

Polish archeologists' latest discoveries in Sudan

Madonna of Banganarti



For many years, Dr. Bogdan Żurawski has led archeological research by the Polish Joint Archeological Expedition in the Middle Nile Valley

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The Polish archeological mission working on the "Lower Church" at Banganarti in Sudan has uncovered magnificent medieval wall paintings, including an already-famous icon of the praying Madonna – one of the world's oldest images of the Virgin Mary

Banganarti, a Nubian village located on the right (eastern) bank of the Nile has for many seasons been the focus of excavation work by the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archeology of the Warsaw University in collaboration with the Research Center for Mediterranean Archeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. These research efforts have concentrated on churches built between the 7th to 11th centuries, discovered under a layer of *kom* (artificial mound). The discov-

eries made in the so-called Upper Church, also known as the Church of the Archangel Raphael, were described in *Academia* one year ago in the article "Miracles of Banganarti."

Under the Raphaelion's floor

In a surprise discovery, the Church of the Archangel Raphael turned out to have been erected over a previous, older building labeled consequently the Lower Church, one of the earliest such structures in the Middle Nile Valley. Banganarti's Lower Church proved to be as interesting as the Upper Church, if not even more so. First built at the end of the 6th century or somewhat later, the building was overhauled in the 9th century. Its roof, supported by four stone columns, was then replaced by a dome resting upon four brick pillars and a system of barrel vaults. Some stone elements of the original columns and walls were used in the foundations for the pillars to hold up the new dome, and among these elements some of the oldest Nubian wall paintings have been discovered, portraying archangels and holy riders.



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Bird's eye view of excavation work at Banganarti



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During the latest archeological campaign (in January–March 2006), an excellently preserved baptistery was also discovered in the southeastern corner of the Lower Church, dating from the 6th/7th century, including two basins and rich decorative paintings. Found alongside one another on these walls are the largest and smallest of the paintings so far discovered in Banganarti: oversized figures of saints, right alongside miniatures only 10 centimeters tall. These and other archeological remains have allowed the 7th/8th-century Nubian baptism rite to be reconstructed. It is now clear that the lower baptismal basin was not in fact filled with water. Rather, here a neophyte would stand upon a layer of sand, and the water used during baptism (drawn from the upper basin) would be immediately absorbed into the sand.

Another room of rectangular layout, found alongside the baptistery, probably functioned as a *consignatorium*. It was here that anointments and the sacrament of confirmation were performed. The text of a Greek prayer found on a small altar, later built into the floor of the Upper Church, tells us that Nubian neophytes were given honey and milk after their baptism.

The Lower Church had already been in existence for two hundred years when two vast tombs were built on either side of the *consignatorium*. Once opened, they were found to contain the decayed bones of three males who died between 30 and 50 years of age. One of them was most likely Markos (d. 786) the *hegemon* (a high-ranking military commander

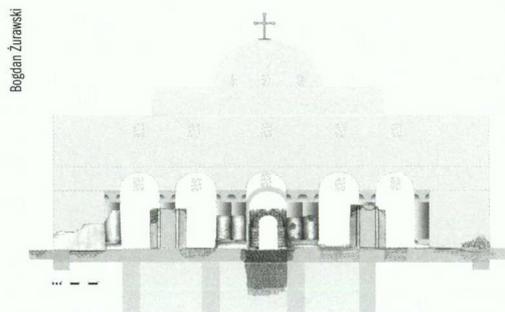
or governor), whose grave stele was found reused in the floor of Church of the Archangel Raphael, immediately above the tomb itself.

The Nubian Madonna of Banganarti

The two greatest painting compositions so far found within the Lower Church are from the south wall. The already well-renowned “Orant Madonna” icon (i.e. a portrayal of the Virgin Mary in praying pose) from Banganarti, now on display at the Archeological Museum in Poznań, was painted here alongside a scene of Saint Mercurius spearing the Emperor Julian the Apostate to death.

This is a hagiographic interpretation of Julian’s ill-understood death in battle against the Persians on 26 June 363, in the vicinity of Ctesiphon. It is unknown who dealt Julian the spear wound that led to his death. This sudden and mysterious death of an emperor who had made efforts to revive paganism was ascribed to divine intervention. According to the *Life of Basil* by pseudo-Amphilochius, it was the Mother of God who sent St. Mercurius to slay Julian, for “hostility shown to her son Jesus

Excavation work underway in the Upper Church (Raphaelion) at Banganarti during the 2003 excavation season



The front (western) side of the Upper Church, with the Lower Church below (a reconstruction)

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Anna Blaszczyk



Ink copy of a painting found on the south wall of the western portion of the Lower Church, with St. Mercurius slaying Julian the Apostate



The Orant Madonna of Banganarti - status after conservation work

Christ." The proximity of the two portrayals, of the Madonna and of Julian the Apostate, therefore does not seem to be coincidental here.

The Madonna of Banganarti portrays a very rare type of Madonna, sometimes called a Venetian-style Orant. In monumental art, this iconographic type is known only from three portrayals in San Marco in Venice and one from San Donato in Murano.

Mary's arms, joined at the wrist, are folded in prayer. Perhaps she was painted onto the wall of the Lower Church to plead for her intercession in a time of war, such as often occurred in Nubian history. In the mid 9th century the Nubians were waging a life-and-death struggle against the Arab adventurer El-Omari, who had set up a gold-hunting enclave near the fourth cataract of the Nile. Just alongside the Madonna icon, someone used black ink to write down the longest Greek inscription known from the Lower Church. It is a litany, presumably addressed to Mary. Other inscriptions from the Lower Church contain clear allusions to historical events (such as an 9th-century prayer to the Archangel Raphael on behalf of King Zacharias, found on the wall of the main nave, to the right of the apse).

"Descent into Limbo"

The most interesting paintings of the Lower Church are located just alongside the

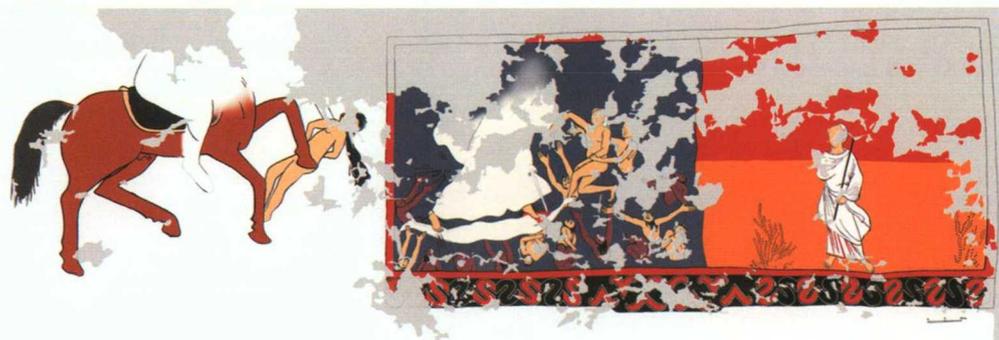
entrance to the baptistry: "Christ's Descent into Limbo" (*Anastasis*), with a scene adjacent to the left portraying what is most likely St. Sisinnius on horseback trampling the demon Alabasria (depicted as a naked woman with her hair loose), plus a scene to the right showing a fragment of a surreal reddish-orange landscape with two weakly visible bushes and a figure reclining in *contrapposto*, in white garments, without a halo. The latter scene, together with the *Anastasis*, is framed in a decorative border.

The "Descent into Limbo" from Banganarti has already earned itself an important place in the history of Nubian art. The composition centers upon a vast figure of Christ, bent over, bathed in a mandorla (almond-shaped aureola) of light, who is treading upon Hades and at the same time drawing Adam out of the abyss. Eve, hidden behind Adam's back, receives marginal treatment.

The painter who painted this scene was a genius ahead of his epoch. The verve, expression, and dynamism that emanate from the figures of the dead (who are, incidentally, portrayed as being of both white and black figures) are completely foreign to the Byzantine art of the age, instead bearing many traits akin to pre-Romanesque art, especially painting during the Carolingian *renovatio*. The nakedness of all the figures aside

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Colored copy of a painting composition found on the south side of the Lower Church, with St. Sisinnius trampling the female demon Alabastria (to the left) and the Christ's Descent scene (to the right)

from Christ also points to inspiration coming from a northern direction. The magnificent composition clearly draws upon the stylistics of the miniatures used in 9th-century pre-Romanesque Psalters (such as the Utrecht Psalter or Stuttgart Psalter).

Nubia's wider connections

The excavations carried out in Banganarti in 2006 aimed to identify the layout of the northern section of a wall that once encircled the churches plus nearby dense residential areas. Aside from tons of ceramics, this work turned up a necklace of 24 beads made of carnelian and rock crystal. Ceramics from the same layer suggest that it was hidden or lost in the 11th century, or in the 12th at the latest, during a time when the Nubian Kingdom was flourishing economically. Interestingly, an identical necklace was also found in Poland, in the 11th-century grave of a girl in Dziekanowice. Both necklaces likely came from western India. It would be hard to imagine a better example to illustrate the extent and intensity of medieval trade links. North Africa and Europe were equally involved in this "global economy," and the Nubian Kingdom, seemingly at the end of the world, was not as inaccessible as one might think. Excavations in Banganarti had already previously turned up evidence of this fact, in the form of inscriptions that a Provençal man named "Benesek" (Benedict) left on the wall of the Upper Church.

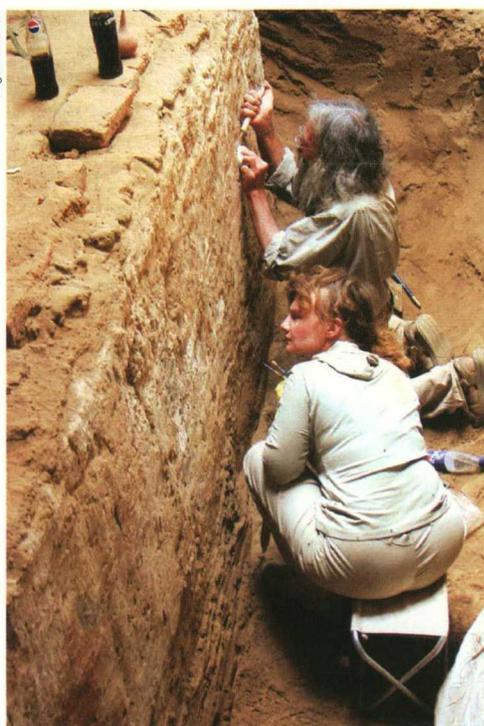
The 2006 campaign likewise produced several interesting inscriptions and engravings made by pilgrims (and for pilgrims) on the walls of the portico surrounding the Upper Church. Among these, the most interesting is a portrait of a certain Nubian pilgrim. The accompanying inscription indicates that he was in fact a Muslim, named Ali. He was presum-

ably drawn to the Church of the Archangel Raphael by the location's renown as a place of miraculous healing. Ali himself had particular reason to travel on foot to the sanctuary in Banganarti, as he was blind and used a cane reminiscent of a short crossier – with which he was depicted on the wall of the portico. Other scenes portrayed by the engravings include a giraffe hunt using a throwing stick called a *safarag*, an instrument which remains in use to this very day among the Beja tribe. ■

Further reading:

- Survey and Excavations between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma, Southern Dongola Reach Survey I (Nubia II)*. (2003). Warszawa: PAN.
 Żurawski B., Phillips J. (2005). Murals from Banganarti. *Minerwa*, 6.1, 37–39.

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Restoration work on the scene of Christ's Descent into Limbo, conducted by Monika Czerniec and Wojciech Chmiel