

Magdalena Łaptaś

Banganarti 2003 : The Wall Paintings

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 15, 244-252

2004

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.

BANGANARTI 2003 THE WALL PAINTINGS

Magdalena Łaptaś

The excavation season in 2003 was the second one during which the mission headed by Bogdan Żurawski continued to uncover murals in the Upper Church in Banganarti. During the first campaign in 2002¹⁾ four chapels numbered 1 to 4 (cf. *Fig. 6* on p. 237) were unearthed in the eastern part of the Church. The apse compositions in these chapels imaged a Nubian ruler under the protection of an archangel and the apostles. During the second campaign the excavation was continued, uncovering most of the murals from rooms 5-21. Having the experience of the first campaign, we expected to find more images of the Nubian rulers in the eastern part of the Church. Our expectations proved correct – chapels 5, 6 and 7 contained such images. The apses of chapels 5 and 6 were blocked in the late period of the functioning of the church. The dividing walls introduced in those chapels to reinforce the construction of the Church were also decorated with an image of a ruler protected by an archangel. This time the image of the ruler was complemented by earlier images of apostles from the northern and southern walls reused in the later compositions. In 2003, the chapels were uncovered up to the dividing walls, leaving the apses for the next year.

The images of the apostles in Chapel 5 are particularly well preserved (*Fig. 1*). The apostles are shown standing, facing the viewer. The rendering of the figures is free, the hand gestures varied, the faces slightly inclined. A tendency toward correct body proportions is evident. In Chapel 6, the best-preserved images of the apostles are on the southern wall. The figures were painted with equal freedom and with a good feel of the form, yet they are different in style from the others.

The images of Nubian rulers protected by an archangel found on the blocking walls in Chapels 5 and 6 were partly damaged because of the destruction of the upper parts of the walls. The figures have survived from the waist down. In both instances, the archangel was depicted behind the protégé, enfolding him with his wings. The figures of the rulers appear to be floating in front and above the huge feet of the archangels.

The richly ornamented robes of the rulers are noteworthy. In Chapel 5, the outer robe is decorated with big ornamental yellow-red medallions and the dress under it with black stripes on a yellow background (cf. *Fig. 1*). In Chapel 6, the ruler's robe features a wavy oblique checker pattern with red dots inscribed in the fields.

1) Cf. B. Żurawski, *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 241-252.

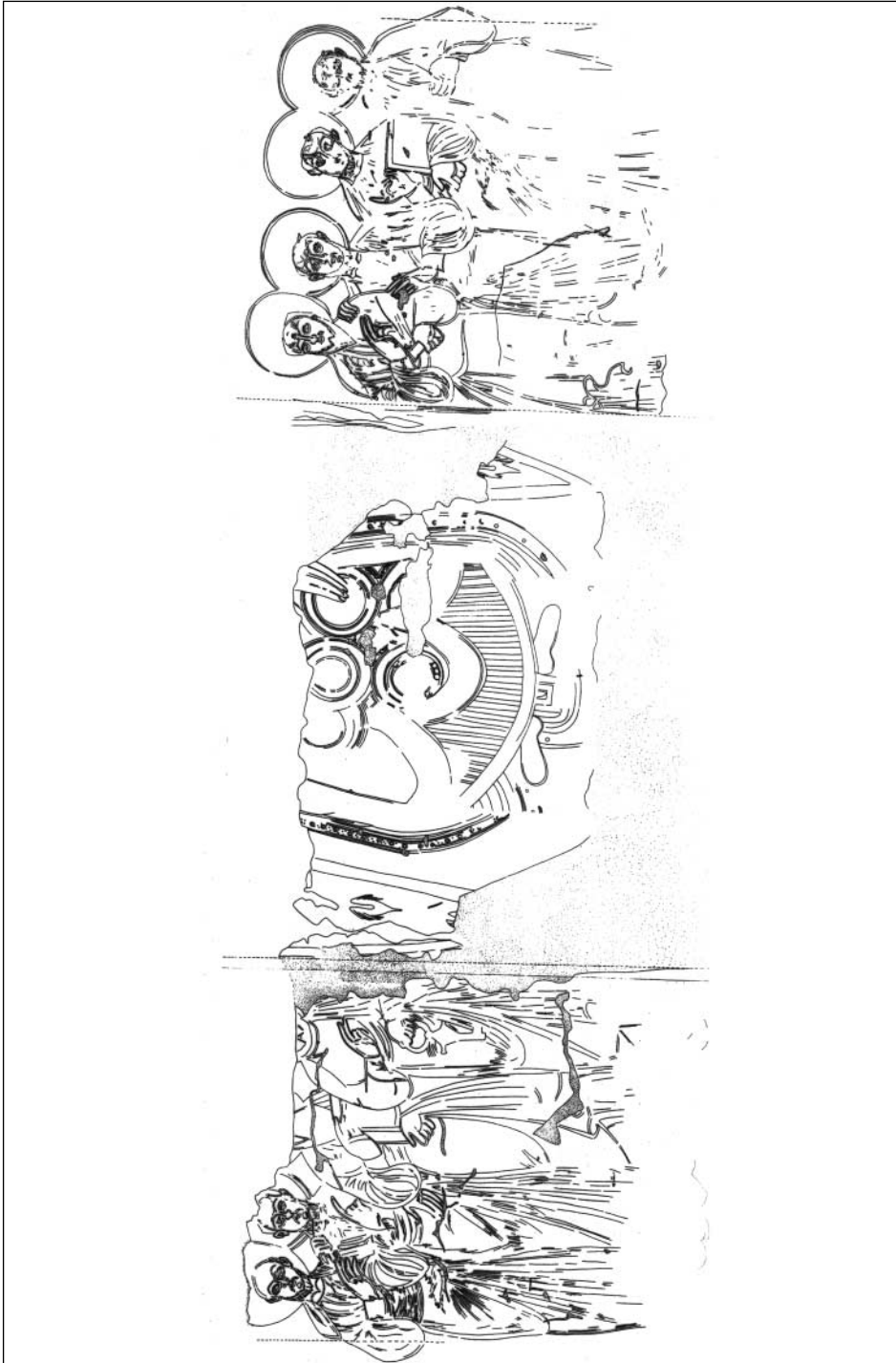


Fig. 1. Representations of apostles on the northern and southern walls of Chapel 5, forming part of the earlier apse composition, and later image of a Nubian ruler under the protection of an archangel painted on the wall blocking the apse (Tracing M. Leptas)

The characteristic flaring form of the robe, the silhouette type and decoration date the above-described murals to the late phase of Nubian wall painting, i.e., in the 13th century or later.

A ruler under the protection of the apostles was also the subject of a wall painting in the apse of Chapel 7, but the composition scheme here was different than in the chapels described earlier. Only the lower parts of the ruler and apostles can be seen as the upper part of the painting has been destroyed. The ruler is shown in the center, somewhat lower than the flanking apostles, whose feet are set firmly on a continuous red line. Neither the archangel nor his wings can be seen, rendering this composition different from the two previously discussed. The archangel may have been depicted above the protected person and, consequently, has been lost. The painting manner is hasty and sloppy, the painting rather careless in general. The paint seems to have worn off in places. To the right of the figure of the ruler, there are evident traces of re-painting on the original layer of plaster. The silhouette is broad, the robes flaring. The folds of the robes are painted very freely with broad splashes of the brush. The intensively blue folds on the white lower robe are especially appealing. The colors are meant to create a contrast, for example, the blues and violets of the ornamental elements standing out from the yellow color of the outer robe. To judge by the modeling and proportions of the figures, the type of dress and the ornaments, this should be one of the latest wall paintings known from the church.

A monumental figure of an archangel dressed in a chlamys and *kampagia* was painted on the north wall just by the entrance to Chapel 7. Only the lower part of the figure has been preserved with the bottom part of the right wing. The

footwear is painted orange and richly ornamented on the tips and heels. It is to be presumed that the archangel depicted in this place guarded the entrance to the eastern part of the church.

The murals in Chapel 8 were preserved fragmentarily at best. Those in Chapel 9 reveal fragments of wings and the figures of three archangels, each painted on a separate wall. Peacock feathers can be discerned on the wings of the archangel depicted on the east wall, while the wings of the archangel painted on the west wall are plain. This could have been intentional differentiation meant to illustrate the position of each of the archangels in the hierarchy. The archangel on the east wall could have been Michael, the other two Gabriel and Raphael.



Fig. 2. *St. Damianos (?) from the west wall of Chapel 13 (Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 3. Close-up of St. Damianos (?) holding scalpel and medical bag
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

In chapel 10, a fragmentary representation of a saint on horseback was preserved on the north wall. In Chapel 13, a depiction of two holy healers decorated the west wall. One of the saints is painted on the wall and the other inside a shallow niche (*Fig. 2*). The painting layer is worn through in places, hence the saint on the wall has survived in worse condition. Both figures are shown frontally, standing, dressed in long, white, belted tunics with wide sleeves, white mantles fastened at the front and falling onto the shoulders. The crowns on the heads of the saints are bejeweled with three projecting semi-circular elements. Both men hold the same medical attributes in their hands: in their right, a scalpel with the blade pointing down and in their left a bag of trapezoidal shape with slightly rounded bottom (*Fig. 3*). The bag and the scalpel are both characteristic attributes of *anargyroi*, healing saints who performed cures without taking payment.

The most frequently represented pair of *anargyroi* is the saints Kosmas and Damianos. They appear in the monastic annex on Kom H in Old Dongola, in a scene in which an angel offers them a bag with medical instruments.²⁾ It is likely, therefore, that the saints represented at Banganarti were also Kosmas and Damianos. The face of Kosmas (he would have been the one shown on the right hand side of the other saint) has not survived. Damianos was depicted with a long face, moustache and medium-length beard. The silhouettes of the figures are slender and

proportionate. The fingers are long and narrow, the gestures full of grace. The mural is striking in its elegance and simplicity. It is one of the best-preserved wall paintings and from the artistic and iconographic point of view definitely the best of the murals uncovered this season.

On the west face of the northwest pillar there is an image of the enthroned Virgin Mary. The painting is very worn, but the composition clear enough for the figure of the Virgin Mary holding the Child to be discerned.

On the west wall of Chapel 14, a fragment of a winged being is to be seen. The two wings raised horizontally are inscribed within a rhomboid figure. An eye motif is repeated on the wings. On this basis, it is likely that the represented figure belonged to the first triad of celestial beings, presumably the cherubim.

In Chapel 16, fragments of a figure with huge sandaled feet survived on the south wall. This could have been an image of Christ, similar to the representation known from the Cathedral at Faras.³⁾

Fragments of much damaged paintings can be observed in Chapel 17 and on the west wall of the southwestern entrance to the church. In Chapel 20, representations of two warrior saints on horseback were uncovered on the east and west walls. These murals were preserved in highly fragmentary state; for example, only a leg in a stirrup is visible on the east wall. The painting style evinces considerable feeling for form and movement. The fetlocks of the horse are slender and the parts of the

2) B. Żurawski, "Faith healing, philanthropy and commemoration in Late Christian Dongola", in: *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlichen Zeit. Akten des 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongresses Münster, 20-25. Juli 1996, Band I, Materielle Kultur, Kunst und religiöses Leben (Wiesbaden 1999)*, 423-448, fig. 18; M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Wall paintings discovered in Old Dongola", in: *Dongola-Studien, 35 Jahre der polnischen Forschungen in Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches*, eds. S. Jakobielski, P.O. Scholz, *Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica* VII (Warsaw 2001), 253-319, Pl. XXXIII.

3) Cf. K. Michałowski, *Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw 1974)*, cat. no. 35, 177-183, Pl. 35.

harness rendered with considerable care for detail.

The figure of a Nubian ruler was represented against the background of a leg with a stirrup on the east wall (*Fig. 4*). It is one of the best preserved paintings discovered during this campaign, apart from the representation of the apostles in Chapel 5 and St. Damianos from Chapel 13. The ruler is depicted standing and facing forward, looking into space. The right arm is bent at the elbow and extended before him. In his hand, he holds a scepter. The left arm is also bent in front of the figure, the hand dropping, fingers together and thumb extended to the side (the painting layer here is too worn for the object held in the hand to be recognizable). The face of the figure is ochre colored,

long, with a high forehead. The eyes are almond-shaped. A straight nose has distinctly marked nostrils. The mouth is small with a prominent cleft chin. The facial features and the contours of the face have been rendered with a dark brown line. The neck is slender and the fingers of the hand are long. The ruler is dressed in a white robe with long narrow sleeves decorated with a styling motif of lilies rendered in dark brown (*Fig. 5*). An ornamental dark yellow band runs on the sleeve and the cuff. The outer robe, which is draped at the waist and on the right shoulder of the figure, is decorated with big medallions. Running at the edge of the medallions are dark-brown hoops decorated with a motif of big and small circles. In the center of each medallion there is an



Fig. 4. Close-up of the head of a Nubian ruler in a horned crown with a bucranium from Chapel 20 (Photo B. Żurawski)



Fig. 5. Nubian ruler in a horned crown with a bucranium from Chapel 20 (Tracing M. Łaptaś)



Fig. 6. *A holy warrior spearing a man and a man in a vessel from the west wall of Chapel 21*
(Photo B. Żurawski)

eagle with spread wings, its back turned to the left. The yellow mantle thrown across the right arm is pinned on the left shoulder. It is decorated with an oblique dark-brown cross-hatching and rows of white dots. A blue band runs at the bottom edge. Around the neck there is a *maniakion*.

The ruler wears a horned crown with a bucranium in front of it (cf. *Fig. 4*). The bucranium is attached to the band placed on the blue cap. The band of the crown and the horns are yellow, decorated with round blue and white elements contoured with a dark brown line.

Round hoops with hanging ornaments decorate the ears of the figure.

The representation is very dignified. The proportions of particular elements are regular. There is a note of refined beauty in the features of the face. The robes are rich but without an excess of ornamentation. The yellow elements of the crown are presumably meant to be golden and the round motifs depict jewels.

The manner of drawing is neat and precise, especially in the part of the crown and the eagles in the medallions decorating the outer robe. The painting style resembles that already observed in the depiction of the *anargyroi* from Chapel 13. It is likely that the two murals were created at about the same time. The rendering of the robes, on the other hand, evokes the images from Chapels 2 and 3.

The image of the saint on horseback is on the same coating of plaster as the ruler and the manner of painting of the two figures appears similar. Again, it is possible that they were done at about the same time.

To the right of the ruler there is the silhouette contour of yet another figure of much smaller size. The painting layer is so washed out here that nothing but the contour of a frontally standing figure survives. The right arm is bent in front of

the figure; the left is raised (perhaps holding a palm branch). The figure appears to be dressed in a long robe and a turban or cap on the head. This could have been the image of the donator of the entire composition, especially as the legend above the head reads: *Gase, son of Mara [n]*.

The scene painted on the pilaster in the entrance to Chapel 20 depicted a Nubian standing under a cross. The cross is raised on a three-step platform. The upper parts have been damaged but the little bells suspended between its arms have survived. On the west wall of Chapel 21 the bottom of a composition was uncovered, depicting the lower part of a warrior saint and two figures at his feet (*Fig. 6*). The saint is shown frontally, standing on spread legs. His feet are clad in high military boots reaching above the knee. He is dressed in a short tunic that is richly draped at the bottom, presumably serving as an under-tunic for armor, and a long mantle thrown over it. With the lance in his hand he is spearing a man lying beneath his left foot. The head of the man is in profile and lifted toward the saint. There is blood gushing from his mouth. His feet and hands are thrown apart in a dramatic gesture, but there is a strong impression as if the body was falling through space. It is difficult to describe the dress as the painting layer here is quite worn, but the man seems to have had a loincloth. There may be something like a chain shackling his feet.

Another male figure shown below the saint's left foot is depicted in a wide-mouthed vessel. Only the head, shown in profile, and torso can be seen. The man appears to be looking toward the saint and raising his right arm, apparently pointing to the warrior saint. The composition is of interest in terms of the iconography, as it is the second such image known from Nubia. A scene depicting a man in a vessel at the

feet of a warrior saint on horseback was recorded in the church at Abdallah Nirqi.⁴⁾ As Török pointed out, the Abdallah Nirqi representation must have illustrated a specific moment of some unknown legend.⁵⁾

The preserved bottom part of a representation on the east wall of Chapel 21 depicted two standing figures. One of these figures was identified by the legend as Doubting Thomas.

At the entrance to the chapel, on the west wall, there was the bottom part of a figure in ecclesiastical dress. Judging from numerous similar representations in the entrances to other chapels inside the church, it can be identified as a representation of a prophet or Church Father, whose teachings constituted pillars of faith.

To sum up, this season's discoveries have shown how the later murals – the representation of a ruler and the apostles from Chapel 7 and the images on the partition walls introduced secondarily in chapels 5 and 6, differ in quality of execution from the earlier murals. The painting technique is careless, the figures clumsy with little feeling for form. Compared to this, the earlier paintings of apostles from Chapel 5, the *anargyroi* and the ruler from Chapel 20 show a more careful approach, better figure proportions and meticulous rendering of detail. An

obvious conclusion is that the paintings were created successively over an extended period of time, presumably from the 11th to the 13th century or even later (?).

The newly discovered murals depicting Nubian rulers protected by archangels and apostles, confirmed the special character of the church. It seems that it served as a sanctuary commemorating Nubian rulers.⁶⁾

The large number of graffiti addressed to archangel Rafael can prove that this archangel was treated as a special protector of Nubian rulers. The one who will prepare the heavenly seat for those who donated money for his earthly church.

The numerous inscriptions and prayers found in the Upper Church in Banganarti mention Raphael as guardian of Young Tobit, conqueror of the demon Asmodaeus and healer of the Old Tobit. It confirms the special function of this archangel who was treated as a guide, saviour and healer.

Based on the evidence of the graffiti, the church at Banganarti was in its late phase a pilgrimage center. The pilgrims may have come here in search of a cure for their ailments.

The newly discovered image of *anargyroi* takes on particular significance in this context, the mutual relations between their activity, the role of the archangel Raphael and the function of the church nicely falling into place.

4) P. Van Moorsel, J. Jacquet, H. Schneider, *The Central Church of Abdallah Nirqi* (Leiden 1975), 115-117, pls. 83, 87.

5) L. Török, "Man in the Vessel. An Interpretation of a Nubian Fresco Representation", in: *Nubia, Récentes Recherches, Actes du Colloque Nubiologique International au Musée National de Varsovie 19-22 Juin 1972* (Warsaw 1975), 121-125.

6) See report by B. Żurawski in this volume.