

Adam Łajtar

Inscriptions from Banganarti : Season 2003

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INSCRIPTIONS FROM BANGANARTI SEASON 2003

Adam Łajtar

The excavations carried out in the 2003 season by the Polish Joint Expedition to the Middle Nile (known also as Southern Dongola Reach Survey) on the site of Banganarti,¹⁾ c. 10 km south of Old Dongola, brought to light important epigraphic material. It consists largely

of inscriptions on the walls of the upper of two churches. Over 400 inscriptions were identified in the course of the present season. Together with those discovered in 2001 and 2002, they form a considerable collection of around 650 items.²⁾

THE UPPER CHURCH

Few of these inscriptions actually belong to the original church interior. Those that do – legends to wall paintings and dedications – are painted in black and their authors were most likely the painters of the murals themselves. All the remaining inscriptions are the consequence of visits of a religious nature made to the church and are thus a secondary element with regard to its interior appearance.

The inscriptions appear mostly on the undecorated part of the walls and pillars, although they do occasionally encroach upon the paintings. They occur all over the church interior, but a special concentration is to be observed on the pillars in the entrances to the chapels of the eastern row, the pillars in the entrances to the chapels of the southern row, on the central buttresses and in the chapels of the western row. In these places, they appear next to one

another and are occasionally superimposed, giving the extraordinary impression of large surfaces covered with writing (*Fig. 1*).

All the inscriptions with the exception of one painted in black were scratched with a sharp instrument in the soft mud plaster coating the interior walls of the church. In many cases, it is possible to observe a certain “stratigraphy” of the inscriptions. Writing started at the top on the left and continued to the right and down. Once the space intended for writing was exhausted, the wall was whitewashed and writing started anew. Traces of inscriptions from the earlier coat of limewash were observed here and there, under the first layer of inscriptions.

In paleographical terms, the inscriptions represent round inclined majuscules in the Nubian variant commonly used in

1) Cf. report by B. Żurawski in this volume.

2) For a more detailed overview, cf. A. Łajtar, “Wall inscriptions in the Banganarti churches. A general note after three seasons of work”, *JJP* 33 (2003), 137-159.

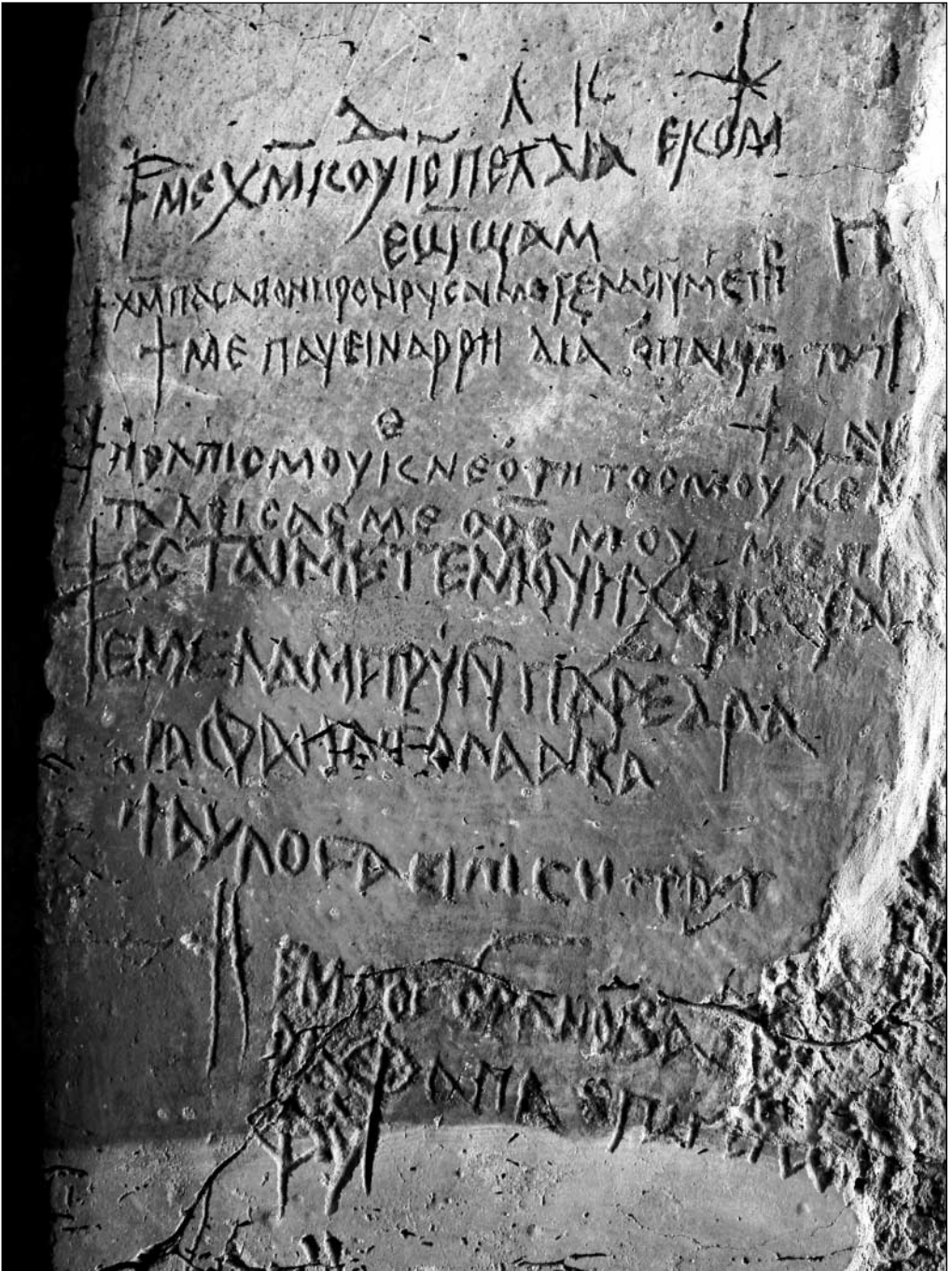


Fig. 1. Inscriptions on the right-hand side of the entrance to Room 21
(Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka)

Nubia both in manuscripts and inscriptions at least from the 10th century onwards, to record texts in Greek as well as in Nubian. The language of the inscriptions from Banganarti is a surprising mixture of elements taken from Greek and Old Nubian. This combination is especially apparent in short texts constructed according to the model: "I so-and-so have written (this)", in which the personal pronoun "I" in Greek is often used with the Old Nubian verb "wrote" and the other way round. The longer and more ambitious texts, often with literary connotations, usually keep to a single tongue, either Greek or Old Nubian. It should be noted that the Greek in the inscriptions from Banganarti is quite far from the standards of normative grammar for this language. Words are distorted by phonetic recording, the decline of the system of declension is total, verbs appear in fossilized form regardless of the current context. It is different with the Old Nubian texts, which are largely correct grammatically. Clearly, the inscriptions from the church at Banganarti were the product of a community speaking Nubian, but on specific occasions, such as, for example, in a holy place, choosing to use Greek, which was the traditional language of liturgy of the Nubian church.

In formal terms, the inscriptions can be classified into four separate groups:

- 1) The name of the author standing alone or supplemented with additional information concerning his person, e.g., the name of the father, church affiliation, function in the civil service etc. A variant in this group is constituted by inscriptions, in which the name of the writer is preceded with the pronoun "I".
- 2) Inscriptions constructed according to the model: "I so-and-so have written (this)". They are the most numerous in the Banganarti church. The basic formula could be supplemented with additional elements, such as some information about the author or a short invocation.
- 3) Invocations and short prayers. Most frequently, they are addressed to the Archangel Raphael. His name is recorded either in *scriptio plena*, or as an abbreviation, or in the form of the numerical cryptogram XM = 640. The Archangel Raphael is presented as the one who stands in front of the Lord, or as the lamp standing in front of the Lord. He is invoked as the one who was sent to the world to redeem the people and rescue them from the devil's net. The authors of inscriptions from this group frequently make use of motifs borrowed from the book of Tobit, which recounts the story of the journey made by a young Jew, Tobias, accompanied by a certain Azarias (in reality Raphael) from Niniveh to Media. The events in the story referred to include: binding the daemon Asmodaeus, rescuing Sara, curing Tobias' father of his blindness. The frequent occurrence of Raphael as the addressee of invocations and prayers in the wall inscriptions from the Banganarti church prompts us to believe that the building functioned under his name. In addition to Raphael, the receivers of prayers are also God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Trinity, Mary, and the Archangel Michael. Inscriptions with invocations and prayers normally end with information about the author occasionally assuming the form "I so-and-so have written (this)".
- 4) Varia. This group is not homogeneous and contains all inscriptions not

classifiable elsewhere. Here belong single words, such as “Light”, for example, and lists giving the names of the archangels.

Who were the people who visited the Banganarti church and left inscriptions on the walls? Of those who indicated their social or occupational status, the majority belonged among the ecclesiastics, mainly priests and deacons, but also archdeacons and epideacons. The mention of the latter function is noteworthy for it is seldom attested in Oriental churches. Certain people designated themselves as clerics and *levitai*, the latter being probably only a terminological variation for deacon. In the overwhelming majority, these people were attached to a Church of (Great) Jesus. It is very likely that the church in question is the Cruciform Church at Old Dongola. It is known that in the late 13th century this church suffered considerable damage, presumably in the outcome of the Arab raid on Dongola in 1275. It was rebuilt, however, and for the next two hundred years served as the main cult place of Dongola, probably under the name of the Jesus Church as alluded to in contemporary Arabic sources. Other churches mentioned in the inscriptions include: Church of Michael, Church of Mary, Church of (the Leader) Raphael, Church of the Holy Trinity, Church of the Three Hebrew Youths, Church of Iob, Church of Marc, Church of Jacob, Church of Andreas. It is presumed that these churches were to be found in Dongola and its immediate hinterland, i.e., in the vicinity of Banganarti. In one inscription, an archbishop (probably of Old Dongola) is mentioned, but it is uncertain whether the text refers to him personally or to someone from his entourage. There were also three archimandritai: one of the monastery of

St. Stephanus, the other two of unknown monasteries.

Laymen are much rarer than clerics. Among them, there is one special case. An inscription in Old Nubian written on the right-hand side of the entrance to Room 7, some 70 cm above the floor, reads: “King Siti”. This Siti is probably identical with his namesake who was King of Dotawo in the 1330s, as attested by four documents in Old Nubian found at Qasr Ibrim and Edfu. King Siti is also attested indirectly in other Banganarti inscriptions. In two texts – one on the north face of the north entrance to the church and another on the southeastern pillar supporting the central cupola – there appears a man with the name Durere who was a deacon of the Jesus Church and Epirshil of the King Siti. King Siti is also mentioned in an Old Nubian inscription on the west wall of Room 9. In two inscriptions, there were mentions of a Queen Mother. There were also some civilian office-holders. The list includes: Epirshil of a king, Lord of Elders, Lord of Governors (reading uncertain), Lord of Brothers (reading uncertain), Thegna, and Tot. All these offices, perhaps with the exception of Thegna, are designated by Nubian terms the exact meaning of which remains unknown. It is worth mentioning here that the term Tot occurs always in connection with the name of a locality (or district ?). Based on this it may be assumed that we are dealing with a village or district chief, perhaps the Makurian forerunner of the contemporary *sheikh el-balad* or *wali*.

The people occurring in the Banganarti inscriptions bear Nubian names as a rule. Several of these are attested for the first time here. A number of Graeco-Nubian formations also occur where a Greek stem

assumes a Nubian ending or is compounded with a Nubian word. Purely Greek names, including Biblical ones, are relatively rare. Interestingly, some of these names, like Rhabdon, seem not to have been attested in the Greek world before.

We have already seen that the people who visited the Banganarti church originated mainly from Dongola and its vicinity, and were connected with the Dongolese Church of (Great) Jesus (= Cruciform Church). In this context, one needs to mention the place-name Tungul, sometimes spelled Tungula, which occurs some dozen times in the Banganarti inscriptions. In several cases, it is accompanied by the designation “dipp”, Old Nubian for “city, town”. It is very probable that this toponym refers to the capital of Makuria. We would thus have the original Nubian name of the Makurian capital attested for the first time in internal sources. Until now, it was known only from external Arabic sources as Dunqula.

In addition to Tungul, we also have other toponyms. The list includes: Silmi (modern Ibrim in North Nubia), Sai (an island and a village between the second and third cataracts), Tillarti (literally “Island of God”, perhaps to be equated with modern Silinnarti, a village on the left side of the Nile opposite Old Dongola), Ouggeri (most probably present-day Argi), Apko (perhaps Abkor, a village some 50 km east of Banganarti with important Christian ruins), Nuri (a village in the fourth cataract area known for its Napatan remains), Apate, Kous(s)a, Ase, and Pinne, the last four remaining unidentified.

The inscriptions from the Upper Church at Banganarti throw light upon it as an important pilgrimage center, which attracted pilgrims from all classes of Nubian society and from all over Nubia, starting from Qasr Ibrim in the north and reaching Nuri in the south. Why did all these people come to Banganarti? The answer is not to be found in the inscriptions. Bogdan Żurawski is of the opinion that the pilgrims came because of some important relics preserved in the church. Such relics could have been kept in the octagonal structure with a square central depression, discovered in the very center of the church. Another reason for pilgrimages to the church would have been the tombs of important persons buried in the church and around it.

The inscriptions on the walls of the Upper Church at Banganarti appear to have been made within a relatively short period, estimated at around 50-100 years. They are undoubtedly later than the latest wall paintings, which date from the 13th century.³⁾ They are also younger than the latest rebuilding of the church, attributed to around 1280, which encompassed the adding of pillars at the entrances to the chapels. In turn, the inscriptions mentioning King Siti and his officials indicate that the custom of leaving a written record of one's visit to the church continued through the 1330s, although it was slowly approaching an end as the inscription of Siti himself occurs relatively low above the floor and was not whitewashed. All this leads to the conclusion that the inscriptions on the walls of the Upper Church at Banganarti should be dated between about AD 1280 and 1350.

3) Cf. contribution by M. Łaptaś in this volume.

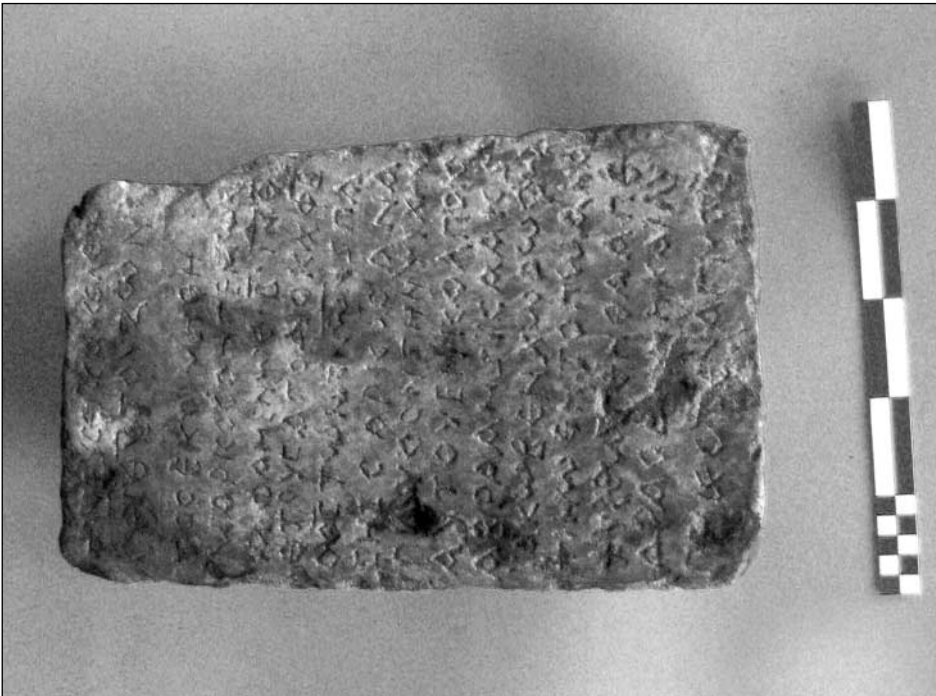
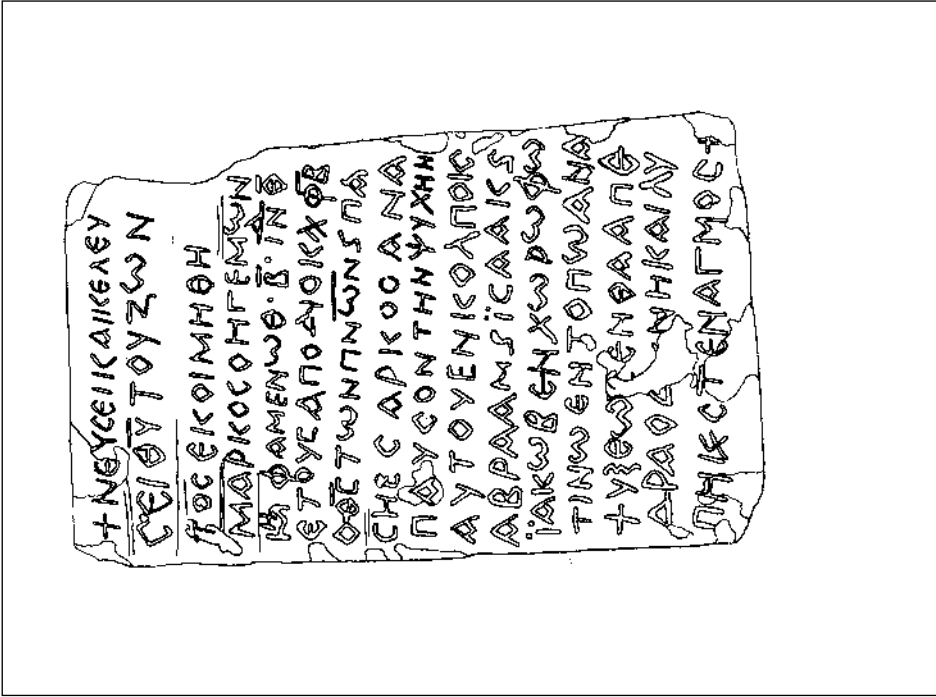


Fig. 2. Epitaph of Marcus, Hegemon
(Photo B. Zurawski, tracing A. Lajtar)

THE LOWER CHURCH

Inscriptions occur also in the lower church, but they are much rarer there than in the upper church. Four texts have been evidenced thus far, three on the east wall of the south pastophorium and one on the east wall of the central space to the south of the apse. Among the texts in the south pastophorium there is an ink inscription written with the inclined majuscules of Biblical type, which probably should be

dated to the 7th/8th century. It contains a literary text, which I have been unable to identify for the time being. The inscription on the east wall of the central space, also executed in ink, is a prayer to the Archangel Raphael to guide, guard, protect and save from enemy ambush one king Zacharias who probably should be identified with Zacharias I, reigning in the first half of the 8th century.

OTHER EPIGRAPHIC FINDS

In addition to wall inscriptions, three epitaphs have come to light, all discovered in secondary contexts during the 2003 season.⁴⁾ The oldest of them is written on a marble plaque and commemorates Marcus, a *Hegemon* (probably district governor), who died in AD 786 (*Fig. 2*). The second in chronological sequence is the epitaph of a woman (name not preserved) deceased between AD 794 and 894 (*Fig. 3*). The text composed in blameless Greek states that she died leaving her children motherless, somewhat unusual as far as Nubian epitaphs go, these being normally deprived of any personal sentiments. The third epitaph, written on a sandstone slab, may be dated on paleographical grounds to the 12th/13th century. It belongs to the Euchologion Mega type, well known in Nubian funerary epigraphy, and probably commemorates a king of the name David. The identification of this king with any of the known personages of this name remains a moot point.

In 2002, a curious epigraphic find came to light in Room 26 (so-called *prothesis*). Standing on the floor of the room near its

east wall, in front of a niche containing the chalice and patena, was an object made of three bricks – one at the bottom and two laid crosswise on top – forming what looks like a capital with square top. The object, except for the bottom, was covered with a thick layer of lime mortar and a Greek inscription was executed in black ink on two neighboring side surfaces, as well as on the top.⁵⁾ The text is composed of three prayers of undoubtedly liturgical intention. The first prayer quotes from Jn 3:3 and Mt 18:3 words about rebirth and becoming like children as prerequisites for entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. In the second, there is the question of food, which is of heaven. Prayer three contains an *epikleisis* for the Holy Ghost to come over the milk. It is known that some early churches, including the Latin and Alexandrian ones, knew the custom of distributing milk together with honey to the newly baptized as a symbol of their joining the community of Christ. On this basis, we may assume that what we are dealing with here is a reflection of the baptismal liturgy of the Nubian church.

4) All three have been published already, cf. A. Łajtar, "Three Greek epitaphs from Baganarti", *JJP* 33 (2003), 161-175.

5) Cf. B. Żurawski, *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 249 and Fig. 15.

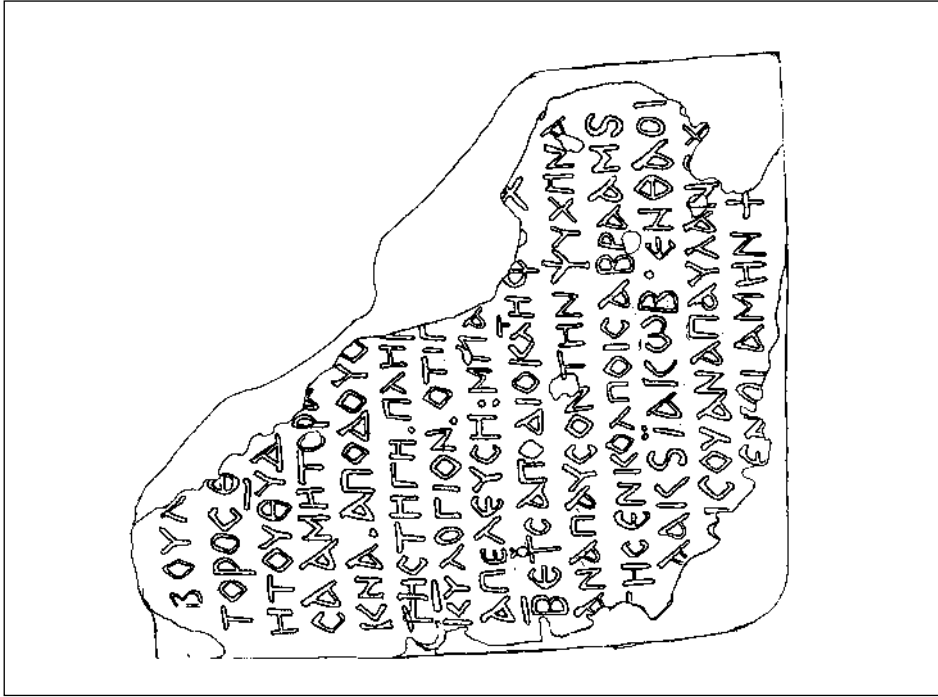


Fig. 3. Epitaph of a woman
(Photo B. Zurewski, tracing A. Lajtar)