

A decorated bronze censer from the Cathedral in Old Dongola

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Abstract: A bronze censer found in the Church of Brick Pillars in Old Dongola in 1968 provides unique insight into the role of such liturgical vessels in medieval Nubia. In this new study of the iconography and production technique of this vessel, coupled with an epigraphical analysis of the Greek and Old Nubian inscription around the edge, the author suggests that the vessel was crafted by Makurian craftsmen sometime in the first few hundred years after the conversion of the Nubian kingdoms to Christianity (in the 6th or 7th century AD). Seeking sources of inspiration for the Dongolan masters of the metal-working craft, the author looks to the Byzantine Empire, where close parallels for the decoration of the Nubian censer can be found in late antique silver objects. This leads to a discussion of trade relations between the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Makuria, and the possible exchange of official gifts.

Keywords: Old Dongola, censer, liturgical vessels, Makuria, Old Nubian, Nubian studies, toreutics

The censer with figural decoration from Old Dongola is the only vessel of its kind from the territory of Nubia from the time between the conversion and the collapse of the Christian kingdoms. It was discovered in the 1967/1968 season during the excavation of the Church of Brick Pillars, which is believed to represent the last phase of the Dongolan cathedral following the rebuilding of the Church of Granite Columns in the 9th century (Godlewski 2006: 282).

The find was mentioned in early reports and studies (Michałowski 1970; Gartkiewicz 1990; Scholz 2001; Godlewski 2013), but never actually published. It merits a full technological and iconographical analysis, made possible by high quality photographs which the author had the opportunity to study, but without actual first-hand examination, without which any discussion of technological aspects must remain an educated guess at best.

DESCRIPTION

FORM AND EXECUTION

The censer has the form of a small shallow bowl on a low stand, 5.5 cm high and

13.2 cm in diameter, with three chains attached to the rim [*Fig. 1*]. The body of the vessel is decorated.

Neither the material nor the technique of execution can be determined with certainty from the photographs. It looks like it was made from a copper alloy, possibly bronze or brass. The most plausible technique is casting as there are no apparent traces of hammering and turning. The decoration also suggests this technique. Firstly, it shows no negatives on the inner surface of the vessel and, secondly, the elongated grooves outlining the medallions and floral motifs are presumed proof of carving executed on a model. Some of the mistakes by the craftsman could also indicate casting.

Hammering should rather be excluded as the rough surface of the vessel is not like the smooth surfaces of hammered artifacts. As for the casting technique used, lost-wax is preferable over molding, as no casting seams can be seen.

The engraved details of the decoration and inscription were the last to be added. The grooves, imitating the leaves of a laurel wreath and the beards, were probably made with a burin. A punch was used to make the circle-like details and the serifs of the inscription. A semi-circular burin was also used to cut the eyes and circular



Fig. 1. Censer from Old Dongola, view of the underside
(PCMA Dongola Project/photo W. Godlewski)

parts of floral motifs. The different length of individual grooves suggest burins of different width. A graver may have also been used by the craftsman.

Three chains were riveted to the rim at three points spaced evenly around the circumference. A cast handle for suspension connected the three chains at the top.

DECORATION

The body of the censer is divided into two registers. The upper one contains an incised inscription, the lower one a figural and floral decoration centered on four framed medallions placed at even intervals around the body. Inside each

medallion there is a male bust with a halo around the head. The figures are dressed in antique garb and each one holds a codex. A simplified wreath frames each medallion.

Of the four busts, only one is easily recognizable as a depiction of Christ. It shows a male countenance with long hair and a beard, depicted with a cruciform halo around his head [Fig. 2 top left]. The figure is dressed in a tunic with a *pallium* and is shown raising his right hand in blessing.

The other busts are not recognizable on account of their attributes and appearances. The garb in these cases suggests that they may be identified as prophets, apostles or evangelists. To the right side of the bust



Fig. 2. Busts of biblical figures on a censer from Dongola: top left, Christ; bottom left, figure to the right of Christ; top right, figure to the left of Christ; bottom right, figure opposite to the Christ medallion (PCMA Dongola Project/photos W. Godlewski)

of Christ there is a figure with short hair and no beard. He is clothed in a tunic and seems to be pointing with a finger of his right hand at the codex held in his left hand. However, only the middle finger of his hand is stretched out, unlike in the case of the other two busts, where both middle and index fingers are stretched out in a canonical composition. It may suggest in this case a craftsman's mistake [Fig. 2 bottom left]. The bust on the other side of Christ is depicted with almost the same kind of haircut as the one described above, but the gesture and clothing are different. The figure is clearly wearing a tunic and a *pallium*. His hand is raised in blessing



Fig. 3. Floral motif separating the medallions on the censer (PCMA Dongola Project/ photo W. Godlewski)

[Fig. 2 top right]. Lastly, there is the bust opposite Christ, dressed also in a tunic and a *pallium*. Unlike the other two figures, he has a pointed beard. With two fingers of his right hand he points at the codex in his left hand [Fig. 2 bottom right].

The medallions are separated from one another by a floral motif composed of a trifoliolate plant at the bottom and a bud with petals shooting up from the middle [Fig. 3].

INSCRIPTION

The inscription under the rim of the vessel on the outside was either cast or incised — without direct examination it is difficult to say — but the serifs were undoubtedly stamped with a punch. From a palaeographic perspective, the letters of the inscription can be described as vertical epigraphic majuscules, essentially round, however some letters, like the *sigma*, occasionally show angular forms. The *alpha* has the form of an oblique stroke provided with a loop, however, the one at the end of the inscription is of the “*alpha* with a broken bar” type. The serifs are in the form of dots.

The script, such as was used in the inscription, occurred in Nubia generally before the 10th century when it was replaced with the Nubian majuscule. The inscription is written in *scripto continua*, but there is a space between $\pi\rho\sigma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\nu\kappa(\omicron\nu)$ and $\tau\omicron\upsilon$. Of the three words written in Greek, one, $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\sigma\tau\acute{\omicron}\lambda(\omicron\nu)$, was abbreviated by shifting the last preserved letter; in other cases, the abbreviations were not marked. The shifted letters were probably also used to mark abbreviations in the Old Nubian part of the inscription. The first letter of the inscription, a *sigma*, was mistakenly used instead of an *epsilon* expected there.

On the whole, the inscription was edited in Greek. In the last part, however, it contains an Old Nubian intercalation. The text can be read as follows:¹

† <ε>ὕχαριστή(ριον) προσένεγκ(ον)
 τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Πέτρο(υ) λ τ ο
 Δ.Δ.Υ.Α.Υ.Τ.ΛΛ.Κ.Α

Two translations are possible:

“Sacrificial gift belonging to the Saint Apostle Peter ...”

or

“Sacrificial gift from the Saint Apostle Peter ...”

“Saint Apostle Peter” is a brachylogy for a “Church of the Saint Apostle Peter”. The inscription suggests that a congregation of this name was either the recipient or owner of the censer given as an offering, or the donor of the censer. Should the first translation be correct and the Church of Brick Pillars was where this censer belonged, it would testify to the dedication of the Dongolan cathedral. In the case of the second translation, the donor of the censer was related to the Saint Peter Church, which need not have been in Dongola.

The final part of the inscription is difficult to interpret and various translations have been proposed. The two interpretations presented here have been suggested by Vincent van Gerven Oei (personal communication).

The only indubitable element in this part of the inscription is the word τῶν, “God” (Browne 1996: 171). The word occurs probably in the accusative, either τῶνκα or the unattested form τῶνκοα. Providing the above suggestion is correct, the element τῶνκα (τῶνκοα) can be translated as: “to (the church of) God”.

The preceding τῶνκα (τῶνκοα) might be related to the word Δαγεῶλ-, “great” (Browne 1996: 36), in spite of the difficulties posed by the initial reduplication of the delta and supralinear elements. This would lead to an interpretation of: “Sacrificial gift presented by (the church of) the Holy Apostle Peter to (the church of) the Great God”, or alternately: “Sacrificial gift presented by (the church of) the Holy Apostle Peter to the Great (church of) God.” In this case “the Great Church” should be the Cathedral of Old Dongola. This interpretation indicates the donor to be a church (congregation), or more properly, the clergy. This situation is unusual, because such gifts were presented by private donors, as in all cases of inscribed objects with similar decoration.

The second interpretation suggested by Van Gerven Oei explains all supralinear letters and due to this fact appears to be more reliable. According to this interpretation Δλ is an abbreviation of Δ(αγε)λ-, “great” (Browne 1996: 37). ΔΥΑΥΤ can be interpreted as an alternative spelling of the well-attested royal name ΔΔΥΤΙ, “David” (Browne 1996: 237). Providing that supralinear letters mark an end of a word the κοα should be instead interpreted verbally as “having”. It leads to a conclusion that it is an epithet, rather than an indirect object. This reasoning suggests that the Old Nubian part of the inscription can be translated as “The great Dauti/David (whom) God has”.

In spite of scribe’s lapses, assumed in this interpretation, the whole inscription can be also interpreted as follows: “Sacrificial gift belonging to the Saint Apostle (by) the great David (whom) God has.”

¹ The part of the inscription in Greek was read and translated by Adam Łajtar.

This second interpretation is also more suitable to the tradition as the donor, Dauti, is a person. The name is well-attested in corpus of Nubian inscriptions.

The characteristic formula, beginning with the word *εὐχαριστήριον*, occurs in late Christian votive inscriptions from the Eastern Mediterranean (Łajtar 2004: 92). There are no examples of such an inscription on a metal object from Makuria,

and in any case the censer from Old Dongola is the only inscribed metal object known from the kingdom so far. The formula, however, is not unknown in Nubia as a keystone with a formula beginning with *εὐχαριστήριον* was found in a church in Maharraka in Lower Nubia; in this case, the “sacrificial gift” was most probably the church itself (Łajtar 2004: 89–94).

DISCUSSION

Censers discovered in Nubian territory have been few in number, but in form they all resemble Byzantine examples. And for lack of evidence to the contrary, it may be assumed that they were all made of copper alloy. The three censers from Naga el-Sheima consisted in two cases of a chalice on a low stand with geometrical decoration while the third one was a shallow bowl on a low stand decorated with diagonal grooves (Bietak and Schwarz 1987: 152). Each had three ring-shaped handles and attached chain with a hook. A bronze censer from Abdallah-n Irqi, in the form of a chalice on a high stand, is almost identical to the piece from Old Dongola (van Moorsel, Jacquet, and Schneider 1975: 20–22).

Numerous examples of censers are represented in Nubian wall painting. A mural depicting an archpriest holding a censer suspended from three chains with small globular bells attached was located in one of the pastophories of the cathedral in Faras; it was dated to the 10th century. The censer itself took on the form of a chalice on a low stand. The archdeacon pictured in an 11th-century wall painting from the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola is portrayed swinging a bowl-shaped censer,

which is composed of four hemispheres and also fitted with small bells (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 219–220). This form seems to have been common in Nubia, because the censer held by the archdeacon depicted in Tamit and the one held by a presbyter in the B.V church in Old Dongola also have the form of a chalice fitted with globular bells. The censer held by Zacharias, depicted in Abdallah-n Irqi, is of a different, hexagonal shape, also fitted with bells (van Moorsel, Jacquet, and Schneider 1975: 20–22). Thus far, the only image of a censer without bells is the one of a censer held by an angel in the church in Kulubnarti.

This clear difference between the censers excavated so far and their depictions in Nubian art is puzzling. On the one hand, none of the censers found in Nubia has the characteristic bells; on the other hand, the images of censers lack the hook commonly found along with the excavated specimens. The issue to be investigated is whether these censers were used for incensing or they had different function, possibly as standing incense burners or even lamps (for a discussion of the function of the Dongola censer, see below).

Outside Nubia, the nearest parallels for a censer of the form and decoration as discovered in Old Dongola, come from the Byzantine Empire. Decoration in the form of images of busts of saints in medallions are typical of Byzantine art, including paintings, ivory and metalwork, the latter especially important for the present discussion. Among silver liturgical equipment and reliquaries, censers are in the majority and they resemble the Dongola censer closely as far as the decoration is concerned, although not in the metal used. They are all of silver, the number of medallions in the decoration vary, and they are dated from the 6th to the 7th century. Censers made of a different material than silver and bearing similar decoration have not been found.

A hexagonal censer from the Sion treasure, dated to AD 550–560, is embellished with three medallions containing three busts, of Christ and two saints, Peter and Paul, identified on the grounds of their iconography and attributes (Mundell Mango 1992: Figs S18.1, S18.2). A censer from the Cypriot treasure, also of hexagonal form, is decorated with six busts in medallions. Three depict the same triad as the censer from the Sion treasure: Christ in the middle and the saints Peter and Paul. Depicted on the opposite side are the Virgin Mary and, according to Cruishank Dodd (1961: 130–131), the saints Jacob and John. Another three censers are known from the Attarouthi treasure, dated to the 6th–7th centuries. The first of them bears a decoration of four medallions separated by crosses. Based on the attributes of the depicted persons, only two could be identified: John the Baptist and saint Stephen (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466131> [accessed: 1.03.2016]). The second censer had a similar

decoration: four medallions with busts of Christ-Emmanuel, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466132> [accessed: 1.03.2016]). The third one is decorated with three medallions separated by crosses. Christ-Emmanuel is surrounded by two archangels, the composition resembling the decoration of the first Attarouthi censer (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466133> [accessed: 1.03.2016]).

The composition of the decoration on the censer from Dongola is found also on other liturgical vessels. A good example of this is a vase from Homs dated to the 7th century. Its body is decorated with medallions with busts of saints. Identifiable are Christ, the saints Peter and Paul, the Virgin Mary and an angel, two other busts probably represent John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (Metzger 1992: 107–109). It is also relevant to point out the floral motifs separating the medallions, which clearly resemble the floral motifs of the Dongolan censer. A 6th-century silver lamp from the Hermitage collection has a similar decoration. Medallions with busts of biblical figures, with Christ-Emmanuel among them, are placed between floral motifs (Effenberger et al. 1978: 162–163). Medallions with busts of biblical figures are also present on silver chalices from the Beth Misona treasure, dated to the 6th or 7th century. Figures depicted on them are easily identifiable as Christ and two saints, Peter and Paul (Mundell Mango 1986: 228–229).

The motif of busts in medallions is found mainly on silver reliquaries. A bust of Christ among the Apostles is the most common and is found on the *Capsella Vaticana* manufactured during the reign

of the Emperor Heraclius as well as on a silver pyxis from a private collection in Switzerland, on a silver reliquary from the times of Justinian I found in Chersonesos and on a silver reliquary from Grado in Italy dated to the 6th century (Kalinowski 2011: 152–155). The medallions on the *Capsella Vaticana* and the two reliquaries mentioned above present the same order of figures with Christ flanked by the saints Peter and Paul, making this the most widespread sequence of images of this kind.

Floral ornaments appear on a great number of artifacts. Some examples include

a silver lamp from the reign of Tiberius Constantine, now in the *Abbeg Stiftung* collection in Switzerland (Cruishank Dodd 1974: 65) and a 6th-century silver reliquary from Novalja in Croatia (Kalinowski 2011: 181–182), as well as a casket from Esquiline Hill, dated to the 4th century (Buschhausen 1971: 214–217) [Fig. 4].

Almost all the objects mentioned above were manufactured in the 6th and 7th centuries. Although not all of them have the same place of origin, most were manufactured in imperial workshops, which is indicated by imperial stamps.

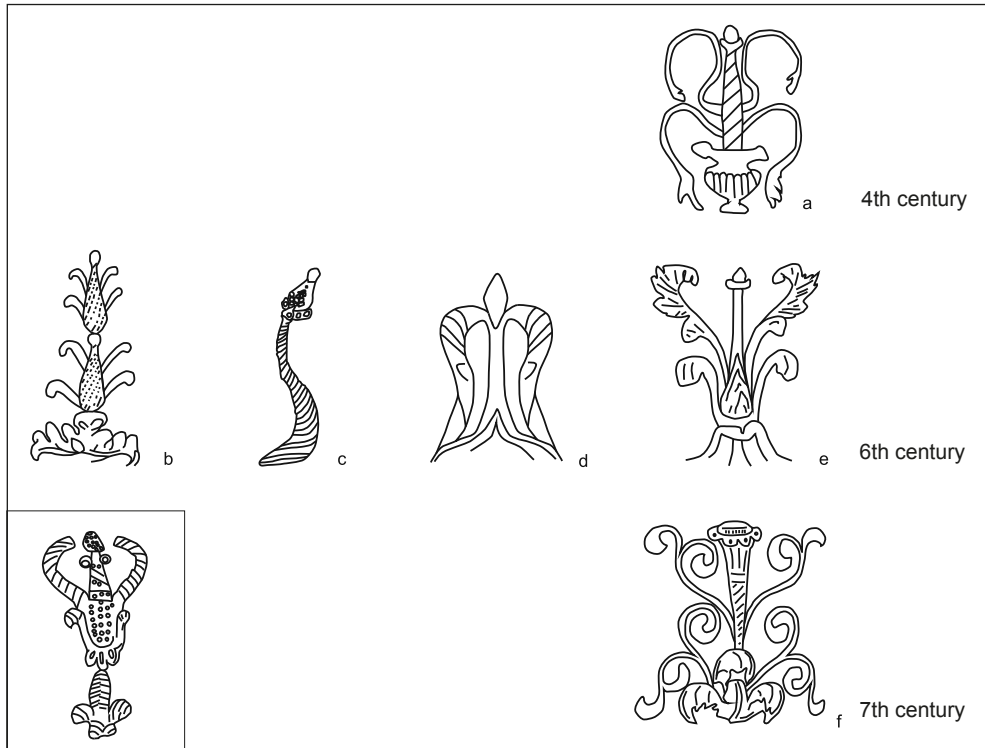


Fig. 4. Floral elements from Byzantine liturgical vessels: a – *Projecta* casket from the Esquiline Hoard, 4th century; b – reliquary from Novalja (Croatia), 6th century; c – reliquary from Grado (Italy), 6th century; d – lamp/reliquary from Chersonesos, 6th century; e – lamp from the *Abbeg Stiftung* collection (Riggisberg, Switzerland), AD 578–582; f – vase from Homs (Syria), now in the Louvre, 7th century; inset, censer from Old Dongola (Drawing M. Wyzgot)

They also share one feature, namely they were all made of silver. No examples of objects of copper-alloy of this kind, decorated with busts in medallions, have been found so far.

THE ICONOGRAPHY

The only figure from the Dongolan censer that could be identified without any doubt is Christ. A strong argument for this identification was the cruciform halo: thus far, in Byzantine as well as in Nubian art, it has been shown to be restricted to images of Christ. Only on two of the parallels cited above, the Grado reliquary and the vase from Homs, Christ was depicted without the halo. The figure on the Dongolan censer is identified as the Christ Pantokrator type, widespread in Byzantium, including all the typical attributes, like the codex, the blessing gesture and the attire: a tunic and a *pallium*.

The other busts could not be identified with certainty for lack of exclusively characteristic features and attributes. They are nonetheless either prophets, apostles or evangelists, as suggested by their garb and the codices in their hands. One may probably exclude prophets, as the only prophet to be depicted on liturgical objects is John the Baptist and his image differs significantly from those depicted on the Dongolan censer.

The saints on both sides of Christ are beardless, which was probably intended to imply their young age, while the saint opposite to Christ is depicted with a beard. This is in accordance with the canon in Nubian art calling for the Twelve Apostles to be presented alternately as young and old. Saint John the Evangelist is usually represented as a young man on Byzantine metalwork, e.g., the figures on the Cyprus

censer and on the vase from Homs. An unidentified beardless saint is depicted on the Attarouthi censer; also one of the Apostles on the Swiss reliquary is beardless. The characteristic feature of the saint on the opposite side to Christ on the Dongolan censer is his pointed beard. In Byzantine tradition, this feature is attributed to saint Paul, although it appears exclusively along with a bald forehead.

Another way to identify the saints depicted on the Dongolan censer is to analyze the order in which they used to be depicted in Byzantine and Nubian art. Christ is, in most cases, depicted between the saints Peter and Paul, as is the case of the censers from Cyprus, Sion, the vase from Homs, the chalices from Beth Misona, and the reliquaries from Chersonesos and Grado. Thus, it might be assumed that the saints on either side of Christ are Peter and Paul. However, the lack of features characteristic to their images makes this assumption somewhat less plausible. Assuming that the saints on the Dongolan censer are the Apostles, the number of possible identifications could be restricted to the first three of the apostolic college. Referring to the list of the Apostles in the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke), the first three mentioned, thus the most important, are Peter, Andrew and Jacob. There is a slight difference in the order of the Apostles given in the Gospel of St. Mark: Peter, Jacob and John come as the first three. In the list of the Apostles from room 29 of the Northwest Annex in the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola, the first three appear in the order given in the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke. This sequence is presented in wall painting. A different order could be observed in room 13: the first three are the

saints Peter, Andrew and John (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 201).

In fact, there are no obvious premises that would allow the saints' images on the Dongolan censer to be identified; therefore it may be assumed that we have here a representation of Christ with the apostolic college *pars pro toto* as on the Capsella Vaticana or the Capsella Africana (Kalinowski 2011: 148–150). It would correspond with a trend present in late Roman toreutics engaged in depicting "anonymous" saints. The transition from depicting individual features to conventional images, where saints could not be distinguished without captions, allowed viewers to identify images with a multiplicity of saints. It was believed to increase the "power" of an object. Some reliquaries labeled as a "reliquary of many saints" are known from the Byzantine Empire. Identifying images presented there with particular saints was not necessary (Kalinowski 2011: 148–150), thus the busts on the Dongola censer could also represent any one of the saints, or more precisely, any one of the Apostles.

The only artistic genre in Nubia depicting Christ and the Apostles is wall painting and a comparison with the Dongolan censer reveals several features in common that are significantly the same as in Byzantine art: garments, gestures and haloes. The sole Nubian distinctive feature, a schematic human head, is not present on the censer. The craftsman in this case made an effort to depict an anatomically correct head shape. However, the two, painting and toreutics, are basically incomparable as crafts, and in any case, most examples of Nubian wall paintings are from the 8th to 12th century, while the 6th century is a *terminus post quem* for the Dongolan censer judged by the decoration and the 8th century according

to the inscription. Surely Nubian art remained under strong Byzantine influence during the first decades after conversion to Christianity, a statement supported by the 7th century wall paintings from Abu Oda (Godlewski 1992: 287–288). Thus objects manufactured then need not have necessarily resembled later examples of Nubian art.

The floral ornaments separating the medallions on the Dongolan censer could be identified only in reference to liturgical objects from Byzantine and Roman art. A floral motif resembling that from the Dongolan censer occurs on a silver casket from Esquiline Hill. There, a thyrsus was placed in a kantharos ending in a pine-like bud, also decorated with stripes in the same manner as the motif on the Dongolan censer. The floral motifs depicted on the lamp from the Abbeig Stiftung collection, the vase from Homs, the lamp from the Hermitage and the reliquaries from Novalja and Grado also represent a similar acanthus plant. Most of them share common set of features: three leaves at the bottom from which a stem rises in the middle. Topping the stem is a pine-like bud with petals. Sprouts spring laterally from the stem. All these features are present on the Dongolan censer.

ORIGIN AND DATING OF THE CENSER

The iconography is not sufficient to establish the origin of the Dongolan censer. The iconographic motifs used are typical of the decoration on liturgical vessels in the Byzantine Empire. Images from the Dongolan censer differ stylistically from liturgical vessels, whether from the Constantinople workshops with imperial stamps as, for example, the censers from

Cyprus and Sion, the Chersonese reliquary, or from provincial workshops as the Chersonese lamp or the Swiss reliquary. The differences, along with the fact that all similar objects are made of silver, suggest that the Dongolan censer is an imitation of a Byzantine artifact made outside the Empire. The only Nubian element is the Greek–Nubian inscription written with epigraphic majuscule. The Nubian part could confirm the censer's Nubian origin, if only the inscription had been executed at the same time or in the same place as the entire artifact. That assuming the serifs were executed with the same punch as the other details of the decoration.

A gift exchange tradition, which included liturgical equipment, is well attested by the annalists. John of Ephesus in his *Ecclesiastical History* described two alleged missions sent by Justinian and by Theodora (although one needs to keep in mind the legendary nature of these missions). In his description he referred to gifts sent by the Emperor (*Eccl. Hist.* IV.6). He also described a mission sent by the Empress Theodora, led by Julian, who brought gifts for the Nobadian king (*Eccl. Hist.* IV.7). Delivery of church equipment to the newly converted kingdom is mentioned in a letter of the king of Alwa to the Nobadian king (*Eccl. Hist.* IV.52). Exchange of gifts between Makuria and the Byzantine Empire is also confirmed by John of Biclar in his chronicle (*Biclar. Chron.*, p. 213). These sources indicate that gift exchanges took place immediately after the conversion to Christianity, as well as in the course of later relations between the Byzantine Empire and the Nubian kingdoms. Thus, Byzantine liturgical equipment, including probably silver censers, was delivered to Makuria between the

6th and the 7th century as a gift. It is then that the censers could have been copied by local craftsmen, the Dongola censer being one such copy.

The archaeological context of the find has given a *terminus ante quem* in the 13th century. The censer was found, covered with bricks, in a shallow depression in the pavement next to the sanctuary in the immediate vicinity of the side of the altar (Gartkiewicz 1990: 297–298), just like a censer from Naga el-Sheima. Either the depression was a common place for the deposition of liturgical equipment or it was hidden there to protect it, effectively as it is, from being plundered during the siege of Dongola in the 13th century (Gartkiewicz 1990: 306–308).

When archaeological methods do not provide a sound enough dating, iconography and/or palaeography need to be relied on instead. Liturgical vessels decorated with medallions with busts of biblical figures were most popular in the 6th and 7th centuries. All the parallels discussed in this paper were manufactured during this period. The oldest, which is dated on the grounds of an imperial stamp to AD 527–565, is the Chersonese reliquary, the youngest the Capsella Vaticana dated by a stamp of the Emperor Heraclius to AD 610–641. The narrowest dating, established on the basis of a palaeographic analysis of the letters of the inscription, ascribes the Dongola censer to the 7th–10th or even to the 6th century. The palaeographic dating is consistent with a theory of an existing model for the Nubian copy, which would have been manufactured around the time of production of similar Byzantine artifacts. It is thus plausible to date the model to the 6th to 7th century and the copy to anywhere between the 6th to 10th century.

FUNCTION

Last but not least, the function of the Dongolan vessel should be considered. Like the censers from Abdallah-n Irqi and Naga el-Sheima, the artifact from Dongola was found without any small round bells attached to it, as it is shown in Nubian wall painting, while the painted images never have the hooks at the top for suspension. Perhaps then there were two kinds of censers in Nubia: stationary, known as *katzion*, and portable. Or it could be a matter of artistic convention.

There was also a wide range of hanging lamps, similar in form to the censers, which were present in ciboria. This kind of lamp is depicted on the 6th century silver paten from Stuma with an image of the Communion of the Apostles (Cruikshank Dodd 1974: 40–45). The form of this lamp is similar to the silver lamps from the

Abbeg Stiftung collection and from the Hermitage.

The absence of little bells suggests that the Dongolan censer may have been stationary or perhaps even a lamp. The censers from Abdallah-n Irqi and Naga el-Sheima, both with hooks, could have been suspended and not necessarily used for incense. However, there is no iconographic evidence for such function of censers in Nubia. The painted decoration of one of the niches in the cathedral in Faras, presenting a ciborium with chains hanging at two corners, suggests that censers or lamps could have been suspended from these chains. Unfortunately, this part of the painting is not preserved, so it cannot be confirmed that the painting resembles ciboria known from Byzantium. The precise function of the Dongolan censer remains uncertain.

CONCLUSION

The Dongolan censer is most probably of Nubian origin. The Greek–Nubian inscription engraved below the rim of the vessel concurrently with the decoration proves its origins. The material and technique are also evidence of a non-Byzantine origin, as they were simply not used for objects with similar decoration in the Byzantine Empire. Thus, the censer under discussion must be a copy made in Nubia based on a silver original from the Byzantine sphere. The copy was quite faithful as, apart from the Nubian part of the inscription, there are no specifically Nubian iconographical features to be discerned. The dating of the copy, based on the palaeography of the inscription, places it sometime between the 6th and the 10th century.

Apart from conclusions concerning the nature, origin and dating of the object, as well as an interpretation of the iconography, one may also draw conclusions on the inter-Makurian and Makurian–Byzantine relations. Claiming that the censer was of Byzantine origin, Gartkiewicz had suggested strong ties between Makurian and Byzantine clergy in the 10th and the 11th century (1990), but now, based on the proposed date of production and the fact that the censer was made in Nubia, his ideas can be refuted. In fact, the presence of 6th–7th century Byzantine patterns on the Dongolan censer could indicate the opposite: namely, that the import of liturgical vessels decreased or even ceased altogether directly after the 7th century and that the need for liturgical equipment was

met on the spot by indigenous craftsmen already in the 6th–7th century.

The presence of such a low quality copper-alloy copy of a byzantine silver censer in the cathedral equipment is puzzling. A most likely explanation is the general scarcity of silver in Makuria. Silver liturgical objects produced in Nubia have yet to be attested and the general ratio of silver to copper-alloy artifacts from Nubia is hardly to be compared to that in the Byzantine Empire. That is why perhaps the cathedral in Dongola was equipped with a copper-alloy censer, while even less important churches in Byzantium owned silver liturgical objects. Moreover, the quality of the Dongolan censer appears low only when compared with Byzantine liturgical vessels. As a Nubian artifact, it might be considered exceptional.

Ornamental patterns from Byzantium flowing to Nubia in the 6th–7th century are undoubtedly evidence of a gift exchange between Byzantium and Nubia. As the references in John of Ephesus and John of Biclar indicate, the original censer that served as a prototype for the Dongolan piece may have arrived in Makuria brought by one of the first Christian missions to

Dongola. It is equally possible that the original censer was traded into Nubia. An opulence of evidence for regular trade between the Byzantine Empire and Nubia has issued from the excavation by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology team of the Ioannes palace on Kom A in Old Dongola. Deposits found there contained amphorae from the 6th and 7th century, originating from Aswan, Mareotis, Syria and Palestine (Godlewski 2002: 206–210). Apart from the wine, other traded merchandise included glass and metal objects of Egyptian origin (Godlewski 2007: 290). There is no reason to exclude the possibility that a silver Byzantine censer reached Nubia in this way.

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