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A Dance for a Princes : The Legends on a Painting in Room 5 of the Southwest Annex of the Monastery on Kom H in Dongola

2017

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A DANCE FOR A PRINCESS:
THE LEGENDS ON A PAINTING IN ROOM 5
OF THE SOUTHWEST ANNEX
OF THE MONASTERY ON KOM H IN DONGOLA

1. THE PAINTING

IN HER MONOGRAPH ON THE WALL PAINTINGS in the Monastery excavated on Kom H in Dongola, Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka describes a dancing scene on the northern wall of room 5 in the Southwest Annex (inv. no. P 30/SW5N),[1] which is of particular interest owing to the presence of

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several legends written in Old Nubian, which heretofore have remained untranslated.

The Annex to the Monastery was excavated by a mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archeology of the University of Warsaw directed by Stefan Jakobielski. Large-scale excavations of the Southwest Annex started in 1995, when two murals were discovered.[2] The wall paintings in room 5 were discovered during the excavations in 2004.[3]

The northern wall in room 5 hosts several paintings: a Nativity Cycle partially extending into the corner with the eastern wall (cat. no. 107); a Standing Virgin with Child (cat. no. 108); the dance scene (cat. no. 109); and the Archangel Michael protecting a Nubian bishop (cat. no. 110). The first three paintings all date from the same period.[4] The Standing Virgin with Child and the dance scene are painted by the same painter, and Martens-Czarneska suggests that they are related.[5] The same painter also painted the other Virgin Mary's and a painting of the Archangel Raphael fighting a demon spirit in the form of a rhinoceros. The same painter, or a scribe collaborating with him on the works, also wrote the legends accompanying these paintings.[6]

Martens-Czarneska describes the painting in question (fig. 1) as follows:

> The composition comprises three rows of male figures, forming two groups, each clad in a different attire. They could still represent the same ethnic group as the all have the same skin tone. The men of one group wear masks densely studded with cowry shells and furnished with open-

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[2] B. Żurawski, 'Old Dongola. Kom H, southwestern unit', *Polish Archeology in the Mediterranean* 8: *Reports 1996* (1997), pp. 169–178.

[3] Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, 'Wall paintings discovered in Dongola in the 2004 season', *Polish Archeology in the Mediterranean* 16 (2005), pp. 273–284.

[4] Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), p. 81.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 233.

[6] A. Łajtar, 'Wall inscriptions in the Southwest Annex to the monastery on Kom H at Dongola: Report on the work in the 2013 season', *Polish Archeology in the Mediterranean* 24/1 (2015), p. 347. See also Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, 'Stylistic homogeneity of groups of paintings in the monastery in Old Dongola', *Gdańsk Archaeological Museum African Reports* 3 (2005), pp. 159–173.

Fig. 1. The dancing scene on the north wall of room 5
in the Southwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola
(photo and enhancement D. Zielińska; courtesy PCMA Archive)

ings for eyes and mouth. The masks are reminiscent of an animal's head with long muzzles and large ears. The men wear loincloths with long tails attached to them. Their feet and legs are bare. The men of the other group are clad in sleeveless *chitonia*, long salwars, skirts and shawls, with sash-decorated turbans on their heads.[7]

According to Martens-Czarnecka, the painting shows 'two folk traditions current in Christian Nubia',[8] the first type of figure with the cowry masks representing a sub-Saharan tradition, whereas those with turbans can be related to a part of Africa dominated by Arab traditions. She suggests that the proximity of the icon of the Standing Virgin Mary with Child, coupled with the stylistic homogeneity between the two paintings, strongly indicates a relation between the two. The nature of this relation, however, remains obscure. As I will show below, a translation of the legends on the painting provides convincing evidence that the paintings are indeed related, and also reveals the nature of this relation.

2. THE LEGENDS

The legends, catalogued as DBMNT 1364, are written in black ink, in the so-called Nubian majuscule commonly used for Old Nubian inscriptions from the tenth century onward.[9] The positioning of the inscriptions strongly suggests that these are lines spoken or chanted by the different dancers depicted in the scene.[10] In the case of inscriptions **A**, **B**, **E**, **F**, **G**, and **H**, the texts clearly starts close to the mouth.

The orientation of the dancers suggests a reading direction that starts in the upper right corner, following an 'S' shape to the lower left corner. The rightmost dancer on the middle row and the rightmost dancer on the

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[7] MARTENS-CZARNECKA, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), p. 233.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 236.

[9] Anne BOUD'HORS, 'L'onciale penchée en copte et sa survie jusqu'au xve siècle en Haute-Egypte', [in:] F. DÉROCHE & F. RICHARD (eds.), *Scribes et manuscrits du Moyen-Orient,* Paris 1997, pp. 118–133, has made the plausible claim that this script has its origins in the White Monastery in Sohag.

[10] ŁAJTAR, 'Wall inscriptions' (cit. n. 6), p. 348.

lower row are clearly talking to each other (**F** and **G**) and the vague presence of legend **C** suggests that there may be similar communication between the leftmost dancers on the upper and middle row. Furthermore, the final statement **I** appears to contain two affirmative verb forms, which would mark the conclusion of the sequence of phrases. Legend **J** is a description of the scene, which is unfortunately only partially, and that with difficulty, readable.

The transcriptions below are based on a photograph and a digitally enhanced image of the painting provided by Dobrochna Zielińska, a tracing published by Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka,[11] a transcript based on autoptic examination by Adam Łajtar, and a partial infrared photograph made by Maciej Wyżgoł.

A. One line to the left of the head of the third dancer in the upper row, written upward slightly bending toward the right. The first alpha is written on the left side of his stick, the rest of the word on its right.

ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲟⲩ̄ⲁ̄

ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲟⲩ̄ⲁ̄ appears to be an exclamation or an onomatopeia.

B. One line to the left of the head of the second dancer in the upper row, written upward slightly bending toward the right.

ⲕⲟⲕⲛⲁ ⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗ

The bearer of purity.

ⲕⲟⲕⲛⲁ from ⲕⲟⲕ, 'to purify, cleanse' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 96), here used nominally (usually ⲕⲟⲕⲕⲁⲛⲉ, 'purification' or 'purity'), with genitive -ⲛⲁ.

ⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗ from ⲁⲣⲁⲅ, 'to bear, to be pregnant' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 18), with participial ending -ⲉⲗ.

[11] Martens-Czarnecka, 'Wall paintings' (cit. n. 3), fig. 7.

C. At least five lines to the left of the first dancer in the middle row, unreadable on the photograph and not decipherable from the tracing.

D. Five lines starting to the left of the left leg of the second dancer in the upper row, continuing to the right of the left arm of the first dancer in the middle row and then seven lines between the second and third dancers in the middle row.

    † ογρογⲁ̣
    [ⲉⲓ]ⲗⲗⲟ
    ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲣⲁ ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲁ
4   ⲥⲁ· ⲕⲉⲗⲁ ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲟ·
    ⲧⲁⲗ
    ⲗⲁ ⲅⲟ̣ⲛ̣
    ⲛ̣ⲁⲥⲁ
8   ⲁⲅⲁ̄ ⲟⲩ
    ⲉⲗ [ⲟ]ⲩ̣
    ⲟⲗ
    ⲗⲉ
12 ⲅⲟⲛ

(He is) the king. You are the queen sister for the prince. Only (?) you are the queen sister for him, making (becoming?) one, two, queen mother.

1. ογρογⲁ̣: from ογρογ, 'king' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 140), with predicative marker -ⲁ marking the nominal predicate. Usage as vocative seems unlikely, because this would make ογρογⲁ̣ the referent of [ⲉⲓ]ⲗⲗⲟ, 'you', from line 2.

2. [ⲉⲓ]ⲗⲗⲟ: from the second person singular personal pronoun ⲉⲓⲣ, with the focus marker -ⲗⲟ. Reconstruction based on ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲟ in line 4.

3. ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲣⲁ: from the previously unattested noun ⲡⲟⲩⲣ, 'prince', with the progressively assimilated dative -ⲣⲁ < -ⲗⲁ, cf. ⲧⲁⲗⲗⲁ in lines 5–6. The word is related to the Meroitic *pqr* /pakwara/, 'prince'. The same root is also found in the toponym ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲅⲟⲩⲛⲁⲓ from the inscription of a daecon Philo from Tamit, with the plural marker -ⲅⲟⲩ and the genitive -ⲛ (S. Donadoni, 'Le iscrizioni', [in:] *Tamit (1964). Missione archeologica in Egitto dell'Universita di Roma*, Rome 1967, p. 67, no. 13 [DBMNT 451]). See V. W. J. van Gerven Oei & A. Tsakos, 'The etymology of the toponym

«Pourgoundi»', *Dotawo* 4 (2017), pp. 269–274. For the loss of the Meroitic *q* and compensatory rounding of the surrounding vowels, cf. the Meroitic *qore*, 'sovereign', with the Old Nubian ⲟⲩⲣⲟⲩ, 'king' (C. Rilly, *Le méroïtique et sa famille linguistique* [= *Afrique et language* 14], Leuven 2010, p. 136).

3–4. ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲁ|ⲥⲁ: a compound word analogous to ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲉⲛ 'queen mother' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 203), with ⲅⲟⲛⲛ < ⲅⲟⲇ-ⲛ, 'lord-GEN' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 201) and ⲁⲥ, 'daughter' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 20), with the predicative -ⲁ marking the nominal predicate. A meaning of 'princess' or 'queen sister' seems very likely (see the discussion below).

4. ⲕⲉⲗⲁ: perhaps a form of ⲕⲉⲗ, 'limit' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 87), with the predicative -ⲁ. Its positioning before ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲟ is curious, maybe suggesting the meaning 'only'.

ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲟ: from the second person singular personal pronoun ⲉⲓⲣ, with the focus marker -ⲗⲟ.

5–6. ⲧⲁⲗ|ⲗⲁ: from the third person singular personal pronoun ⲧⲁⲗ, with the dative -ⲗⲁ.

8. ⲁⲅⲁ̄: from ⲁⲩ, 'to do' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 13), with the predicative -ⲁ.

8–9. ⲟⲩⲉⲗ, 'one' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 132).

9–11. [ⲟ]ⲅⲟⲗⲗⲉ: from ⲟⲅⲟ, 'two' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 138), with the emphatic (?) suffix -ⲗ-ⲗⲉ; cf. ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ in **F**, l. 1.

12. ⲅⲟⲛ: abbreviated form of ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲉⲛ, 'queen mother'.

E. Three lines starting underneath the rope connecting the two shakers of the third dancer in the middle row, and continuing above the head of the fourth dancer.

> ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓ ⲟ̃ⲟⲩⲛ̄ⲧⲛ̄ ⲕⲟⲩⲥⲥⲓⲇⲉⲣⲁ[- - -]
> ⲙⲁ[ ]ⲉ̄ⲁⲓ̈ⲁⲅⲟⲛ· ⲛⲉ[- - -]
> ⲛⲟ . .

Mother Mary, loosener of labour, …

1. ⲉⲛⲟ: from ⲉⲛ, 'mother' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 72), with the vocative suffix -ⲟ; also attested in *The Miracle of Menas*, p. 8, l. 16: ⲡⲁⲡⲟ, 'father' (El-Shafie el-Guuzuli *&* V. W. J. van Gerven Oei, *The Miracle of Saint Mina*, The Hague – Tirana 2012 [ⅮⲂⲘⲚⲦ 713], p. 35). For the sequence ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓ, cf. an Old Nubian invocation of Mary from the Faras cathedral: ⲉⲛⲁ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ̄ (F. Altheim *&* Ruth Stiehl, *Christentum am Roten Meer* I, Berlin – New York 1971, p. 505 [ⅮⲂⲘⲚⲦ 1861], l. 1).

ⲙⲁⲣⲓ, 'Mary'.

ϭⲟⲩⲛ̄ⲧⲛ̄: from ϭⲟⲩⲛⲧ, 'labour (of childbirth)' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 193), with the genitive -ⲛ̄.

ⲕⲟⲩⲥⲥⲓⲇⲉⲣⲁ: noun deriving from ⲕⲟⲩⲥⲥ, ⲕ̄ⲥ̄(ⲥ) 'to loosen' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 102), with the nominalizer -ⲇⲉⲣ and the predicative -ⲁ, here used to indicate the vocative.

2. ⲙⲁ[ ]ⲉ̄ⲁⲓ̈ⲁⲅⲟⲛ: word spacing is unclear. ⲁⲅⲟⲛ could be a first preterite of the second/third person singular form of ⲁⲅ, 'to do': 'he/she did,' but this leaves ⲙⲁ[ ]ⲉ̄ⲁⲓ̈ unanalyzable. ⲁⲓ̈ is the nominative of the first person singular personal pronoun, which makes no sense if the following is the second/third person singular verb. An exclamation seems implausible, because of both the phonological complexity of the phrase and the fact that this phrase appears to be uttered by an unmasked dancer (see the discussion below).

F. Three lines starting near the mouth of the fourth dancer on the middle row and continuing downward.

> ⲙⲓⲯⲯⲁ ⲁ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲁ ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ ⲙⲓⲯ ⲁ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲁ·
> ⲕ̄ⲥ̄ⲥⲉⲛ ⲁⲥⲁ· ⲉ̄ⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ·
> ⲕ̄ⲛ̄ ⲁⲥⲁ : −

What are you, Mother Mary, what are you? – The daughter of the Church.
Mother Mary – The daughter of the Church.

1. ⲙⲓⲯⲯⲁ: variant of the question word ⲙⲛ̄ (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 117), with the predicative -ⲁ, 'what?'. This particular spelling is quite rare, only attested elsewhere in a fragment from the Gospel of Mark found in Qasr Ibrim, Browne, *Literary Texts*, pp. 66–67 (DBMNT 1011), i, ll. 13 and 22: ⲙⲯ̄.

ⲁ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲁ: from ⲁⲕ, 'to sit, remain' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 8). A usage as copula seems logical considering the rest of the context, which is straightforward in its meaning. The ending -ⲟⲩⲁ may appear less clear, but has a parallel in documentary texts, where the initial *rho* of the present tense ending -ⲣⲁ has softened to a glide. For example, *P. Qasr Ibrim* IV 91 (DBMNT 2833), l. 1: ⲧⲓⲣⲓϫⲓ, 'I give'. The subject is an implied subject 'you,' that is Mother Mary.

ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ: from ⲙⲁⲣⲓ, 'Mary', with the emphatic suffix -ⲗⲉ (G. M. Browne, *Old Nubian Grammar* [= *Languages of the World/Materials* 330], Munich 2002, p. 71).

ⲙⲓⲯ: a shortened form of ⲙⲓⲯⲯⲁ, with the deletion of the final predicative marker before ⲁ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲁ, perhaps for metrical reasons.

2. ⲕⲥ̄ⲥⲉⲛ: from ⲕⲥ̄ⲥⲉ, 'church' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 93), with the genitive -ⲛ.

ⲁ̣ⲥⲁ: from ⲁⲥ, 'daughter', with the predicative -ⲁ marking it as a nominal predicate. ⲕⲥ̄ⲥⲉⲛ ⲁ̣ⲥⲁ is the answer to the question ⲙⲓ̈ⲯ̈ⲯⲁ ⲁ̄ⲕⲟ̈ⲩⲁ from line 1.

3. ⲕ̄ⲛ: cf. ⲕⲥ̄ⲥⲉⲛ in line 2. For the spelling with a single *sigma*, cf. ⲕⲥ̄ⲉ̄ⲛⲓⲅⲟⲩⲛⲁ found in the so-called 'Stauros-Text', p. 25, ll. 4–5 (Browne, *Literary Texts*, pp. 22–29 [ᴅʙᴍɴᴛ 1391]).

G. Three lines written upward above the head of the fourth dancer on the bottom row.

> † ⲁⲣⲁⲕⲉ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ
> ⲕⲁ· ⲁ̄ⲣ̣ⲁ̣ⲅ[ⲁ]
> ⲧⲣⲉ

I bear, I make Mary bear.

1. ⲁⲣⲁⲕⲉ: from ⲁⲣⲁⲕ, 'to bear, to be pregnant,' with the first person singular clitic -ⲓ and the predicative marker -ⲁ > -ⲉ; cf. ⲧⲣⲉ in line 3.

1–2. ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ|ⲕⲁ: 'Mary,' with the accusative -ⲕⲁ. This is the object of ⲁ̄ⲣ̣ⲁ̣ⲅ[ⲁ] ⲧⲣⲉ in lines 2–3.

2. ⲁ̄ⲣ̣ⲁ̣ⲅ[ⲁ]: from ⲁⲣⲁⲕ, with the predicative -ⲁ; cf. ⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗ in **B**, l. 1.

3. ⲧⲣⲉ: from ⲧⲣ̄, 'to give' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 93), with the first person singular clitic -ⲓ and the predicative marker -ⲁ > -ⲉ, here used as an applicative withe preceding ⲁ̄ⲣ̣ⲁ̣ⲅ[ⲁ]. It is unclear who the 'I' is referring to (see the discussion below).

H. Two brief lines underneath the sticks of the second dancer on the bottom row.

> ⲟ̣ⲩ̣ⲟ̣ⲩ
> ⲟ[ⲩ]ⲟⲩ

ⲟ̣ⲩ̣ⲟ̣ⲩ ⲟ[ⲩ]ⲟⲩ appears to be an exclamation or an onomatopeia, cf. ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲟ̈ⲩⲁ̄ in **A**, l. 1.

I. At least five lines starting to the right of the head of the first dancer on the bottom row. Their meaning is not fully clear.

ⲁⲅⲓⲕⲕⲁ [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄ⲙⲁ
ⲙ[ⲁⲣⲓ]ⲁ̄· ⳝⲉⲣⲕ̄
. [2–3] . ⳟⲓ
4   [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄
ⲙ̣[ⲁ]

Mary takes (her?) seat. ... she takes.

1. ⲁⲅⲓⲕⲕⲁ: perhaps from ⲁ̄ⲅⲓⲇ, 'seat' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 8), with the accusative -ⲕⲁ. This is the object of [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄ⲙⲁ.

1. [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄ⲙⲁ: from ⲉⲗ, 'to find, obtain, take' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 56), with the affirmative -ⲙ̄, assimilated second/third person singular subject clitic -ⲛ, and predicative -ⲁ. We expect this type of verb form to come earlier in the sentence than a regular finite verb, which makes ⲙ[ⲁⲣⲓ]ⲁ̄ from line 2 a plausible subject of this verb.

2. ⲙ[ⲁⲣⲓ]ⲁ̄, 'Mary'.

2. ⳝⲉⲣⲕ̄: perhaps from ⳝⲉⲣ, 'to sleep' (Browne, *Dictionary*, p. 199).

4–5. [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄|ⲙ[ⲁ]: reconstructed on the basis of [ⲉ]ⲗⲙ̄ⲙⲁ from line 1.

J. Four lines of text written below the third and fourth dancers on the bottom. The text is hardly readable on the photograph and its interpretation is difficult. It appears to contain a description of the whole dancing scene.

[- - -]
ⲉ . ⲁ𝕚ⲕ̣[- - -]
ⲛⳟ . . ⲉ̣ⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗ[ⲉ] . . ⳝⲓ̣ⲕⲟⲛ[- - -]
4   [- - -]

2. ⲁ𝕚ⲕ̣: the first person singular personal pronoun with the accusative -ⲕ(ⲁ).

3. ⲉ̣ⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗ[ⲉ]: reconstructed based on similar phrases in **F**, ll. 1 and 2.

3. COMMENTARY

3.1. *Linguistic and palaeographical observations*

Anne Boud'hors already observed that the slanted uncial used in Coptic manuscripts had remained 'remarkably stable' over several centuries. The same observation can be made as regards the Old Nubian texts, nearly all of which are written in the same style.[12] This makes any palaeographic evaluation of the legends on the painting difficult. Martens-Czarneska suggests that the painting was painted during the second period of decoration of the monastery, between the second half of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,[13] which is not incompatible with the writing.

The language used in the legends, however, shows several peculiarities as regards vocabulary that are difficult to interpret. First, there are three words which are rare: ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕ, 'to bear', ⲟ̄ⲟⲩⲛⲧ, 'labour (of childbirth)', and ⲁ̄ⲕⲓⲇ, 'seat', all of which are only attested once elsewhere, in the Serra East codex[14] (see below). Also the spelling ⲙ̄ⲯ̄ for the question word ⲙ̄ⲛ̄ is very rare, only appearing once elsewhere, in a Gospel fragment found in Qasr Ibrim. Unfortunately, we are unable to draw any decisive conclusion from these facts as regards to the relative age of the writing, or the provenance of its author. A final clue may be the form ⲁ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲁ found in **F**, l. 1. 'Literary' Old Nubian would have written the form *ⲁⲕⲓⲣⲁ, so the weakening of the rhotic to a glide could indicate the relative lateness of the text. Unfortunately, none of the other documents containing this variant have been dated either, and it may well be this is an older form that was later replaced rather than an invention.

Finally, we have been able to determine the meaning of two Old Nubian words that have not been previously attested: ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲁⲥ, 'queen sister', on analogy with ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲉⲛ, 'queen mother'; and ⲡⲟⲩⲣ, 'prince', on the basis of the Meroitic word with the same meaning, *pqr*.

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[12] Boud'hors, 'L'onciale penchée en copte' (cit. n. 9), p. 128.

[13] Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), p. 38.

[14] Browne, *Literary Texts*, pp. 28–45 (dbmnt 1385).

3.2. *The role of the Virgin Mary*

As to the general interpretation of the scene, Martens-Czarneska already suggested that the dancing scene is related to the depiction on its right side, representing the standing Virgin Mary with Child.[15] Even though not all of the inscriptions are equally readable or comprehensible, they appear to substantiate this suggestion. Our question is rather about the precise nature of their relation.

The Greek legend above the icon is written in the same hand as the inscriptions on the painting, and identifies the depiction as ϩ ⲁⲅⲓⲁ ⲙ[ⲁⲣ]ⲓⲁ ⲡⲁⲣ`ⲑ´ ⲙ̄ⲏⲣ ⲧⲟⲩ ⲭⲩ, 'The Holy Mary Virgin Mother of Christ'.[16] Mother Mary is in fact mentioned several times in the inscriptions: **E**, l. 1: ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓ; **F**, l. 1: ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ; **F**, l. 2: ⲉ̄ⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗⲉ; and **J**, l. 3: ⲉⲛⲟ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲗ[ⲉ].[17] These invocations resemble her epithet as found twice in the cathedral in Faras, under a wall painting of the King's Mother (also called Queen Mother) and the seated Virgin Mary with Christ:[18] ⲉ̄ⲛⲁ̄ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ` ⲡⲁⲣⲑⲉⲛⲟⲥⲗ, 'Mother Mary the Virgin',[19] and ⲁⲯⲟ̄ⲛ ⲉⲛⲁ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ̄, 'Mary Mother of the Saviour.'[20]

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[15] MARTENS-CZARNECKA, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), p. 236.

[16] The inscription remains unpublished; my reading from the photo and drawing in MARTENS-CZARNECKA, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), fig. 81.

[17] ⲉⲛⲟ is attested as an onomastic element or title in several Nubian names. Perhaps in all these cases a translation of 'mother' should be proposed: *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 32 (DBMNT 590), l. 18: ⲉⲛⲟⲧⲁⲛⲛⲗ̄ⲗⲟ; *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 36 (DBMNT 584), l. 25: ⲉ̄ⲛⲟⲙⲉⲁⲇⲟⲩⲁⲁⲗ; *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 40 (DBMNT 588), l. 20: ⲉ̄ⲛⲟⲉⲓⲟⲛⲅⲟⲕⲁⲗⲟ; *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 44 (DBMNT 1028), l. 1: ⲉⲛⲟⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ̄ⲙⲏ; *P. Qasr Ibrim* IV 75 (DBMNT 2808), l. 9: ⲉ̄ⲛⲟ˙ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ̄ⲫⲁⲛ. Cf. also the Coptic funerary stela *I. Khartoum Copt.* 7 (DBMNT 37), prepared for a certain ⲧⲁⲙⲁⲁⲩ ⲟⲩⲁⲣⲉⲛⲱ, 'My mother Ouarenō' (ll. 1–2; I thank Grzegorz Ochała for this reference). ⲉ̄ⲛⲟ thus appears to follow the same logic as ⲡⲁⲡⲟ.

[18] The figure to the side of the Virgin Mary was initially thought to be St Damiana, but was later identified as the King's Mother owing to the lack of a legend and iconographical evidence (Dobrochna ZIELIŃSKA, 'The iconography of power – the power of iconography: The Nubian royal ideology and its expression in wall painting', [in:] Julie R. ANDERSON & D. A. WELSBY (eds.), *The Fourth Cataract and Beyond: Proceedings of the 12th Iinternational Conference for Nubian Studies* [= *British Museum Publications on Egypt and Sudan* 1], Leuven 2014, p. 946, n. 13.

[19] ALTHEIM & STIEHL, *Christentum am Roten Meer* I (cit. above, comm. to **E**, l. 1), pp. 504–505 (DBMNT 1860), l. 1.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 505 (DBMNT 1861), l. 1.

However, we find neither the epithet 'Virgin' or 'Mother of the Saviour' in the inscriptions that accompany the painting. In fact, we only find one: ⲕⲯ̄ⲥⲉⲛ ⲁⳓⲁ, 'Daughter of the Church' (**F**, l. 2). We hope to elucidate the meaning of this particular phrase, and its relation to the queen sister in the context of the other inscriptions below.

When inspecting those parts of the texts whose meaning we feel confident about, it appears that many of the phrases have to do with fertility or child bearing. There is a repeated appearance of the root ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕ, 'to bear': **B**, l. 1: ⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗ, **G**, l. 1: ⲁⲣⲁⲕⲉ, and **G**, ll. 2–3: ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲅ[ⲁ] ⲧⲣⲉ. This is a rare word, otherwise only attested once in the Serra East codex: ⲙⲁⲛ ⲧ[ⲁ]ⲩⲕⲗⲱ [ⲥ̄]ⲕⲧ̄ⲗⲗⲟⲛ ⲥⲟⲩⲧⲟⲩ ⲕⲁⲇⲟ̂ⲓ[ⲇⲉ]ⲕ ⲕⲟⲗ[ⲕ]ⲁ ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕⲕⲉⲛⲁ· 'Then, the earth bears the ripened ears' (p. 6, ll. 2–4). The meaning of the verb here is connected with the metaphorical fertility of the earth, whereas the widely attested verb ⲟⲩⲛⲛ, 'to bear',[21] appears to be more connected with child-bearing. In fact, the latter verb is the one attested in the Old Nubian translation of the epithet Theotokos: ⲧⲁ̄ⲗⲕ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲛⲟⲗ ⲡⲁⲣ`ⲑ´· ⲙⲁⲣⲓ-ⲁ̄ⲛ, 'Virgin Mary Theotokos';[22] ⲧⲁ̄ⲗⲕ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲛⲟⲗ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁⲛ, 'Mary Theotokos'.[23] Claude Rilly suggests an etymological relation between the Meroitic *erike*, 'engendré', and Old Nubian ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕ, 'to bear', and ⲡ̄-ⲕⲁⲛⲉ, 'birth'.[24] Considering the fact that several royal titles such as ⲟⲩⲣⲟⲩ and ⲡⲟⲩⲣ are etymologically related to Meroitic, it is perhaps the case that ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕ was an archaic word only used in relation to royal birth, the common verb ⲟⲩⲛⲛ being reserved for other instances, remarkably including the birth of God.

That in the Nubian tradition Mary Theotokos was associated with fertility can be gathered from the Nubian *Miracle of Saint Menas*.[25] In the story, an infertile woman gives an egg to a skipper as an offer to the

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[21] Both verbs are still reflected in modern Nubian languages, *ark* in Kenzi and Dongolawi, *unn* in Nobiin. So perhaps the variation is of dialectal nature.

[22] *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 57 (ᴅʙᴍɴᴛ 1041), i, l. 1.

[23] Eʟ-Sʜᴀғɪᴇ ᴇʟ-Gᴜᴜᴢᴜʟɪ & ᴠᴀɴ Gᴇʀᴠᴇɴ Oᴇɪ, *The Miracle of Saint Mina* (cit. above, comm. to **E**, l. 1), p. 11, ll. 3–4.

[24] Rɪʟʟʏ, *Le méroïtique* (cit. n. 16), pp. 122–123.

[25] Eʟ-Sʜᴀғɪᴇ ᴇʟ-Gᴜᴜᴢᴜʟɪ & ᴠᴀɴ Gᴇʀᴠᴇɴ Oᴇɪ, *The Miracle of Saint Mina* (cit. above, comm. to **E**, l. 1).

Church of Saint Menas, but the skipper eats the egg underway. When Saint Menas confronts him in the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary, the skipper runs to an icon of Mary Theotokos after which he confesses his sins and gives birth to a fowl – a fowl that subsequently brings fertility to the woman and her entire household.

We find another reference to fertility in **E**, l. 1, where the fragmentary text seems to suggest that Mother Mary 'loosens,' or perhaps 'eases,' the 'labour' of childbirth. The word ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲧⲛ̄, 'labour', is here clearly readable and, as with ⲁ̄ⲣⲁⲕ, the only other attestation is found in the Serra East codex: ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲧⲟⲩⲧ[ⲟ]ⲅⲗⲟ[ⲗ]ⲟ̣ ⲧⲟⲧ ⲟⲩⲛⲛⲁⲛⲛⲁ·, 'In travails you will bear children' (p. 23, ll. 1–2),[26] which is what God tells Eve as he casts her out of Paradise. ⲇⲟⲩⲛⲧ, therefore, appears to carry a negative connotation of pain. It is this pain that the Virgin Mary is called upon to ease.

The childbirth of which woman is Mother Mary then supposed to ease? The lines spoken in **D** maybe suggest an answer. The inscription features two sentences, framed between the words ⲟⲩⲣⲟⲩ, 'king' (**D**, l. 1), and ⲅⲟⲛ, 'queen mother' (**D**, l. 12). The Nubian royal dynasty was matrilineal in the time period in which the painting was painted. This meant that the successor to the king was not his son, but the son of his sister.[27] Inscription **D** twice features the previously unattested noun ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲁⲥⲁ, a compound noun formed from ⲅⲟⲛ, 'of the lord', and ⲁⲥ, 'daughter'. Taking into account the context of the other inscriptions, it would make sense to suggest that the dance is invoking Mother Mary to ease the childbirth of the queen sister in order to bring forth a ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲣⲁ, 'prince' (**D**, l. 3) to the throne, thus making her the future queen mother. Thus ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲟ (**D**, ll. 2 and 4) refers to the actual ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲁⲥⲁ, who, perhaps, has already entered labour.

This connection between Mary Theotokos and queen sister and mother can be witnessed in two paintings in the Faras Cathedral, showing female

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[26] Browne, *Literary Texts*, p. 43.

[27] S. Donadoni, '*ΜΗΤΗΡ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ*', *Studi Classici e Orientali* 18 (1969), pp. 123–125; J. Spaulding, 'Medieval Nubian dynastic succession', [in:] T. Kendall (ed.), *Nubian Studies 1998: Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference of the International Society of Nubian Studies, August 20–26, 1998, Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston 2004, pp. 413–418; Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, *The (Hi)story of Nobiin: 1000 Years of Language Change*, Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 237; G. R. Ruffini, *Medieval Nubia: A Social and Economic History*, Oxford 2012, p. 241.

members of the royal family under the protection of the Virgin Mary. First, a painting of what Bożena Rostkowska calls a 'princesse',[28] showing the Virgin Mary with Christ standing behind the queen sister with her right hand and the Queen sister's shoulder. The second is a monumental effigy of Queen Mother Martha and Mary Theotokos in the Faras cathedral, currently exhibited in the Sudan National Museum.[29] The painting, which just like the painting in the Dongola monastery annex is found on the northern wall, shows the Holy Virgin resting her hand in protection on the shoulder of the dark-skinned Martha. As Bożena Mierzejewska suggests, 'The dress, attributes and regalia of both the queen and the Theotokos mirror the Heavenly order: Mary is the Queen of Heaven and Martha is her representative on Earth'.[30]

3.3. *The location of the painting*

This brings us to the location of the painting, namely a room in the Southwest Annex to the monastery on Kom H in Dongola. Why would a painting showing a dance that invokes Mother Mary in the context of the queen sister's pregnancy be present in such a space? Could it be that the queen sister was brought to the monastery annex to receive specific medical care? Or perhaps to keep her away from the dangers and intrigues of the palace? As Giovanni Ruffini suggests, there might have been a 'hidden presence of some challenge to the principle of matrilineal succession',[31] because of either the increasing influence of Islam[32] or uncertainties surrounding the succession.

[28] Bożena Rostkowska, 'Remarques sur l'ioconographie des éparques de Nubie', *Études et travaux* 6 (1972), p. 200, fig. 4.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 199, fig. 2.

[30] Bożena Mierzejewska, 'Intercessio perpetua: The Nubians and their heavenly allies in painting', [in:] W. Godlewski & A. Łajtar (eds.), *Between the Cataracts: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of Nubian Studies, Warsaw University, 27 August – 2 September 2006*, II: *Session Papers* [= *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean Supplement Series* 2.2], Warsaw 2010, p. 662.

[31] Ruffini, *Medieval Nubia* (cit. n. 27), p. 242.

[32] G. Vantini, *The Excavations at Faras: A Contribution to the History of Christian Nubia*, Bologna 1970, p. 271.

Such an interpretation would allow us to establish a parallel between Mother Mary as ⲕ̄ⲥ̄ⲉⲛ ⲁⲥⲁ, 'Daughter of the Church' (ꜰ, l. 2), and the king's sister as the 'daughter of the queen mother'. Both were 'presented' to the church. According to the apocryphal Gospel of James, Mary's parents Joachim and Anna consecrated her to God in the Temple of Jerusalem (Prot. Jas. 4:1; 7:1–8:2).[33] This narrative was most probably known in the Nubian church as well, as a wall painting in the Paulos' cathedral at Faras depicts St. Anna as the 'Mother of [Mary] Theotokos'.[34] The care of the Church over the future queen mother thus reflects the care of the Church over the young Mary. Considering the economy of the painting and the importance of the theme with which it deals – the birth of the successor to the royal throne – it would be difficult to imagine how this repetition of the noun ⲁⲥ could be purely accidental.

The invocation of Mother Mary thus seems to have at least a double function: to ease the labour pains of the soon-to-be-mother of the future king, and also to provide legitimacy to the matrilineal bloodline. As Dobrochna Zielińska remarks about the iconographical programme in the Faras cathedral, the sequence of Anna – Virgin Mary – queen mother forms an 'unconventional «succession» line' that is a purely Nubian invention,[35] created in order to ideologically justify to a matrilineal dynastic system harking back to earlier Kushite dynastic traditions, which assigned an equally important functions to the queen mother and the sister of the king.[36]

Furthermore, both the painting of Mary Theotokos and the queen mother in the Faras cathedral, and the paintings of the Virgin Mary and the dancing scene in room 5 of the Southwest Annex are painted on the north-

[33] Megan Nutzman, 'Mary in the *Protevangelium of James*: A Jewish woman in the Temple?', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013), pp. 551–578. I thank Alexandros Tsakos for this reference.

[34] Jadwiga Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* [= *Faras* IV], Warsaw 1974, no. 62 (DBMNT 2029).

[35] Zielińska, 'The iconography of power' (cit. n. 18), p. 947.

[36] D. Kahn, 'The royal succession in the 25th dynasty', *Antike Sudan: Mitteilungen der Sudanarchäologischen Gesellschaft* 16 (2005), pp. 146–150.

ern wall. Both spaces seem to have been marked as feminine. In personal communication, Adam Łajtar remarks that overall the decoration in the Southwest Annex is dominated by representations of Mary and that several of the paintings have been donated by women. Stefan Jakobielski is reported to have said with regard to the walls in the northern nave of the Faras cathedral that most of graffiti on those walls had been left by women.[37]

Until we have a complete edition of the wall inscriptions of both sites we have to remain on the level of speculation, but the combination of the dancing scene evoking the care of the Virgin Mary over childbirth, the relation between the Virgin Mary and the Nubian matrilineal dynastic line, and the domination of Mary representations inside the Southwest Annex suggests that we are perhaps dealing with a certain type of maternity ward, with room 5 reserved for royal guests.

3.4. *The nature of the dance*

The text spoken by the dancers must have had a sung or chanted quality, considering the presence of the two exclamations ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲁ̄ⲟⲅⲁ̄ (**A**, l. 1) and ⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲟ[ⲩ]ⲟⲩ (**H**, ll. 1–2), both uttered by dancers donning masks with cowry shells. These types of exclamations or onomatopeia are otherwise not attested in Old Nubian texts.

There also seems to be a role division within the group of dancers. It appears that the dancers dressed in chitons with the castanets have the longer texts (**C**, **D**, **E**, **F**, and **I**), whereas those with the masks only speak brief sentences (**B**, **G**) or exclamations/onomatopoeia (**A**, **H**). Especially the phrase uttered in **G** is difficult to interpret. All dancers with the castanets seem to appeal directly to Mother Mary, whereas the first person speaking in **G** remains obscure. Does it refer to the dancer himself or to

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[37] Dobrochna Zielińska, personal communication. In fact, nearly all representations of queen mothers in the cathedrals in Faras are on the northern walls; see W. GODLEWSKI, 'Bishops and kings: The official program of the Pachoras (Faras) cathedrals', [in:] W. GODLEWSKI & A. ŁAJTAR (eds.), *Between the Cataracts: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of Nubian Studies, Warsaw University, 27 August – 2 September 2006*, I: *Main Papers* [= *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean Supplement Series* 2.1], Warsaw 2008, pp. 263–282.

what he impersonates? Martens-Czarneska suggests that similar cowry shell masks 'represent various animals associated with an ancestor cult, most often hyenas'.[38] Could it be that the 'I' in ⲁ̄ⲣⲁ̣ⲅ[ⲁ] ⲧⲣⲉ, 'I make Mary bear' (**G**, ll. 2–3), the 'I' that turns her into ⲕⲟⲕⲛⲁ ⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗ, 'the bearer or purity' (**B**, l. 1), refers to such an ancestral spirit?

Such an interpretation raises the question whether the (religious) attitude of the mask-wearing dancers toward Mother Mary is the same as castanet dancers', and, moreover, whether it is indeed the case that both groups of dancers are male. Considering the decidedly feminine space in which we find this painting, would it not be likely that at least some of the participants in the ritual were women too? Are the 'men' in 'skirts and shawls' not simply women? These are questions, however, that cannot be answered presently.[39]

The phrase in **G** furthermore opens another possibility, namely that the queen sister in question is called by the same name as the Virgin Mary. It would be curious if ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁⲕⲁ (**G**, ll. 1–2) would literally refer to the Virgin Mary, but note that in this case, and in the final sentences in **H**, the ⲉⲛⲟ is absent. So perhaps the 'Mary' here refers not to the religious figure, but to the actual woman expected to give birth. If we then inspect the attested queen mothers called ⲙⲁⲣⲓ in Old Nubian documents, we find that the most frequently attested ⲅⲟⲛⲛⲉⲛ in the extant corpus is ⲙⲁⲣⲓ ⲓⲉⲥⲟⲩⲥⲓⲕⲟⲗ, 'Mary Who Has Jesus', in sources all dating from the latter half of the twelfth century.[40] Although this dating coincides remarkably well with Martens-Czarneska's dating of the painting based on iconographical and archeological evidence, this remains speculative.

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[38] Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings* (cit. n. 1), p. 233.

[39] See P. Dilley, '*Christus Saltans* as Dionysus and David: The Dance of the Savior in its Late-Antique cultural context', *Apocrypha* 24 (2013), pp. 237–254, for an interpretation of another dance, from Qasr el-Wizz, in a Christian context.

[40] *P. Qasr Ibrim* III 30 (DBMNT 581), 31 (DBMNT 589), 32 (DBMNT 590), 33 (DBMNT 591), 34.i (DBMNT 582), 35 (DBMNT 583), 36 (DBMNT 584), 37 (DBMNT 585), 38 (DBMNT 586), 40 (DBMNT 588), G. M. Browne, 'An Old Nubian document from Kulubnarti', *Le Muséon* 113 (2000), pp. 177–184 (DBMNT 594), and idem, 'Griffith's Old Nubian sale', *Orientalia* 61 (1992), pp. 454–458 (DBMNT 596), all except two from Qasr Ibrim. I thank Robin Seignobos for providing me with this list.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to interpret the legends on the painting of the dancers in room 5 of the Southwest Annex of the monastery in Kom H in Dongola in a manner that takes into consideration both the linguistic data as well as the philological, historical, iconographical, and architectural context in which these data are manifested. The full and satisfying interpretation of such inscriptions can only happen on the basis of this context and finally relies only partially on grammatical analysis or dictionary meanings. Their referentiality is intimately tied up with the painting in which they appear, the painting with the paintings on the same wall, in the same room, in the same building, and with all the wall inscriptions that accompany them – paintings and inscriptions that we can then compare with similar spaces elsewhere in Nubia. At the same time, I realize that my reading of the legends has only barely scratched the surface of the meaning these inscriptions may have had in the lives of the people who first wrote and read them.

Nevertheless we may conclude that the painting, together with its legends, bears witness to a gathering of two different Nubian groups, either constituted as groups for this specific occasion or a reflection of broader social or cultic variety, joining together to perform a ritual that marks an important but also precarious moment in communal life, the birth of a new male heir to the royal throne. The Virgin Mary, in her quality as the Mother of God and protector of the queen mother and sister, and perhaps ancestral spirits, are invoked to ease the pangs of labour of the king's sister so that she may give birth to a successor and thus continue the matrilineal bloodline of the Nubian dynasty.

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