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An Unexpected Guest in the Church of Sonqi Tino (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 4)

Adam Łajtar and Grzegorz Ochała¹

During the excavation in a church at Sonqi Tino,² carried out by an Italian and Vatican team lead by Sergio Donadoni in the years 1967–70,³ a large number of wall inscriptions were discovered. Regrettably, only a handful of them have been published, but available publications allow assessing at least the character of the material.⁴ Among the inscriptions are both graffiti and dipinti. They represent different categories of texts, from legends to paintings adorning the church's walls (e.g., to a representation of King Georgios protected by Christ⁵), through liturgical texts (e.g., prayers of the liturgy of the Presanctified⁶), official inscriptions (e.g., list of offerings brought to the church⁷), private prayers, visitor's inscriptions, to school exercises (lists of words beginning with certain letters of the Greek alphabet⁸).

- 1 The authors wish to thank Włodzimierz Godlewski, Marcin Krawczuk, Jacques van der Vliet, and Ewa Wipszycka for reading an earlier version of this paper and commenting upon it. They also express their gratitude to Vincent P.-M. Laisney and an anonymous reviewer for their critical remarks.
- 2 The site is situated on the west bank of the Nile in the region of Batn el-Hagar, ca. 70 km south of the Second Cataract. The church located at the cemetery was erected in the tenth century. It was decorated with wall paintings, including a representation of a king of Makuria. It appears that the church functioned until at least the fourteenth century.
- 3 A complete publication of the excavation is still lacking; the only aspect of the church that has been studied comprehensively so far is its architecture: FANFONI, *Sonqi Tino I*. However, a team gathered by Loredana Sist of the Sapienza University has undertaken a renewed effort to elaborate the archaeological data; see, preliminarily, the 18th volume of *Scienze dell'Antichità* (2012), where the proceedings are published of the workshop "The Nubian Church of Sonqi Tino, A Multidisciplinary Approach," held in Rome in February 2012.
- 4 LAISNEY, "Les inscriptions grecques et nubiennes." For a survey of inscriptions, see DONADONI, "Les graffiti de l'église de Sonqi Tino."
- 5 See, most recently, PASI, "I dipinti della chiesa di Sonqi Tino," pp. 580–81, with fig. 15.
- 6 See, most recently, ŁAJTAR & ZIELIŃSKA, "The Northern Pastophorium of Nubian Churches," p. 442 (no. 3), with bibliography in n. 14.
- 7 See OCHAŁA, "Old Nubian Lists of Goods and Money."
- 8 LAISNEY, "Les inscriptions grecques et nubiennes," pp. 611–12 (no. 15), fig. 12.

Figure 1. Graffito with a mention of an archbishop in the church at Sonqi Tino.



A small portion of inscriptions that were published by Vincent P.-M. Laisney in 2012 includes one seemingly very interesting, although very fragmentary graffito, labelled DON51 by the editor.⁹ The inscription was located in the southern pastophorium (room 3), on the north wall. Laisney offered the following transcription of the text:

... ἀρ\`χ\` ἐπι\`κ\` α:\`ν\` κοϋ

and translated it:

... *archi-évêque (de) ...sôs*

arguing that the final word of the inscription, “qui paraît être l’abréviation du génitif grec d’un nom de lieu, est énigmatique et il n’est pas sûr que la première lettre soit un α.”

Laisney is definitely right when he interprets the final word as a toponym referring to an archbishopric see. The question arises, of course, which see is at stake here. As far as the Makurian Church is concerned, the only known see the occupants of which bore the title of archbishop is Dongola.¹⁰ The title of archbishop can be hypoth-

⁹ Ibid., p. 606 (no. 4), fig. 2.

¹⁰ The title of archbishop was borne by Georgios who died 1113 CE and was buried in a vaulted tomb situated under room 5 of the Northwestern Annex to the monastery on Kom H at Dongola. His see is not mentioned in sources at our disposal but Dongola is near to certain. For Georgios and his dossier, see ŁAJTAR, “Georgios, Archbishop of Dongola.” A visitor’s graffito in the upper church at Banganarti was left by a certain Papi who is described as ὁ τοῦ οἱ πρόδροι ἀρχ(ι)επισ[κ] (όπου), probably “son of one of the councillors of the archbishop”; for the publication of the graffito, see ŁAJTAR, *A Late Christian Pilgrimage Centre at Banganarti*, no. 347. Considering the proximity of Banganarti and Dongola, the archbishop referred to in this inscription is likely the hierarch of the royal capital. The famous inscription of 1322 CE from Deir Anba Hadra (St. Simeon Monastery) near Aswan commemorates a visit paid by Joseph, the archbishop of an unknown Nubian see. As this man fulfilled important civil offices at the central level before he became the archbishop, one can suppose that he was the archbishop of the capital city. For the reading and the interpretation of the inscription in question, see ŁAJTAR, “The So-Called Kudanbes Inscription.” The title of archbishop was borne by Lukas, who is known as the sender of an Old Nubian letter from Qasr Ibrim (P. QI IV 105 vo), and perhaps Martyrophoros, the author of a visitor’s inscription in the church in the temple of Horemheb at Abu Oda (MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La Nubia medioevale* I, p. 175). Like other Makurian archbishops they were likely

esized also with relation to bishops of Faras, who are occasionally designated as “metropolitai.”¹¹ As none of the known forms of names of the two Makurian archbishoprics, Dongola and Faras, can be matched with the inscription from Sonqi Tino, the see of the archbishop mentioned in it should be sought elsewhere. In Nubian context, another archbishopric could have existed in Soba, the capital of the Kingdom of Alwa. However, even disregarding the fact that we have no information whatsoever on (arch)bishops of Soba, the letters of the inscription do not seem to reproduce this toponym. Another, the most obvious in fact, solution here would be Alexandria as the seat of the Egyptian patriarch,¹² but this is also out of question. Therefore, we would like to propose the following reading:

[---] ΔΡ`Χ`ΕΠΙC`Κ` ΑΞΟΥ`Η`

that is

[---] ἀρχ(ι)επίσκ(οπος) Ἀξούμ(εος)

[---] *archbishop of Axum.*

or:

[---] ἀρχ(ι)επίσκ(οπος) Ἀξουμ(ειτῶν)

[---] *archbishop of the Axumites.*

As the beginning of the inscription was not preserved, we refrain from resolving the abbreviation at the end of the word “archbishop,” because the word could stand in any grammatical case. For the same reason, we do not put a word accent. But it is the second element of the phrase that is the “clou” here, the toponym Axum (or the ethnonym Axumites). The reading does not come without palaeographic difficulties: both the *alpha* at the beginning and the *mu* marking the abbreviation are doubtful. Especially the *mu* displays an ornamental

bishops of Dongola. Dongola (Timikleos) is designated as “metropolis” in the title of its bishop given in the protocol of a Coptic legal document of 925 CE found in Qasr Ibrim; cf. ΛΑΥΤΑΡ, “The Mystery of Timikleos Solved!,” pp. 232–33.

11 The designation “metropolitēs” is attested with relation to the following bishops: Kyros (866–902 CE), Kollouthos (903–923 CE), Stephanos (923–926 CE), Aaron (952–972 CE), and Petros (972–999 CE); for bishops of Faras as “metropolitai,” see ЯКОВИЕВСКИ, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras*, pp. 84–139.

12 The patriarch of Alexandria is frequently referred to as ἀρχιεπίσκοπος in both literary and documentary sources. For a list of examples, see ΛΑΜΠΡΕ, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v. In Nubia, such a use of this term is attested in the letter of Moses George to Mark III mentioned below, n. 14.

character with its right-hand part considerably prolonged upward and curved. Moreover, the right-hand vertical bar was incised very delicately. There is, however, little doubt as to the *ksi*, read as a *sigma* by Laisney: it assumes a typical Nubian shape with the line forming a loop at the top and descending in two curves, first to the left and then to the right.¹³ Normally, the letter includes also a horizontal stroke above the loop, unconnected to it, here apparently lacking. Examples of such a shape of this letter are numerous in the corpus of Christian Nubian texts, for instance in the letter of King Moses George to Mark III, patriarch of Alexandria (DBMNT 610), most notably in the words ἀξιῶμα, “Axum” (verso, 1st Greek subscript, ll. 11–12) and ἀξιῶμητης, “Axumites” (verso, 2nd Greek subscript, l. 5), occurring in the titulature of the king and patriarch respectively.¹⁴ It is also attested in epigraphy, for example in inscriptions left by a certain Axos (ἄζος) in the Rivergate Church (DBMNT 1580) and cathedral at Faras (DBMNT 1847).¹⁵ One notes also the spelling of the toponym/ethnonym with ογ instead of ω, the latter letter present in the two Nubian attestations of the word mentioned above. It seems, however, that both spellings are equally justified, as literary sources attest to one form or the other, neither having a significant statistical prevalence.¹⁶ Also on phonological grounds, the interchange of ω and ογ is nothing surprising, especially in a case where both are supposed to render a sound from a word of a Semitic origin that does not exist in Greek.

If our interpretation is credible, the name Axum undoubtedly means here the ancient capital of the Ethiopian Kingdom of Axum.¹⁷ The city, although it lost on importance during the Middle Ages, has continued to exist until present and has long been considered as a symbolic capital of Ethiopia.¹⁸ Thus, we are most probably dealing here with a hierarch of the Ethiopian Church. This makes the inscription an extremely valuable source, being as it is the first, as far as we know, non-literary piece of evidence from outside Ethiopia mentioning an (arch)bishop of Axum. What seems to make it even more significant is the fact that the text can be dated to the thirteenth–fourteenth century (just as the majority of graffiti from

13 Laisney must have interpreted the second, slightly shallower curve as a crack in the plaster.

14 The document has not been published so far; its content is known from a tentative translation published in ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, pp. 227–29. The first of the above-mentioned forms is visible on the photograph published in PLUMLEY, “New Light on the Kingdom of Dotawo,” pl. 56; the second can be identified on a photograph from the Qasr Ibrim Archive kindly made available to us by Joost Hagen, who is working on the proper publication of the text.

15 For Axos, see ŁAJTAR & OCHAŁA, “Two Private Prayers in Wall Inscriptions,” no. 2, where another inscription by the same person has been identified.

16 According to a survey in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (January 24, 2017).

17 For the Kingdom of Axum and its capital, see MUNRO-HAY, *Aksum*. For the Christianization of Axum, see BRAKMANN, *Die Einwurzelung*.

18 See, e.g., HIRSCH & FAUVELLE-AYMAR, “Aksum après Aksum.”

Sonqi Tino), a not-very-well-documented period in the history of Ethiopia in general and the Ethiopian Church in particular.¹⁹ The graffito, fragmentary though it is, raises a number of questions, such as who was the archbishop of Axum, what was he doing in Makuria, why did he left his (or perhaps why was he commemorated in an) inscription in Sonqi Tino, etc. Of course, because of the fragmentariness of the source answers to many of these issues must remain hypothetical, but these hypotheses seem to us worth considering nevertheless.

First, what do we know about the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Church in the thirteenth–fourteenth century? Were there any archbishoprics, that of Axum in particular? According to our knowledge, until 1959 the hierarchical structure of the Ethiopian Church presented the following pattern:

1. *Liqā pappasat* (lit. “the eldest of the bishops”), that is the Patriarch of Alexandria, the head of the Miaphysite Egyptian Church to which Ethiopia belonged since the beginning of Christianity there.
2. *Pappas* (Gr. πάππας, “father, priest”), called also *abun*, who headed the Ethiopian Church in Ethiopia. Traditionally, he was an Egyptian monk sent by the patriarch to preside over the local congregation. Until the nineteenth century, there was only one *pappas* in Ethiopia at a time.
3. *Eppisqoppas* (Gr. ἐπίσκοπος, “bishop”), whose function is unclear until the nineteenth century, when the territory of Ethiopia was divided into dioceses.²⁰

While no exact Ethiopic counterpart existed for the Greek ἀρχιεπίσκοπος, it seems that, from the perspective of the Miaphysite Patriarchate of Alexandria, *pappas* was indeed a metropolitan who headed the entire province, even though he did not have dioceses under his jurisdiction²¹ nor did he have the right to ordain bishops. Regrettably, we have no bilingual Greco-Ethiopic or Copto-Ethiopic source that would confirm such a rendering of the term *pappas*, but there seems to be no formal objection to such an assumption; moreover, it is commonsensical to think that when referring to the Ethiopian *pappas* in Greek or Coptic, for example in contacts

19 For the history of Ethiopia in the thirteenth–fourteenth century, the initial period of the reign of the Solomonic dynasty, see BARTNICKI & MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii*, pp. 42–65; for the Ethiopian Church during this period, see MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*, pp. 195–209; idem, *Ethiopia and Alexandria II*, pp. 9–39.

20 Generally, for the structure of the Ethiopian Church of medieval times, see MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*, pp. 7–54, esp. pp. 49–54. See further KAPLAN, “Pappas,” and NOSNITSIN, “Eppisqoppas.”

21 Some hints exist, however, that more bishoprics might have existed in Ethiopia before the fourteenth century; see *ibid.*, p. 342.

with the Patriarchate, a title would be employed emphasizing their higher position than that of other “ordinary” bishops, hence, most probably, “archbishop.”

The second problem is the use of the toponym Axum in the titlature. To the best of our knowledge, the present inscription brings the first attestation of the title “archbishop of Axum/the Axumites” in Greek and Coptic sources. Of course, the toponym itself (or rather the ethnonym “Axumites”) is well attested in Coptic, most notably in the titlature of the Patriarch as one of territories under his jurisdiction, and in Copto-Arabic *scalae*, which include lists of bishoprics belonging to the Alexandrian Patriarchate,²² but never in connection with local hierarchs. In Ethiopic sources, on the other hand, we find the title *eppisqoppoṣ zä’Aksum*, “bishop of Axum,” which most certainly refers to the metropolitan *pappas*. The oldest attestation of the title comes from a fourteenth-century manuscript (Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library 1763) collecting homilies by several “bishops of Axum,” including Menas, the successor of Frumentius, the first metropolitan of the Ethiopian Church in the fourth century.²³ Of course, given such a late date of the manuscript, the antiquity of the title can be put into question. However, even if the title was used there anachronistically, it must have been in use from at least the fourteenth century, as the dating of the manuscript proves, which, in turn, perfectly corresponds with the discussed graffito. It is also worth noting that until quite recent times the only cathedral in Ethiopia was the one in Axum, even though the *pappas* did not reside there permanently but travelled around the country with the emperor.²⁴

Third, let us now consider the probability of an archbishop of Axum appearing in the Middle Nile Valley. The most natural reason for this would be that he was en route from Egypt to Ethiopia to assume his office. Regrettably, no literary source is known to us that would relate the itinerary of a newly designated abun from Alexandria (later on from Cairo) to his metropolitan see,²⁵ but only two options come into question: (1) by the Nile to Qus in Upper Egypt, then

22 On Axum/Axumites in these contexts, see, most recently, SEIGNOBOS, “Les évêchés nubiens,” pp. 178–79.

23 KAPLAN, “Pappas,” p. 113, and NOSNITSIN, “Eppisqoppoṣ,” p. 343. Interestingly, never does the combination *pappas zä’Aksum* occur.

24 See, for example, CRUMMEY, “Church and Nation.”

25 Some pieces of information are provided by the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*. The biography of Patriarch Joseph (831–849 CE) informs that metropolitan John was escorted by trustworthy men on his way to Ethiopia on account of the road’s being fraught with dangers on both land and water (*History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, part IV, ed. Evetts, pp. 508ff.). The biography of Patriarch John VI (1189–1216 CE) brings information that the metropolitan Michael of Fuwa, while fleeing from Ethiopia to Egypt, was accompanied by some one hundred men, most of whom perished through the exigencies of climate and terrain and the hostility and greed of the local rulers (*History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, vol. III/2, ed. Khater & KHS-Burmester, pp. 184ff.).

through the desert to one of Egyptian ports on the Red Sea coast and by ship to Adulis, or (2) by land, along the Nile and its tributaries. The first route was definitely easier and more natural as it was the principal way of commercial and cultural contacts between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean region from the second century BCE up to the nineteenth century CE.²⁶ The second route was longer and more troublesome, but it had the advantage of leading through Christian countries remaining in the sphere of influence of the Alexandrian Patriarchate. While travelling on this route a newly ordained *abun* could have relied on the hospitality of Nubian Christians and take part in their religious life. It is, of course, theoretically possible that the *abun* visited Makuria not on his way from Egypt to Ethiopia but the other way around. Basically, the *abun* was nominated for life and once arrived in Ethiopia remained there until his death, but some prelates are known to have returned to Egypt for one reason or another.²⁷ If our reading and interpretation of the inscription is correct, the text would constitute a proof that (at least some) *abuns* chose to travel by land. Of course, as the inscription was in such a fragmentary state of preservation, we cannot know whether it mentioned *abun* himself or, for example, someone from his entourage.²⁸ In this context it is important to observe that the text was apparently edited in Greek and was executed by someone using Nubian-type majuscules, a type of script characteristic of Christian Nubian literacy of the time. This suggests that the *abun* (or a member of his entourage) was only a commissioner of the inscription, the writer of which was a local, probably a cleric. It is rather improbable that the inscription came into existence without connection to a visit of the *abun*, as it is hardly imaginable who and for what reason could have referred to an Ethiopian prelate in a provincial Makurian church.

Last but not least, if we are correct in our interpretation and this was indeed archbishop's signature, what an Ethiopian metropolitan was doing in such a provincial and seemingly unimportant place as

26 Cf., e.g., GARCIN, *Un centre musulman*, passim, esp. p. 220, where the author quotes an information from Ibn Jubair (1145–1217 CE) that official contacts between Ethiopia and Egypt went through the Red Sea ports in his times.

27 As an example, one can cite Michael of Fuwa (*abun* 1206–1209 CE), who fled from Ethiopia to Egypt, where he was deposed by the Patriarch for “misuse of his stewardship”; cf. *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, vol. III/2, ed. Khater & KHS-Burmester, pp. 184ff. (in the biography of John VI). Another example is John (*abun* mid-ninth century CE), who returned to Egypt under pressure from an unfavorable political situation in Ethiopia, but after some time he came back and died there; cf. biography of Joseph in *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, part IV, ed. Evetts, pp. 508ff. For a short discussion of these two cases, see MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*, pp. 123–25 (John) and 181–85 (Michael of Fuwa).

28 Some examples of clerics belonging to the entourage of bishops are known from Nubia: *epitropos* of bishop of Faras (KRALL, “Ein neuer nubischer König,” pp. 236–238 [unknown provenance, 803–812 CE; DMNT 634]), *asti* of bishop (P. QI III 38 appendix, l. 5 [Qasr Ibrim, 12th cent. CE; DBMNT 1000]), and *trikliniaris* of bishop (P. QI III 35, l. 20 [Qasr Ibrim, 30 July 1187 CE; DBMNT 583]).

Sonqi Tino? We would rather expect traces of his passing through Makuria in more respectable locations, for example the cathedral in Faras or the sanctuary of Archangel Raphael in Banganarti. Of course, this may be purely accidental and that no other mention of an Axumite metropolitan is known from Makurian sources may be due to their state of preservation. Otherwise, the presence of an archbishop of Axum in Sonqi Tino may point to the fact that the church was not as unimportant as its remote location would suggest. After all, it housed a full-scale representation of King Georgios under Christ's protection, a phenomenon not observed in other "provincial" churches, and a large (perhaps the largest known to date) painted official inscription recording, most probably, the offering of foodstuffs to the church by various persons and possibly involving the presence of one bishop Aaron.²⁹

The present inscription, if we are not mistaken in its interpretation, constitutes a very important addition to the list of traces of Nubian–Ethiopian relations in Middle Ages. The list is surprisingly short, all the more so since both neighboring Christian kingdoms were homelands of the Churches that belonged to the same Alexandrian Patriarchate. From our perspective, the most important trace of these contacts is found in the biography of Patriarch Philotheos (979–1003 CE) from the *History of the Patriarchs*.³⁰ According to this story, an unnamed Ethiopian king sent a letter to the Makurian king Georgios,³¹ in which he described a tragic political situation of his kingdom, interpreted as God's punishment for the inappropriate treating of metropolitans by previous rulers, and asked Georgios to negotiate with the Patriarch the ordaining of a new *abun*. Georgios reacted sympathetically and sent a request letter to the patriarch (Philotheos) who nominated Daniel, a monk of the monastery of St. Makarios, as the new metropolitan for Ethiopia.³² Another important trace is found in the biography of Saint Ewostatewos (1273–1352 CE).³³ He was a monk and preacher from the first years of the Solomonid dynasty in Ethiopia, the founder of the monastery in Särawe

²⁹ The inscription remains unpublished; for a description and analysis of its contents, see OCHAŁA, "Old Nubian Lists of Goods and Money."

³⁰ *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, vol. II/2, ed. Atiya, Yassa 'Abd al-Masih, & Burmester, pp. 171–72. The fragment with the story of the letter is reprinted by VANTINI, *Oriental Sources*, pp. 205–7. The story is also told in the synaxary of the Ethiopian Church; cf. BUDGE, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, vol. I, pp. 233–34.

³¹ Commonly identified with the King Georgios reigning in the last third of the tenth century (beginning of the reign before 969 CE – end of the reign unknown). He is designated as Georgios II by U. Monneret de Villard (*Storia della Nubia cristiana*, pp. 123–126), S. Munro-Hay ("Kings and Kingdoms of ancient Nubia," pp. 107–8), and D. Welsby (*The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 260); Georgios III by W. Godlewski ("Introduction to the Golden Age of Makuria," pp. 90–91), and R. Werner (*Das Christentum in Nubien*, pp. 101–4); Georgios D by G. Ochała ("When King Georgios was the King of Dotawo").

³² The story is discussed in MUNRO-HAY, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*, pp. 133–34.

³³ For Ewostatewos, see FIACCADORI, "Ewostatewos" and idem, *Etiopia, Cipro e Armenia*. The fragment of *Gadla Ewostatewos (Acta Eustathii)* describing his visit in Nubia is reprinted by

(present-day Eritrea). In 1338, in the last years of King ‘Amdä Şeyon’s reign, Ewostatewos left Ethiopia, probably fleeing the country because of his teaching on the necessity of celebrating the Jewish Saturday together with the Christian Sunday. He first went to Nubia and then to Egypt and Jerusalem to end his life in distant Armenia. The story of the ordination of Daniel as the metropolitan of Ethiopia and the route of Ewostatewos’s escape to Egypt, they both indicate that Nubia (i.e., Makuria) was a natural link between the Alexandrian Patriarchate and Christian Ethiopia and make credible our interpretation of the graffito from Sonqi Tino as a souvenir of an Ethiopian abun’s visit to the Middle Nile Valley.

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