

## Wall inscriptions in Banganarti churches. Contribution to the study of the society and culture of Christian Nubia

### Description of the project

Nubia is a countryside stretching along the middle course of the Nile, more or less between the first and the sixth cataracts. The inhabitants of the present-day Nubia are almost exclusively believers of Islam, however, their country was part of the Christian world between the 6th and the 15th century, i.e. at the time corresponding roughly with the European Middle Ages. Three Christian kingdoms – Nobadia, Makuria and Alwa – flourished in the area in this period. They were organized on Byzantine models and their culture displayed numerous Mediterranean traits introduced at the time of the Christianization in the 6th century. After the kingdoms ceased to exist, traces of their culture were covered by the desert sands and eventually came into oblivion. They were revived thanks to archaeological excavations carried out with particular intensity in the 1960s, in the frame of the UNESCO salvage campaign connected with the construction of the Aswan high dam. A Polish archaeological expedition under the direction of Professor Kazimierz Michałowski joined the campaign. The discovery of a cathedral with a set of magnificent wall paintings made by it in Faras was a true eyeopener and one of the factors that contributed to the creation of Nubiology – a scientific discipline dealing with the study of the Nubian past. Since the discoveries in Faras, Polish archaeologists have interruptedly taken part in the research on Christian Nubia excavating Dongola, the capital of Makuria laying midway between the third and the fourth cataracts, and recently also Ghazali, an important monastic centre in the area of the fourth cataract. Another Nubian Christian site explored by Poles is Banganarti situated ten kilometres to the south of Dongola. There, the Polish Joint Expedition to the Middle Nile under the direction of Doctor Bogdan Żurawski has been unearthing since 2002 a small fortified settlement boasting in its centre a church. The settlement existed from the end of the sixth through the fifteenth century with the climax falling in the period between the eleventh and the fifteenth century. The settlement's church, the so-called upper church or Raphaelion (church of Archangel Raphael), was then an important cult centre drawing visitors from the entire Makurian territory. Test excavations in the upper church demonstrated that it was preceded by another building, the so-called lower church, most probably also having Archangel Raphael as its patron. Walls of the churches carry numerous inscriptions, the study and publication of which is the goal of the present project. The overwhelming majority of inscriptions in the upper church are graffiti left by visitors coming to worship Archangel Raphael. Numerous pieces of information about visitors together with invocations and prayers to the patron of the church contained in those texts yield a vivid picture of the society and culture of the Kingdom of Makuria in the final stage of its existence (13th-14th century). They allow insight into the questions of the administrative structure of the Kingdom, the organization of the Nubian Church, the church topography, patterns of name-giving, language strategies and the level of literacy to name only a few. As far as the lower church is concerned, we are dealing mainly with painted inscriptions containing texts of liturgical character. Their identification and reconstruction will allow for better understanding the ritual life of the Nubian Church, which is almost unknown to us. In general terms, the deciphering of the inscriptions from the Banganarti churches and studying them in their context will considerably increase the present knowledge of the history and culture of Christian Nubia and the life of its inhabitants.