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*Washtub from the Palace of Ioannes
in Dongola*

A deposit of objects discarded from the palace was found in the 2008 season in a pit cut in the rocky ground of an open space that existed between the Palace of Ioannes (SWB.B.I) and the western citadel defenses. This irregular area may have been a courtyard, which was later adapted architecturally, building domestic units B.I.15, 36, 37, 41 and 42. The pit in question was discovered in the northwestern corner of room B.I.37, sealed by the foundations of the northern partition wall. It is not certain whether its full extent was explored.

The pit had been used as a dump for broken objects, which consisted mainly of pottery, both tableware and wine amphorae, the latter in the main part imported from Egypt. At the bottom, broken into ten pieces but reconstructible, were fragments of a broken tub of considerable size, cut from a single block of sandstone¹ (**Fig. 1**). The front and the left side of the tub with part of the bottom have been preserved, enabling a reconstruction of both form and size (**Figs 2–3**). Apparently, the tub must have been broken elsewhere and only these fragments landed in the rubbish pit. The rest must have been discarded elsewhere, perhaps somewhere nearby.

The tub stood on a long oval base, 70 cm long and 35 cm wide, finished with a torus (**Fig. 4**). The wall, which was 4 cm thick, took on an S-shape in profile, gently widening toward the top and terminating in an outcurved rim. The height of the tub was 58 cm, the width at the top edge 76 cm and the length 105 cm. Making the tub unique was carved decoration in high relief turning into full sculpture on the outside wall.

The composition on the front was antithetic: two rams standing on decorative bases opposite one another, flanking a lion's head presented frontally in the center (**Fig. 5**). The part of the tub immediately below the head of the lion has not been preserved, but it is not very likely that either an outlet, as in basins for producing wine, or a carved front of the body with forepaws, as is common for lion gargoyles, had existed there.² The head of the lion with its lightly rendered mane is marked by small standing ears, oval eyes rendered in relief and a withdrawn and shut muzzle with whiskers (**Fig. 6**).

The flanking rams were shown in full, heads raised and facing forward, walking toward the lion's head in the center, their tails raised (**Fig. 7**). The woolly fleece was rendered schematically, the heads practically sculpted in the round with round bulging eyes and a smooth muzzle with parted lips. The horns, shown curving downward behind small ears, were pointed forward (**Fig. 8**).

The rounded wall of the tub preserved on the left side was adorned with two plaited panels in bas-relief. The bigger one, set to the front, was inscribed in a square; the double guilloche entwined to form three concentric geometric figures: circle in the center, an 'X' shape and a rhombus, all surrounded by a wavy line intertwined with the arms of the 'X' and the rhombus (**Fig. 9**). The smaller panel, which is partly damaged, followed behind the bigger one, disappearing already in part on the back wall of the object (**Fig. 10**). Assuming the back had been decorated like the front, this second panel could well have

¹ W. GODLEWSKI, Dongola after the 2008–2010 seasons: royalty, saints and blessed bishops, *SudNub* 14, 2010, pp. 76–78, pl. 7–8.

² W.Y. ADAMS, Meinarti. The Late Meroitic, Ballana and Transitional Occupation, *SARS*. London 2000, pp. 37–39, Pl. 5 a 2.



1. Palace of Ioannes. B.I.37. Pit with fragments of the tub at the bottom (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



3. Left side of the tub. Add.09.358 (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



2. Tub. Provisionary reconstruction Add.09.358 (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).

4. Bottom of the tub. Add.09.358 (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



been part of a bigger composition. It was composed of a continuous double guilloche forming a cross inscribed in a diamond. The double ending of the cross was decorated additionally with knobs inscribed in arches.

The size of the object and its apparent connection with the palace building suggests that it may have been a freestanding tub used in the bath of Building B.I (**Fig. 11**). Since



5. Tub, the front part. Add.09.358 (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



6. Lion's head on the front of the tub (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



7. Figure of a ram from the right side of the composition (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



8. Head of a ram from the tub decoration (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).

the basin was found out of context, away from the bathroom, and since only a fragment was found preserving no outlet hole, the interpretation cannot be anything more than a suggestion. The uniqueness of the tub in terms of form and decoration does not facilitate the interpretation.

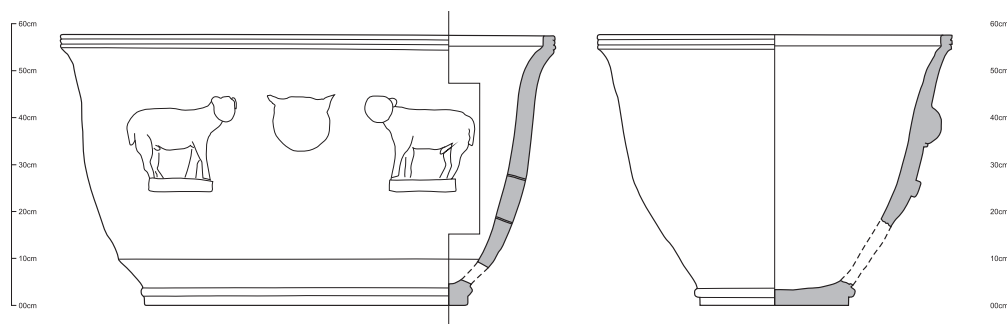
It was clearly a local creation, judging by the material used, as well as by the decoration style and iconography. The context in which it was found, which sets a date for when the object was broken and discarded, produced sherds of pottery from the end of the Sixth and from the Seventh century AD. The tub is an earlier work, executed perhaps as part of the furnishing for the palace of Ioannes (SWN.B.I) in the end of the Sixth century or earlier,



9. The bigger panel from the left side of the decoration (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



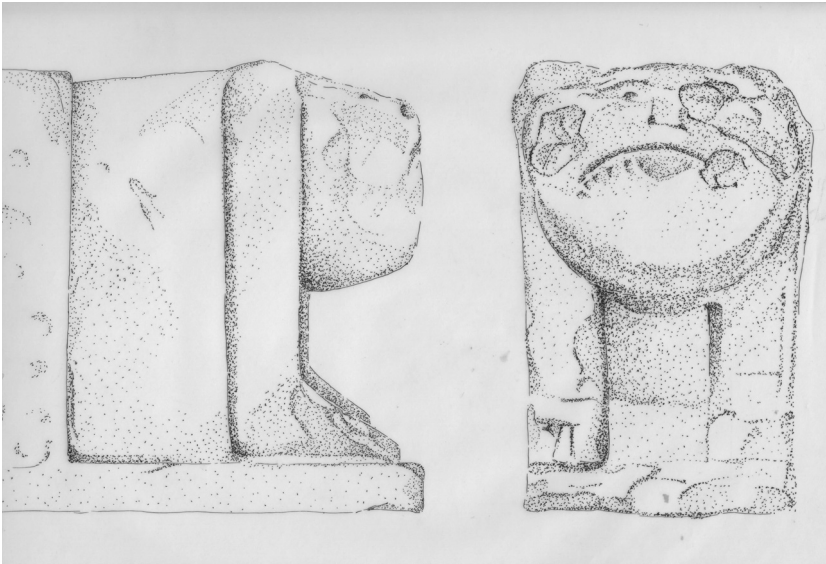
10. The smaller panel from the left side of the decoration (Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA Archive).



11. Tub. Add.09.358. Sections (Drawing: W. Godlewski, S. Maślak, D. Zielińska).

in the first half of the Sixth century, for Building B.IV of unidentified function, which was destroyed even as the palace of Ioannes was being built. Assuming an image of a cross was actually inscribed into the plaitwork panel, which is not explicitly clear, then the basin could have been executed after Makuria's conversion to Christianity in the middle of the Sixth century. There are no works of sculpture from the Sixth century from either Dongola or Makuria in general, except for capitals and altar screens, so there is no comparative material. Moreover, in the Sixth and Seventh century baptismal fonts and washing basins were masonry structures built below the level of brick pavements, occasionally employing stone blocks to line their edges.³

³ W. GODLEWSKI, *Les baptisteries nubiens, Faras VI*, Varsovie 1979, pp. 39–45.



12. Lions from the south facade of Building B.I – Palace of Ioannes (Drawing: D. Zielińska, PCMA Archive).



13. Architrave of the Roman Kiosk in Naga (after: Meroe, un empire sur le Nil, Milano 2010, Fig.105).

The southern facade of Building B.I (Palace of Ioannes) had two frontally depicted lions, unfortunately severely damaged, emerging from the front wall and serving presumably as the supports of a throne (bench) standing next to the entrance (**Fig. 12**). A connection between lions and royal buildings is well grounded in the Meroitic tradition, as indicated by sculptures from Gebel Barkal and the royal city of Meroe.⁴

The carved decoration on the front of the object in question, undoubtedly of the biggest importance ideologically, indubitably refers to the Meroitic tradition. Images of recumbent lions from the Roman kiosk in Naga, represented in antithetic arrangement with heads

⁴ M. BAUD, Meroe et ses lions, [*in:*] Meroe. Un empire sur le Nil, Milano 2010, pp. 90–92.

sculpted in the round and turned outward, are the nearest parallel to the decoration of the Dongolan tub (**Fig. 13**). The rams are also closer to the Meroitic tradition, in which the ram was a symbol of Amun. They do not seem to have anything in common with the symbolism of the Christian lamb, even if a cross may actually be discerned in the geometric decoration on the sides of the object from Dongola.

The known Meroitic basins from Palace M.950⁵ and House B⁶ in Meroe and from Palace B.2200 from Gebel Barkal,⁷ regardless of their interpretation, whether as washtubs or ritual basins, were all executed in single blocks of stone and set up on the floors of rooms. In this case, however, the outside walls were plain, devoid of any carved decoration.

The tub from Building B.I in Dongoli is smaller in size compared to the Meroitic examples, but its function as a washtub seems unquestionable because of the form, the size which does not depart substantially from the size of washtubs used today and, finally, the context of the find inside the Citadel. Excavations inside the bathroom of the palace of Ioannes should help in carrying out a fuller functional analysis. For the moment, however, the tub with its carved decoration is virtually the only example of Makurian sculpture of the Sixth century produced in a local workshop.

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⁵ L. TÖRÖK, I. HOFMAN, I. NAGY, *Meroe City, an Ancient African Capital: John Garstang's Excavations in the Sudan*, EES London 1997, pp. 207–215, Pl. 172b.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–60, Pl. 9.

⁷ M. NOVELLA SORDI, *Gebel Barkal. New Excavations in B2200*, [in:] W. Godlewski, A. Łajtar (Eds), *Between the Cataracts*. Proceedings of the 11th Conference for Nubian Studies Warsaw University, 27 August – 2 September 2006, Vol. II/1, Warsaw 2010, pp. 181–185, Figs 2–4.

