

# BANGANARTI 2006: THE INSCRIPTIONS

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The work of the 2006 season carried out by the Polish expedition on the site of Banganarti brought to light 25 wall inscriptions. Of these inscriptions, 15 were recorded on the walls of the Upper Church

and the remaining 10 on the walls of the Lower Church.

The Lower Church yielded also two fragments of funerary stelae made of local marble and inscribed in Greek.

## THE UPPER CHURCH

The discovery of wall inscriptions in the Upper Church was rather unexpected as the excavations of this building had been completed in 2004, following which a corpus of inscriptions from it had been closed at 954 items. Reporting on the 2004 season, I had expressed the opinion – a prophetic one as it turned out this season – that further inscriptions, if any, could occur in places where the building had undergone remodeling and replastering in the course of its use (Łajtar 2005: 309).

One of the present objectives was to study the western part of the Upper Church and the area adjoining it on the outside where a huge mud-brick structure, the so-called Western Building, is located. The original, presumably 11th century plan of the Church called for porticos to form an external passage around the building on the north, south and west. On the latter side, this portico consisted of six different, symmetrically paired supports, a double

column flanking the entrance, a single free-standing column and a single column abutting the corner wall (see reconstruction drawing of this facade above, in *Fig. 3* on p. 387). At least three stages of rebuilding have been observed in this portico: first a massive reinforcing of the double columns in the center and the flanking single columns, then blockages constructed between these pillars and the Western Building, which is likely to have been constructed at this time, and finally, blocking of the spaces between the supports of the portico to create a dark corridor running along the length of the west wall of the church. This third stage of portico modification was probably part of the latest rebuilding of the Upper Church, which should be dated to or perhaps shortly after AD 1280.<sup>1</sup>

During the 2006 season the blockages between the supports of the portico and partly also the blockages between the

<sup>1</sup> For the date, see Łajtar 2005: 311. It is grounded in a calculation of chronological indications from the inscription of a certain Teeita appearing on the first layer of plaster coating the east wall of Room 19.

portico and the Western Building were removed, returning the portico to its appearance after the first stage of the rebuilding. This brought to light 15 inscriptions and several figural drawings, executed on the portico supports presumably in the second half of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century, considering the established date for the rebuilding of the portico. Thus they predate by some 50-100 years the huge epigraphic production connected with the Upper Church, which should be dated to the last years of the 13th and the first half of the 14th century.

The newly discovered inscriptions follow in general terms the rules established for the epigraphic production connected with the Upper Church (cf. Łajtar 2003: 137-159). All of them are visitors' graffiti, done in a more or less practiced hand using Nubian-type majuscules.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, the hand becomes decorative and even plays with the script.<sup>3</sup> The inscriptions are composed in Greek with a considerable influence of Old Nubian seen in the morphology (Greek words and names with Nubian -ογ ending, like κληρικογ, μαρτυροφορογ) and syntax (*regens* always following *rectus* in attributive expressions). From the formal point of view, we have personal names standing alone, personal names preceded by the personal pronoun of the first person singular "I", short prayers followed by information about the visitors, and *varia*. The last group is represented by a list of

archangels, including the names of Iael, Ourouel (both repeated twice), and Anael. Two inscriptions are too damaged for anything certain to be said about their contents, and one is completely not understandable.

The four prayers display the same pattern. They start with the invocation Ῥαφαήλ θεέ, which is probably a word-for-word translation of the Old Nubian ραφραηλ τλλα and should be understood "God of Raphael",<sup>4</sup> and follow with the request φύλαξον = "guard", supplemented, in one case, with the sequence: οἰκτεῖρσον, εὐλόγησον, σκέπασον = "have pity, bless, protect". The prayers show a formal resemblance that suggests a close connection between them. Attractive as it is, this supposition cannot be taken for granted. It should be observed that prayers of the ὦ δεῖνα, φύλαξον type are rather uncommon in visitors' inscriptions which came into existence in Nubia in Christian times. Several examples are attested in the later Baganarti prayers, but the percentage is very low with relation to the bulk of the material. Yet prayers of this type frequently occur in dedicatory inscriptions of paintings in Nubian sacral buildings (churches and monasteries) where they probably were adopted from liturgical sources. Perhaps the liturgy exerted an influence also on the redactors of visitors' inscriptions on the supports of the western portico of the Upper Church at Baganarti.

The persons mentioned in the inscriptions mostly bear Nubian or Graeco-

2 Several inscriptions mentioning different people give the impression of having been done by the same hand, but this is difficult to corroborate.

3 Note, for example, the way the letter 'ϕ' is recorded in the name of the Archangel Raphael, provided with a pair of wings attached at the top of the round element and/or a pair of eyes within the round element, both wings and eyes surely referring to the Archangel Raphael.

4 The invocation "God of Raphael" confirms a supposition formulated on the grounds of earlier finds that the Upper Church at Baganarti was dedicated to the Archangel Raphael, cf. Łajtar 2003: 147.

Nubian names (Akshokouda, Marinkouda, Martyrophorou, Phorou). One name is of Biblical origin (David), one is most probably Greek (Adelph[---]) (Adelphios ?, for an inscription containing this name, see also below), one Arabic (Ali) (see below), and one of unknown origin (Promesa). As for functionaries, we have two clerics of the Great Jesus Church,<sup>5</sup> and another ecclesiastic connected with the Great Jesus Church.<sup>6</sup> One man, also an ecclesiastic, apparently a priest in a Church of Mary, followed a splendid civil career, which included the functions of epistolary scribe (ἐπιστολογράφος), a court notary (?) (νοτάριος ζητῶν), and *thegna* of the City (=Dongola). He must have been quite self-confident for he calls himself a marvel (θαῦμα) and order (τάξις), and boasts that he wisely exercises power over people. The word *thegna* also occurs in another inscription, but the text is so badly preserved that the exact meaning of the word under consideration, either “village /town official” or “son”, escapes us (see Łajtar 2006: 94-98). Two of the persons occurring in the inscriptions were owners of churches according to a pattern well attested for Christian Nubia for the period from the 11th century onwards (Łajtar, van der Vliet 1998: 35-53).

Let me present in greater detail two of the inscriptions from the Upper Church discovered this season. The first is a two-line inscription incised on the southern face of

the first pillar from the south, 1.65 m above the floor. It reads: ΔΙΟΦ | ΑΛΙ [Fig. 1]. This is neither in Greek nor in Old Nubian, but apparently in Arabic. The word ΔΙΟΦ probably transcribes the Arabic *dióf* = “guests” (plural of *def* = “guest”), and *ali* must be the Arabic personal name Ali. I do not know why the personal name in singular is connected with the substantive in plural. This is perhaps a mistake of the writer, undoubtedly a Nubian, rooted in his imperfect knowledge of Arabic. Alternatively, one can suppose that the inscription is incomplete, at least one more name having been omitted after Ali.

The “guest Ali” mentioned in this inscription was in all likelihood a Muslim. This is suggested by his name, the language of the inscription and, last but not least, the lack of a cross at the beginning of the text. This shows that the Christian pilgrimage center at Banganarti drew visitors from all of Nubian society, which was being steadily Islamized at the time that the inscription was written.

To the right of the inscription, there is a drawing showing a man clad in a skirt walking to the right. The arms of the man are outstretched. He holds a stick in his left hand and has a bag hanging over his left forearm. The stick and the bag suggest that we are dealing with the representation of a pilgrim. Perhaps this is a representation of the “guest Ali” who is mentioned in the inscription. Assuming Bogdan Żurawski is

5 Both of them are presented in the same manner as Ἰησοῦς μέγ(ας) ΤΗΗΚ(ΛΕΘΟΣ) ΚΛΗΡΙΚΟΥ. The reading of the abbreviated word ΤΗΗΚ( ) as ΤΗΗΚ(ΛΕΘΟΣ) is based on other Nubian attestations of this word, especially in the list of bishops of Faras, which mentions ἐπίσκοπος Ἰώσηφ ΤΗΗΚΛΕΘΟΣ; cf. Jakobielski 1972: 194, line [26]. The word itself, ΤΗΗΚΛΕΘΟΣ (ΤΗΗΚΛΕΘΟΣ), is a source of problems. It is either a toponym, here referring to the place where the church of Jesus was situated, or an epithet. The first possibility is more probable to my mind. The similarity of the men's presentation, considered together with the form of the prayers, is yet another proof for the inscriptions on the supports of the western portico being closely related.

6 The name of his function has not been preserved. There is no way of telling whether the Great Jesus Church in which he held his function is identical with the church of the two clerics.

right in interpreting the figure as a blind-man, Ali could have come to Banganarti attracted by the miraculous healings procured in the church by its patron, the Archangel Raphael, who was considered a healer *par excellence*.

The other inscription I would like to present stands 2.015 m above the floor, on the western face of the fourth support counting from the south. It can be translated: "God of Raphael, guard. I Adelph( ), cleric of the Great (Church of)

Jesus at Timikleos (?), having (the church at) [...]on, son of David Martyrophorou [---] carved (this) for the rest of the great *notarios* on Friday, in the fifth day of the moon, in the month of Phamenoth" [Fig. 2]. This inscription is exceptional in the Banganarti epigraphic material as it was left not as commemoration of a visit in the church by the writer, a certain Adelph( ), but on behalf of the rest of the great *notarios* (νοτάριος μέγας). This man, mentioned without name, could be one with the author

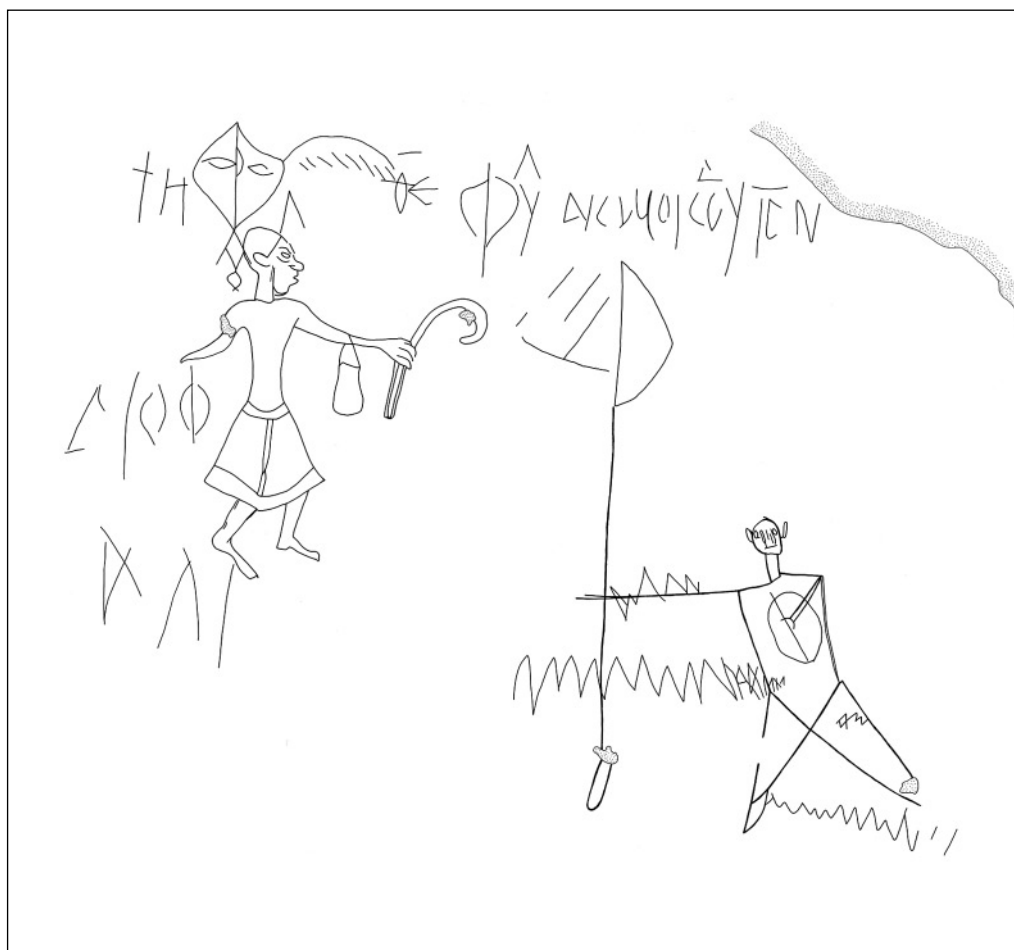


Fig. 1. Inscription of Ali on a pillar of the western portico of the Upper Church  
(Tracing A. Łajtar)

of an inscription on the southern face of the same, fourth support counting from the south, perpendicular to the present text, in which he is designated, among others, as νοτάριος ζητῶν (for this person, see above). Judging from the latter inscription, he was an exceptional figure, which explains why he was remembered by his contemporaries. Another unusual trait of the inscription discussed here is that its author uses the word χαράσσω = “to carve” instead of the stereotypical γράφω to describe the process of leaving a written record from a visit to the church.<sup>7</sup> He also

gives quite a precise date of his visit to the church, using three chronological indications: weekday, day of the lunar month, and month of the civil calendar. Such a precise dating is paralleled in the Banganarti material only by the inscription of a certain Teeita situated on the east wall of Room 19, on the first layer of plaster, which suggests that it is more or less contemporary with the discussed inscription, both of them predating the final remodeling of the church in or shortly after AD 1280 (Łajtar 2005: 311-312 with Fig. 2; 2008: 327-328).

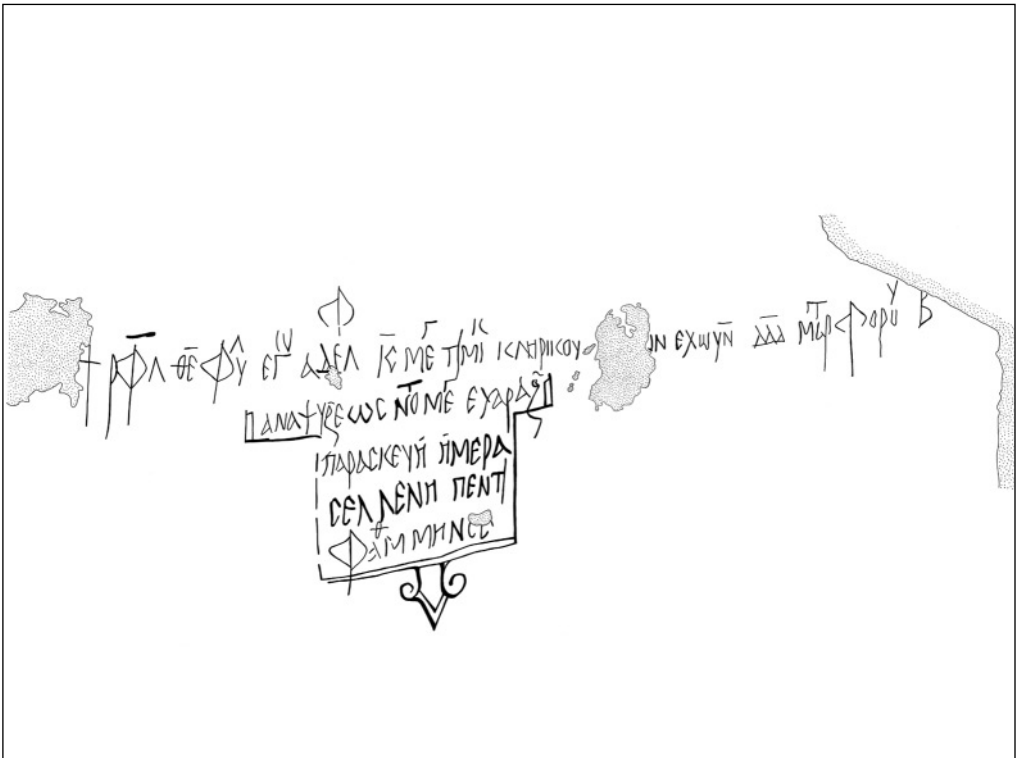


Fig. 2. Inscription of the notario from the western portico of the Upper Church in Banganarti (Tracing A. Łajtar)

7 As far as I can see, this is the first attestation of the word χαράσσω with relation to Christian Nubia.

## THE LOWER CHURCH

Eight wall inscriptions were known from the Lower Church prior to the work of the 2006 season: three on the east wall of the passage behind the apse (literary text, list of archangels, and prayer for intercession for a priest), one on the east wall of the central space (prayer for intercession for a King of the name Zacharias addressed to the Archangel Raphael; Lajtar 2003: 157-159), one on the south wall of the central space (prayer for intercession for abba Kyrou addressed to the God of the holy martyr Georgios), and three on the south wall of the western annex (two literary texts including a litany (?), and a votive (?) text inscribed in an icon showing *Maria orans*<sup>8</sup>. The ten inscriptions discovered during the 2006 season have more than doubled the corpus.

The “new” inscriptions occurred on the west wall of the western annex (eight items) and on the east wall of the passage behind the apse (two items). The former are all done in black ink by hands using majuscules of a Biblical type.<sup>9</sup> The paleography as well as

black ink suggest a literary or subliterate character of the texts. They could be excerpts from the Holy Scriptures and/or Early Christian literature, ecclesiastic canons, liturgical prayers, etc., but identification is difficult because of the poor state of the preservation of these inscriptions.

Of the two inscriptions recorded on the east wall of the passage behind the apse, one is written in black ink, but is too damaged for anything certain to be said about its contents. Another one is a visitor's graffito containing the name Antonnis or Antonnios. This man may be identical with the priest Antonios commemorated in an inscription in black ink situated immediately above. The latter inscription was discovered during the 2002 season, but was not read correctly until now. The “new” texts reads: “Preserve the most holy priest Antonios in peace, zeal and in love”. Archaeological criteria and paleography suggest an 8th/9th century as the date for all the wall inscriptions discovered in the Lower Church.

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8 Cf. Lajtar 2005: 313. Note that the text here designated as a litany (?) was qualified there as being dogmatic in character.

9 One inscription was executed with a very thin *kalamos*, as thin as those used for writing on papyrus.

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