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*A Scene of a Ritual Dance
(Old Dongola – Sudan)*

Old Dongola, the capital city of the Nubian kingdom of Makuria, was an early medieval city located on the eastern bank of the river Nile, between the Third and the Fourth Cataracts (**Fig. 1**). The ruler of that city was Christianized by Byzantine missionaries in the sixth century.¹ A century later, as a result of merging of Makuria and the kingdom of Nobadia situated to the north, the united 'Christian Kingdom of Nubia' was created. Dongola became its capital city. Its history spans an uninterrupted period from the sixth up to the fourteenth century.

Archaeological research in Dongola, started in 1964 by Polish archaeologist, prof. Kazimierz Michałowski,² have been continued by the Polish Archaeological Expedition from the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. Excavations in the monastery of the Holy Trinity, located in the northern part of the city, have been conducted since 1991 by dr Stefan Jakobielski from the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.³ In that monastery, just as in the Faras cathedral,⁴ Polish archaeologists made a spectacular discovery of a complex of wall paintings.

The walls of the main rooms and chapels of two Annexes attached to the main building and the church of the monastery in Old Dongola were decorated with paintings in tempera technique, positioned about 1.5 m above the floor level. The paintings represent a wide iconographic repertoire.⁵ There are representations of Christ and Holy Virgin, the Holy Trinity, archangels and angels, apostles and saints, scenes from the Old and New Testament

¹ D.A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*, London 2002, pp. 22–35.

² K. MICHAŁOWSKI, Polish Excavations at Old Dongola – First Season 1964, *Kush* XIV, 1966, pp. 289–300; ID., Dongola, *Archeologia* 29, 1969, pp. 30–33; ID., Les fouilles polonaises à Dongola, in: E. DINKLER (ed.), *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in christlicher Zeit. Ergebnisse und Probleme auf Grund der jüngsten Ausgrabungen*, Recklinghausen 1970, pp. 163–170.

³ S. JAKOBIELSKI, Old Dongola 1993, *PAM* V, 1964, pp. 115–128; ID., Old Dongola 1993/94, *PAM* VI, 1995, pp. 84–92; ID., Monastery of the Holy Trinity at Old Dongola – a short archaeological report, in: M. STAROWIEYSKI (ed.), *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism. Acts of the International Colloquium held in Cracow – Tyniec 16th–19th November 1994. Specialized Contributions*, Cracow 1995, pp. 35–45; ID., Old Dongola, Monastery 1995, *PAM* VII, 1996, pp. 103–113; ID., Old Dongola, Excavations 1996, Kom H, Site NW, *PAM* VIII, 1997, pp. 161–168; ID., Old Dongola, Kom H, *PAM* IX, 1998, pp. 160–169; ID., The Monastery in Old Dongola, Excavations in the Western Annexe 1995–1997, *GAMAR* 1, 1998, pp. 55–61; ID., Old Dongola, Excavations 1998, *PAM* X, 1999, pp. 137–147; ID., Das Kloster der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit. Bauphasen des nordwestlichen Anbaus, in: S. JAKOBIELSKI, P.O. SCHOLZ (eds.), *Dongola-Studien. 35 Jahre polnischer Forschungen im Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches, Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica* 7, Warsaw 2001 [= *Dongola-Studien*], pp. 141–168; ID., The Monastery in Old Dongola: Excavation of the North-Western Annexe 1998–2002, *GAMAR* 3, 2005, pp. 107–126.

⁴ K. MICHAŁOWSKI, Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand, Köln – Zürich 1967; ID., Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw 1974; M. MARTENS-CZARNECKA, Faras VII. Les éléments décoratifs sur les peintures de la Cathédrale de Faras, Varsovie 1972.

⁵ M. MARTENS-CZARNECKA, New Mural Paintings from Old Dongola, in: *Actes de la VIII^e Conférence internationale des études nubiennes*, II. Découvertes archéologiques, *CRIPPEL* 17/2, Lille 1997, pp. 211–226; EAD., Wall Paintings Discovered in Old Dongola, in: JAKOBIELSKI, SCHOLZ (eds.), *Dongola-Studien*, pp. 260–280; EAD., Wall Paintings from the Holy Trinity Monastery in Old Dongola, in: I. CANEVA, A. ROCCATI (eds.), *Acta Nubica. Proceedings of the X International Conference of Nubian Studies, Rome 9–14 September 2002*, Rome 2006, pp. 321–326.

as well as church and secular dignitaries (local bishops and kings). Apart from more than hundred separate representations preserved on the walls of particular rooms, many fragments of paintings have been found in debris covering the floors. Those paintings once decorated either vaults or destroyed sections of walls. The fragments, which in many cases were put together, supplemented to a considerable extent the general iconography of the painting decoration and enriched our knowledge on the subject. They also gave us a wider ground for conclusions concerning style and characteristic features of the paintings.

The analysis of the murals gave grounds to generally classify the painting to the so-called late period of the Nubian art,⁶ which corresponds with the time of construction of the excavated part of the monastery. In certain cases architectural and epigraphic data made

more precise dating possible. Some of the paintings were created in the second half of the eleventh century and decorated rooms after the reconstruction arranged by Georgios, bishop of Dongola, others were painted after the death of Georgios⁷ and thus can be dated to the period from the twelfth century up to the end of the existence of the monastery in the thirteenth century.

The great majority of the paintings have been painted as *ex vota*, ordered by people related to the monastery, probably monks, and in some cases even bishops, what is confirmed by numerous representations of donors added to the paintings. The entire pictorial decoration does not make an impression of having been executed according to a pre-arranged programme. On the contrary, except for the east walls of the chapels,⁸ the majority of the paintings seem to have been painted spontaneously, without any thematic



1. Map of Nubia (after: JAKOBIELSKI, SCHOLZ (eds.), *Dongola-Studien*, p. VIII).

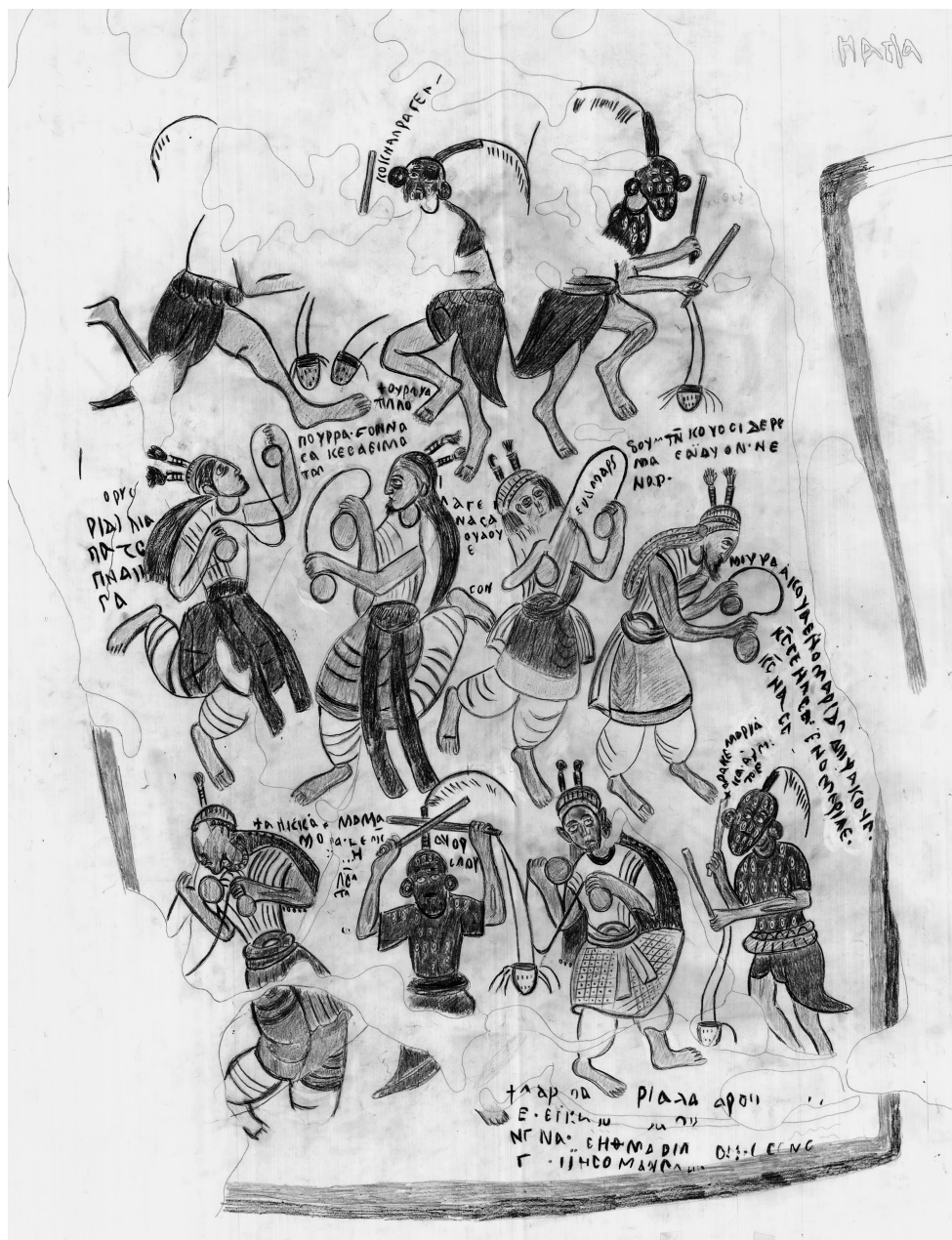
⁶ M. MARTENS-CZARNECKA, Late Christian Painting in Nubia in: CH. BONNET (ed.), *Études nubiennes. Conférence de Genève. Actes du VII^e Congrès international d'études nubiennes 3-8 septembre 1990*, I, Genève 1992, pp. 307–316.

⁷ Cf. EAD., Suggestions on Dating of some Murals from the Monastery in Old Dongola, *EtTrav* XIX, 2001, pp. 217–236; EAD., Stylistic Homogeneity of Groups of Paintings in the Monastery in Old Dongola, *GAMAR* 3, 2005, pp. 159–174.

⁸ EAD., The Attempt to Define the Functions of Selected Rooms at the Monastery in Old Dongola, *GAMAR* 1, 1998, pp. 81–93.



2 a. Nubian Dancers – painting (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



2 b. Nubian Dancers – drawing (by M. Martens-Czarnecka).

connection to each other, wherever there was a free space on the wall. Sometimes, however, a tendency to group paintings of a similar subject together (representations of archangels, Holy Virgin or holy Trinity) can be noticed. It probably resulted from the desire to intensify by repetition a causative force of the *vota* as a means of obtaining grace.

All the paintings discovered so far in the Holy Trinity monastery in Dongola represent either biblical scenes or holy figures. One of the wall paintings, however, discovered in 2004 in the so-called South-Western Annexe, i.e. a lean-to extension built at the south-western external wall of the monastery, as far as the iconography is concerned, stands out against the general rules applied over centuries to Nubian religious representations. At first glance the composition appears to contain purely secular substance.

The composition, representing the scene of dances, was positioned next to the representation of the Virgin Mary with the Child and directly above the passage leading to the next room. The painting (**Figs. 2 a, b**) is enclosed in a rectangular frame and painted on the whitewash applied precisely within the frame. The whitewash creates all the white parts of the composition. Upper section of the painting is partly damaged. The plaster is cracked on the entire surface and large deposits of soluble salts are visible. The layer of paint is washed away or powdered in many places. Nearly entire surface of the painting is darkened with bats' droppings. However, in spite of by far unsatisfactory state of preservation, the composition is distinctly visible and colours as well as iconographical details are easy to read.

The subject of the painting is intriguing and its form, compared with other, rather static and monumental representations in the monastery, strikes with spontaneousness of expression.

The composition consists of three horizontal rows of male figures. The men are shown in motion, they dance violently hopping, bending forward or leaning back.

The painting, similarly to the present day cartoons, is supplemented with inscriptions in Old Nubian which are still incomprehensible to specialists. Were it not so, the substance of the painting would probably be comprehensible, since the inscriptions undoubtedly described persons or episodes, as did legends, which in those days always accompanied religious pictures.

There are two types of figures distinctly differing in dress but of the same skin colour, what suggests that they belong to the same ethnic group. Men of one type (**Fig. 3**) wear dark purple masks covering faces and partly necks, imitating heads of some long-snouted and big-eared animal. The round ears are black with yellow insides. The masks have eye holes, lips marked with black lines and are topped with long black ostrich feathers set in a thick shaft. The dancers are dressed in caftans with wide sleeves reaching down to the elbows and aprons with 'tails' slightly bent upwards in the same purple colour as the masks, what indicates that both parts of garment are made of the same material (probably leather). The surface of the masks and caftans is trimmed with rows of white *cowrie* shells. The legs of the men are bare. The flesh tints are yellow-orange with musculature marked with red lines. The contours of the arms and legs are black, brought out into relief with red lines. Two red lines mark the folds on the necks.

The second group of men (**Fig. 4**) is also dressed basically uniformly but some parts of their attire differ in colour and decoration. They wear sleeveless tunics and long galligaskins, short skirts, shawls, and turbans. The turbans are in a form of decorative helmets topped with something reminding two giraffe horns with little tufts at the tips. The turbans are grey, graded red, and yellow; their shape, emphasised with an arrangement of little black strokes and dots. Long extremities of the turbans fall on the dancers' backs. The edges of the extremities are decorated with rows of dots undoubtedly imitating little pompons, which usually decorate the edges of real Arabic turbans. The tunics are white with black trimming at the neck. The tunic worn by one of the men has a decoration in a form of row of pearls instead of the plain black trimming. Skirts of different length, rolled up at the waist are yellow-orange, red or purple with stripes at the bottom edge. One man in the bottom row wears a white skirt decorated with black chequered pattern with red dots. Some of the men have long, grey shawls tied around their hips. The galligaskins are white. Folds on all the garments are marked with black lines. As in the case of the first group the men are bare-legged. The men dance back to back or facing one another; their heads and bodies are shown in three quarters profile or full profile depending on the motion, their look in most cases is directed to one side (irises in the corners of the eyes). The faces shown in full profile have characteristic long noses and prominent lips and chins. The contours are drawn with a single stroke of brush. The faces represented in three quarters profile have noses with rounded nostrils and red lips shaped as a letter X. The ears are big and protruding. The faces are graded red, red shadows above and under the eyes as well as along the contour of the nose. Short, black beards are rendered with short strokes of brush.



3. Fragment of the painting – man wearing mask
(Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).

The upper row of the composition consists of only three figures wearing masks, two remaining rows are composed of four figures each. There are only the men in the galligaskins in the middle row. In the lower row the men in the masks and the galligaskins are represented alternately.

The men are represented with musical instruments and weapons. The men wearing masks hold two sticks each, hitting one against the other above their heads, and things



4. Fragment of the painting – men in Arabic dresses (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).

resembling small baskets (probably containing sling pebbles)⁹ hanging on long strings, those wearing turbans violently shake castanets made of two gourds connected with a piece of string.

It remains to be answered in what way that scene, purely secular in appearance, is connected with other religious paintings in the monastery. The direct proximity of the icon of the Virgin Mary with the Child (**Fig. 5**) as well as an artistic uniformity of the two representations can probably be the key factor in this respect. The two representations were probably intended to make one composition. Perhaps it is a representation of a celebration of joy or thanksgiving devoted to the cult of the Virgin Mary. It is beyond any doubt that the composition in question does represent a scene of a ritual dance. Represented dresses, particularly the masks and tunics decorated with shells as well as the turbans with little horns sticking out, make only a kind of a costume probably typical for that sort of religious ceremony.

The analysis of the form of the composition reveals two distinct folkloristic trends that can be traced in the iconography of the scene, one originating from black Africa, another from Africa dominated by Arabic culture. As far as the form of the masks, dresses, weapons, and musical instruments as well as the undoubtedly ritual character of

⁹ 'Baskets' of this form can also be seen in iconography of the scenes representing a fight between David and Goliath, in which David always uses a sling: cf. M. ZIBAWI, *Images de l'Égypte chrétienne*, Paris 2003, Fig. 81; J. SPATHARAKIS, *Corpus of Dated Illuminated Greek Manuscripts to the Year 1453*, Vol. II, Leiden 1981, No. 43, Marc Gr. 17, IVv, c. A.D. 1020, Fig. 83.



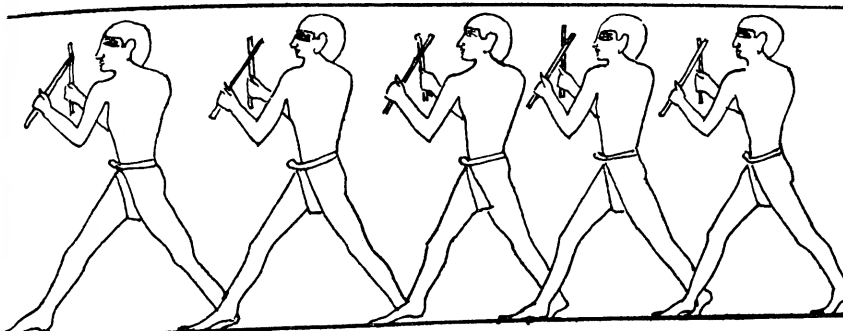
5. Whole composition – dancers and Virgin with Christ (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).

the dance itself is concerned, analogies can be found in the culture of people inhabiting central Africa (present territories of the western Sudan, Chad, and Niger). That culture featured richness of ceremonies connected with the festivity of crops, initiation of young boys or rituals of causing rain. Masks played an important role in those rituals, which include music and dances. Zoomorphic masks (people of Koré) tacked with *cowrie* shells and decorated with feathers on tops (N'tomo masks) are rooted in the Bambara culture (peoples of Mande group)¹⁰ and imitate animals, most frequently hyenas,¹¹ connected with worship of ancestors. Most likely that type of masks is represented on the described painting.

Two half a meter long sticks and castanets made of gourds with dried seeds inside have been used as musical instruments in African culture since times immemorial, both in ritual

¹⁰ G. DIETERLEN, *Essai sur la religion bambara*, Paris 1951 [= *Religion bambara*]; F.-H. LEM, *The Art of the Sudan in Brooklyn Museum*, New York 1954; R. GOLDWATER, in: *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan. The Museum of Primitive Art*, New York 1960 [= *Bambara Sculpture*], pp. 5–17, Figs. 31, 32, 33.

¹¹ *The eyes of the mask are large, so that [the god] may see and uncover everything; the nostrils are wide open, for he must sense everything, and smell the good and evil of all things. The mouth is twisted (...) since [the god] does not talk but only whistles and sings. The ears are enormous, so that he may hear all even what each one says secretly in his heart (...).* This is the fragment of explanation given by one informant for the features of the Komo masks, cf. DIETERLEN, *Religion bambara*, p. 149.



6. Ritual dancers (after: J. VANDIER, *Manuel IV*, Fig. 219).

and war dances.¹² Striking one stick against the other and shaking the gourds provided rhythmic background for the dances. In the art of Ancient Egypt, in graves dating from the Old and New Kingdoms¹³ (**Fig. 6**), numerous representations of ritual dances, connected with magic ensuring rich crops, are preserved. Similar type of dances went together with celebrations in honour of the goddess Hathor and also made a component of funerary ceremonies.¹⁴ Corresponding arrangement of the sticks, held by the men wearing masks, can be seen on the described painting.

The dresses worn by the second type of the dancers (the men with the gourds), tunics and long galligaskins, short skirts, shawls, and turbans can be found not only in the ethnographic evidence,¹⁵ but also in many illuminated manuscripts.¹⁶

It can thus be concluded that in the painting in question, so much untypical for iconographic repertoire of Nubian art known so far, two different kinds of folkloristic components are blended. This reveals a folk element of religious ceremonies while Nubia was still Christian. From the ethnographic information concerning the territory of central Africa as well as preserved relics of Ancient Egypt, it appears that presented form of dance and musical instruments feature a centuries old tradition and make purely African constituent.

If the presented reasoning is correct, the religious character of the analysed composition should not arise any doubts. Bearing in mind the long lasting tradition of using the described musical instruments in the ritual dances, the composition can be interpreted as a represen-

¹² C. SACHS (ed.), *The History of Musical Instruments*, New York 1940 [= *Instruments*], pp. 88–89; R.M. STONE (ed.), *Africa. The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music 1*, New York – London 1998, pp. 674–677, Fig. 18; J. ELSNER, V. KUBICA, B. BAHLOUL, *Der religiöse Tanz sergu. Saïda, Nordalgerien*, in: P. CELLAER, J. ELSNER (eds.), *Nord Africa*, in: W. BACHMANN (ed.), *Musikgeschichte in Bildern I/8*, Leipzig 1983, p. 124, Abb. 119; H. HICKMANN, *Ägypten*, in: H. BESSELER, H. SCHNEIDER (eds.), *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, Bd. II/1, Leipzig 1961 [= *Ägypten*], p. 78, Abb. 46.

¹³ SACHS (ed.), *Instruments*, Fig. 29; J. VANDIER, *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne*, Vol. IV, Paris 1964 [= *Manuel IV*], Figs. 202, 219; Vol. VI, Paris 1978, p. 154, Fig. 74.

¹⁴ *Id.*, *Manuel IV*, pp. 387–389.

¹⁵ GOLDWATER, *Bambara Sculpture*, Fig. 6; HICKMANN, *Ägypten*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ M. HATTSTEIN, P. DELIUS (eds.), *Islam. Art and Architecture*, Cologne 1999, p. 107.

tation of a ritual of request for good crops and rain or thanksgiving for them devoted to the Virgin Mary. It is of course nothing more than an assumption, very likely but not necessarily the only one, which has to suffice until the inscriptions, with which the painting is supplemented, are read.

It should be also stressed that in the analysed painting, for the first time in the archaeological material, a variety of the Nubian society of the twelfth–thirteenth centuries is shown. The Arabic component started to be predominant and also African folklore appeared in the art, which previously was noted as belonging rather to the sphere of the Mediterranean world.

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