

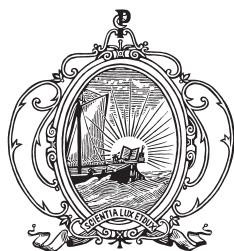
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THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND

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edited by

Julie R. ANDERSON and Derek A. WELSBY



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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF POWER – THE POWER OF ICONOGRAPHY: THE NUBIAN ROYAL IDEOLOGY AND ITS EXPRESSION IN WALL PAINTING

DOBROCHNA ZIELIŃSKA

Among the various iconographic types in Nubian wall painting there is a group of portraits of Nubian dignitaries that forms a part of the church decoration, the so-called ‘official program’ as defined by Włodzimierz Godlewski (2008). This group consists of representations of bishops, kings and kings’ mothers. The iconographic idea of displaying rulers and other high officials was obviously following Byzantine patterns.¹ In Nubia, the oldest surviving examples of such representations were found in the Cathedral of Faras and were dated to the 9th century (Godlewski 2006, 268-269). These official representations mainly portray Nubian dignitaries under the protection of celestial-heavenly creatures or saints of the Church. Such portraiture developed into an iconographic type that became popular in the wall decoration of Nubian churches.²

This paper³ discusses the iconographical characteristics of the portraits of kings and their mothers that show interesting – and originally Nubian – ideas in royal iconography in the Kingdom of Makuria.

KING UNDER SUPREME PROTECTION

The oldest examples of mural representations of Nubian kings uncovered in the Faras Cathedral were located in the southern and western part of the interior, in the *naos* and in the neighbouring baptistry.⁴ How-

ever, most probably at some time in the 10th century,⁵ the idea of portraying kings developed further, and crossing the limits set by Byzantine tradition, it was introduced into the most important place in the church interior – the apse.

A basic variant of the Nubian apse decoration is represented in the so-called ‘two zones apse composition’ with the representation of *Maiestas Domini* in the upper zone and the Virgin Mary surrounded by the Twelve Apostles in the lower zone.⁶

The iconographical type of the representation of the Virgin Mary in these compositions seems to play a decisive role in the interpretation of such decoration. As it is connected with the most important place in the church, the apse decoration could reflect ideas related to the Eucharist. However, the interpretation of the iconographic details is complex and can symbolise the Ascension, the Incarnation (as well as a dogmatic representation of the double nature of Jesus Christ – especially in those examples with the figure of Virgin Mary with Child in the lower zone), and the Second Coming at the day of the Last Judgement (Grabar 1968, 134-135; van Moorsel 1986a, 2; 1986b, 337, 339); consequently, the apse decoration was the most important of all of the paintings in the church.

The original apse decoration of the Faras Cathedral also represented the typical composition schema with the representation of the Virgin Mary with the Child – most probably in the iconographical type of Hodigitria – surrounded by the figures of the Twelve Apostles, and apparently with the composition of the *Maiestas Domini* in the upper zone (Figure 1). This programme was totally changed when the representation of the king was introduced in the central place of the lower register of the apse decoration. The figure of the king was placed slightly below that of the Virgin Mary, and in such a manner as to make it possible to repaint her hands, now placed on the shoulders of the

¹ The literature is very extensive, e.g. André Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin*, London 1971, and Christopher Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church*, London 1982.

² Several problems concerning the iconography of those representations have been discussed in numerous articles. Among others, one should note works by Bożena Rostkowska (1971, 1972, 1978), Tadeusz Gołgowski (1966, 1967) and Stefan Jakobielski (2001, 2007).

³ This text presents preliminary remarks from a wider study on Nubian royal iconography under preparation by the author.

⁴ The tendency to place kings’ portraits in the southern part of the church interior, as mentioned above, and to place female representations in the northern nave, discussed later in the text, could be linked to the Byzantine tradition where certain parts of the *naos* were designated separately for female and male members of the congregation (Mathews 1971, 130-132; Godlewski 2006, 71).

⁵ The dating is based on the identification of the person of the king; see below, footnote 10.

⁶ For Byzantine apse decorations this type was defined (*zweizonige Apsisprogramme*) and divided into different variants by Christa Ihm (1960, 95-102).



Figure 1. First phase of the decoration of Faras Cathedral (digital reconstruction by the author; based on Michałowski 1974, fig. 19).



Figure 2. Second phase of the decoration of Faras Cathedral (digital reconstruction by the author; based on Michałowski 1974, fig. 19).

king in a gesture of protection (Martens-Czarnecka 1986, 330-331) (Figure 2).

This new arrangement not only changed the iconographic elements of this composition, but the whole idea of this apse decoration. The most important painting – from a theological point of view – in the iconographic programme of any church was subsequently transformed into a symbolic representation of royal authority.⁷ It was the king who had become the main figure of the composition being surrounded by Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Apostles, and being under their heavenly protection.⁸ However, the identification of the king is purely hypothetical due to the lack of an accompanying legend, but this lack is in fact not necessary for further analysis.⁹

⁷ The exact meaning of the new composition could be only hypothetical, but the representation of the king in the apse decoration could signify his role in the Eucharist which was performed in front of him. See the unpublished PhD thesis by Robin Seignobos (2005) *Le roi, le sacré et l'Église dans les royaumes chrétiens de Nubie (VII^e-XIII^e siècles)*.

⁸ It is worth mentioning that at the same time the figure of a bishop had been incorporated into this composition (Godlewski 2008, 268-269). The bishop's figure was placed on the right side at the edge of the representation.

⁹ The person of the king is important for the analysis of the causes and moment of the formation of such type of the apse decoration, but not necessarily for understanding its meaning. In the earlier publications the figure of the king is identified as

The final phases of the apse decoration of the Faras Cathedral show that this new iconographic scheme became one of the variants used subsequently in Nubian churches continuing well into the 13th and the 14th centuries.¹⁰

The examples from Dongola and Banganarti show that the new representations played an important role in the expression of royal ideology in the iconographic programme of the churches. Both examples show a variation in the representation of the Nubian ruler; he is now depicted under the protection of the Archangel and/or the Apostles.

The Dongolese example is the 12th century decoration found in Room 29 of the North-Western Annex of the Monastery on Kom H. This decoration has been identified as the programme of the apse in an unusual church formed by Rooms 22, 23, 27, 29 and 31 (Zielińska 2010, 646). In this case the programme consists of the so-called 'two zones composition' with the depiction of Christ (in the Pantocrator type) in the upper

Georgios I, the most recent identification is Zacharias III (Mierzejewska 2000, 22-23; Jakobielski 2001, 66; Godlewski 2008, 268-269).

¹⁰ Apart from this kind of iconographical programme in the apse, one can still observe both, the "two zones composition" and the so-called reduced composition (Zielińska 2009, unpublished PhD thesis).

zone, and a Nubian ruler under the protection of the Archangel surrounded by the Apostles (Martens-Czarnecka 2001, 262-264) in the lower (Plate 1). The exact character of this painting, however, remains unclear.



Plate 1. Apsse composition in the room no. 29 of the North-Western Annex of the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola (digital reconstruction by the author; based on Jakobielski and Scholz (eds) 2001, pl. XXVI).

Nevertheless, it is highly probable that since the neighbouring complex in the same Annex was adapted to accommodate tombs located beneath the pavement and to be used for the performance of the commemoration of the dead, perhaps a similar function was also intended in the case of this space (Jakobielski 2008, 291–295).

The same idea was probably expressed in the Upper Church, or *Raphaelion*, at Banganarti. The unique architectural features of this building provided the interior space with seven apses repeating the same iconographic pattern where the ruler always appears under the protection of the Archangel Raphael (hence, together with numerous graffiti mentioning this Archangel, the name suggested for the Banganarti church;

Łajtar 2004, 255; Łaptaś 2004, 244). In Chapels 2 and 3 the Apostles are also protecting/venerating the king by resting their hands on his shoulders or supporting his elbows (Plate 2).

As mentioned above, it is difficult to define the exact character of this special iconographic programme in



Plate 2. Fragments of apse decoration from Chapels 2 and 3 in the Upper Church (or Raphaelion) at Banganarti. The gestures of the Apostles are indicated by the arrows (photo B. Żurawski, courtesy of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology).

either Dongola or Banganarti. However, an important observation is that most of the royal figures at Banganarti were at some point in time repainted and replaced by the portraits of the next rulers. This was carefully done without touching other areas of the composition (Calaforra-Rzepka 2005; Łaptaś 2004, 24; 2008, 106). This could suggest that these wall paintings were executed after the death of the king to serve a purpose of a very special veneration, and were ‘updated’ when the time had passed and the place for the new one was required. On the basis of the stylistic features, as well as the archaeological data and the accompanying inscriptions, this practice seems to have continued from the 11th until the 13th century or even later (Łaptaś 2004, 252).

The idea of portraying kings in the church interiors was not alien to Byzantine customs. However, in Byzantine iconography representations of the ruler in the area of the sanctuary are extremely rare. The most famous example of this pattern is the 6th century representation of Justinian from the San Vitale Church in Ravenna. Here, the emperor was portrayed according to the tradition as a perfect believer and a donor (Grabar 1971, 98-111). The Nubian type of the official royal portrait in the apse composition, though, reveals a different idea. This official royal portrait decorated the apse in order to imply by the depiction of the king under the protection of the heavenly hosts that his office was given and protected by God.¹¹

Bogdan Żurawski suggested that this type of apse decoration could express the 12th century Byzantine idea of *Christou mimesis* (Żurawski 2003, 245; 2006, 181). However, as demonstrated by the example from Faras, the figure of the king is neither placed among the Apostles, nor is it replacing the figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The royal figure is rather added in such a manner as to make it clear that the king is there to receive their protection. Furthermore, the examples at Banganarti show that the king is represented under the protection of the Apostles, but not among them. Nevertheless, the idea of *Christou mimesis* was expressed in a different way, as discussed below.

HOLY AND ROYAL MOTHERS

The most complex section of the iconographic programme in Nubian churches was that of the *naos*. It comprises paintings of various subjects, among them the most numerous group are the representations of saints.

The various representations of male saints identified on the walls of Nubian churches can be divided into specific groups representing Prophets (e.g. King David, John the Baptist), Apostles (e.g. Peter, Paul, Mark?), Anachorites (e.g. Onophrios, Melas, Amone), ecclesiastic saints (e.g. Stephen, John Chrysostom, Psate, Kaau, Pakhomios, Kyprianos, Ignatios the archbishop of Antiochia), saint warriors (e.g. Georgios, Theodore Stratelates, Merkourios, Epimachos, Phoibammon, Sol-

omon/Sisinios?), and saint healers (e.g. Kosmas and Damianos).¹²

A surprising contrast, however, can be found in the much more restricted selection of female saints, where only depictions of Saint Anna and the Virgin Mary can be identified.¹³ Moreover, the representations of these two saintly figures are quite numerous,¹⁴ highlighting in an even more meaningful way the absence of other female saints from the iconographic programme.

These are not, however, the sole female representations in Nubian painting. In the northern nave of the Faras Cathedral, in both chronological phases, a group of paintings has been identified as representations of the mothers of the kings.¹⁵ Their identification is based on the legend accompanying one of these representations, which describes a woman portrayed as a 'Martha, Mother of the King' and the similarities of the iconographic features of this painting with other female portraits (Michałowski 1967, 154-157; Jakobielski 2001, 66-70, 78-79; Rostkowska 1972; Godlewski 2008).

The title and position of the Mother of the King in Nubia are well attested (Donadoni 1969). It was clearly of a Nubian origin and seemed to have belonged to a long tradition, as could be judged on the basis of Napatan documents showing the matrilineal tradition of royal succession (Kahn 2005, 145-147). In the Kingdom of Makuria, the King's Mother seemed to have played a similarly important role, as confirmed by 22 documents that listed her office directly after the king's,

¹¹ Cf. Seignobos 2005, *passim*.

¹² This database has been constructed on a basis of the materials collected for my PhD thesis, and updated with Alexandros Tsakos as part of the project *Corpus of the Nubian Wall Paintings*. Progress of the work was presented at the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies and recently at the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Sofia in 2011.

¹³ There are two paintings previously identified as representations of female saints. One of the paintings from the Faras Cathedral was initially identified as saint Damiana (Michałowski 1967, 125-126), but due to the lack of a legend and other iconographical arguments it has been recently identified as a representation of King's Mother (Godlewski 2008, 278-280, fig. 13). The other representation has been uncovered in the *prothesis* room in the Church of Archangel Raphael in Tamit. Initially described as a saint, it has been recently identified as the Virgin Mary based on the details of its iconography (Balasare 1967, 45).

¹⁴ This is especially evident when it comes to the representations of the Virgin Mary in the various iconographic types. There are only three examples of depictions of Saint Anna identified by legends.

¹⁵ The chronological phases refer to the so-called Paulos Cathedral and Petros Cathedral. It is difficult to state when the tradition of portraying Mothers of the King was introduced. W. Godlewski has dated the oldest representation to the beginning of the 10th century (Godlewski 2008, 271).

and as a part of the official protocol¹⁶ (Rostkowska 1982).

Both the title and the position of the representations of Mothers of Kings in the Nubian iconographic programme have no equivalent in the Byzantine Empire; however, the Nubian representations could have been inspired by the portraits of Byzantine empresses.

The representations of the Mothers of Kings together with the aforementioned depictions of Saint Anna and the Virgin Mary form an interesting, indisputably homogenous group of portraits the character of which

is emphasised by the accompanying legends. As a result, the fully preserved¹⁷ painted decoration of the northern nave of the Faras Cathedral created a unique official iconographical programme that depicted an unconventional ‘succession’ line: from Anna – mother of Mary, through Mary – mother of Christ, to the Mother of the King (Plate 3).

These representations, especially in the absence of other depictions of female saints among the known Nubian wall paintings, create the impression that a specific *metros mimesis* or *Marias mimesis* idea was



1



2

Η ΑΓΙΑ ΑΝΝΑ Η ΜΗΤΗΡ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚ[ΟΥ]
Η ΑΓΙΑ Κ[ΑΙ] ΜΑ[ΡΙΑ] or ΜΑ[ΡΙΑΤΟΚΟΣ]

ΑΝΝΑ : ΜΗ(ΤΗ)Ρ : ΜΑΡΙΑ : ΜΗ(ΤΗ)Ρ : Τ[ΟΥ ...]

Η ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ ΜΗ(ΤΗ)Ρ Τ(ΟΥ) Χ(ΡΙ)ΣΤΟΥ

ΜΗ(ΤΗ)Ρ ΒΑΣ(ΙΛΕΩ)Σ



Plate 3. 1: Representation of Saint Anna from the so-called Paulos Cathedral at Faras, legend see Łukaszewicz 1994 (photo Michałowski 1974, fig. 1). 2: Representation of Saint Anna from the so-called Petros Cathedral at Faras, legend see Kubińska 1974, 120, the possible reading of “T[ΟΥ]...” at the end updated by Alexandros Tsakos (photo D. Zielińska, courtesy of the Sudan National Museum). 3 and 4: Virgin Mary and the Mother of King from the so-called Petros Cathedral at Faras, legend see Michałowski 1967, 154-155 (photo D. Zielińska, courtesy of the Sudan National Museum).

¹⁶ I would like to thank Dr Grzegorz Ochała for allowing me access to his database of Nubian texts. They are also listed on http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Offices_and_Titles.

¹⁷ Fully in this context means preserved to a sufficient degree for full identification of all representations, on the basis of unmistakable iconographical attributes and legends.

expressed in Nubian painting. This idea parallels interestingly the abovementioned concept of *Christou mimesis*, setting the image of the holy mothers and of the kings' mothers beside each other, the Mother of the King thus assuming a position equivalent to that of the Mother of God. Consequently, the royal office in Maku-ria becomes an image of Christ's role as the heavenly king and the king consequently become an equivalent or terrestrial deputy of Christ (Godlewski 2008, 266).

CONCLUSION

From their very beginning, studies on Nubian iconography have concentrated on defining the limits of Byzantine influences and the degree of Nubian independent artistic activity. Both topics discussed in this paper exemplify this tendency, while clarifying its nature in the following: it is clear that Nubian wall painting was initially based on Byzantine patterns, but rather quickly crossed the boundaries set by these origins and went further so as to express indigenous ideas.

In the iconographic material examined here, there is an unusual – for the art of Eastern Christianity of the Middle Ages in general – stress on the significance of royal authority. Although we lack the written sources to define similar aspects in other levels of public expression of Christian Nubians, we can infer from the special role of the king and his mother in the mural decoration of Nubian churches that this iconographical custom mirrored a specific social reality of the Christian Middle Nile Valley.

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