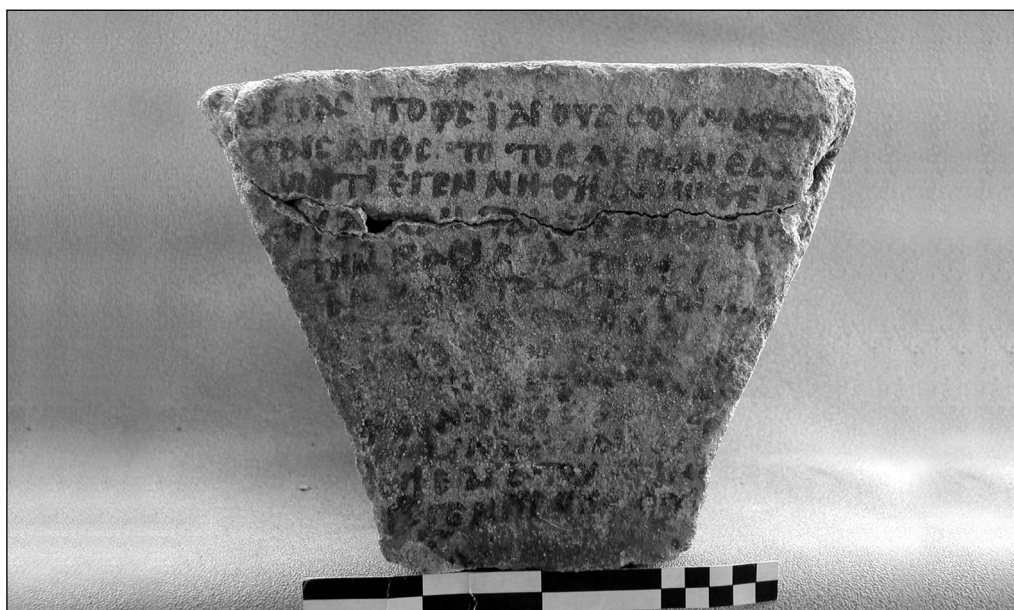


Fig. 13. Early Christian grave under Chapel 6 (in the northeastern part of the church) (Photo B. Żurawski)

9) Information regarding the inscriptions was kindly provided by Dr. Adam Łajtar.



*Fig. 14. The so-called prothesis in the Banganarti church  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 15. Altar top found in the so-called prothesis  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

## INSRIPTIONS

The rich epigraphic crop in 2002 included inscriptions on the walls of the church, an altar with a painted inscription of liturgical character and several inscribed potsherds. The wall graffiti left in the hundreds by visitors to the church were the work of mostly local scribes on behalf of illiterate pilgrims. New layers of lime wash repeatedly provided fresh space for new scratching. A typical formula runs along the lines represented by a text found on a late extension of one of the central pillars: "I, *Ampapa, thegna* of the *papas* Athanasios, have written."

The inscription in question, while written in Greek, is heavily mixed with Nubian. It is ambiguous therefore, *papas* in Nubian referring to a bishop and in Greek to a patriarch. Whether the *papas* Athanasios in question is the same as Athanasios III, Coptic patriarch reigning eleven years from 1250 to 1261<sup>10)</sup> or a local bishop of Nubia, remains a moot point. He may have also been a *thegna* of the church of Athanasios the Great.<sup>11)</sup> The position of the inscription is strongly suggestive of a very late date, possibly in the mid-14th century.

He could easily be the bishop Athanasios, preceding Timotheos on the episcopal throne in Qasr Ibrim and Faras<sup>12)</sup> (It is worth mentioning here that Timotheos, a Nubian by race, was ordained in AD 1371-2,<sup>13)</sup> also to serve as bishop of Nubia.<sup>14)</sup>

The inscriptions were scratched as a rule on the wall plaster. Only a few items had been painted in black. The texts were either in Greek or in Old Nubian, and some of them displayed a mixture of elements from both these languages. None of the inscriptions were dated.

Adam Lajtar distinguished three major groups on formal grounds: 1) names of visitors standing alone; 2) inscriptions following the pattern "I, so and so, have written (this)" – the bulk of the material represents this group; 3) brief invocations to God, the Virgin Mary and the archangels, as well as prayers, which often make use of quotations and adaptations from the Holy Scriptures. Belonging here is an inscription of definitely literary character, written in a nice book-hand (not Nubian-type majuscules) on a wall of the funerary chapel under room 3.

RESTORATION OF THE MURALS<sup>15)</sup>

The number of murals uncovered in 2002 on the walls of the memorial church and the building below it stopped at nineteen. All required immediate attention and were

treated by restorers. The painted surfaces were cleaned immediately upon discovery with soft brushes and sprayed subsequently with a 3-5% solution of PRIMAL AC-33 in

10) J. Maspero, *Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie depuis la mort de l'empereur Anastase jusqu'à la réconciliation des Églises Jacobites (518-616)*, (Paris 1923), Appendice III, 376.

11) Dr. Adam Lajtar, personal communication.

12) J.M. Plumley, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos* (Oxford 1975), 4,18,34.

13) Plumley, *op. cit.*, 23.

14) Plumley, *op. cit.*, 18. In the mid-14th century the see of Nubia was limited to the dioceses of Ibrim and Pachoras.

15) Information provided by Mrs. Ewa Paradowska and Mr. Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka.



water (this acrylic fixative was applied alternatively with a similar dilution of PARALOID B-72 in toluene).

The most fragile due to accumulated moisture were the lower parts of the paintings. To consolidate the flaking and air-pocketed layers, a 50% ethanol solution in water was injected under the paint to enable the PRIMAL AC-33 20% adhesive to penetrate into the mortar. The surfaces and edges of all big lacunae and cracks were impregnated with a 5% solution of PRIMAL AC-33 (alternatively PARALOID B-72) to avoid the water from the filling to penetrate into the painted layers.

The most challenging state of disrepair was noted on the western wall of the subterranean funerary chapel with blocked entrance. Two layers with murals were

entirely coated with a gray lime wash and a thick coating of mud. The wash had disintegrated due to humidity at this depth and the paint layer was obviously flaky and powdered. Most of the composition had been lost and the remains still in place were very weakly bonded to the wall. Structural cracks were visible in all of the wall, especially at the grave entrance.

Injections of PRIMAL AC-33 and E330 served to consolidate the cracks and voids. After the wall had turned gray, its surface was sprayed with a 2% PARALOID B-72 solution in toluene to fix it. Mud and dirt were cleaned mechanically. Some parts were cleaned with brushes and cotton tampons with acetone. Complete conservation will follow once the entire composition is uncovered.