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WALL INSCRIPTIONS IN A BURIAL VAULT UNDER THE NORTHWEST ANNEX OF THE MONASTERY ON KOM H (DONGOLA 2009)

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Abstract: Autoptic examination of the texts found on the walls of a crypt uncovered in a monastery annex in Dongola in 1993 and their collation with a preliminary reading on the grounds of photos taken at the time of discovery and a transcript prepared by S. Jakobielski. The crypt has been identified by an immured funerary inscription outside as the burial place of archbishop Georgios, who died in AD 1113. Six other males were also interred in this crypt at a later date. In 2009 the crypts were cleared of the burials and the walls cleaned professionally by a restorer. The texts in Greek and Coptic, executed by one Ioannes, form a coherent and well designed program covering all four walls.

Keywords: Dongola, archbishop Georgios, Greek, Coptic, prayer, magical text, Virgin Mary

One of the most intriguing discoveries made by the Polish archaeological mission at Old Dongola is a commemorative complex situated in the northern part of the so-called Northwestern Annex of the monastery on Kom H. It consists of three burial crypts constructed parallel to one another, in east–west direction, underneath a liturgical space that comprises two Eucharistic chapels (3, 5), two ancillary rooms (4, 7), and a space for the faithful (1, 1b, 2). The exact chronology of the complex is not quite clear, yet it seems almost certain that its southern part, which includes the southernmost crypt, the Eucharistic chapel 5 and the common room 2, was constructed for (or by) Georgios,

archbishop of Dongola, who died in AD 1113 (for Georgios and his career, see Łajtar 2002). His epitaph together with a commemorative inscription and what seems to be his painted portrait can be viewed on the east wall of room 2, to the north of the entrance leading to the Eucharistic chapel 5.

The commemorative complex was unearthed by the Polish mission during the 1993 season of excavations. At the time, the crypts were opened and found to contain several bodies each, some of them wrapped in rich garments. Surprisingly, the internal walls of the southernmost crypt appeared to be densely covered with inscriptions in Greek and Sahidic Coptic. After the crypts

had been documented photographically and in drawing, they were walled up and left for further investigation in the future. In 2008 a program was launched to clear their interiors and study their contents. In February 2009, the southernmost and middle crypts were reopened. The bodies interred inside the crypts were removed by anthropologist Robert Mahler in cooperation with textile specialist Barbara Czaja-Szewczak (Godlewski *et alii* 2012, in this volume). After the removal of the bodies deposited in the southernmost crypt and the cleaning of its walls by restorer Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka, it was possible for the present authors to study

the inscriptions. Our work consisted of autoptic examination of the texts and their collation with a preliminary reading established on the basis of photos taken in 1993 and a transcript prepared by Stefan Jakobielski.

The crypt has the shape of a rectangular barrel vault approximately 140 cm high, 80 cm wide and 210 cm long. A narrow entrance is situated in the short west wall. The inscriptions occupy its four walls almost entirely. They are executed in black ink on a thin layer of whitewash covering the plastered walls and are generally in a good state of preservation. Only the lower part of the Greek text on the north wall and the



Fig. 1. General view of the crypt after removal of the burials in 2009, looking east, from the entrance (Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka, PCMA archives)

right half of the colophon on the west wall have suffered some damage. All the texts are the work of a single hand, belonging to a certain Ioannes who left his signature no less than three times, at the end of each of the long inscriptions on the north, east and south walls. Most probably his name was also given in the colophon at the top of the west wall, where it is now lost, though, due to the wall being damaged here.

The script shows the inclined majuscules that are characteristic of Nubian literacy from the 10th century onwards. The quality of the Coptic texts (on the east and south walls) is excellent, that of the Greek, especially of the prayer on the north wall, shows numerous corruptions. The scribe was apparently better acquainted with Coptic than with Greek, which is quite remarkable since Sahidic Coptic was already a dying language at the time (end of 11th–beginning of 12th century). In the case of the Greek text on the north wall, which has a textual history going back to late antique times (see below), he may also have been working from an imperfect “Vorlage”. An interesting feature is the frequent occurrence of self-corrections, especially in the long Greek prayer on the north wall. These corrections are practically invisible in the photos, but easily detected on the walls: the scribe covered a mistake with a splash of whitewash and overwrote it with his correction. One should also note the use of an asterisk to mark a place in the text where a part had been omitted by the

scribe, who then added the omitted text on the margin preceded by an asterisk.¹

The texts in the crypt are deliberately chosen to form a coherent and carefully designed program. The program starts at the top of the west wall (the entrance wall) and continues clockwise through the north and the east walls to the southern one. This sequence is indicated most clearly by the order of the Gospel quotes that occur on each of them.

The west wall contains an ensemble of apotropaic elements. It starts with an iconic invocation of the Holy Trinity with God the Father in the middle, the Son on His right, and the Holy Spirit on His left, placed on the ceiling, near the top of the wall. Below, there is a Greek colophon in two parts stating that the inscriptions of the crypt were executed as a *phylakterion malakias*, a “phylactery against weakness”. The colophon is followed by a series of magical signs in a rectangular frame, and a Trinitarian formula (“In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”) in Greek, written in one long line. Under the Trinitarian formula, there are two list-like texts arranged in rectangular blocks placed near one another. The left-hand list contains a series of 24 numerical cryptograms denoting names of God and angelic beings,² and the right-hand one a series of ten “magical” divine names starting with the famous triad Iao, Sabaoth, Eloi. The ensemble is completed by a circle inscribed over a cross, and the opening and

¹ For similar use of an asterisk in other Nubian sources, see Łajtar 2003: No. 3, commentary to line 22.

² The same series of numerical cryptograms is also found in a tomb near the Cathedral of Qasr Ibrim (Łajtar, Van der Vliet 2010: No. 91, G) and in a variety of “amuletic” texts from Egypt and Nubia, among others, on an ostrakon found on the surface on Kom A in Dongola (unpublished); for further parallels, see Łajtar, Van der Vliet 2010: 272–274. Of the 24 cryptograms only six have been identified with reasonable certainty: Adonai, Eloi, Sabaoth, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Ourouel, see Plumley 1982 and Müller 2001.

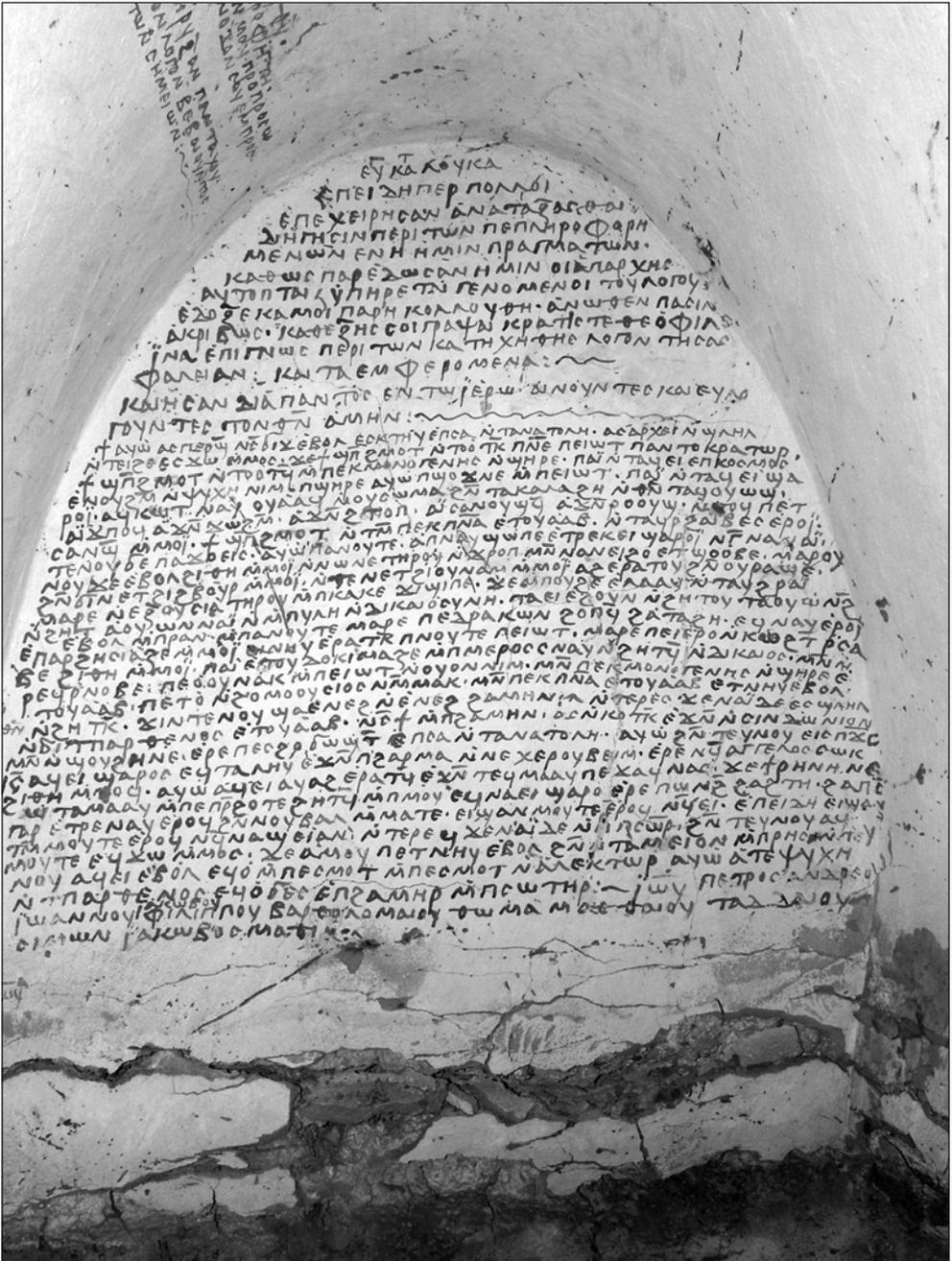


Fig. 2. The east wall after cleaning
(Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka, PCMA archives)

final verses of the Gospel of Saint Matthew in Greek.

The north wall bears a long magical text in Greek that presents itself as a prayer by the Virgin Mary, of a type commonly designated as the *Oratio Mariae ad Bartos*. This prayer, which may have its origin in apocryphal stories about the Apostle Matthias, is known in various forms in Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac and Arabic.³ Here, for the first time, we find such a prayer in Greek, which was quite likely its original language. The prayer is interrupted towards the end by a prescription for a magical ritual aimed at chasing malignant spirits from a place (here most probably the tomb where the inscription is written). In addition to this prayer, the opening and final verses of the Gospel of Saint Mark in Greek are found in the upper right-hand corner of the wall, while the famous SATOR-square is inscribed in its lower left-hand corner. The square shows the variant OTERA-ARETO, instead of OPERA-AREPO, which is characteristic of the Egyptian and the Ethiopic tradition, and is attested also elsewhere in Nubia.⁴

The inscription on the east wall begins with the opening and closing verses of the Gospel of Saint Luke in Greek and continues with an excerpt from a popular encomium on the life of the Virgin, known as the “twenty-first exegesis” by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (about 315–386), in Sahidic Coptic.⁵ The excerpt contains the prayer that the Virgin pronounced before

her death as well as the scene of her death itself and corresponds to paragraphs 48–50 in Antonella Campagnano’s edition (Campagnano 1980: 188, lines 5–27; see Bombeck 2001: 62–64). The quality of the text is excellent and it shows only one enigmatic detail that is found in none of the four other Coptic witnesses for this part of the text. When Mary has finished her prayer, Death appears to Mary “in the form of a rooster” (line 40). The inscription concludes with a list of the names of the Apostles in an order that represents a Nubian tradition, with Andrew in the second position after Peter, and John preceding James in the third and the fourth positions respectively (see Hägg 1993, and, for lists of apostles in general, Dolbeau 2005).

The text on the south wall opens with the first and last verses of the Gospel of Saint John in Greek and a second copy of the SATOR-square. The greater part of the wall is occupied by an excerpt from a homily on the Dormition of the Virgin attributed to the shadowy figure of “Apa Evodius, the archbishop of the great city of Rome, the second after the Apostle Peter” and preserved in various redactions in Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic (*CANT* Nos 133–134; Mimouni 1995: 195–201; Orlandi 2008: 62–64 [Clavis 0151]). The excerpt equals chapters 18–22 in Stephen J. Shoemaker’s edition (Shoemaker 1999: 274, l. 1–278, l. 8). The standing of the text is again excellent. It describes the

³ A very complete Coptic version is found in P.Heid.Inv.Kopt. 685 (ed. Meyer 1996); for a review of the most important parallels, see Meyer 1996: 58; for the Coptic tradition of powerful prayers attributed to Mary, see further Kropp 1930–1931: vol. 3, 220–224; Kropp 1965; Meyer 2002 and 2004.

⁴ Thus, e.g., in the SATOR-square on the south wall of the crypt, and in a late magical ostrakon discovered on Kom A in Dongola; see Łajtar, Van der Vliet 2011, where also other parallels are cited.

⁵ *CPG* no. 3603; *CANT* no. 132; Mimouni 1995: 188–195; Orlandi 2008: 59–61 (Clavis 0119). The attribution to Cyril of Jerusalem is fictitious.

death of the Virgin and her subsequent ascension to heaven together with Jesus, but with a strong focus on the preparations for the burial of Mary's body. These are ordered and partly performed by Jesus himself: He brings the garments for Mary's shroud from heaven, spreads them out for her and, following her demise, proceeds to dress her in them. For the interpretation of the ensemble it is of capital importance to note that a very similar Marian text is still today part of the Ethiopic funerary liturgy, where it is known as the "prayer of the linen garments", to be pronounced over the shroud before it is going to be used for wrapping the deceased (as noted by Daley 2001: 83, note 57).

The last observation brings up the question, what may have been the function of the entire program inscribed on the walls of this burial vault. The colophon on the west wall qualifies the ensemble as a "phylactery", a charm or protective amulet. This is confirmed by the nature of the texts themselves. Such elements as the SATOR-square and the first and last lines of the Gospels were widely used for apotropaic purposes in the entire Christian East.

In the three major texts of the ensemble, the Virgin occupies a central place. From late antiquity onwards, the Virgin had acquired a prominent place in Christian piety as the patroness of a blessed death and a role model for "Christian dying" (see Daley 2001). This is reflected in particular in the excerpts from the two Coptic texts about the Dormition of the Virgin, one of which reproduces the prayer that she pronounced in the face of death, whereas the other parallels part of the Ethiopic funerary ritual, where it is concerned with the shroud of the deceased. Also the Greek prayer of the Virgin "ad Bartos" on the north wall is basically an apotropaic ritual text. The decoration of the burial vault may therefore be properly described as a silent ritual, intended to safeguard not only the tomb, but primarily those who were buried inside of it during the dangerous liminal period between the moment of dying and their appearance before the throne of God.⁶ The entire ensemble of texts and architecture must be considered a unique and important witness to the funerary beliefs and practices of Christian Northeastern Africa in medieval times.

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⁶ For a more detailed discussion, see Van der Vliet 2010. A monographic study of the decorative ensemble, including a full edition of the texts, is currently being prepared by the present authors.

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