

El-Ghazali – a royal monastery in Northern Sudan?

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The article presents results of research on Nubian monasticism with a focus on the monastery of el-Ghazali, located in Wadi Abu Dom in the Bayuda Desert. It begins with a short introduction to Nubian monasticism and goes on to summarise results of the recent excavations at el-Ghazali. Intensive excavations at el-Ghazali and the study of Nubian monasticism were possible thanks to generous funding from the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project and from the National Science Centre, Poland.¹

Nubian Monasticism

Three types of monasticism are attested in Nubia: anchoritic (an individual hermit), laurae (a group of hermits forming a community that meets on a regular basis, for instance for Sunday Mass), and coenobitic (a communal monastery). There are two soundly confirmed hermitages in Nubia: the so-called anchorite dwelling in Faras and the hermitage in ez-Zuma. Two tentatively suggested ones are located at Toshka East and in the Wadi Allaqi (Firth 1927; Monneret de Villard 1935). Several small, walled enclosures in the region of Batn el-Hajar – like Akasha (21-N-11), Kulb (21-R-3), Kulubnarti (21-S-10) and Ukma (21-N-7, -9) were laura-like communities, according to an idea originally proposed by Julie Anderson (Anderson 1999). They could have housed up to seven monks living in separate rooms and they lacked communal spaces such as dormitories or refectories. The most spectacular are Nubian coenobitic monasteries like those at Qasr el-Wizz and el-Ghazali. The latter was an enclosed complex densely filled with structures constructed using a variety of materials: mud and baked bricks, rubble, and well-dressed sandstone blocks.

Only two monasteries, Qasr el-Wizz near Faras and el-Ghazali, have been fully excavated so far; two others, the suburban monasteries of Old Dongola located on Kom H and Kom D, are under excavation. Several tens of sites in Nubia have been tentatively identified as monasteries over the last century and a half. However, surveys and excavations have confirmed the presence of monastic remains only in the following locations (Figure 1):

Nag esh-Sheima (Bietak and Schwarz 1987; 1998)

Ar-Ramal (Monneret de Villard 1935)
 Qasr el-Wizz (Obluski 2016; forth. a; forth. b; Scanlon 1970; 1972; 1974)
 Toshka East (Kolotod) (Weigall 1907), (under Kolotod, Monneret de Villard 1935), (Simpson 1963)
 Faras (hermitage) (Griffith 1927; Monneret de Villard 1935; Pietschmann 1899; Sayce 1898; SBKopt. II, 90; van der Vliet 2017; Weston 1894, vol. 3, 78)
 Geziret Matuga (Clarke 1912; Monneret de Villard 1935)
 Akasha² (Anderson 1999; Mills 1965)
 Ukma (21-N-7, -9) (Anderson 1999; Mills 1965)
 Kulb (21-R-3) (Dinkler 1970; 1985)
 Kulubnarti (21-S-10) (Adams 2011; Anderson 1999)
 El-Ugal (Wadi Abu Zeit) (Welsby 2001)
 Old Dongola – Kom H (Jakobielski and Scholz 2001), and Kom D (Dobrowolski 1987; 1991; Jakobielski 1991; Jeute 1994)
 Ez-Zuma (hermitage) (Lepsius 1849; Monneret de Villard 1935; Wilkinson 1849)

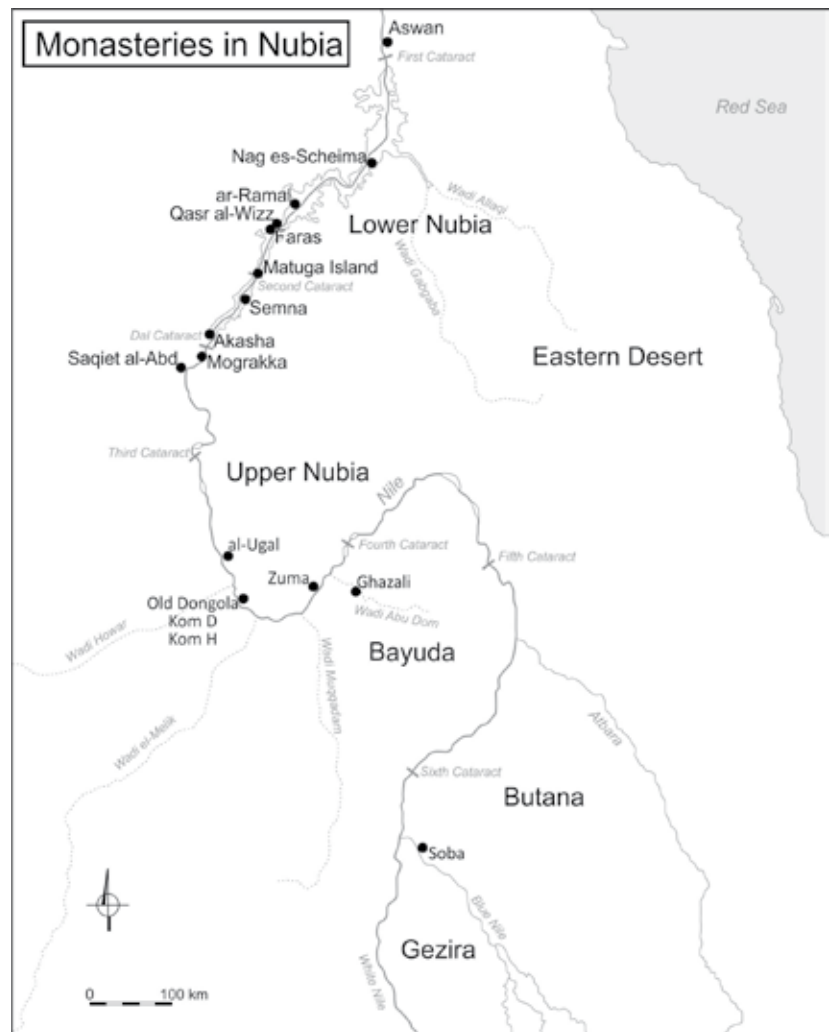


Figure 1. Map of securely identified Nubian monasteries (drawing: S. Maślak).

¹ QSAP A.36, Ghazali Archaeological Site Presentation Project and National Science Centre, grant no. 2014/13/D/HS3/03829, Monasticism in the peripheries of the Byzantine world.

² I would like to thank David Edwards who drew my attention to this enclosure and shared records of James Knudstad's excavations there with me.



El-Ghazali (Shinnie and Chittick 1961), (Ciesielska *et al.* 2017; Obluski *et al.* 2015; Obluski and Ochala 2016; Obluski *et al.* 2018)

According to the medieval historian Abū al-Makārim, churches and monasteries in Nubia were plentiful. For the southernmost kingdom of Alwa only, he quotes 400 churches. The figures given by him could be just a topos in a description of Christian countries and they were definitely exaggerated, but still the number of churches must have been considerable if it drew his attention. He passed to us the names of six monasteries:

Safanūf (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

Monastery of Michael (Mikā'il) and Quzmā (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

Dairā (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

Saint Sinuthius (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

Abū Jarās (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

Ansūn in Tafa (Abū-l-Makārim in Vantini 1975)

None of these monasteries have ever been paired with particular locations in Nubia or with archaeological sites.

The largest number of monasteries is attested in epigraphic sources.

Monastery of Pashshe (Qasr Ibrim, epitaph, 12, Greek, I. QI 20, l. 11, cat. no. 653)

Monastery of Poukō (Qasr Ibrim, epitaph, 11, Greek, I. QI 22, l. 10, cat. no. 77)

Monastery of Raphaēl (Qasr Ibrim, epitaph, 12, Greek, I. QI 20, l. 10, cat. no. 653–Qasr Ibrim, epitaph, 12, Greek, I. QI 21, l. 13, cat. no. 654)

Monastery of [.]enganarti (I. Khartoum Greek 15, pl. 14)

Monastery of Eittde (ΕΙΤΤΔΗ) (I. Khartoum Copt. 27, pl. 20)

Monastery of Maria (in) Timaeie (ΜΑΡΙΑ ΤΙΜΑΕΙΕ) (I. Varsovic 110, pl. 11)

Monastery of Maurage (ΠΜΟΝΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ [...] ΜΑΥΡΑΓΗ) (SB-Kopt. 1, 719)

Great Monastery of Anthony (ΑΝΤ ΜΕΓ): l. 6; (Ο ΜΕΓΑΣ ΑΝ'Τ'): l. 14 (Łajtar 2002)

Monastery of the Holy Trinity (ΤΡΙΑΣ ΔΓΙΑΣ) ll. 13–14 (Łajtar 2002)

(Monastery of) Apa [---] (ΑΠΑ[---]): l. 10 (I. QI 39, fig. on p. 149)

Monastery of Jesus (in) Tillarti (ΙC ΤΙΛΛΑΡΤ): l. 8 (I. Fitz. 110)

Monastery of Pot() (ΜΟΝΑΣΤΗΡΙΩΝ ΠΟΤ): l. 1 (Łajtar and Pluskota 2001)

(Monastery) of Michael (ΜΙΧΑΗΛ): l. ? (Łajtar 1992; Łajtar and Pluskota 2001)

(Monastery) of Maria in Pachoras (ΜΑΡΙΑ ΠΑΧ): l. 1 (I. Faras Copt., 117–18, fig. 31; I. Faras Greek 43, fig. 30)

Monastery of Four Living Creatures in Pachoras (ΠΑΡΑ ΖΩΑ): ll. 3–4 (unpublished; in preparation by V. Laisney)

(Monastery of) Danionijer (ΔΑΝΙΟΦΩΕΡ): l. 3 (Łajtar 2003)

Monastery of Apa Dios (unpublished material from Qasr el-Wizz monastery)

Monastery of Apa Dioskoros (unpublished material from Qasr el-Wizz monastery)

Nubian monasticism in general was linked to Egypt, the cradle of this movement, by means of religious confession, spiritualism and organization, yet the Nubians took their own path, as is clear, for example, from the spatial organization of coenobitic monasteries. The earliest known, and secure evidence for monasteries can be dated to the second half of the 7th century, about 100 years after the official conversion of the Nubian kingdoms. These are the tombstone of Joseph, a bishop of Syene who died in 668 and was buried in the church of the monastery on Kom H (Gazda 2005; Jakobielski and van der Vliet 2011) and a series of radiocarbon dates obtained from the monastery of el-Ghazali. The end of monasticism in Nubia is correlated with a considerable weakening of central and regional authorities and impoverishment of Nubian society due to instability and frequent Mamluk invasions at the end of the 13th century.

The monastery at el-Ghazali

The monastery of el-Ghazali was an important site of interest already at a very early period of Nubian studies. The site was visited by famous 19th-century travelers, such as Linant de Bellefonds (Linant de Bellefonds 1958), Richard Lepsius (Lepsius 1853), who took from the site 10 tombstones now stored in the Berlin Museum, Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (Wilkinson 1848-9; 1849), and Pierre Trémaux (Trémaux 1854; 1862). Each of them drew at least a sketch of the monastery and the North Church. These drawings do not seem to have been done at the site, or if they were the draftsmen let their imagination run wild. They are not in agreement with each other, and based on the still preserved architectural remains we can easily reject some of the details drawn in the 19th century. The illustrations showing the greatest attention to detail and the ones closest to reality are those of Pierre Trémaux. For instance, he was the only one who drew the vault ribs.

Peter Shinnie and Neville Chittick carried out the first excavations at the site in 1953 and 1954 (Shinnie and Chittick 1961). They excavated the monastic church and several rooms: the refectory, water storage facility, and two rooms next to the entrance to the monastery. The Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums re-launched studies on the monastery in the framework of a joint expedition in 2012 and initiated a site presentation project.

In the following section of the article, I attempt a reconstruction of monastic life and address several questions: what languages the monks used, what was the spiritual and everyday life at the monastery like, what and where did they eat, where did they sleep, and ultimately how were they buried.

Languages used at the monastery

The monastery of el-Ghazali functioned in a complex linguistic environment. The most commonly attested written

language was Coptic, but the spoken language was vernacular Old Nubian. A potsherd with the Coptic alphabet written on it proves that education in this language was conducted at the monastery (Plate 1).

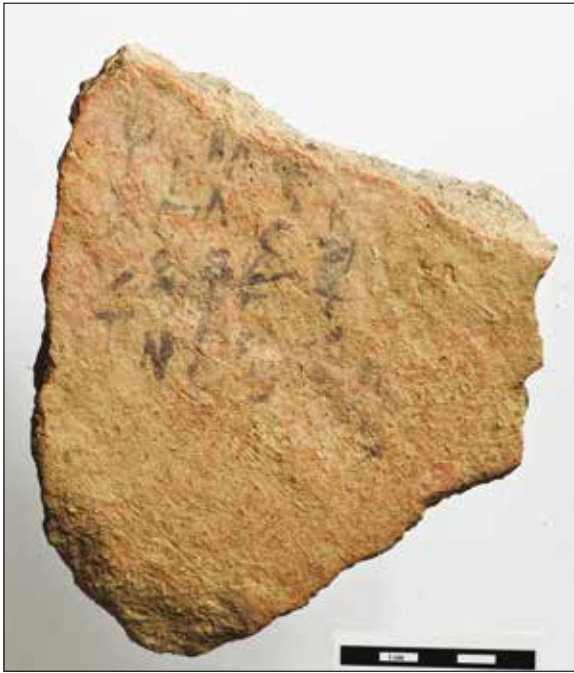


Plate 1. A school exercise on a coarseware sherd, el-Ghazali.

Tens of epitaphs were written in Coptic (Obluski *et al.* 2018). Thanks to work done mostly by Jacques van der Vliet and Adam Łajtar (I. Khartoum Copt.; I. Khartoum Greek), it was possible to identify in them some elements common to Egyptian monastic communities and to Egyptian culture in general. Parallels can be traced in funerary formulae, and also in paleographic features. For instance, in some of the tombstones the shape of the letter μ is borrowed from the Coptic written tradition (Plate 2): it is written with two vertical strokes and a horizontal one at the bottom. Surprisingly, on one tombstone the same letter may also be written in a standard manner, e.g. in the name of the deceased.

Greek, the third language, is attested in the Agnus Dei inscription (Plate 3), the only attestation of this prayer in Nubia so far. The best example to illustrate the multilingualism of not only el-Ghazali, but Nubia in general, is a simple word for monk, written on the tombstone of one Prochoros recovered at el-Ghazali. The way it was written is interesting: “ $\tau\mu\omicron\nu\alpha\chi\omicron\gamma$ ”. The Greek substantive ($\mu\omicron\nu\alpha\chi\omicron\varsigma$) is provided with the Coptic masculine article τ - and



Plate 2. Tombstone of Marianos

the Old Nubian ending – $\omicron\gamma$ (I. Khartoum Greek).

The most abundant epigraphic finds are inscriptions on pottery vessels. Approximately 1200 such objects have been discovered. This is certainly the largest assemblage of this category of finds registered in the whole Nile Valley for the Middle Ages. The inscriptions on tableware were almost exclusively scratched; the ones on utility ware were applied in the same way, but were also incised in wet clay before firing or painted. Texts on vessels are for the most part the so-called owners' inscriptions, that is, a kind of label identifying the



Plate 3. Agnus Dei inscription, south wall, North Church.



person to whom the object belonged (Plate 4). They consist of the name of the person and sometimes his position both in church and monastic hierarchy, such as priest (*presbyteros*) or head of the monastery (*archimandrites*). The second largest



Plate 4. Owner's inscription on a bowl.

category are divine names, for instance God, Jesus Christ, Mary, and names of other holy figures like archangels and saints. The names were given as full words, numerical cryptograms, monograms or in abbreviated form. Their function was spiritual or apotropaic, being a simple acclamation or a call for protection of the contents of the vessel and its owner against evil forces. A protective role must also have been ascribed to the names of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste written on a bowl, of which only a quarter with seven names is preserved (Plate 5). The surface of another vessel carries an abbreviation of the name Matthaëus, but we cannot be certain that this was done when the bowl was still intact.

Spiritual life at the monastery

No doubt the centre of spiritual life of the monks was the North and South Churches (Figure 2, Plate 6); however,



Plate 5. Bowl fragment with partly preserved inscription listing names of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste.

teachings could have been delivered in other places if the superior thought it served a didactic purpose.

The original church of the monastery was the basilica frequently depicted by the 19th century travellers and excavated by Peter Shinnie. The building features all the characteristic elements of Makurian churches (Obluski *et al.* 2015; Obluski *et al.* 2018). In the first phase, it was a tri-aisled building with a flat roof resting on arches supported by dark grey granite columns. The possibility of three parallel vaults covering the nave and the aisles is unlikely due to the overall height of both the arches and vaults themselves. The apse, nave and western section of the building were taller than the rest. The walls of the North Church were built of sandstone in the lower courses and of baked brick in the upper part. They were decorated with paintings preserved only in the north-eastern room and in the central western bay. The pillars, rectangular in plan, were built of baked brick with horizontally laid wooden beams. On the nave-side, the four central pillars were reinforced with pilasters. They mark the second phase in the history of the church when the emphasis of the building shifted from the horizontal axis, which centred attention on the apse, to the vertical axis concentrating the focus on the central highest element of the church, either a sail dome or a compound dome. At 4m from the mouth of the apse there were four pots sunk into the floor in a line across the width of the nave. They were used to support posts for the construction of an altar screen (*templon*). The *ambo* was located against the southern and western faces of the second pillar on the north. The apse was entirely filled by the *synthronon* built of baked bricks covered with lime plaster (Figure 3). Ancillary rooms on both sides of the apse were accessible from the aisles.

The South Church is almost an equilateral trapezoid, 14.9m long on the north side, 14.72m on the south side and 6.46m and 8.95m along the west and east sides respectively. It was entirely built of mud brick. Four massive pillars were constructed in place of the intended north wall; they were attached to the southern face of the south wall of the older church. Three entrances led into the church. The naos was unusual for Makurian architecture, as it lacked tripartite division. A three-stepped *ambo* abutted the southern face of the third pillar from the west. The *hierateion* comprised an area set off from the eastern part of the naos and included the apse with a built-in *synthronon*. The floor of the *hierateion* was paved with trapezoidal ceramic tiles. Two auxiliary rooms flanked the apse on the south and north. The roofing is the most intriguing aspect of the South Church. The almost square (6.08 x 6.13m) naos may have been roofed with a dome similar to the church at Kulb (Deichmann and Grossmann 1988).

Wall inscriptions complement the evidence for spiritual life in the monastery. Grzegorz Ochala, the mission's epigrapher, identified 137 individual texts on the walls of the North Church, among which the following categories can be recognized:

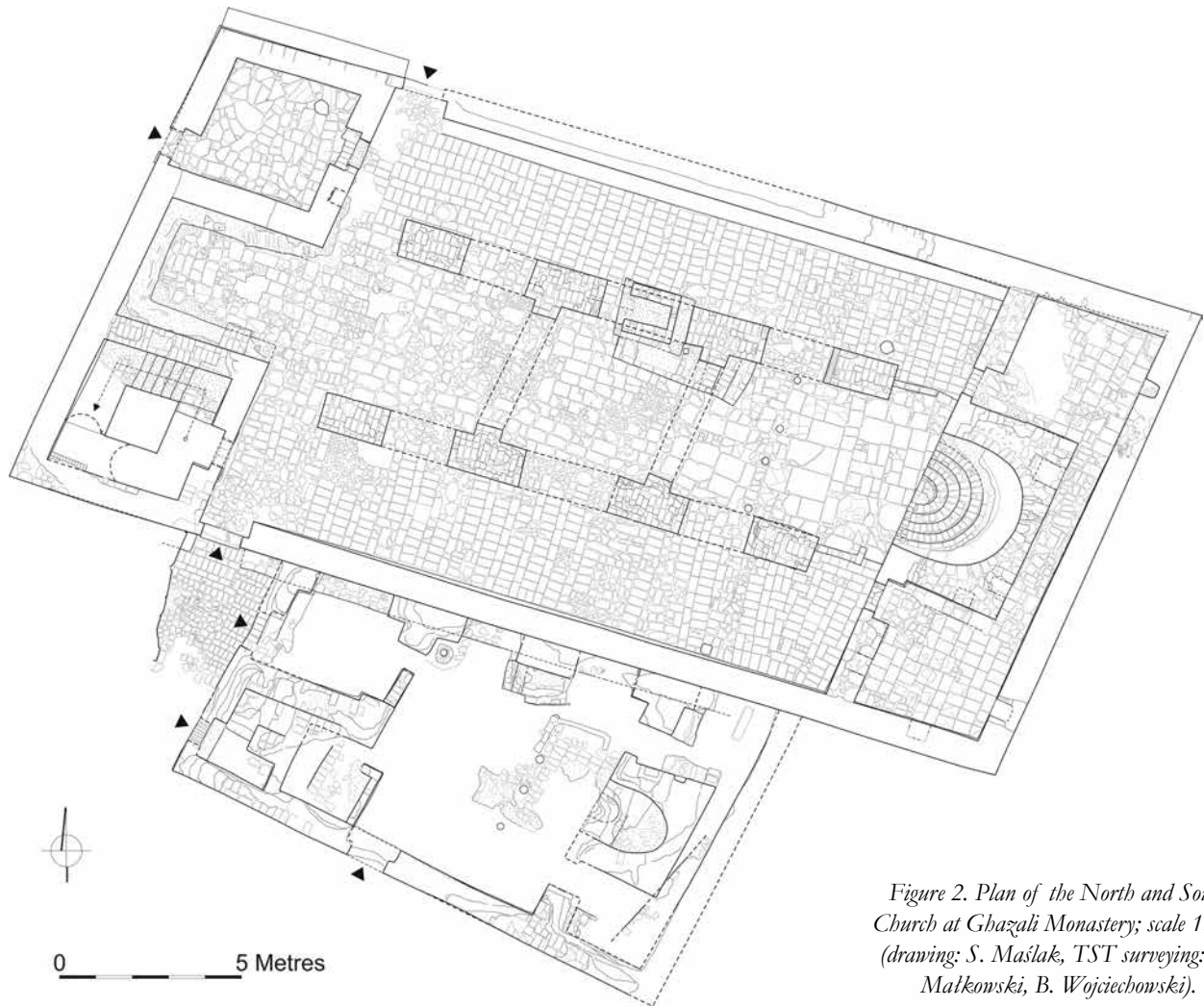


Figure 2. Plan of the North and South Church at Ghazali Monastery; scale 1:200 (drawing: S. Maślak, TST surveying: W. Matkowski, B. Wojciechowski).

Plate 6. Churches of the el-Ghazali monastery, kite aerial photograph.





Figure 3. North Church reconstruction, cross-section.

so-called visitors' inscriptions
 texts left by persons paying a visit to a holy place
 acclamations (including the beginning of the Hail Mary prayer)
 inscriptions of liturgical character (the Agnus Dei prayer)
 various holy names including those of Jesus Christ, Mary, and the Archangels, as well as scratched depictions of these figures

Two intriguing objects were recovered during excavations at the el-Ghazali monastery. Both are fragmentarily preserved terracotta figurines of monks made of fired clay (Shinnie and Chittick 1961, pl. IX) (Plate 7). Their function is obscure. It is rather unlikely that monks made such figurines for themselves; it seems most probable that they were devotional items taken from the holy site by visiting pilgrims. Yet to confirm this hypothesis such figurines would have to be found on at least one archaeological site other than the



Plate 7. Monk figurine.

el-Ghazali monastery. These devotional items bring us to an important spiritual but also economic phenomenon, in which the Nubian monastic communities took part: pilgrimage. While el-Ghazali offers no irrefutable material evidence of pilgrimage besides the figurines and visitors' inscriptions, such evidence is present at the monastery of Qasr el-Wizz. At Qasr el-Wizz, a new church was erected east of the original one, and the old church underwent substantial structural changes to facilitate pilgrimage to the tomb of a local saint buried in the monastery (Obluski forth. a).

Daily life in the monastery

Another vital part of monastic life was work. Archaeological finds related to physical labour have not been discovered in large numbers but are nonetheless present in Nubian monasteries. They include spindle whorls, punchers, weaving swords and scraps of leather, probably offcuts from production of monastic aprons and sandals (Obluski forth. b). Apart from relatively simple labour like spinning or leatherworking, Nubian monks delivered services which required a good education, such as notarial work, or skill and experience, like the production of clay objects and iron smelting (Obluski forth. b).

Two iron-smelting centres were identified close to the monastery. One immediately south east of the monastery and the other south of the settlement. Several iron-smelting furnaces were uncovered during excavations. They were built in pairs, one separated from the other by a container (Plate 8). Each furnace features a horizontally laid terracotta tile, probably intended to facilitate slag tapping, which suggests that the whole load was placed above it (Plate 9). El-Ghazali is the sole iron production site where such a feature has been found. The contiguity of the monastery and of the northern iron smelting area and the fact they are contemporary offer strong grounds to support the monks' association with this industry. Jane Humphris and her team are conducting a detailed archaeometric analysis of industrial remains from the iron smelting process. Monk-blacksmiths are attested in Egyptian textual sources associated with the Pachomian (Palladius 1996)



Plate 8. North iron smelting centre.



Plate 9. Ceramic tile facilitating slag tapping (?).

and Shenoutian (Kuhn 1956) monasteries, as well as at Bawit (Maspero and Drioton 1931, no. 428).

Isotope analyses were carried out to investigate the monks' diet.³ The results show that most monks subsisted on a varied C3 and C4 plant diet and frequently consumed animal protein (C3 plants are barley, rice, wheat, legumes, and most fruits and vegetables, C4 plants include millet, sorghum, maize, and sugar). This rather blurred picture is complemented by the results of zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical research.⁴ The animals in the monks' menu were domesticated species: pig, sheep, goat, and cattle. Their bones bore signs of food processing and consumption. Sometimes monks tried something more exotic, like an antelope. This leads one to ask if the monks or their servants hunted or if they bought/received game as a gift or expression of gratitude. We usually do not associate hunting with the monastic life of solitary or communal contemplation and devotion to God. However, it does find support in material evidence: two archer's looses were found by Peter Shinnie (Shinnie and Chittick 1961, 26).

Study of the plant remains identified some usual species: dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*), dom and onion. A less obvious but expected plant species was represented by the presence of grapes although not necessarily indicating the local cultivation of the vine (*Vitis vinifera*). Some of the plants can shed light not only on the monks' diet but also on their activity as healers. One of these plants is purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), which in modern Sudan is known as *reglab* (رجلة) and

cooked as a vegetable stew. In antiquity, it was esteemed for its numerous healing properties and used as a remedy for inflammations and ailments of the urinary system. Pliny the Elder even advised wearing the plant as an amulet to expel all evil (Megaloudi 2005; Roca-Garcia 1970). Purslane can also help relieve digestion problems and in larger quantities can be used as a laxative. Another is *Euphorbia aegyptiaca* known in the Arabic-speaking world as *um leban*. In Sudan, *Euphorbia* is still used by traditional herbalists for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, dermatitis, and other inflammations as well as for aches of the neck and head. The latex is used internally to expel intestinal worms, and externally to treat snakebites and scorpion stings (Schmelzer *et al.* 2008). The last plant is the so-called African cabbage, or spider plant (*Cleome gynandra*). Nutritional analyses have shown it to be high in certain nutrients including beta-carotene, folic acid, ascorbic acid, and calcium. It is used as a medicinal herb due to its anti-inflammatory properties (Broun *et al.* 1929).

Excavations at el-Ghazali unearthed finds that are unique to monastic studies in the Nile Valley. Discovered in separate rooms within the food production compound were the remains of an oil press, as well as a mill with grain storage facilities (Plate 10). Both are otherwise unattested in Nubia, while the latter is known only from the monastery of Anba Hadra in Aswan (Monneret de Villard 1927) and from Shenoute's White Monastery (Brooks Hedstrom *et al.* 2011). The monastic mill occupied one of the largest rooms (Room H) in the monastery. There were three silos in the room, and they were associated with three millstones. One of the latter (a pink



Plate 10. Food production facilities.
oil press on the top, Room H
monastic mill at the bottom

³ The analyses were carried out by Robert Stark, McMaster University.

⁴ The animal remains were studied by Urszula Iwaszczuk, Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, while plant remains were identified by Adela Pokorna, Charles University, Prague.



granite-like stone) is particularly interesting, as it is part of a so-called pseudo-Pompeian-type mill. Grain and oil were of utmost importance for monastic communities, which should have pursued a restricted diet, at least in theory. Oil was the only source of lipids for monks. The cultivation of olives is not attested in Sudan, and one may assume that oil was made from sesame or other seeds. The production of oil for domestic and industrial use at the monastery, for example for lighting, also has to be considered. The food production compound was not limited to the mill – monastic storage and probably a kitchen were located next to it. In this room, which was reorganized at least three times, we found storage vats, storage containers and probably a cooking installation. The latter consisted of large pots tapering towards the rim, upon which another pot may have been placed and filled with food to boil. If this interpretation is correct, then the cooking installation constitutes a continuation of Meroitic traditions of food preparation, since installations based on the same principle have been found at Hamadab and Dangeil (Pawel Wolf pers. comm.; Anderson *et al.* this volume.).

Initially there was a single refectory in the monastery, but during the peak of its development a neighboring room was also turned into a dining room (Figure 4, Plate 11). During the last phase of occupation, the monks again used only the original one. This was an almost square room roofed with four domes. The domes rested on arches springing along the walls and spanning the space between walls and a central cross-shaped pillar. Monks sat on circular benches, and tables were placed within these circles. When the number of monks decreased, the function of the room changed again and the benches were demolished.

The excavations revealed two sanitary complexes at the monastery. The original one was located within the monastic enclosure, and another was found in an annex to the monastery constructed at the turn of the 10th century (Plate 12). They consist of rows of toilets and adjacent washing facilities. The most important information provided by this complex is that each toilet was a private space located in a single room and separated one from another. This clearly marks a break with the ancient Roman tradition of latrines as common public spaces.

The monastic dormitory occupies a space next to the food production facilities in close proximity to the refectory as well as the North Church (Plate 13). Like the dining rooms, the dormitory evolved following the needs of the monastic community. According to radiocarbon dating, it was erected between 684 and 718 and initially constituted a six-cell complex (Figure 5).⁵ It was built of mud bricks for

⁵ The radiocarbon analyses of samples were carried out by the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory, Poland.



Plate 11. Refectories, kite aerial photograph.

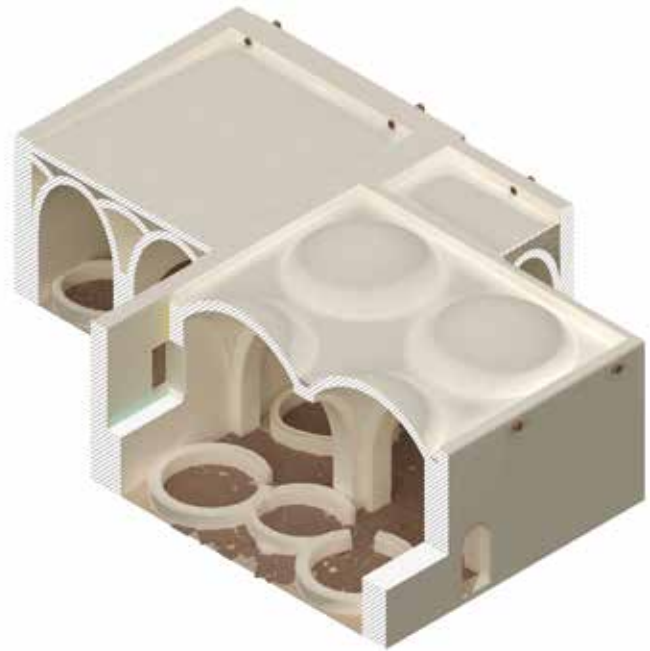


Figure 4. Double refectory reconstruction, cross-section.

better thermal insulation. The rooms were located on the eastern and western sides of a north-south oriented corridor, which was roofed with a barrel vault. The cells were also roofed with vaults, but these were built perpendicular to the one over the corridor. Fragments of whitewashed mud plaster inscribed with letters in black ink were found in the north-western corner of the corridor. The only legible set of letters spelt out the name Isaias. Fragments of plaster painted with a geometric pattern were found in the same spot. They represent the only such discovery outside of the churches.

Each cell was furnished with three benches running along the walls. The benches were designed for sleeping, as indicated by a slope imitating a pillow preserved in several



Plate 12. Latrines.

cases. The cells were also furnished with niches, the number of which varied from room to room. This indicates an individual approach to the spatial organisation of the cells. We may conclude that niches had not been part of the original building, and that the monks cut them into the already standing walls at various times to suit their needs. Reused kitchen pots were sunk into the benches to serve as storage facilities; however, they were found empty, so it is possible they served as stands for other pots. Containers of different shapes but always divided into two parts complete the set of furnishings of a monastic cell at el-Ghazali. The floors of the cells were paved with pottery tiles of square and rectangular shape,

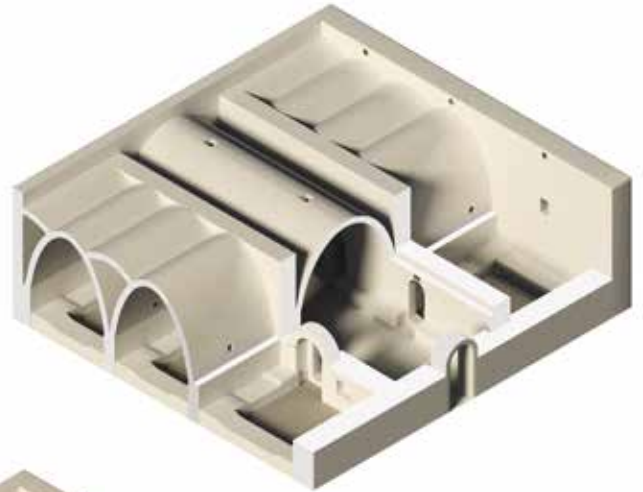


Figure 5. Dormitory in Phase 1, reconstruction.

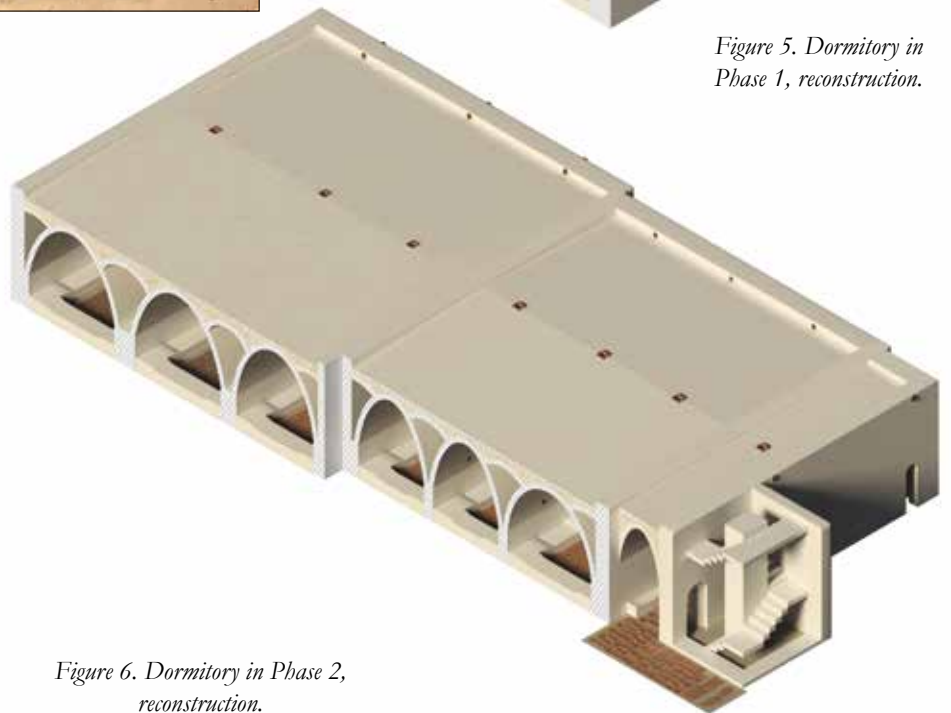


Figure 6. Dormitory in Phase 2, reconstruction.



Plate 13. Dormitory.

made in various sizes. Noteworthy among the finds from the dormitory is a fragmentarily preserved terracotta tablet with ornamental decoration and a quotation from verse 8 of Psalm 121: The Lord will protect your coming in and going out. The tablet probably was placed above the entrance to the whole complex or to one of the monks' cells.

The late 10th and the beginning of the 11th century brought many changes to the monastery. The North Church was rearranged, the South Church was built, and the dormitory was enlarged by adding a second block of six cells at the northern end of the original building (Figure 6). These were somewhat larger than the original ones. A new



floor made of pottery tiles was laid in the enlarged building's main corridor. The furnishing of the rooms was the same as in the older dormitory. Little more can be said about the new block of cells because of its mediocre state of preservation.

A gradual decline of the monastery began in the second half of the 12th century. In this period, the number of monks and the actively used area of the monastery shrank. Changes were made in the western part of the monastery, and it is highly likely that the food production facilities went out of use at that time, as the northern part of the enlarged dormitory was turned into a food storage facility.

Death and burial at el-Ghazali

The final part of this paper is devoted to death at the monastery and to el-Ghazali's burial ground. Cemetery 2 encompasses a vast area directly to the south of the monastery and contains *c.* 800 tombs. The tombs show a great diversity in terms of their architectural form. Most were oriented along a north west-south east axis. There were three types of superstructures constructed in the monastic cemetery: stone box-graves, so-called mud-brick pavements – flat rectangular arrangements one-course high, and brick *mastabas*. Most of the *mastabas* had a niche in the western part for a funerary stele commemorating the deceased.

The architecture of the subterranean part of the tomb shows a similar degree of variability. Simple shaft-like pits were the standard. Two narrow ledges were cut along the longer sides of the burial shaft in some cases providing support for large stone slabs set across over the body of the deceased. So-called vaulted tombs had a mud-brick vault closed on two ends by walls and entirely covered with a thin layer of mud (Plate 14). As a rule, the deceased was placed in an extended position, supine on the bottom of the pit with head towards the north west. Usually, both hands were placed on the pelvis or alongside the body. The head of the deceased was protected by an arrangement of bricks, one to each side, with a third (or even two) laid over the face. Bodies were wrapped in textiles and no traces of coffins were observed.

Excavations of the joint Sudanese-Polish team uncovered pieces of 93 epitaphs, although most were found in second-

ary contexts inside the monastic compound. Still, together with the 134 discovered during earlier works or attributed to el-Ghazali,⁶ they form the second largest collection of tombstones known from Nubia, after the cemetery of Sakinya-Toshka West in Nobadia. The epitaphs contain a prayer for the soul of the deceased, which is usually an appeal to God or His Providence to secure the existence of a monk's soul on the bosom of the prophets or in the world of the living. It may also contain some personal data such as whether the deceased was a monk and for how long, or what offices he held in the course of his life. The date of death was often indicated, but only giving the day of the month without a year, except on a single tombstone that of Makarios, who died in the 760s.

The average age at death of the monks was between 35 and 50, with nine individuals who died in young adulthood and only 11 who exceeded the age of 50. Overall, the skeletal remains appear healthy, with arthritic changes in the vertebral column, mostly connected with age, being the most consistently present pathological condition. Activity-related changes on the long bones, mainly in the form of pronounced muscle and tendon attachments and increased robustness of the skeletal elements, were also observed. The dental health of the monks, in contrast, was highly variable, with some individuals preserving a youthful appearance of dentition, a large number of analysed individuals showing significant tooth wear and pathological alteration, and several individuals who are almost completely edentulous.

The monastery – an overview

What overall picture of monastic community emerges from excavations at el-Ghazali? Its foundation was sponsored probably by King Merkourios, called in the history of Coptic patriarchs of Alexandria the New Constantine (Vantini 1975). The radiocarbon range we have received from several locations in the monastery (pillar of the staircase of the North Church, dormitory and two other places) suggests that the monastery was built between *c.* 680 and 720 (Obluski and Korzeniowska 2018). Close ties to the royal court are confirmed not only by the concurrence of the erection date of the monastery with the reign of Merkourios but also by the scale of investment. The monastery is the same size as the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula, a foundation of the Byzantine emperor Justinian. We can distinguish three phases of development of the el-Ghazali monastery: its growth from the end of the 7th century to the mid-10th century, its peak from the mid-10th until the mid-12th century, and decline from the mid-12th until the third quarter of the 13th century. The number of monks fluctuated in correlation with the prosperity of the monastery. It was the highest (at least 36 monks, number based on the space available in the



Plate 14. Cemetery 2, vaulted tombs.

⁶ These include tombstones brought to Jebel Barkal Museum by local people who reported that they were revealed, in the vicinity of el-Ghazali, after a huge flood in the 1980s.

monastic dormitory)⁷ when the monastery peaked in the 12th century and started to diminish thereafter. We need to bear in mind that lay people were also present in the monastery.

The monastic community at el-Ghazali was involved in production and processing of food, in the iron industry, as well as with medical treatment. The monks lived fairly good lives: they were well fed with a diverse diet, some individuals clearly eating more meat than others. The head of the community was an archimandrite, who also bore the title of presbyteros (priest). This seems to have been a way to avoid conflicts between monastic and church hierarchies inside the monastery, a frequent situation in Egypt. The monks spoke vernacular Old Nubian, while Coptic was used for spiritual guidance and religious education. Due to the fact that at least in the early period Nubian monasteries relied heavily on Coptic literature, they were also beacons of Coptic language.

Abbreviations

- I. Faras Greek = J. Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* [= Faras IV], Warsaw 1974.
- I. Faras Copt. = S. Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions* [= Faras III], Warsaw 1972.
- I. Fitz. = G. T. Martin, *Stelae from Egypt and Nubia in the Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge, c. 3000 BC-AD 1150. Cambridge 2005.
- I. Khartoum Copt. = J. van der Vliet, *Catalogue of the Coptic Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum* (I. Khartoum Copt.) [= *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 121]. Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA 2003.
- I. Khartoum Greek = A. Łajtar, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum* (I. Khartoum Greek) [= *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 122], Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA 2003.
- QI = A. Łajtar, – J. van der Vliet, *Qasr Ibrim. The Greek and Coptic Inscriptions Published on Behalf of the Egypt Exploration Society* [= *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* 13]. Warsaw 2010.
- I. Varsovie = A. Łajtar – A. Twardecki, *Catalogue des inscriptions grecques du Musée National de Varsovie* [= *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* 2]. Warsaw 2003.
- SBKopt. = *Koptisches Sammelbuch, herausgegeben von Monika R.M. Hasitzka*, Mitteilungen aus der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek (Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer); Neue Serie, 1993.

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⁷ Whether the stairway in the second phase building led to an upper storey with more cells or simply gave access onto the roof is unknown. During excavation it was considered that not enough mud-brick rubble was found to suggest the existence of a second floor. However, this material could have been taken away by *wadi* farmers to make their plots more fertile.

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