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ARCHBISHOP GEORGIOS OF DONGOLA. SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE KINGDOM OF MAKURIA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 11TH CENTURY

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Abstract: Georgios of Dongola is the most fully documented member of the Makurite establishment of the second half of the 11th century. He was an *archistilites*, *archpresbiteros*, *archimandrites* of the monastery of the Great Anthony and bishop of the Dongolan cathedral. Archbishop Georgios (1031–1113), most probably the son of King Zacharias V, archbishop of Dongola and of the Kingdom of Makuria (1063–1113), changed the face of Makurite Christianity by popularizing religious literature in Old Nubian and by introducing the cult of dead rulers and bishops, as well as local saints. His burial crypt with a rich array of religious texts of Great Power was a special foundation, exceptional in Makuria and most probably unparalleled in the Byzantine Christian world.

Keywords: Dongola, Makuria, monastery of the Great Anthony, archbishop, *archistilites*, crypt, Great Power texts, Georgios bishop, Staurosaña, king Zacharias V

Archbishop Georgios of Dongola — I will refer to him in these terms as another Georgios was bishop of Pachoras at the same time, that is, in 1062–1097 — is the most fully documented member of the Makurite establishment of the second half of the 11th century. He also seems to have played an instrumental role in the transformation of the kingdom in his time.

A set of inscriptions from the Northwest Annex in the monastery on Kom H in Dongola, associated with the person of Georgios of Dongola, was published by Adam Łajtar (2002), and the text of his

funerary stela, written in Greek, constitutes undoubtedly the fullest biography of the man (Łajtar 2002: 163–184) [Fig. 1]. The text reports a long life: Georgios was born in 1031 and died in 1113 at the age of 82. Ordained bishop in 1063, he served for half a century; before that, probably from 1060, he was *archistilites* and archpresbyter of the Dongolan cathedral dedicated to the Holy Trinity and, briefly, archimandrite of the monastery of the Great Anthony, which is presumed to have been the monastery located on Kom H in Dongola.¹ Only one other Nubian became

¹ Following the evidence of several inscriptions, Stefan Jakobielski in his reports of the excavations on Kom H in Dongola identified the monastery as dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This identification appears to be doubtful. In the caption to

a bishop at such an early age. It was Marianos of Pachoras, son of bishop Ioannes, who received the orders when he was 36. He took office from his father, having first

been archimandrite of the monastery in Puko (Plumley 1971; Kubińska 1974: 38–40; Lajtar, van der Vliet 2010: 86–93) [Fig. 2].



Fig. 1. Stela of Georgios. Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola (Photo D. Zielińska)

Psalms 130 (129) (Lajtar 2002: 188–189; Browne 2006), Georgios was referred to as archbishop of a cathedral of the Holy Trinity and on his funerary stela (Lajtar 2002: 165) as *archistilites* of a church of the Holy Trinity and archimandrite of the monastery of Great Anthony.

In his analysis of the text of the funerary stela of Georgios of Dongola, Łajtar (2002: 171–174) pointed out a number of epithets that demonstrated striking similarities between the bishop's stela and the Greek address of a letter of King Georgios Moise to the Coptic patriarch Mark III (1166–1189). According to Łajtar, the similar epithets could be construed as evidence of Georgios' ties with the royal family. The suggestion has gained merit in the light of a discovery made in 2012 in a church belonging to

the royal complex on the Citadel (SWN, Building B.V). The object discovered was a stela of Staurosania, grandson (or granddaughter) of King Zacharias (V), dated to 1057 (Godlewski 2012; Łajtar forthcoming) [Fig. 3]. King Zacharias was certainly still alive at the time of Staurosania's death. One wonders why neither the father of the deceased Staurosania, a member of the royal family, or his or her offices were not mentioned in the text. Staurosania may have died at a young age (his/her years of life are certainly not given in the text), which could mean that he/she had not yet been invested with any significant functions. The father, a son of Zacharias or



Fig. 2. Likeness of bishop Marianos in the protection of the Virgin and Christ, mural from the Cathedral of Petros in Faras (National Museum in Warsaw) (Photo T. Żółtowska-Huszczka)

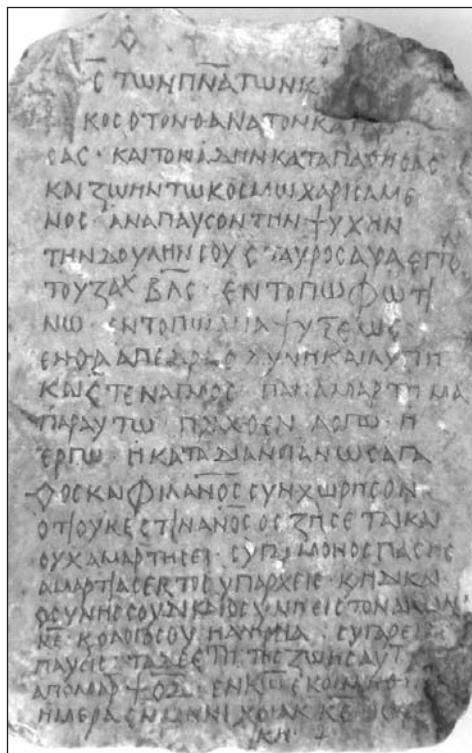


Fig. 3. Stela of Staurosania (Photo W. Godlewski)

a husband of his daughter, may not have been mentioned in the text, despite it being customary practice, for reasons perhaps deriving from royal court etiquette. He may have rebelled, rebellion being a distinct possibility at a time when the kingdom was in deep transformation, especially with regard to the royal succession. It is theoretically possible that changing the line of succession from the king's son to the son of the king's sister, which could have taken place possibly about midway in the reign of Zacharias V, that is, in the middle of the 11th century, could have caused serious conflict and even rebellion, not only within the royal family, but also within the Makurite establishment in general.

Zacharias V may have had at least two sons. Georgios of Dongola was one of them, the eldest in all likelihood, and groomed for a career in the clergy in view of the pending change of royal succession (the custom of ordaining the son of a dead king as bishop in keeping with the will of the successor, who was the son of a royal sister, was attested in Makuria a number of times in the 11th and 12th centuries). As *archistilites* of the Holy Trinity cathedral in Dongola and later as bishop, he became a spiritual leader of the Dongolan community (Łajtar 2002: 170–171). A younger son of King Zacharias, the nameless father of Staurosania, could have been a leader of the opposition protesting the changes introduced by the king. A nameless sister of Zacharias was most likely the mother of Solomon, King of Makuria after Zacharias V, becoming in consequence Mother of the King [Fig. 4]. The situation may have been spurred by a failing economy — poor harvests and starving herds, caused by cyclically lower Nile floods, similarly as in Egypt (Lane-Poole 1925: 142–143).

Help was sought from more successful crop producers, Egypt turning to Byzantium and Makuria presumably to Alodia (Arwa). Fate had it that in the first years after 1060, the terminal years of the reign of Zacharias V, the climate improved and the economy swung back to normal. This could have fired the ambitions of the king's son, perhaps even fomenting open rebellion.

The scarcity of sources permits nothing but a hypothetical interpretation of the facts from the biography of Georgios of Dongola. It can be supposed that when Zacharias V died and the negotiated changes of succession were implemented, presumably between 1060 and 1063, Georgios entered the monastery of the Great Anthony in Dongola and his anonymous brother, still heading the opposition, was imprisoned by the new king, Solomon. This must have occurred before 1063 when Georgios of Faras (1063–1097) became bishop and commissioned a portrait of the new ruler in the apse of the cathedral

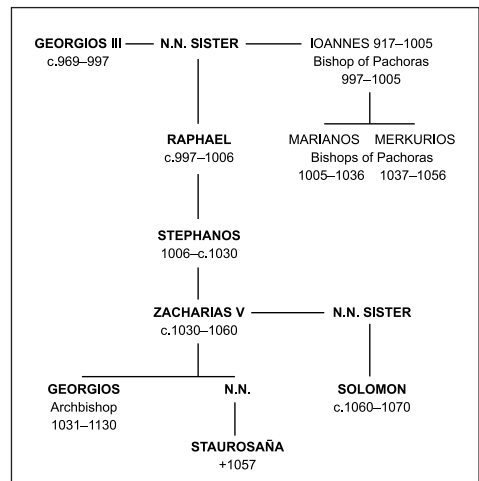


Fig. 4. Reconstructed lineage of the Kings of Makuria and Mother of Kings in the first half of the 11th century

in Pachoras (Godlewski 2008: 270–271), as well as his own portrait on the southern pier of the apse in the cathedral and a likeness of Zacharias' sister below the Nativity mural on the east wall of the northern aisle. The portrait of Georgios of Faras is accompanied by an identifying legend (Jakobielski 1972: 154–159). Georgios of Dongola referred to himself as “abba, archipresbyteros and archistylites” in a foundation inscription of the sanctuary of a commemorative church, which he had built for his father, King Zacharias V (Łajtar 2002: 185–186; Jakobielski 1997: 166, Fig. 3) — after the king's death, that is, after 1060 but before 1063 — within the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H. This had to have happened before he became archimandrite of the monastery and bishop in 1063. Georgios' rapid career resulted from a combination of factors: his importance in the Dongolan community, his special position as *archistilites* (guide) in the Makurian Church and most probably also his desire to counter the influence of the anonymous brother and rebel, soon to be royal prisoner, who may have spent the rest of his life in the monastery as a prisoner of state.

Georgios of Dongola, already as an orthodox archbishop of the (cathedral of the) Holy Trinity (Łajtar 2002: 188–189) constructed a burial crypt in the western entrance to the monastery keep (Building I identified in the Northwest Annex) [Fig. 5]. The crypt was a special foundation, exceptional in the Kingdom of Makuria and most probably unparalleled in both the Byzantine and Western Christian world. The crypt, which was 2.06 m long, 0.86 m wide and 1.10 m high, had plastered and whitewashed walls, which served a certain Ioannes as the backdrop

for a meticulously written array of religious texts of Great Power, composed of quotes from the four Gospels and texts on the death of Mary, Mother of Christ, in both Greek and Coptic, as well as magical signs and cryptographic lists of names (Łajtar, van der Vliet 2012). This unparalleled “prayer” for the salvation of a soul was further strengthened by a quote from Psalm 130(129), written in Old Nubian on the west wall of Building I, next to the entrance to the western vestibule (Browne 2006), as if personally by Georgios [Fig. 5, bottom]. This was indicated by the last line of the text written on the wall in Greek: “abba Georgios orthodox archbishop (of the Cathedral) of the Holy Trinity, let him live eternally” (Łajtar 2002: 189). This inscription shows explicitly that the crypt was built during the lifetime of Georgios, most probably much earlier than the year of his death in 1113, but after he had taken office as bishop in 1063.

Such a concentration of texts of Great Power and prayers designed to facilitate passage of the soul into the Celestial Kingdom is also surprising. There are older burials of monks, where texts of Great Power were recorded above the grave. One such burial is that of the monk Theophilos from 738 in the so-called Anchorite's Grotto in Faras, but the selection there was much more modest and contained the incipits of the four Gospels, a letter from Christ to King Abgar, a list of the Forty Martyrs from Sebaste, the names of the seven youths from Ephesus and the names of the nails of Christ (Griffith 1927). Bishop Ioannes of Pachoras (999–1005) had a representation of the Archangel Michael as *archistrategos* (presumably *Psychopompos*) painted in the rooms preceding his tomb on the

eastern side of the cathedral; the other mural was that of the Virgin and Child, represented as guardians of the bishop's soul (Michałowski 1967: 149–150, Pls 71–72; Godlewski 2008: 139–143).

The burial crypt in Dongola was prepared some years before Georgios' death, but there is no certainty that it was intended for him, even though his funerary

stele leaves no doubt that he was actually buried in it. There were two male burials in the lower layer in the crypt, distinctly separated from later burials (Godlewski, Mahler, Czaja-Szewczak 2012). One of these was surely Georgios, but who was the other individual buried with him? The skeleton was pushed somewhat toward the north wall of the crypt. It is for this person,

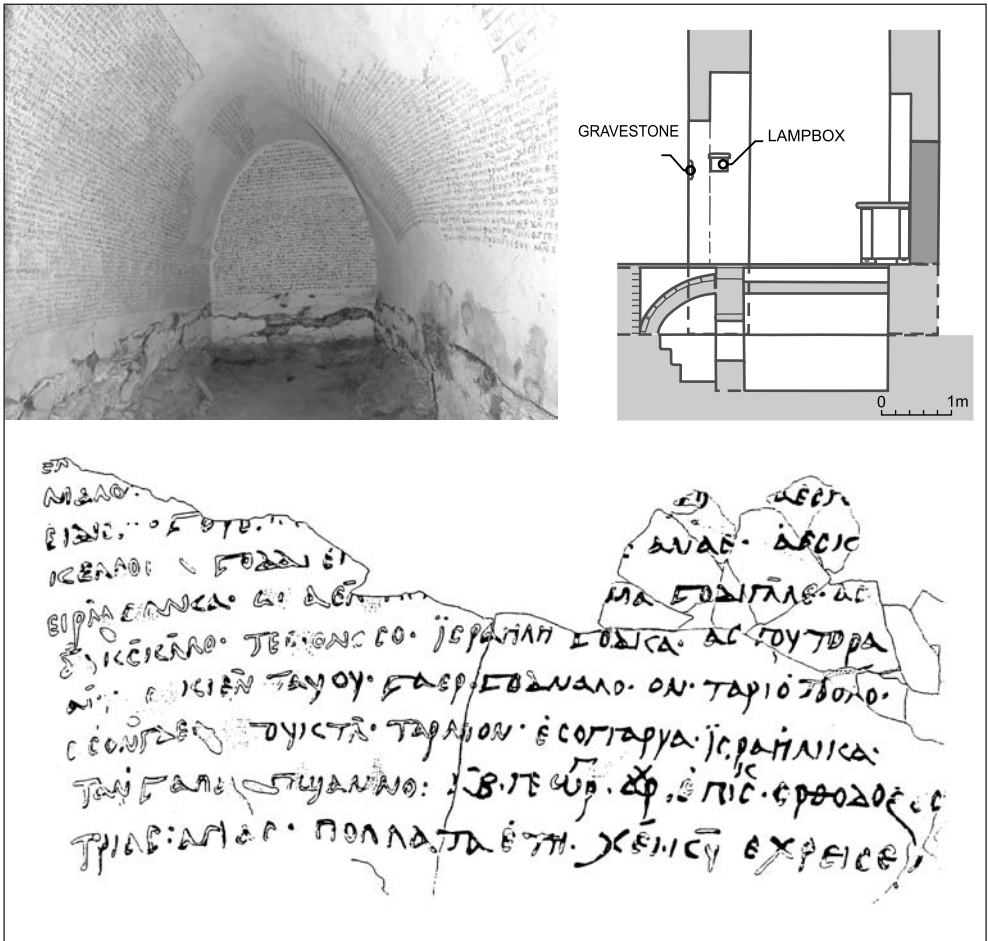


Fig. 5. Crypt of Georgios, view from the west (top left) and cross-section (top right); bottom, Psalm 130(129) as it appears over the gravestone of Georgios (Drawing W. Godlewski, S. Maślak; photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka; tracing S. Jakobielski)

whose soul may have been in great need, that the text of Psalm 130(129) was written above the entrance. One can only assume that the man must have been someone close to Georgios. Might it have been that rebellious brother, rejected by Solomon and banished to in the monastery?

After the bishop's death in 1113, his body, presumably in keeping with his will, was laid to rest in the same crypt. His funerary stele was mounted in the west wall of the keep (Building I of the Northwest Annex), below the text of Psalm 130(129), on the northern side of the entrance to the sanctuary, which was raised at this time in the chambers of Building I.5 above the crypt. Some time later, but still in the 12th century, four more men, presumably bishops, were laid to rest in the crypt (Godlewski, Mahler, Czaja-Szewczak 2012) [*Fig. 6*].

In the 1060s and 1070s, Georgios of Dongola joined the king in hosting envoys of the Coptic patriarch Christodoulos. Christodoulos had opted for spreading in Egypt an Arabic edition of the teachings of the Church and the tradition of the Alexandrian Church (HP) (Swanson 2010: 59–66), this in view of the gradual isolation of Coptic, which was becoming a language of the elite. In Makuria at this time religious texts were being distributed in Old Nubian, quite possibly with the blessing of Georgios of Dongola. The same can be said of administrative texts, in which case the king's approval would have been essential (Hägg 2010; Łajtar 2010; van der Vliet 2010). This prevented Arabic from being introduced in the Makurian Church (especially in monastic circles that were more strongly rooted in the Coptic language tradition) and blocked for several hundred years the use of Arabic

by the royal administration. Greek was the language of literary texts and a source for translations into Old Nubian. It was also used in daily practice, reflected in the numerous Greek–Old Nubian graffiti and inscriptions even in the 14th century, as indicated by the epigraphic record from the church in Banganarti (Łajtar 2003; 2004; 2005; 2008). It should be noted that Greek terminology in administration, titles and honorary epithets (Hägg 1990) does not find counterparts in Old Nubian (Browne 1991), which suggests that the Old Nubian terminology had already become entrenched and was in common use, side by side, with the Greek version modeled on Byzantine tradition. It is not clear when Old Nubian terminology was developed and whether it happened in the second half of the 11th century, at the same time that Nubianizing regalia in the form of a horned crown and bucrania in front were adopted (Godlewski 2008: 271–274) [*Fig. 7*]. In all likelihood, the new symbols of authority (crown, scepter etc.) and the official Old Nubian terminology were developed in the south, in the kingdom of Arwa, and were transferred to Makuria following the dynastic union of the two kingdoms, although the preserved records show a continuing devotion to Byzantine tradition.

Georgios was archbishop of the Makurite Church in the reigns of King Solomon (about 1063–1071), King Georgios (1071–1089) and King Basilios (1089–1133). Solomon's relatively short rule and his abdication before 1072 may have been due to another wave of hunger caused by a low Nile, a fact well documented in Egypt. The resistance of Dongolan elites and remembrance of events following the death of Zacharias V must have resulted

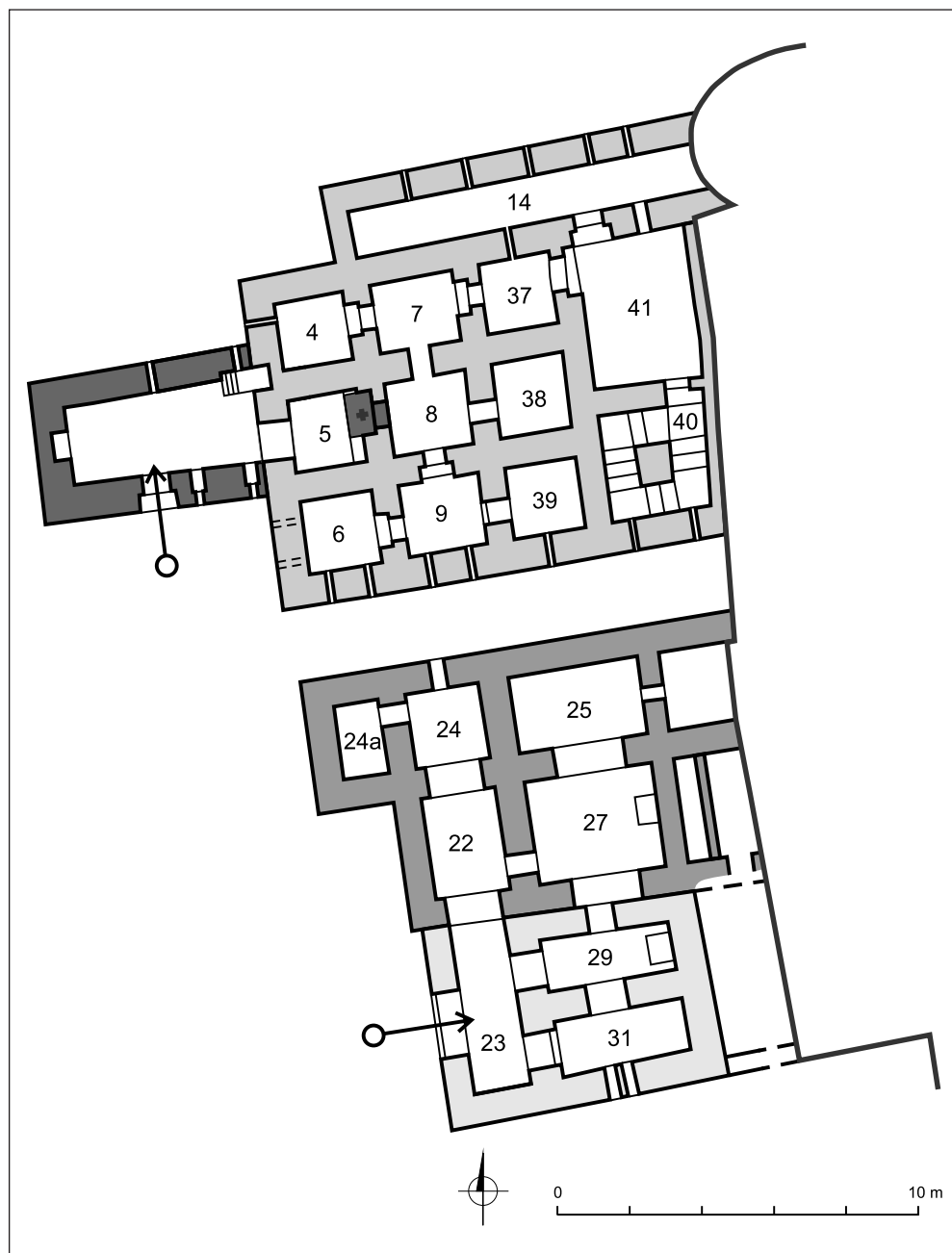


Fig. 6. Commemorative complex of the bishops of Dongola in the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H (Plan and reconstruction W. Godlewski, M. Puszkarski)

in Solomon being sent to the Monastery of Onophrios (Ghazali?), from where he was abducted to Egypt a few years later, most probably after 1076, after the south of Egypt had been subjugated by the vizier Badr al-Gamali. It was at the vizier's court in Kahira (Cairo) that King Solomon passed away.

As head of the Makurite Church in 1063–1113 archbishop Georgios of Dongola exerted considerable influence on the organization of spiritual life in the kingdom. Nubization is attested by the spread of Old Nubian and its use as a language for religious texts and the official language of the royal administration. The change of royal regalia was a departure from Byzantine tradition,

which was cultivated sporadically only by the Mothers of Kings, this being attested by murals from the cathedral of Petros in Pachoras (Faras) and from the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola (Godlewski 2008: 278–280). The changes are of a much broader nature, which the wall paintings best exemplify. Two new foundations from the second half of the 11th century are an excellent example: the commemorative church of Georgios in the Northwest Annex of the monastery in Dongola and the Upper Church at Banganarti. The two buildings were founded by Bishop Georgios, or at least by his permission, in close association with the royal court in the case of the Banganarti church. Georgios' role in these

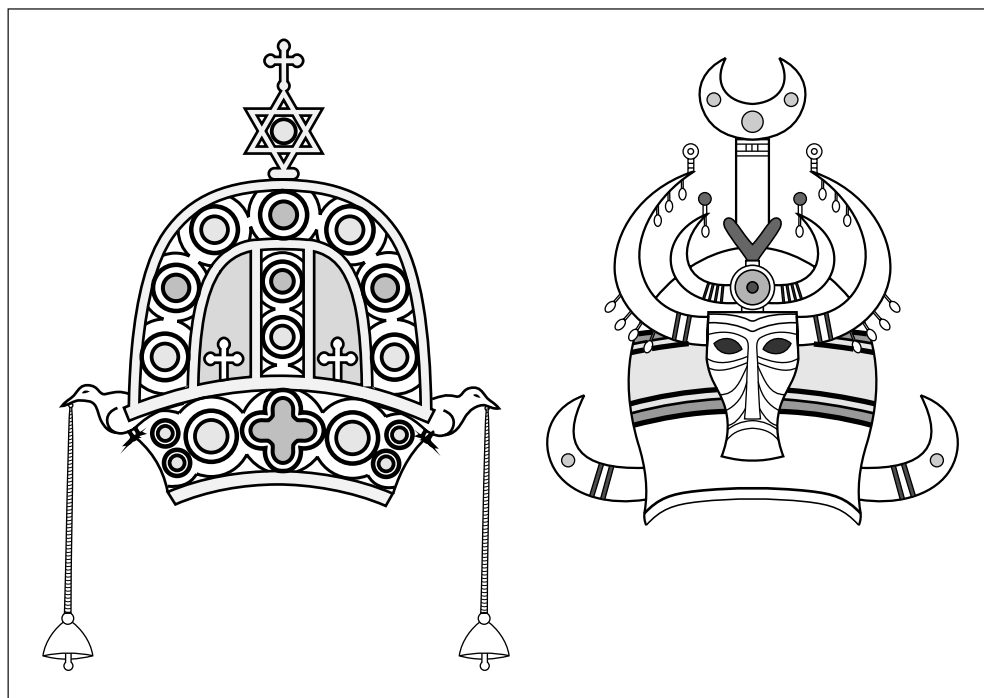


Fig. 7. Makurian regalia: Byzantine crown (left) and Nubianizing crown (Drawing W. Godlewski, M. Puzkarski)

foundations, as a member of the royal family and at the same time *archistylites* and archbishop, is irrefutable. It was he presumably who personally influenced the creation of an image of an idolized ruler of Makuria and introduced an official cult of dead rulers. The first image of this kind, representing Zacharias V, appeared in Georgios' commemorative church and Georgios' name appeared in the foundation inscription in the sanctuary, although he was not even archbishop at the time. The two-register composition, divided by the foundation inscription, represented a bust of Christ in blessing in the upper part and a huge archangel Michael with small figures of the apostles in two groups on either side, set under his spread wings, in the lower part. The lamentably preserved figure in front of the archangel represented the ruler under the archangel's protection (Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Pls XXVI–XXVIII). The identification of this representation as Zacharias V has been suggested, based on the surviving foundation inscription of the king's son, Georgios.

A more developed apse composition of the same type was painted in the church at Banganarti, which was built most probably in the reign of King Solomon's successor Georgios, in the last quarter of the 11th century, as a commemorative church for dead rulers. It seems to have been a royal foundation executed in conjunction with Bishop Georgios. In a few of the surviving compositions, the archangel *psychopompos* (Michael presumably) joined forces with a college of apostles to raise the dead ruler. The upper parts of these compositions have not been preserved and there are no identifying inscriptions, either of the rulers or of the other

figures (Żurawski 2002; 2004). Starting from the second half of the 11th century, the dead ruler cult became an integral part of Makurite Church liturgy and remained so for several centuries. A developed documentation of this process stands to view in the rebuilt apses of the church in Banganarti. An official representation program of the kings of Makuria and the Mothers of Kings continued to function in the churches and cathedrals of Makuria, as well as the Throne Hall in Dongola. Royal representations from the 12th and 13th century have been preserved in the Cathedral of Petros in Pachoras (Faras). One of the last representations of a king of Makuria, painted in the sanctuary of the cathedral in Pachoras, is dated to the 13th century (Michałowski 1974: 271–273). In late representations of the rulers of Makuria in the Faras Cathedral and the Rivergate Church, but also the Throne Hall in Dongola and the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H, the kings were painted frequently under the protection of the Holy Trinity depicted as a triple figure of Christ (Griffith 1927; Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 229–233).

In the 11th and early 12th century Bishop Georgios was responsible for an even broader program of Nubization of the Makurian church. The beginnings of this program can be observed in the commemorative church in the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H. Examples of individual interventions by Christ in the life of the Makurite community can be observed in compositions like the Healing of a Blind Man, the protagonist here depicted as a Nubian with dark skin (Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Pl. XXXVII; Jakobielski 2008: Fig. 16). The sanctuary of the first epigraphically attested

saint of Makuria, Anna,² was constructed at the same time on the western side of the monastery church. The grave of the saint became the reason for transforming the “cell”, where Anna spent the last years of his life, into a small sanctuary, the walls of which were covered with numerous

graffiti left by visitors to the saint’s tomb (Jakobielski 1993; Łajtar forthcoming) [Fig. 8].

One of the most original religious buildings to be constructed in Makuria, the Upper Church in Banganarti (Żurawski 2004; 2008: 314–320), which is practically

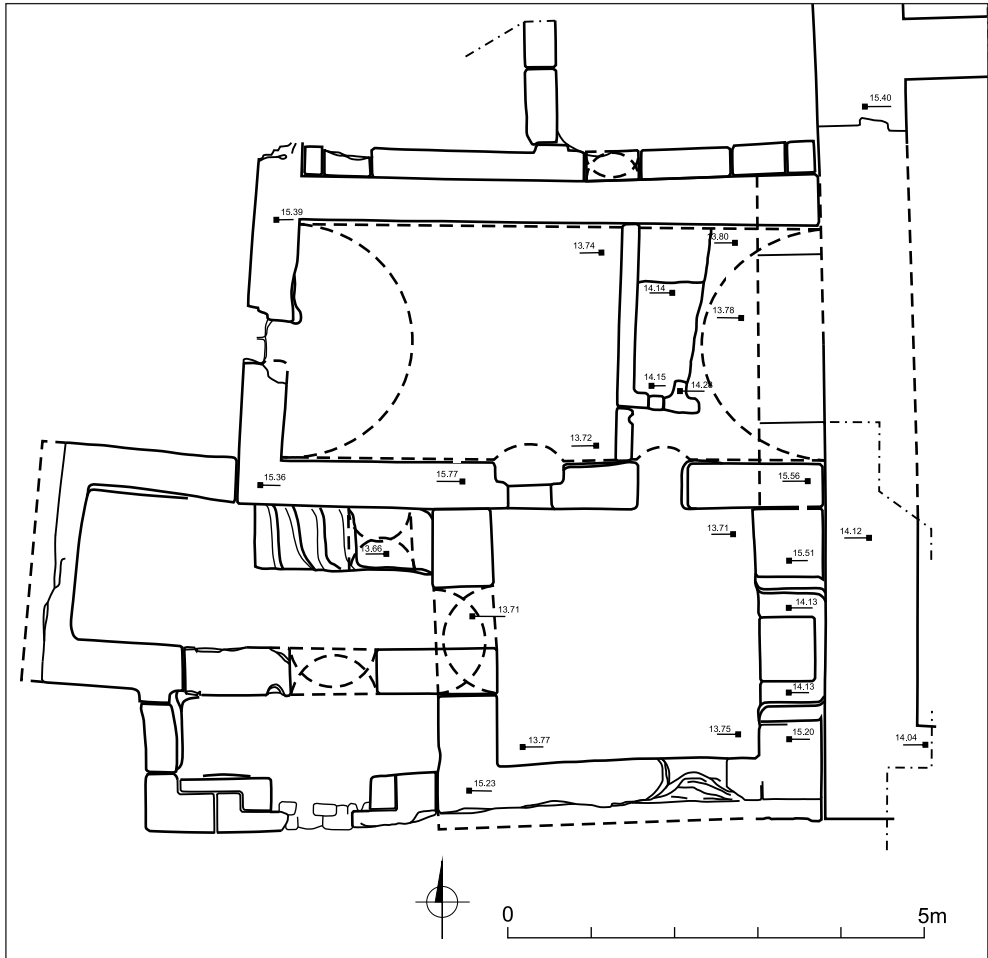


Fig. 8. Commemorative chapel of Makurian saint Anna (Plan J. Dobrowolski, updated S. Maślak [2012])

² The saint Anna is mentioned in four inscriptions, but only in one, which also gives the date of his feast, his name is followed by two letters, BY; it is still not clear what this could stand for.

unparalleled in either local or Byzantine architecture, was also built in the episcopate of Georgios of Dongola. Its plan follows that of a domed central church, furnished with multiple apses at the eastern end and numerous annexes on the other three sides, all opening onto the central naos. The wide expanses of the facades were softened by external porticoes. It is one of the finest architectural foundations of the 11th century and, in view of the cult of Makurian rulers practiced inside it, it must have been considered one of the symbols of the kingdom, much like the Cruciform Church in Dongola. It cannot be excluded that the multi-dome rebuilding of the cathedral in Dongola was also the work of Bishop Georgios, but the dating of this rebuilding requires more detailed consideration. The original excavation report had suggested a date in the early 11th century (Gartkiewicz 1990: 285–299), countered by a much earlier date in the 9th century proposed in broader studies of Dongolan church architecture (Godlewski 2006b: 281–282). In the light of current knowledge on the subject, this early dating seems less justified.

The last important building project associated with Georgios, rather than actually executed by him, was the commemorative complex of the Dongolan bishops, which was constructed already after his death in 1113, in the western part of the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola (Jakobielski 2001: 140–168). It developed around three crypts and the northwestern part of Building I (Godlewski, Mahler, Czaja-Szewczak 2012). The construction of this complex was undoubtedly part of the archbishop's well considered program. The cult of dead rulers and bishops fits the developed

religiousness of Makurite society in the 11th century.

A Mother of the King appears to have been the founder of this complex; her portrait is found in the western part of a chapel, added on the south side of Building I, dedicated to the Archangel Michael crowned by the Holy Trinity (Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Pl. XLIII), similarly as an anonymous Mother of the King shown holding a traditional crown in her hands, also protected by the Holy Trinity (Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Pl. L). It should be noted that Stefan Jakobielski and Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka have consistently recognized this representa-



Fig. 9. *Mother of the King, mural from the Northwest Annex of the monastery on kom H in Dongola (Photo W. Godlewski)*

tion as a likeness of a Nubian king (most recently Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 229–233). The official program of the chapel was supplemented by a representation of an unidentified bishop, painted on the north wall (Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Pl. XLVIII).

The chapel is an integral part of the rebuilt commemorative complex of Dongolan bishops and was constructed after Georgios' death in 1113. It is possible that the founder was a sister of King Basilios and mother of King Georgios V who took the throne in 1133. Thus her portrait, assuming the identification is correct,

would have been painted in the 1130s [Fig. 9].

Archbishop Georgios, who was most probably the son of King Zacharias V, may have been prevented from succeeding to the throne because of a change in the system of royal succession, but as head of the Makurite Church he accomplished an exceptional feat. He changed the face of Makurite Christianity by popularizing religious literature in Old Nubian and by introducing the cult of dead rulers and bishops, as well as local saints, the latter well documented by the case of Anna of Dongola.

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