

Polish archeological discoveries in Sudan

# Miracles of Banganarti



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**In a Nile valley village,  
Polish archeologists are excavating  
an important pilgrimage center  
of an aicient Christian kingdom**

Banganarti, a Nubian village on the right (east) bank of the Nile about halfway between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts, lies about 10 kilometers upriver of the medieval capital of Nubia at Old Dongola. As the name Banganarti suggests (in Nubian "Island of the Locust"), the area was once an island. Sometime before 1821, when French traveler F. Cailliaud briefly stayed there, the northern channel (that once separated the island from the right bank) became sanded up by sweeping dunes blowing ever southwards from the desert, and thus Banganarti became part of the Sahara.

The Banganarti excavation represents part of a larger project known as the Southern Dongola Reach Survey. It is being carried out by the Polish Archaeological Joint Expedition to the Middle Nile organized by the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the

**The central kom  
in Banganarti  
(center) –  
oblique aerial photograph  
taken in February 2003**



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Polish Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the Michałowski Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo, and the Poznań Archaeological Museum. Some other institutions also contributed to the project, the company Heidelberg Poland being the main sponsor of the reconstruction and restoration works.

The first site selected for excavation was a huge *kom* (artificial mound) on the outskirts of the Banganarti village. A "sondage," or test trench, which was dug across the *kom* pit in 2001 hit upon the central apsis of a church sumptuously decorated with murals. Every available space (i.e. not covered with paintings) was densely filled with inscriptions in Greek and Old Nubian. The sight was breathtaking. The sondage was immediately widened, revealing a royal figure clad in robes of honor, flanked by apostles with the huge figure of an archangel behind.

## The Holy Patron

It soon became evident that the central *kom* at Banganarti preserved a sequence of three churches, built in the 7th-11th centuries. Apart from a first church, built there in the 6th/7th centuries and now totally dismantled, there were two more churches in Banganarti. The earlier of these two, the "Lower Church," is still preserved to about four meters high. It was larger than its successor, the "Upper Church," constructed directly on top of it in the mid-10th century. The latter building, also known as the famous Archangel Raphael Church, still stands three meters high.

The religious center is surrounded by the remains of a 80x100m fortification wall some 1-3m thick, with several rounded towers and a defensive entrance gate on the southern side.

Both churches were decorated with extensive high-quality murals on many interior walls, some repeatedly over several plaster layers. Most unpainted wall surfaces are covered by hundreds of inscriptions painted or scratched onto the plaster by pilgrims who journeyed here.

Banganarti seems to have been the most important pilgrimage center in the Christian king-

The very moment  
at which the murals  
in Banganarti  
were discovered



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dom of Makuria, the middle of three Christian kingdoms that existed for over 800 years (c. 550-1400 AD) along the Sudanese Nile valley.

The "Lower Church" probably did not collapse but was abandoned when high Nile floods damaged its foundations. Its walls were purposely leveled, and the rooms deliberately filled in with their own debris, sometime in the late 10th/early 11th century. Almost immediately, the "Upper Church" was constructed partly on the walls of its predecessor and partly on sand.

On the eastern wall of the Lower Church presbytery next to the apsis, a prayer to the Archangel Raphael was written in black ink on the second layer of plaster; to some extent it proves that the lower church was also dedicated to the Archangel Raphael.

After the 2004 season, there is no doubt that the Lower Church was constructed in the 7th-8th century on the plan of a "rectangle in cross."

### The Upper Church

The main principle behind the planning of the Upper Church is symmetry, whereas its main diagnostic feature is the outer portico and a most unusual layout, consisting of 18 chapels raised around a central dome supported on four mighty piers composed of a double column and a pillar.

The celebrated royal portraits of Banganarti were found only in the seven eastern chapels (1-7) arranged along the eastern wall of the Upper Church, which was constructed so that these chapels were built directly above the crypts aligned against the eastern wall of the Lower Church. One of these graves was opened in 2003. Inside two bodies were found, with heads covered by roofings made of three bricks, two placed vertically on both sides of the head, topped by a third one laid horizontally. Water that had entered the crypt (this being 4 meters beneath the present walking level) destroyed the vault and decayed the bones, which were found in a most fragile state of preservation.

In its first phase, the back wall of these seven eastern chapels is an apse painted



3D reconstruction  
of the Archangel Raphael  
Church (Upper Church)  
at Banganarti

Pawel Maliec

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with the same composition; a king, crowned, dressed in elaborately decorated robes of honor, his right hand holding a scepter and his left another crown, stands under the holy patronage of the Archangel Raphael behind him. These figures are flanked by four or six apostles on the side walls, a local version of the Byzantine *christoumimesis*. Most intriguing is the unique form of the scepter held in each king's right hand: a column with a capital. Christ, seated on the capital, bestows even greater sanctity to this symbol of the Nubian kings' earthly power.

This portrayal of Nubian rulers amongst apostles, a position usually occupied by Christ, reflects a contemporaneous evolution in Byzantine political theology, and strengthened the authority of the Makurian dynasty by underscoring the divine aspect of kingship. A long inscription written below the painted composition in Chapel VI invokes the Archangel Raphael. It begins with the phrase: "From the devil's net liberate us, Raphael."

Chapel VI, in the center, was constructed to a slightly different plan. Its apse and side walls are divided into seven arched spaces by six pilasters with capital and base, all covered with various painted designs. The central *interco-*

Apostles flanking a king from Chapel III underscore the divine aspect of kingship



Bogdan Zurawski



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A splendid mural (here during conservation work) indicates the therapeutic character of the place. It depicts St. Damianos holding a scalpel in his right hand and a bag of surgical instruments in his left hand

*lumnium* contains the ruler's portrait under the Archangel's patronage. All twelve apostles are seen, a pair in each *intercolumnium*.

Banganarti is only 10 km distant from Old Dongola, yet the differences in the painting methods and general esthetics of the contemporaneous murals are substantial. The Banganarti painter, for the sake of convenience called the master of Sinada, is obsessed with the third dimension. He strives to render the spheroid aspect of the head and face by applying deep shading to the cheeks and circular strokes of the brush to the foreheads. Such diagnostic features are rarely encountered in Dongola.

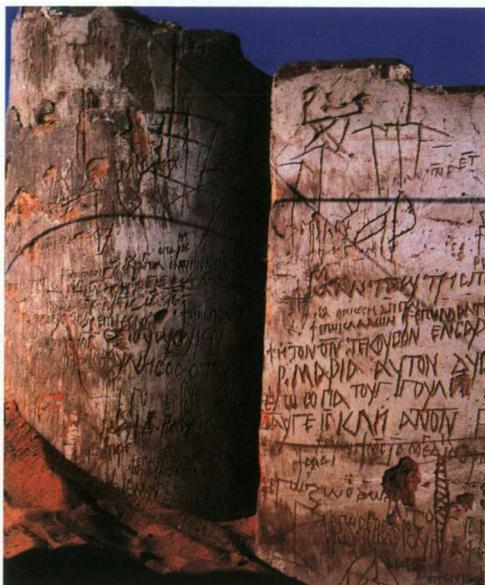
### The pilgrimage center

In 2004, some more important inscriptions were found and deciphered. First, a graffito on the south-eastern pier mentions a king whose name is David who reigned in the 1260s-1270s. Next, two inscriptions of "King Paper of *Toungoul*" (Dongola) were found. He probably reigned in the middle of the 14th century AD.

However, the most important person among the visitors was King Siti, whose signature is found in two locations. In addition, a certain Durere who was *epirshil* of King Siti ("I *Dourere*, Deacon of [the church of] Great Jesus, *epirshil* of King Siti") left his signature on the stone voussior of the arched entrance to the church. Of the royal personages, a Queen mother named Outiga also left her signature.

Most of the inscriptions from the Upper Church belong to the second half of the 13th

Greek and Old Nubian inscription scratched (and painted) on the eastern wall of Room 21



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and first half of the 14th century - the most turbulent time in Nubian history. Dongola was besieged, taken several times, and finally left in ruins. These misfortunes are reflected in the tenor of some inscriptions, for example those on the entrance to chapel V, north pillar.

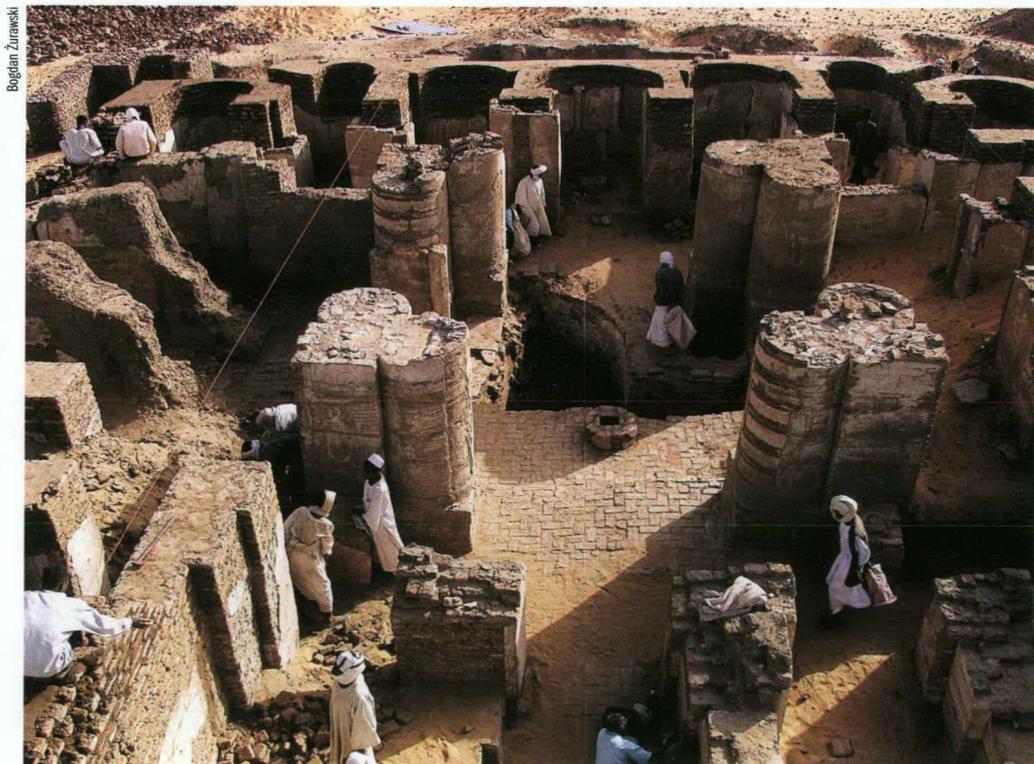
The enormous bulk of pilgrim inscriptions is strongly suggestive that Banganarti was one of the most important pilgrimage centers in the Middle Nile valley (judging by some uniformity of the hands, most of the inscriptions were written by scribes attached to the church on behalf of illiterate visi-

tors). What the expectations of people visiting this place were, and what the curative procedures performed there involved, is hard to tell solely on the basis of archaeological data. The therapeutic aspect of the place is to some extent suggested by a splendid mural found in a northern staircase vestibule. It depicts two standing figures of *anargyroi* saints, namely Cosmas and Damianos.

Needless to say, Banganarti, as other pilgrimage centers in the Nile Valley, was frequented by people who sought miraculous healing. It is hard to evaluate which of the healing procedures known from literary sources may have been performed here. Such sources mention incubations, scratching lime and paint from holy paintings, drinking holy water, etc. This is but one of the many secrets still left to discover about the miracles of Banganarti. ■

#### Further reading:

1. Bogdan Żurawski *et al*, *Survey and Excavations between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma*, Warsaw 2003.
2. Bogdan Żurawski, Banganarti, w: *Sudan, Ancient Treasures. An Exhibition of Recent Discoveries from the Sudan National Museum*, ed. D. A. Welsby & J. R. Anderson, London 2004, 220-226.



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The very centre of the sanctuary in Banganarti