Some Remarks on Iconography of Rulers and Archangels in Nubian Painting
Excavations that have been carried out for many years by Polish scholars in the territory of Nubia, namely in the monastery in Old Dongola and the church in nearby place called Banganarti,\(^1\) exceedingly enriched our knowledge of the subject of rulers and archangels in the Nubian wall painting. So far all the conclusions concerning that subject have been drawn mainly on the ground of an analysis of wall paintings discovered in the twentieth century by British,\(^2\) Italian,\(^3\) and Dutch\(^4\) missions in churches in Faras, Abd el-Qadir, Tamit, Sonqi Tino, and Abdalla-n Irqi, and later by Polish mission directed by Professor Kazimierz Michalowski in the cathedral in Faras.\(^5\)

A set of paintings representing effigies of Nubian rulers under protection of archangels in chapels of Banganarti church\(^6\) and the painting in the Dongola monastery,\(^7\) showing the scene of coronation of a Nubian king, considerably contribute to the learning of culture of the Christian Nubia. Representations of Nubian rulers, investigated in different aspects can largely enhance our knowledge of the structure of the royal court, hierarchy, propaganda, and ideology of rule and religion, while discoveries of grave crypts give an idea of kinds of burials of Christian Nubia rulers. Analysis of attire can in turn bring new information on attributes of power (sceptre, crown), while richness of fabrics and decorative elements shows what sorts of objects were available to and used by an elite of the Nubian society.

Paintings preserved in chapels of the church in Banganarti and the monastery in Dongola confirm certain pattern of iconographic arrangement which, as it seems, appeared in Nubia in the middle of the tenth century and made an original element in the Nubian art. According to that pattern a figure of a ruler is always protected by an archangel or a holy person.\(^8\) The protecting person is pictured in large dimensions behind the protégé making

---

a background against which the smaller figure of a ruler is represented. The protecting person’s hands rest on the ruler’s shoulders. In that way all the figures of rulers preserved in the chapels of Banganarti are protected. The protecting persons are always either archangel Rafael or Michael, represented in full splendour.

Position of a ruler in the Christian kingdom of Nubia, from the very beginning of its existence, can be learned from numerous references in written sources like inscriptions and reports by medieval historians and travellers. Kings are mentioned as Great King or Greek King, they bear by-names like Philochristos, Augustus or Theostepos. King Mercurios is named New Constant in and the crown of Cyriakos originates from Heaven. It is all aimed at stressing particular role and position of a ruler at the very top of social hierarchy and at the same time his connections with God. King’s power is conferred on him by Christ and he performs it on earth in Christ’s name. King’s high standing recognised by the Church largely contributed to maintaining integrity of the Nubian kingdom and strengthening Christian faith. The most appropriate places for such formal effigy of a ruler were city squares and public buildings. However, a ruler was represented in church interiors in perhaps slightly different aspect, more personal and intimate in his relation with God, his representation in full royal attire with insignia of power equally popularise his person among believers. Rulers represented on portraits placed in church interiors were in a way ‘sanctified’ and adjacent representations of holy persons as well as representations of rulers under direct protection of Holy Virgin, Christ, Holy Trinity, saints, and archangels testify the divine origin of rulers’ power.

The paintings represent not only the Nubian kings, whose residence was in the capital city of the kingdom – Dongola, but also governors of provinces – eparchs, named by Arabs Masters of the Mountain – Sahib el-Giabal, residing in Faras or Qasr Ibrim. Those paintings were found in churches discovered in Sonqi Tino, Abd el-Qadir, and the

---

13 VANTINI, Christianity, p. 74; Io., Oriental Sources, p. 40.
14 Ibid., p. 45.
17 WELSBY, Medieval Kingdoms, pp. 93–95.
Rivergate Church in Faras. The most numerous paintings of that kind decorated the interior of the Faras cathedral. Because of almost uninterrupted functioning of the Faras cathedral over nearly eight centuries during which its painted decoration evolved, being enriched with new effigies, we are able to trace changes in the way of representation of a figure of ruler. Such elements as foreign influence and local components in painting art of particular period, adopted rules of representation as well as painting techniques of different ateliers were of particular importance in formation of the relevant iconography. Because of the same artistic trends prevailing in the entire kingdom of Nubia in different periods, portraits of rulers as well as other effigies discovered outside Faras feature significant iconographic similarities. According to the rules, all portraits should be supplemented with, appropriate to the period, identifying legends. Unfortunately in many cases legends are not preserved. In such cases definition of a person of a ruler is very difficult. Sometimes it is entirely impossible and than analysis of style can help to place particular painting in general chronological classification.

It seems that the one of the earliest portraits of a ruler well preserved in Nubia is an effigy of a king dating from the beginning of the tenth century, placed in the middle of the apse of the Faras cathedral (Fig. 1). Discussion on the king’s identity is currently under way; is it Georgios I, Zaharias III or, maybe, one of his predecessors?

The king is represented under protection of the Virgin Mary, who stands behind him and whose hands rest on king’s shoulders. The king is clad in chiton with long sleeves with adorned cuffs. The red belt decorated with pearls and with golden buckle is bound round the king’s waist. Around the neck there is a wide red ‘collar’ which makes a specific component of the attire of Nubian dignitaries (red is attributed to kings and bishops). On his shoulders, the king wears chlamys braced on the right shoulder and decorated with tablion – the sign of dignity. The bottom corners of the mantle are decorated with golden pendants. The king wears red shoes, covering the insteps. The king’s head is not preserved, and therefore we do not know what the crown was like. The king holds a short silver cross in his right hand. On the ground of other, later representations, we can assume that together with a crown, the cross belonged to attributes of a ruler.

As far as the way of representation is concerned, from among all Nubian paintings of that type, the figure from the apse of the Faras cathedral mostly resembles effigies of
Byzantine dignitaries, for example emperor Justinian from the church San Vitale in Ravenna. Later paintings are more and more different from that pattern.

The effigy of one of the later and most famous Nubian rulers – king Georgios II can be found not only in the Faras cathedral, in so-called Bishops’ Room,\textsuperscript{29} but also in the church in Sonqi Tino. In the Faras cathedral the king is protected by the Virgin Mary (Fig. 2) while in Sonqi Tino\textsuperscript{30} by Christ (Fig. 3). Both effigies are supplemented with

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Representation of king Georgios II from the church in Sonqi Tino (The Sudan National Museum in Khartoum). (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., Cat. No. 34.

\textsuperscript{30} G. Vantini, S. Donadoni, Gli scavi nel diff di Sonqi Tino, \textit{RendPontAc} 3 (1967–1968), p. 257, Fig. 5; Donadoni, Sonqi Tino, p. 215, Fig. 91.
Byzantine type of inscription – *polychronion* wishing the ruler long life, which indicates that the portraits were painted in the ruler’s lifetime, that is in the second half of the tenth century.\(^{31}\) The date of birth and death of Georgios II is unknown;\(^ {32}\) we know however, that he reigned in the year 969, in which Egypt was conquered by Fatimids (report of Arab emissary Selim el-Aswani). He must have died before 1002 because in that year his successor, king Raphael,\(^ {33}\) was already in power. Both paintings from Faras and Sonqi Tino are executed in the same artistic manner, specific for Nubian painting in the period of the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century.\(^ {34}\) On both pictures the king is represented in similar attire and with the same attributes. He has the red ‘collar’ and the red belt with golden buckle is bound round his waist. *Chlamys* with golden pendants covers his shoulders, he wears the red shoes and holds a short golden cross in his right hand. The king’s crown is of *kamelaoukion* type and is topped with the star of David and a cross. On both sides of the crown little chains with crosses at the ends hang from the pieces resembling horns. In Byzantium such crown – one of the insignia of imperial power – was considered to be God’s gift for the first emperor, brought to him from heaven by an angel.\(^ {35}\) Apart from the cross, Georgios from Sonqi Tino holds a sceptre topped with a spherical piece decorated with precious stones (Fig. 3). On the representation from Faras the same attribute is held in place with right hand of the Virgin Mary resting on the king’s shoulder.

Another portrait of a dignitary from the period of the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century have been discovered in the Faras cathedral on the oldest coat of three times repainted painting. It represents a king\(^ {36}\) wearing a veil on his head (a crown not preserved) and clad in a mantle decorated with medallions filled with coloured circles. Rich belt on the hips and *enchirion* held in right hand can be seen. If it is a portrait of a king, it could be of one of the successors of Georgios II, that is Raphael (1002–1006) or Stephanos? (around 1027).\(^ {37}\)

Another representation of a figure wearing crown and veil (Fig. 4) discovered in the church in Sonqi Tino is undoubtedly painted by the same painter as the portrait of Georgios. The figure is protected by archangel Michael adored by Four Living Creatures.\(^ {38}\) The crown is poorly preserved, nevertheless it can be concluded that its shape is different from that of the crown of Georgios. It is tripartite, higher in the middle. The figure holds a bow and a sceptre in his right hand. It is known from historic sources that Nubian army was renowned

---


\(^{32}\) Vantini, Christianity, pp. 119–123.


\(^{34}\) Martens-Czarnecka, Faras VII, pp. 68–69, 72, 75, 80–88.


\(^{36}\) Michalowski, Wall Paintings, Cat. No. 56.


\(^{38}\) Donadoni, Sonqi Tino, p. 214, Fig. 191.
for its archers. Archers were under command of an eparch – viceroy, whose attribute of power was a bow, so the painting from Sonqi Tino could represent that Nubian dignitary. It would be then the earliest portrait of an eparch preserved in Nubia. Other representations of eparchs originated from the late period, i.e. twelfth-thirteenth century.

According to, adopted in Nubia, manner of representation of archangels in imperial pose and splendour and at the same time in conformity with artistic trends specific for

---

39 VANTINI, Oriental Sources, pp. 80, 95.
40 Cf. representations of eparchs from the church in Abd el-Qadir and from the Faras cathedral.
the period of the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century, archangel Michael protecting the eparch is clad in loros with richly decorated stripes, has not red but green ‘collar’ around his neck and on his head probably a diadem shaped crown, which unfortunately is not preserved. Archangel’s yellow wings are decorated with simplified peacock feathers with green centres, specific for representations of archangel Michael in Nubia, and are finished at the edges with wide red border (Fig. 5).

It is worthwhile to consider the effigy of queen Martha – a royal mother, represented under protection of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 6). However the painting undoubtedly originated in the period of Georgios II, the figure is shown wearing slightly different garments and also different type of crown. Also the Holy Virgin stands beside and not behind the queen. Those differences may result from application of another iconographic pattern, which in the period in questions appears on other representations.

An interesting painting (unfortunately only fragmentarily preserved) representing a figure in rich robes under protection of an archangel (not Michael) was discovered in recent years in the Holy Trinity monastery in Old Dongola (Fig. 7). The painting is lo-

---

43 Michalowski, Die Katedrale, pp. 154–157, Figs. 77–79; Id., Wall Paintings, p. 48.
44 Ibid., Cat. No. 45.
cated on the eastern, thus the most important from liturgical point of view, wall of a chapel. Under the painting remains of an altar can be found. The painting represents a complex composition. The central part is composed of the mentioned figure and above it a bust of Christ and dedicatory inscription of Georgios, later bishop of Dongola and


prior of the monastery. On both sides, like in the apse of Nubian churches, there are rows of apostles framed with the wings of the archangel.

The archangel in hieratic pose is clad in wide loros and dalmatic. He holds a sceptre and probably a sword in his right hand. The diadem shaped crown on his head is set with precious stones. The wings are plain yellow with no decoration. Very poorly preserved protected figure (Fig. 8) is dressed in ample mantle decorated with rows of crosses. A red belt on the hips draws one’s attention. A veil is visible on the head. A dark hand supports
a wallet. The painting originated in the second half of the eleventh century. Assuming that the figure represents a ruler, it would be for the first time that a wallet appears as an attribute of power of a king or eparch, which is the case on many paintings from the late period of the Nubian art (twelfth–thirteenth century). The wallet in the form of a sack hangs loose from the right shoulder, across the chest to the left hip. Such wallet can be most clearly seen on the representation of king Moise, son of Georgios IV, who reigned in the twelfth century and whose portrait was painted in the Faras cathedral under the

87 Rostowska, Remarques, pp. 201–208.
composition of Nativity (Fig. 9). On that painting, the king is depicted in ample caftan and skirt with pattern similar to caisson decoration, typical for that period of Nubian painting. A cross can be seen on the king’s chest, a veil and tripartite crown on his head. The king supports a wallet and holds a bow, an attribute of an eparch, with his right hand. Can it be that, in the period of the twelfth–thirteenth century, attributes of Nubian king and eparch, that is a veil, a bow or a wallet were used interchangeably while painting portraits of those figures? Could it be also in case of yet another portrait of a dignitary in the apse

48 Michalowski, Die Kathedrale, pp. 147–148, Fig. 70.
of the Faras cathedral, placed to the left of the figure of Zaharias III? The figure on that portrait, under protection of the Virgin Mary and Christ, has an attire similar to that of king Moise but instead of a typical crown there is a helmet with a pair of horns and topped with a crescent. In that period eparchs who, as king Moise, had wallets (eparch from the church in Abd el-Qadir⁴⁹ and Rivergate Church in Faras⁵⁰ or a king from the Faras cathedral⁵¹) were represented in such crowns.

⁴⁹ GRIFFITH, Oxford Excavations II, painting No. 12, Pl. XXXI/2.
⁵⁰ GRIFFITH, Oxford Excavations I, painting No. 34, Pl. XXXIII/1.
⁵¹ Michalowski, Wall Paintings, Cat. No. 66.
Another painting of that late period, from the Faras cathedral, representing an eparch belongs to the extremely interesting ones (Fig. 10). Bright colours, agglomeration of decorative elements, and distinct linearity attract attention. The eparch is clad in typical garments – caftan and ample skirt decorated with medallions. In his right hand he holds a bow and in the left hand a diadem with bucramion richly decorated with sashes. The diadem that can be put on the crown shaped as a helmet with horns makes a separate component of the headgear. Such conclusion can be drawn on the ground of another representation of the eparch’s crown composed of a helmet and a diadem. It can be that diadem as such makes certain mark of some additional high rank. White and thus ‘sacred’ hands on the eparch shoulders indicate protection of God, under which the eparch was represented. It can not be excluded that the scene symbolically represents the eparch’s investiture, authorised by a holy person – Christ, Virgin Mary or archangel. Similar ideological meaning has the painting from the Holy Trinity monastery in Dongola (Fig. 11). This is however the scene of coronation of a Nubian king by Christ – Person of the Holy Trinity. The painting is executed in the same artistic manner as above mentioned representation of an eparch from Faras. The painting represents a figure of a king dressed in a cloak in a form of paenula decorated with linked together medallions with effigies of eagles. The king wears a veil under a kamelaukion type crown topped with a cross. The hand of Christ, central Person of the Holy Trinity, protruding from clouds above the king’s head, rests on the crown. Right hands of the remaining two Persons of the Holy Trinity rest on the ruler’s shoulders. A sceptre topped with a cross, held in king’s right hand is supported by the Person of the Holy Trinity. Like above mentioned eparch, the king holds another crown in his left hand. The crown on the king’s head is a ‘heavenly’ crown, given to the king as a gift from Christ, while the king’s ‘earthly’ crown is held in his hand.

Chronologically ordered, preserved effigies of Nubian rulers show changes in course of time in the form and details of their attire. What remained unchanged, as in all effigies of rulers in the Christian world, is the representation of those figures in hieratic, full of dignity poses, standing en face with all insignia of power. The Holy Person, that is Christ, Virgin Mary, and archangels, who protect the rulers, always keep their hands on the rulers’ shoulders and in majority of cases stand behind them, less frequently they can stand beside or protrude from clouds above the rulers’ heads. Iconographic pattern, in which protecting person stands behind protected one seems to constitute specific local feature of the Nubian art. Introduced in the beginning of the tenth century it was used throughout all the periods of Nubian painting.

Obviously not all the representations of Nubian rulers have been preserved up to our time and can thus be subjected to research. State of preservation of those paintings is sometimes very poor and in many cases it is even difficult to identify a rank of the person (king or eparch). Nevertheless it is possible to follow the changes to which the rulers’ attire

52 Ibid., Cat. No. 61.
and attributes as crowns, sceptres, and crosses as well as fabrics\textsuperscript{54} and decorative patterns were subjected over entire period of existence of the Nubian kingdom. Those changes probably reflected trends in fashion but also resulted from current wealth of the country. It may be significant that the major part of preserved representations originated in the late period of Nubian painting (twelfth–thirteenth century) in which decline of power and prosperity of the Nubian kingdom took place.

Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka
Zakład Archeologii Śródziemnomorskiej
PAN, Warszawa