

Dongola 2018, winter season: epigraphic note



Abstract: The paper gives a brief account of the epigraphic work carried out in Dongola in the 2018 winter season. It included studying wall inscriptions and ostraca from the monastery on Kom H and Church B.V on the citadel, unearthed during both the previous and the present seasons.

Keywords: Dongola, Greek inscriptions, Old Nubian inscriptions, multilingualism, psalms, ostraca, visitors' graffiti

The epigraphic work was carried out at the site of Old Dongola by the two authors within the frame of the PCMA expedition directed in 2018 by Włodzimierz Godlewski (for a summary of the expedition's work see Godlewski forthcoming). It concentrated on:

- 1) Studying wall inscriptions discovered in previous seasons in the so-called Northwest and Southwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H and in Church B.V on the citadel;
- 2) Studying ostraka and inscribed pottery discovered in previous seasons on Kom H;
- 3) Documenting wall inscriptions in the newly unearthed Church N.B.2 within the monastery on Kom H.

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(1)

The Northwest and Southwest Annexes of the monastery on Kom H were excavated by the PCMA expedition under the direction of Stefan Jakobielski between 1989 and 2002 (Northwest Annex) and 1996 and 2006 (Southwest Annex) (see Jakobielski 2001; 2008: 291–298; 2010: 73–82). These spaces were to all appearances liturgical, largely commemorative in nature, accessible to the monks from the monastery as well as to believers from outside. The annex walls bear numerous inscriptions. Some of these belong to the original “decoration” of the buildings: e.g., legends to the painting, dedications, quotations from the Holy Scriptures, and prayers. Others are secondary, added as mementos of visits by believers. The authors’ main objective was to study three

ink inscriptions of the first category, containing bilingual Greek-Old Nubian psalms (these have been published in the meantime; van Gerven Oei and Łajtar 2020). The inscription on the north wall of Room 29 of the Northwest Annex contains Psalm 96.6–12, followed by a partly preserved Greek doxology (discovery of the inscription reported in Jakobielski 1998: 163) [Fig. 1]. The verses of the psalm are given first in Greek and then in Old Nubian (a full translation). The versification is slightly different from that in the Septuagint, which could be important for a text-critical appreciation of this text. The inscription on the south wall of Room 31 of the Northwest Annex has Psalm 127.1–6 (complete psalm) followed by the invocation to the Holy

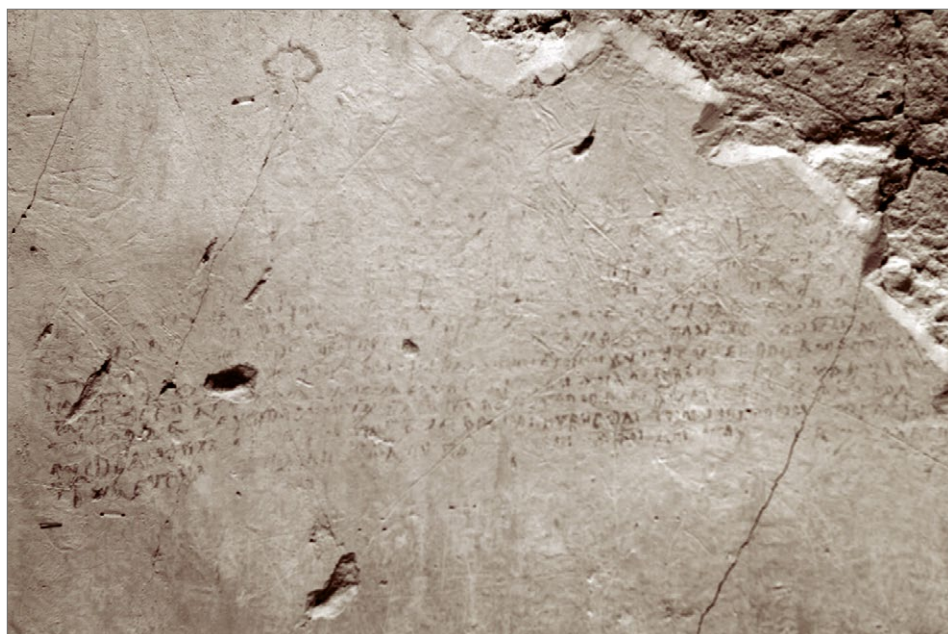


Fig. 1. Ink inscription on the north wall of Room 29 in the Northwest Annex, with Ps. 96.6–12 in Greek and Old Nubian (PCMA UW | photo M. Wyżgoł)

Trinity and the signature of the writer in Old Nubian (discovery of the inscription reported in Jakobielski 1998: 163). Like Psalm 96, it is a full translation with verses in Old Nubian following those in Greek. The versification again is slightly different from that accepted in the standard editions. A five-line addition ending with “amen” intrudes from the right margin (language unknown, possibly Greek). A piece of plaster, originally from the east wall of Room 6 of the Southwest Annex, bears the text of Psalm 29.2–13 (the complete psalm without the title) (discovery reported in Jakobielski 2010: 81, Fig. 19). Unlike the other two psalms, the verses are

alternatively in Greek and Old Nubian, as attested already for poetic books of the Old Testament in Christian Nubia (see, e.g., Łajtar 2015–2016: 143–144). Different reading and versification variants are observed, especially for verses 2 and 7–8.

A transcription of an Old Nubian inscription next to a representation of a royal figure on the south wall of Room 12 of the Northwest Annex was the other important task [Fig. 2].¹ Its bad state of preservation makes any continuous and conclusive reading impracticable. A sacrament in the “Church of the Holy Trinity of many protections” seems to be mentioned in the first line.² The text

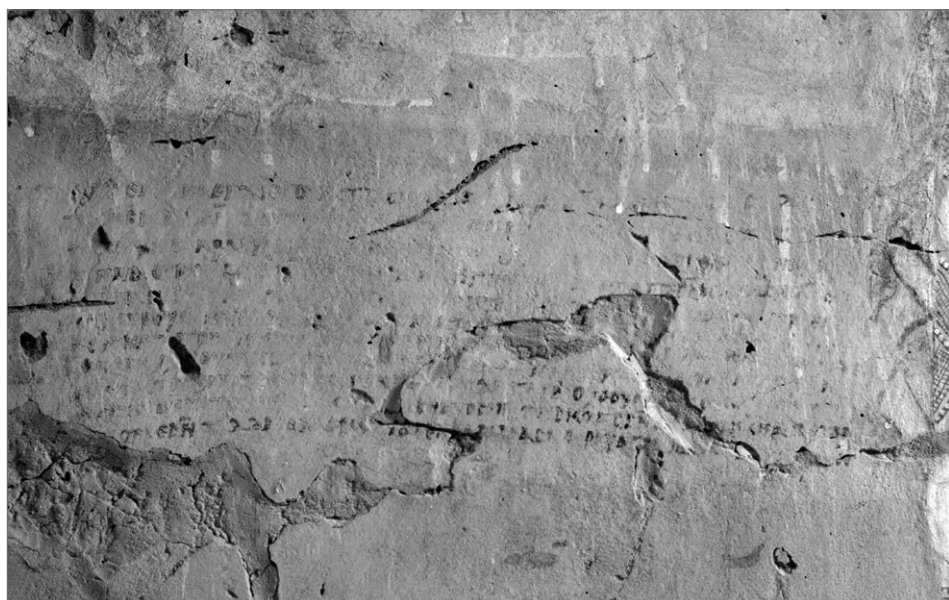


Fig. 2. Ink inscription on the south wall of Room 12 in the Northwest Annex, with a text in Old Nubian (PCMA UW | photo M. Wyżgoł)

- 1 For this painting see Martens-Czarnecka 2001; 2011: 159, with Fig. 76 (top) on p. 161. Various interpretations of the subject have been presented by different researchers: Martens-Czarnecka sees a representation of a Makurian king under the protection of the Holy Trinity, Włodzimierz Godlewski (2008: 280, with Fig. 14) an image of the Holy Trinity protecting a mother of the king (*ngonnen*).
- 2 This could be the cathedral of Dongola (see below, page 532).

makes frequent use of the word *ourou*, “king”, and may also mention *ngonnen*, “mother of the king”.

Two Old Nubian visitors’ inscriptions in Room 31 could have been authored by the same person with the name Aris-(s)inna.³ Both inscriptions invoke the God of Michael, indicating a special connection of the Northwest Annex, or at least its southern part including Room 31, with the cult of this Archangel.⁴ The texts ask for instruction in the “Book of Power”, a designation otherwise unparalleled in Christian Nubian epigraphy, even if the request “instruct me in the Book” is known.⁵ One of the inscriptions mentions a month date: 12 Pauni. Considering that the twelfth day of every month was a feast day of Saint Michael in the Coptic calendar, this constitutes additional proof of the southern part of the Northwest Annex being intended for the cult of this Archangel.

An Old Nubian–Greek graffito on the east wall of Room 2 of the Southwest Annex is a prayer of an anonymous woman asking Mary to intercede in the birth of

her first child. The prayer is followed by a formula explaining the anonymity of the petitioner: her name is known to God. The inscription testifies to a strong link between the Southwest Annex and womanhood.⁶

An Old Nubian inscription, written in exceptionally big letters, found on the west wall of the monastery courtyard, seems to contain a private prayer, possibly in the name of a certain Staurosinkouda.⁷ The text mentions “hunger” apparently and may feature a heretofore unattested loanword *rus-*, “to save” (from the Greek *εῤῥῶ*, and specifically from the second person singular imperative of the aorist middle form *rusai*). The inscription, dated apparently to the 13th–14th century, is interesting as one of the latest examples of Old Nubian literacy in the Dongola area.

Church B.V on the citadel of Dongola was excavated by Włodzimierz Godlewski between 2005 and 2016 (Godlewski 2018). Dedicated most probably to the Archangel Raphael, the church in question formed part of the royal quarter, in-

3 This name does not seem to have been attested before, but similar names are known: Aris (Łajtar and van der Vliet 2010: No. 17, l. 1; Łajtar 2020: Nos 65, 192, 638, 639, 820, 900) and Arisdawi (Łajtar 2020: No. 224).

4 “God of Michael” is invoked several times in an ink inscription found in a niche in the west wall of Room 21 of the Northwest Annex (Łajtar forthcoming) and in visitors’ inscriptions in the newly discovered Church N.B.2 (see below). Generally, for the designation “God of Saint NN”, which is believed to have a “topical” character, pointing to the cult of a given saint in a given place, see Nowakowski 2018: 79–80, and in relation to Christian Nubia see Łajtar 2017: 99–101; 2020: 45.

5 For this request see Łajtar 2014: 266–267; 2020: 34 and commentary to inscription 750. It is attested in wall inscriptions in the Upper Church at Baganarti (with “God of Raphael” as addressee), Room 21 of the Northwest Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola, the cathedral of Faras and the church at Medik (all having “God of Michael” as addressee).

6 The inscription was published in the meantime, in Łajtar and van Gerven Oei 2018.

7 The inscription was discovered during the excavation of the courtyard in 2014–2016 (Dzierzbicka and Deptuła 2018: 92).

cluding also the palace of Makurian kings and a small cruciform building of commemorative character, later turned into a church. An Old Nubian inscription on the south wall of the naos of the church gives a month date (22 Khoiak = 19 De-

cember) and mentions people constructing something. The inscription seems to be later than the 11th century, hence it is unlikely that the construction of the church itself is intended.⁸ The text may refer to a later addition to the building.

(2)

The archaeological work on Kom H brought to light a rich collection of ostraca and inscribed pottery. The objects came to light in different parts of the monastery including, in particular, a refuse dump accumulated behind the southeastern corner of the main monastery church. Two complete Old Nubian ostraca were identified. The first

(HDd.17.027) is a letter with a single greeting [Fig. 3], the second (D.92.033) contains a prayer for remission of sins which are like rain. An apparently very long and multipart inscription, written in Old Nubian on a late local amphora sherd, preserved in nine fragments (D.9/98a–i), was probably an account mentioning proper names and amounts of unknown goods.⁹ Interestingly, the word *ngapil*, “gold”, is mentioned. This is the first mention of gold coins, undoubtedly of Muslim provenance, in Christian Nubia outside of Qasr Ibrim. The coins might have been used in Dongola solely for accounting purposes.

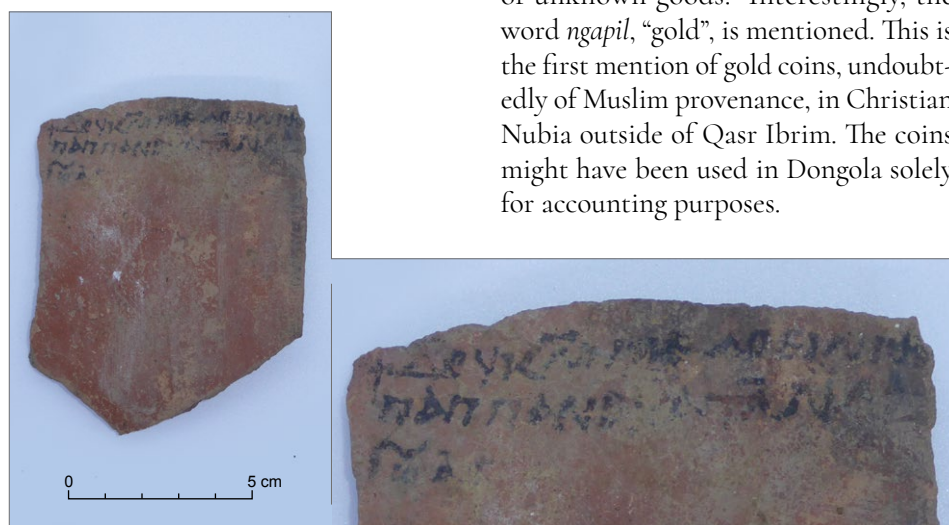


Fig. 3. Ostracon HDd.17.027 with a greeting formula in Old Nubian (PCMA UW | photo V. van Gerven Oei)

- 8 According to Godlewski (2018: 130), the church was built at the end of the 8th century.
- 9 For this kind of texts in general see Ochala 2014; Lajtar and Ochala 2015. They are known from several Nubian sites, including Qasr Ibrim, Gebel Adda, Faras, and Sonqi Tino, and are inscribed on paper, walls of churches, and potsherds. They should probably be interpreted as registers of gifts made to the Church by individuals or, less probably, of goods distributed by the Church within the frame of the institution's charitable activities.

(3)

Church N.B.2 in the northern part of the monastery on Kom H was partly excavated in the 2017/2018 season. Constructed in the Late Period (13th/14th century), it displayed a highly unusual plan with two pairs of long, parallel rooms ending in apses, placed symmetrically to the east and west of a square central space. Parts of the church bear exceptionally well-preserved paintings, sometimes with unusual iconographic elements (Godlewski 2019).

In addition to the paintings, 61 inscriptions were identified: 9 painted (*dipinti*) and 52 scratched or carved (*graf-*

fiti). Just three of the inscriptions belong to the original decoration of the church: two legends identifying the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the eastern side of the arcade connecting the two western rooms, and a quotation from Jh. 1.29 (“Behold, this is a lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”), written on a roll held by a person in a purple mantle, shown in Room 3 and identifiable as Saint John the Baptist.¹⁰ The remaining 58 inscriptions were added successively by believers attending the church. They represent a type of literary production

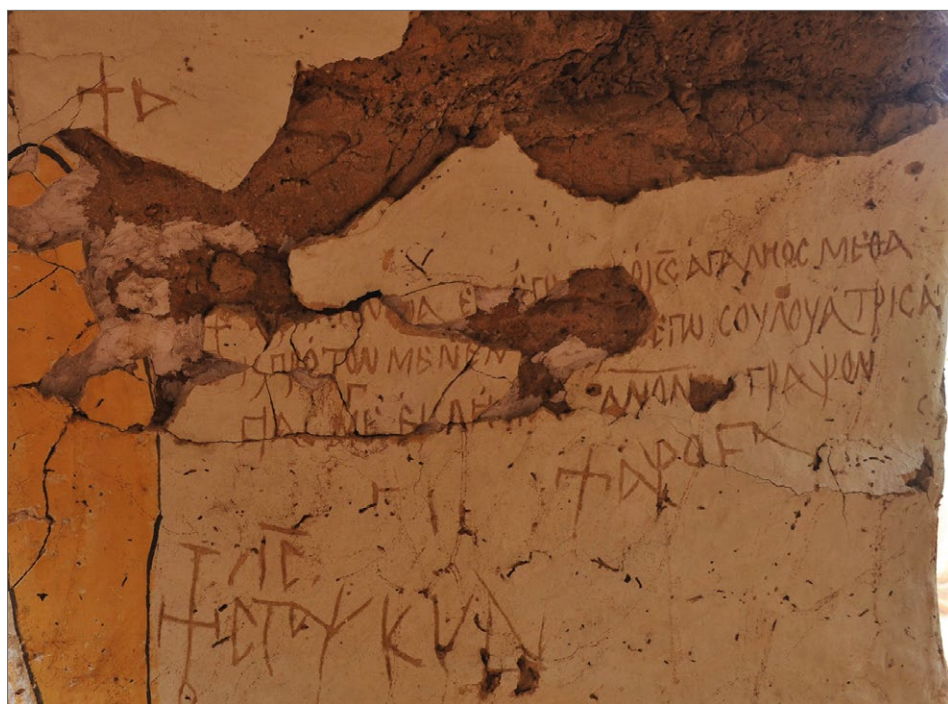


Fig. 4. Inscription with Ps. 117.24 on a wall of the North Church (N.B.2) located inside the monastery on Kom H (PCMA UW | photo V. van Gerven Oei)

¹⁰ The same quotation (actually 1.29–33) is found in an inscription painted on a roll held by Saint John the Baptist in a representation on the west wall of the baptistery in the cathedral at Faras. For the painting and inscription see Jakobielski et al. 2017: 345–347, No. 110.

characteristic of late Christian Nubia (13th–14th century), predominantly known from Banganarti but also attested elsewhere.¹¹ The script of these inscriptions is an inclined majuscule of the Nubian type, and the language, if discernible, either Greek or Old Nubian, or a mix of the two. The simplest consist of personal names, sometimes preceded by the personal pronoun “I” in either Greek (*ego/emou/eme*) or Old Nubian (*ai*). The more elaborate ones add information about the visitors, such as their filiation, their church affiliation, their function in the church or state apparatus. The most sophisticated contain, in addition to visitors’ personal data, holy invocations or prayers requesting different favours from God, and also quotations from the Holy Scriptures, especially the psalms, and later Christian liturgical poetry. One of these quotations, reading “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”, comes from Ps. 117.24 [Fig. 4]. Another one, reading “Blessed be the Lord, the one who saved the youths unhurt in the furnace and preserved the birth-giver a Virgin after childbirth”, may be identified as a verse from a hymn by Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople between 715 and 730 (Eustratiades 1932: 226, No. 324, ll. 25–27). The inscribed invocations and prayers in Church N.B.2 are mostly addressed to the “God of Michael”, which suggests that the church in question was dedicated to this particular Archangel. The visitors were mostly, if not exclusively, inhabitants of Dongola

and its neighbourhood. This is clearly demonstrated by their onomastics, different from the onomastics of the Qasr Ibrim documents, but paralleled by the onomastics of the Banganarti inscriptions. The most characteristic elements of these onomastics are the names ending in *-onga*, *-inga*, such as Anyonga, Paronga, Tironga, Goullinga, etc., and compounds with *-noukout*, most probably an Old Dongolawi forerunner of the modern Dongolawi *núgud*, “(male) slave” (see Armbruster 1965: 157, s.v. *núgud*). Some of the individuals, who left inscriptions in Church N.B.2, should probably be identified with their namesakes in the Banganarti inscriptions. This concerns foremost Dourerê, deacon of the Great Church of Jesus, who may be identical with Dourerê, deacon of the Great Church of Jesus and Epirshil of King Siti, mentioned several times in Banganarti (Łajtar 2020: Nos 9, 507, 554, 564, perhaps also 890 and 903). Members of the clergy were frequent among the visitors to Church N.B.2. Two churches are mentioned with particular frequency: the (Great) Church of the Holy Trinity and the (Great) Church of Jesus. The latter can probably be identified with the Cruciform Church¹² and the former with the cathedral of Dongola. An interesting phenomenon, observable in Church N.B.2, is the whitewashing of visitors’ inscriptions, presumably due to general maintenance activities inside the cult space. One of the graffiti in Church N.B.2 is in Arabic and reads: *ism*, “name”. Its date is unknown.

11 For a characteristic of Nubian visitors’ inscriptions see Łajtar 2020.

12 For the identification of the Cruciform Church as a Jesus Church see Godlewski 1990: 136.

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