



Inscription with liturgical hymn from the Lower Church in Banganarti

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INSCRIPTION WITH LITURGICAL HYMN FROM THE LOWER CHURCH IN BANGANARTI

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Abstract: Study of a Greek inscription found in unit 18 of the Lower Church in Banganarti. The grammar of surviving parts suggests literary character, a larger poetic structure consisting of odes, most probably a canon, that is, a structured hymn used in the Byzantine church. The inscription proves that even after AD 641 Byzantine liturgical texts found their way into Nubia.

Keywords: Banganarti, Lower Church, poetic ode, Greek, Byzantine Church hymn

Excavations in the Lower Church in Banganarti during the 2008 season (for the fieldwork, see Żurawski 2011, in this volume) brought to light a Greek inscription [*Fig. 1*] located in the central space of the western annex (18), on its north wall, just below a mural of a warrior saint. It was inked in black on the second layer of plaster. Due to high humidity, the state of preservation of the inscription is very poor and identification of individual letters is often impossible. In many places the plaster either has cracked and fallen off the wall or has been significantly displaced, which makes the text even more illegible.

The inscription consists of 49 lines of different length, each containing from 70 to more than 100 letters. The text is written in clear and legible hand. No accents are marked. A single dot above marks vowels H or Y at the beginning of a word. *Nomina sacra* are abbreviated corresponding to the normal Byzantine usage and

the conjunction καί is noted as a *siglum* resembling the Latin letter 'S'. In at least two cases (lines 6 and 27) the end of the verse is marked by a double diagonal stroke. All letters are written in majuscule and inclined to the right. Neither shape nor size of the letters is regular with one letter frequently taking on different forms. Φ, Β and Ξ are especially characteristic and find many analogies in other inscriptions and parchments from Nubia. Examples of similar scripts come from Qasr Ibrim (Frend 1986: 66), Qasr el-Wizz (Barns 1974: 206) and Dongola (Jakobielski, Łajtar 1997: 10–11), all dated to the 10th–11th century. Comparison of the inscription and these texts indicates that the inscription was written in an early form of ogival majuscule usually referred to as Nubian-type.

The Greek in the inscription was written as pronounced, which was typical of late Antiquity, not only in Nubia, but in



*Fig 1. Inscription from the north wall of unit 18, Lower Church in Banganarti
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

the entire Greek-speaking world. The main confusions are those of phonetic character, mostly caused by iotacism and the loss of distinction of vowel length. Another common mistake is omitting characters from the middle of the word or conversion of adjacent letters. Orthography suggests that the scribe knew some Greek, but it was not his mother tongue. Because of the poor state of preservation, hardly anything can be said about the grammar.

The paleography of the text suggests literary character. Despite its fragmentariness the text is easily identifiable. At the beginning of the 9th, 13th, 14th and 17th line, one finds the letters Ω and Δ written in ligature with a dash overhead. It was a very common abbreviation for the Greek word ᾠδή. These letters are followed by numerals from 4 to 6. This indicates that we are dealing with a larger poetic structure, which consists of odes. The form that fits best is a canon, that is, a structured hymn used in the Byzantine church.

Byzantine historians attribute the invention of the canon to Andrew of Crete, who lived in the second half of the 7th century, but his works presuppose the existence of some earlier models. Moreover, he was contemporary with three other canon-writers: the Patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople, St John of Damascus, and Cosmas of Maiuma. The canon is a poetic form comprised of nine odes, which was sung daily at *orthos* (the main morning service). All of its odes were attached to the nine great Biblical canticles. Each canon developed a specific theme, such as adoration of Jesus Christ or *Theotokos*, or

honoring a particular saint, but each ode had to contain some allusion to its model (Wellesz 1961: 98–246).

Odes have a tripartite composition. At the beginning, there had to be a *hirmos*, a significant structural element in the poetic form of the composition. Canons were usually not metrical and had no rhyme, so the *hirmos*, for which a melody was composed, served as a model for the melody, verse structure and disposition of stress for the next *stanzas*, called *troparia*. The number of *troparia* was arbitrary. At the end of each ode, there was a verse in honor of the Virgin, called *Theotokion*.

As said, most canons were not metrical and there was no music notation in service books. Therefore, a cantor needed an additional textbook to learn the melodies. Books called *hirmologia*, containing only *hirmoi*, had music added above each line. The *hirmologion* enabled singers to memorize the melodies of the *hirmoi*, so that they could be transferred to the *troparia*. Initially, an individual *hirmos* was composed for each canon. Later, about the 8th–9th century, borrowing *hirmoi* from earlier compositions became common. Writers selected one of the various patterns already existing in *hirmologia* and composed new *troparia*. Indeed, only a small percentage of canons written during the Byzantine period had their own original meter and music. The chosen *hirmos* was indicated at the beginning of each ode, often by giving just the first two or three words of the model verse.¹ It was sufficient for a singer to convey the melody to the rest of the composition. Most of the

¹ Many examples of *hirmoi* abbreviated to the first words can be found in service books such as Μηναῖον, Τριῳδίου or Πεντηκοστάριον.

known *hirmoi* were composed very early, at the turn of the 7th century, and a lot of them can be attributed to the four earliest canon writers. Very few *hirmoi* seem to have been composed after that

In the text of the Banganarti inscription it is possible to identify at least five *hirmoi* known from other sources. Only one of them, belonging to the 4th ode, was written in full length. In the other cases, an anonymous author used just the first few words from the original model. The numeral 6 at the beginning of line 17 indicates that another *hirmos* is to be used there and the same probably applies to line 1 as well. Unfortunately, no analogy for the text written in these lines can be found. This could indicate that the canon from Banganarti is not preserved in any other source.

Apart from the *hirmoi*, only small fragments of the text can be read, which makes it impossible to reconstruct the entire hymn. It is also impossible to establish what could have been the main theme of this poem. Because of the fact that canons were often written to honor a particular saint, it is very tempting to relate the inscription to an adjacent mural painting depicting a warrior saint on horseback spearing the small figure of a man lying under the hooves of his horse. Above the victim there is a legend with his name, however the reading of this inscription is not clear. The name ΜΑΞΙΜΙΑ[ΝΟΣ] can probably be read from the preserved letters. It is very possible that the speared figure is one of the Roman emperors, two of them being the most plausible candidates: Aurelius Valerius Maximianus (285–305) and Galerius

Valerius Maximianus (293–311). Both are known to have been among the worst persecutors of Christianity. The list of saints martyred during their reigns is very long, and features Georgios, Demetrios, Sergius, Bacchus, Menas and Theodor Tiron. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to identify any of them with the saint depicted on the wall in unit 18. The name Dorotheos may be deciphered tentatively in the first line of the inscription. Only a few saints bearing this name are known. Among them there were two soldiers from the times of Maximianus' persecutions: the Martyr Dorotheus of Nikomedia and the Martyr Dorotheus of Melitene. Neither of them was very popular as a saint and their iconography is not known, hence it is difficult to be certain that either, if any at all, was depicted in the mural.

So far, no parallel composition for the canon from Banganarti has been found in the Nubian kingdoms. The most relevant parallel seems to be an inscription discovered in Qasr el-Wizz, containing the Biblical hymn Benedicite (Barns 1974). This chant from the Gospel according to Luke is one of the canticles to which odes of the canon were attached. Apart from the Banganarti text, only a few more Greek hymns are known from Nubia. Most have not been published yet. Two of them were discovered during Polish excavations in Faras. One is a parchment with a *troparion* for the Palm Sunday, a part of which can be identified as a hymn Ἦλθεν ὁ Σωτὴρ σήμερον characteristic of the Byzantine church (Brakmann 2006: 290).² The next one is a wall inscription containing 23 hymn incipits, but it is hard to

² This hymn is mentioned briefly in topic literature. The parchment is kept in the National Museum in Warsaw. Its publication is being prepared by Adam Łajtar.

find an identical *initia* in Greek hymnic poetry.³ Another text worth mentioning comes from Qasr Ibrim. It is a piece of parchment with an alphabetic hymn to the Virgin Mary (Adam Łajtar, personal communication). All these compositions, including the canon from Banganarti, prove that Byzantine hymns were popular in the medieval kingdoms of Nubia.

It is very unlikely that the canon from Banganarti was composed in Nubian territory. The Nubians apparently never produced any religious or historical literature. All of the known texts come from Egypt or Byzantium and were brought usually to Nubia during the Christianization or in the following period. It seems logical, therefore, that the provenience of the text from our inscription should be sought outside Nubia.

Canon as a poetical genre did not form part of Coptic liturgy, hence few hymns of this kind have been found in Egypt (Haelst 1976: 981, 221–222, 228–229). The canon from Banganarti was composed most likely in the territory of the Eastern

Empire, where it was the most popular kind of liturgical poetry. But it is impossible to determine which part of the Empire it originated from or who could have been its author. It is also very difficult to tell when exactly the canon could have been written, but it does not seem to be one of the earliest, as indicated by the reuse of *hirmoi*. As already mentioned, they are abbreviated to the first few words, a common practice beginning from the 8th century. This leads to the conclusion that the 8th century is the earliest period in which the text could have been written down. Surely, some time must have passed before it reached the Middle Nile Valley. This certainly took place after the Arab conquest of Egypt, after which — in the view of some scholars — Nubia's relations with the rest of the Christian world were severely limited or terminated. The inscription from Banganarti is a significant piece of evidence against the idea that the Arab conquest of Egypt ended Nubian relations with the outer world. It proves that even after AD 641 Byzantine liturgical texts found their way into Nubia.

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