

## Two Old Nubian Inscriptions from Akasha West

VINCENT W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI, ADAM ŁAJTAR

**Abstract:** The present paper analyses two Old Nubian inscriptions found at a church in Akasha West in 1969. The first inscription was found on an ostracon and invokes Jesus Christ. The second inscription was found on the altar inside the church’s sanctuary, and refers to the Holy Altar of Michael. The publication gives a description of the inscription, a transcription with critical apparatus, and a grammatical and general commentary on the text.

**Keywords:** Christian Nubia, Akasha West, Old Nubian, ostracon, altar

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, independent researcher, The Hague; [vincent@vangervenoiei.com](mailto:vincent@vangervenoiei.com);

 0000-0003-1637-4261

Adam Łajtar, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, Warsaw; [a.lajtar@uw.edu.pl](mailto:a.lajtar@uw.edu.pl);

 0000-0003-3842-2180

The following two Old Nubian texts were discovered respectively in Rooms 4 and 46 (Sanctuary) of the church (Rooms 1–4, 45–46) at the northern end of a fortified settlement at Akasha West (**Figs 1–2**). The site was initially registered in April 1964 during Sudan Antiquities Service’s reconnaissance survey from Gemai to Dal directed by Anthony James Mills as [21-N-11], a ‘stone-built Christian fort’.<sup>1</sup> James Knudstad supervised the excavation work at the site between March and April 1969, and considered it a monastery, as also reported by Jean Leclant.<sup>2</sup> David Edwards suggests that the ‘unusual form’ of the ‘small church’ was the result of a series of ‘significant modifications’ to the building.<sup>3</sup> Jacques van der Vliet has identified an inscribed ceramic basin with a fish motif found at the same site as being dedicated to Saint Epimachos, which he suggests could be ‘the name

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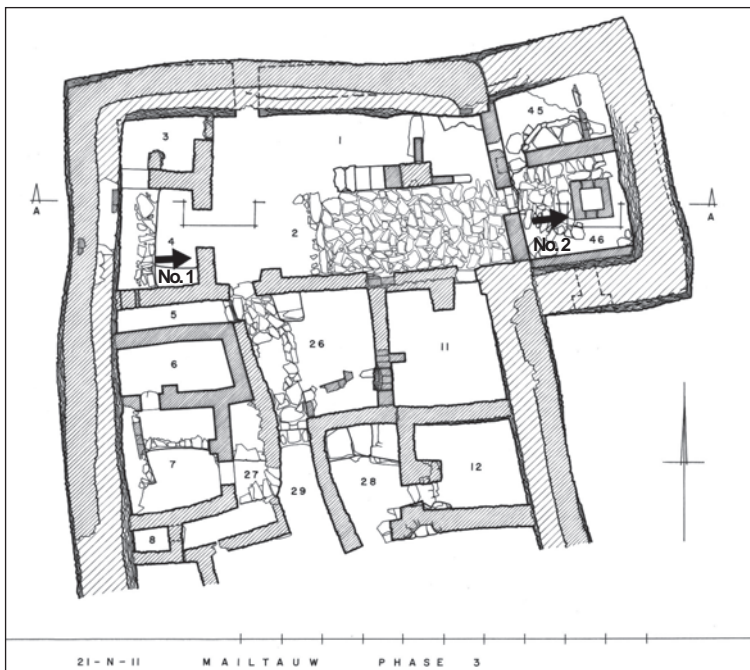
<sup>1</sup> Mills 1965: 10.

<sup>2</sup> Leclant 1971: 249.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards 2019: 57.



1. Late phase of church within [21-N-11] with paved floor and altar in sanctuary beyond (© ASSN archive, photo F/613:3).



2. Plan of (late) phase 3 of church within [21-N-11]; location of the ostracon (no. 1) and the altar with the inscription (no. 2) marked with arrows (© ASSN archive; drawing: J.E. Knudstad, 1969; courtesy of D. Edwards).



3. Ostracon from [21-N-11] (© ASSN archive).



of the church or monastery to which the basin was donated'.<sup>4</sup> The presence of a church is confirmed by the local toponym *Kisseentawwo* 'below the church (ruin)',<sup>5</sup> which still refers to the site in which the inscriptions were found.

### OSTRACON

The ostracon (**Fig. 3**) was found with its written face oriented downward in the fabric of the eastern wall of Room 4 of the church, on the south side of the doorway, at the level of its lintel.<sup>6</sup> Room 4 was accessible from the body of the church through a door from Room 2. The room contained two mastaba benches, and its walls, replastered three times, were covered by painted decorations.<sup>7</sup> The ostracon has 4 lines in black ink on the outside of a sherd, executed in a neat and regular hand. Even though the text is in Old Nubian, it is not executed in Nubian-type majuscules. The script is very particular, with some letters written upright while others look like inclined majuscules, with pronounced one-sided serifs on the *kappa*, *alpha*, *mu*, and *nu*. The text is clearly readable from the photograph and complete. The current location of the object is unknown.

Transcription:

ICXCM̄A

TAPAΓOC

KONAMAP

4 KEC̄NNA

<sup>4</sup> Van der Vliet 2003: 83–84 (no. 24).

<sup>5</sup> Bell 1970: 72, no. 140201.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards 2019: 66. It is impossible to know whether the ostracon was deposited there on purpose, e.g. for apotropaic reasons, or if was placed accidentally, as part of the mortar filling the space between bricks. The second possibility seems more probable to us.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards 2019: 58.

Reading text:

IC XC MATAPALCOCKONA MAPKECĪNA

Translation:

*Jesus Christ. He/you has become a witness. He/you stole.*

Commentary:

After the invocation of Jesus Christ in line 1 IC XC, we find two verbal forms.

1. ICXC̄: *Nomen sacrum* for Jesus Christ. The horizontal stroke above IC marking it as a *nomen sacrum* is effaced together with the upper part of I.

1–3. MATAP-AL-OC-KO-N-A witness-become-ASP-PERF-PRS.2/3SG-PRED, ‘He has become (fully) a witness’. The aspect marker -OC has a variable meaning dependent on the meaning of the verbal root it is attached to. It often appears to indicate a sense of completion, as in AXL-OC, ‘to save completely’. The presence of perfect tense marker -KO is very rare in Old Nubian literary texts and may be either a reflex of the spoken language (modern Nile Nubian -ko as regular past tense morpheme). It may therefore be an indication that the text should be dated relatively late. MATAP<sup>8</sup> is generally used for witnesses in legal documents, but has also been attested in a visitor’s *graffito* in a commemorative complex of the monastery on Kom H in Dongola, probably as an expression of admiration by an eyewitness.<sup>9</sup>

3–4. MAPK-EC-ĪN-A steal-PFV.PST2-PRS.2/3SG-PRED, ‘He stole’. This verb MAPK has not been previously attested, but most probably related to the Nobiin verb *mark* ‘to steal’.<sup>10</sup> The combination of the past 2 tense with the present tense morpheme is uncommon, but the tense system underwent a rather dramatic transformation in the development from Old Nubian to contemporary Nobiin. Both verbal forms on this ostrakon may be a testimony to that.

The referentiality of the two verbs is unclear. Without further context it is impossible to judge whether a second or third person subject is implied, and whether both verbs in fact have the same subject. It cannot be ascertained whether the text referred to a real-life situation or played with a literary motif.

## PRAYER ON AN ALTAR

The altar was located in Room 46 of the church. The altar was constructed from mud-brick with mud plastering, without a surviving altar top.<sup>11</sup> The upper-right corner of the front

<sup>8</sup> Browne 1996: 112.

<sup>9</sup> Łajtar, Van der Vliet 2017: 28 (no. VIII).

<sup>10</sup> Reinisch 1879: 110.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards 2019: 59.



4. Detail of the altar in Room 46 of church within [21-N-11] (© ASSN archive, photo ASSN F/613:11).

of the altar featured an inscription (**Fig. 4**) of 4 lines in red ink, written in Nubian-type majuscules executed in an uneven hand. No other Old Nubian inscriptions of this length have been found on altars. The usage of red ink is very rare in wall inscriptions, for which black ink is the norm. Because of the lack of comparative material, it is impossible to assert whether the red ink is used because the writing is on an altar, or because of another reason. The text has significantly faded. Leclant first reported its discovery during work by Mills, Knudstad, and Lars E.I. Gezelius in the Batn el-Hajjar between October 1968 and May 1969: *Trois grandes forteresses de pierre se dressent sur la rive Ouest d'Ukma. La plus au Sud semble avoir correspondu à un monastère: on y a trouvé les ruines d'une petite église de briques avec un autel également en briques qui portait une longue inscription en vieux nubien.*<sup>12</sup> According to David Edwards, the front of the altar was consolidated in mid-May 1969 and transported to Khartoum, but its current whereabouts are unknown. Therefore, the authors relied solely on photographic material shot during the excavation for the transcription.

<sup>12</sup> Leclant 1971: 249.

## Transcription:

+ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΤΡᾶΠΗϢΑ ἘϢϢΑ ΔΙΚΑ  
 ΟΥΡΟΥΕΙΘΟΥΝ ΟΥΛΥΓΙΛΟ ΟΥΤΡΕϢΩ ΔΗ  
 ΤΟΥΤΑ Δ . . Δ ΔΙΝΕϢΩ ΕΜΟ\Υ/ ΕΙΕΑΤ . | Η  
 + Ϙ . . . ΤΕΔ . Δ

## Translation:

*Holy Altar (of) Michael,  
 put me in the ear of the kings,  
 (...) my son to/for me.  
 I Eingat() (...) Priest (...)*

## Commentary:

The text exhibits the essential properties of a prayer, including the invocation of the Holy Altar of Michael (line 1), the request with the imperatives ΟΥΤΡΕϢΩ (line 2) and ΔΙΝΕϢΩ (line 3), and the mention of the beneficiary (lines 3–4). Both the request and the mention of the beneficiary are not entirely clear due to the damage of the text; for some thoughts see the line commentary. From the formal point of view the text resembles mementos left by visitors on the walls of cult places in Christian Nubia. This suggests that it is a secondary addition to the church space and not an element of the original installation. The honourable location of the inscription on the church altar may be connected with the fact that its author was a priest, perhaps the main priest of the church. The fact that the inscription invokes Archangel Michael seems to suggest that the Church was dedicated to Michael; Michael was an important figure in Nubian Christianity, and frequently appealed to.<sup>13</sup>

1. ΜΙΧΑΗΛ: archangel Michael.

ΤΡᾶΠΗϢΑ: ΤΡᾶΠΗΣ, ‘altar’ from Greek τράπεζα,<sup>14</sup> ending in predicate marker -α.

ἘϢϢΑ: Εῢς, ‘holy’<sup>15</sup> with predicate marker -α used as adjective to ΤΡᾶΠΗϢΑ. The supralinear stroke over the first *sigma* is no longer visible or had been omitted by the scribe. The construction ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΤΡᾶΠΗϢΑ ἘϢϢΑ here appears to be constructed along the lines of the well-attested invocation ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΤἼΛΛΑ, ‘God of Michael’, and clearly refers to the altar on which the inscription has been written. Such an invocation is unparalleled in Christian Nubia but has been attested in Sahidic Coptic rent receipt written on papyrus: ΠΔΙΚΑΙΟΝ ΝΠΘΥΣΥΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΕΤΟΥΑΒ ΦΑΓΙΟΣ ΓΕΩΡΓΕ, ‘The *dikaion* of the holy altar of George’

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the cult of Archangel Michael in Christian Nubia, see: Gilhus, Tsakos, Wright 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Browne 1996: 175.

<sup>15</sup> Browne 1996: 200.

(P.Ryl.Copt 181).<sup>16</sup> It might be explained by the fact that the altar (and the entire church) was dedicated to the Archangel Michael, who functioned as an intermediary between man and God. This then also implies that the monastery, and not the church, should be identified with Saint Epimachus.

αικα: accusative of first singular pronoun. Probably the object of 2. οΥΤΡΕϞΩ.

2. ΟΥΡΟΓΕΙΓΟΥΝ: ΟΥΡΟΓΕΙ, ‘king’<sup>17</sup> ending in plural -ΓΟΥ and genitive -Ν. The reading is tentative, but no other attested noun appears to fit. The *gamma* strongly suggests a plural suffix -ΓΟΥ, and before the subsequent noun ΟΥΛΑΓΙΛΟ only a genitive seems plausible.

ΟΥΛΑΓΙΛΟ: a previously unattested spelling variant of ΟΥΛ(ΟΥ)Γ, ‘ear’,<sup>18</sup> with locative ending -ΙΛΟ. The letter after ΟΥΛ is barely readable but possibly Γ, while ΓΙΛΟ has been written with a considerably taller letter than the first part of the word. The phrase ΟΥΡΟΓΕΙΓΟΥΝ ΟΥΛΑΓΙΛΟ would thus mean ‘the ear(s) of the kings’. Considering the fact that the text is written on an altar, there are two possible referents: heavenly kings, implying either the Trinity or those Makuritan kings, which are frequently depicted under the guardianship of archangels, already ascended to heaven, or earthly kings, in which case God is asked, through the intercession of Michael, on whose altar the prayer is written, to put in the ears of the kings of Makuria the person and the case of the author. If indeed the kings referred to are earthly, the plural could indicate here that there were at least two rulers with the title ΟΥΡΟΓΕΙ present at the same moment.

ΟΥΤΡΕϞΩ: ΟΥΤΡ, ‘to put, lay’<sup>19</sup> with imperative second/third singular ending -ΕϞΩ.

ΑΝ: genitive of first singular pronoun.

3. ΤΟΥΤΑ: ΤΟΥΤ, ‘son’<sup>20</sup> with accusative -ΚΑ, progressively assimilated to -ΤΑ, object of 3. Δ . . Δ ΔΙΝΕϞΩ. This type of assimilation is not attested in literary Old Nubian, which consistently has ΤΟΥΤΚΑ. However, assimilated forms such as ΤΟΥΤΤΑ are attested in Nobiin.<sup>21</sup> This may suggest a relatively late dating of the text. A similar phrase, ΑΝ ΤΟΥΤΤΑ ΕΑΕΙΑ ΔΙΝΕϞΟ ‘save my son for me’, has been found at Banganarti in an inscription of a rather late date (end of the thirteenth/first half of the fourteenth century).<sup>22</sup>

Δ . . Δ: Verbal form ending in predicate marker -Δ. It depends on 3. ΔΙΝΕϞΩ. The second letter is completely illegible, while the third letter perhaps has a vertical descender

<sup>16</sup> Crum 1909: 92–93 (no. 181).

<sup>17</sup> Browne 1996: 140.

<sup>18</sup> Browne 1996: 136.

<sup>19</sup> Browne 1996: 141.

<sup>20</sup> Browne 1996: 180.

<sup>21</sup> Werner 1987: 98.

<sup>22</sup> Łajtar forthcoming: no. 309.

(perhaps a ρ?). There are also traces of a possible supralinear stroke above the first or first and second letters.

ΔΙΝΕÇΦ: ΔΙΝ, ‘to give (to me)’,<sup>23</sup> with imperative second/third singular ending -ε-çφ. Here used in a benefactive construction Δ . . Δ ΔΙΝΕÇΦ ‘(imperative verb with ΤΟΤΤΑ as object) to/for me’.<sup>24</sup>

ΕΙΟ\Υ/: Greek pronoun ‘I’, often used in visitor inscriptions.<sup>25</sup> What follows must be the name of the author of the text.

ΕΙΡΑΤ . Η: This is expected to be a proper name. No proper names beginning with ΕΙΡΑΤ have been attested.

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<sup>23</sup> Browne 1996: 42.

<sup>24</sup> Bechhaus-Gerst 2011: 142–147.

<sup>25</sup> See: Łajtar forthcoming.



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