

INSTITUT DES CULTURES MÉDITERRANÉENNES ET ORIENTALES  
DE L'ACADEMIE POLONAISE DES SCIENCES

ÉTUDES et TRAVAUX  
XXV  
2012

MAŁGORZATA MARTENS-CZARNECKA

*Iconography of Jesus Christ in Nubian Painting*

In religious art the image of Christ was one of the key elements which inspired the faithful to prayer and contemplation. Pictured as the Incarnation of Logos, the Son of God, the Child born unto Mary, the figure of Christ embodied the most important dogma of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Depicted in art, Christ represents the hypostasis of the Word made man – the Logos in human form.<sup>2</sup> Christ the Logos was made man (*κατά τόν ανθρώπινον χαρακτήρα*). God incarnate, man born of Mary, as dictated by canon 82 of the Synod In Trullo in Constantinople (AD 692), was to be depicted only in human form, replacing symbols (the lamb).<sup>3</sup> From the moment of incarnation, the image of Christ became easily perceptible to the human eye, and hence readily defined in shape and colour.<sup>4</sup> Artists painting representations of Christ drew inspiration from the many descriptions recorded in the apocrypha: ... *and with him another, whose countenance resembled that of man. His countenance was full of grace, like that of one of the holy angels* (1 Enoch 46:1).

For humankind Christ was the most essential link between the seen and the unseen, between heaven and Earth;<sup>5</sup> the link between God and the men sent by God (John 1:6; 3:17; 5:22-24), through whom God endows the world with all that is good. He is the mediator to whom the faithful, often through the intercession of the Virgin, make supplication and prayer – *if you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you* (John 16:23; 14:11-14; 15:16). The entire eschatological meaning of life is concentrated in the person of Christ.

There are many Christ representations in Nubian interior decoration of the religion buildings. Christ could be depicted standing<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1) or seated in majesty on the throne (Fig. 2). He could have his hands raised in the gesture of the orant (Fig. 3). Numerous busts of Christ were enclosed in a form of medallion or mandorla reminiscent of the *imagines clipeatae*<sup>7</sup> or at the intersection of the arms of the crosses (Fig. 4).

Christ was represented as a half-figure emerging from a cloud with the gesture of benediction, protecting and crowning the main figure in the votive composition (Fig. 5). He can also be represented in glory, surrounded by the Living Creatures (Fig. 6) – inspired

<sup>1</sup> S. DER NERSESSIAN, Two images of the Virgin in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, *DOP* 14, 1966, pp. 72–86; G. MILLET, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Évangile aux XIV<sup>e</sup>, XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris 1960, p. 174; H. MCGUIRE, *The Icons of their Bodies. Saints and their Images in Byzantium*, New Jersey 1996, pp. 87–92, Fig. 90.

<sup>2</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, L'image du Christ d'après Théodore Studite, [in:] A. GRABAR, J. HUBERT (Eds), *Synthronon. Art et archéologie de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age*, Paris 1968 [= *Synthronon*], pp. 115–117; T. DOBRZENIECKI, Maiestas Domini z katedry w Faras w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie (cz. 2), *RMN XXXI*, 1987 [= *Maiestas Domini* 2], p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> A. GRABAR, L'iconoclasme byzantin, *Dossier archéologique*, Paris 1957 [= L'iconoclasme], p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> G. ZANANIRI, *Histoire de l'église byzantine*, Paris 1954, p. 152; GRABAR, *loc.cit.*; T.D. ŁUKASZUK, Obraz święty – ikona w życiu, w wierze i teologii kościoła. Zarys teologii świętego obrazu, Częstochowa 1993, pp. 39–41.

<sup>5</sup> T. VELMANS, V. KORAČ, M. ŠUPUT, *Rayonnement de Byzance*, Paris 1999, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Paintings from Dongola Monastery are quoted according to *Catalogue Numbers* in: M. MARTENS-CZARNECKA, *Nubia III. Dongola III. The Wall Paintings from the Monastery on kom H in Dongola*, Warsaw 2011.

<sup>7</sup> G.W. ELDERKIN, Shield and mandorla, *AJA* 42, 1938, pp. 227–236; A. GRABAR, L'art de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age I, Paris 1968, pp. 607–613; Id., *Martyrium II. Iconographie*, London 1972, p. 227; J. LEROY, Les peintures de couvents du désert d'Esna, Le Caire 1975, pp. 45–46, n. 5–6; DACL VII-1, 1926, pp. 302–303.

by the theophanic visions of the Old Testament prophets – Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1-26), Isaiah (Isa 6: 1-3) and Saint John (Rev 4:2-10), depicting in this way the image of the *Maiestas Domini*. The painters could also represent only the head of Christ as the element inscribed in to a square or circle. An interesting example of the head of Christ depicted with images of the Living Creatures is represented by a painting of Saint Menas from Dongolan Monastery. In his left hand Menas holds a shield in the form of a broad-rimmed medallion encircling the head of Christ (**Fig. 7**). Images of the heads of the Living Creatures, of which the lion's head survives in best condition, are portrayed in oval fields between the arms of the cross in Christ's cruciform halo. An another example is visible in meander decorative stripe from Dongola too. Christ was depicted as main central person in scenes from the Gospels, e.g. in the Baptism in the Jordan (**Fig. 8**); in the Healing of the Blind Man at the Pool of Siloam (**Fig. 9**). The composition of these scenes was based on relevant gospel and apocryphal narratives. The figure of Christ Victor trampling evil powers according to *Psalm 91* was discovered in the suburban district of Dongola in the house “A” in the room 3 (**Fig. 10**).<sup>8</sup> Christ was represented too as the second Person of the Holy Trinity (**Fig. 11**). Analysis of depictions of the Holy Trinity extant in Nubia reveals that in Nubian iconography, the Trinity was represented either as three identical images of Christ, or as a single figure of Christ with three identical heads – *Trinitas Trifrons* (**Fig. 12**).<sup>9</sup> Christ occupied the central position between God the Father and the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the few surviving legends written above the heads of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> This central position in compositions also stemmed from Christ's rightful place *on the right hand of the power of God* (Mark 14:62).

He is also always present as the Child in paintings of the Mother of God (**Fig. 13**) and in the scene of the Nativity (**Fig. 14**).

In the Nubian murals, Christ is always dressed in the robes of antiquity (**Figs 1, 2, 9**): a *chiton* (a type of tunic with long, narrow sleeves) and a mantle in the form of a rectangular piece of fabric – *himation*.<sup>11</sup> He is never depicted in imperial dress, e.g. in a *loros*.

<sup>8</sup> S. JAKOBIELSKI, Dongola 1976, *EtudTrav* XI, 1979, pp. 229–244; W. GODLEWSKI, Some comments on the wall painting of Christ from Old Dongola, [in:] Nubian Studies, Proceedings of the Symposium for Nubian Studies, Sellwyn College, Cambridge 1978, J.M. Plumley (Ed.), Warminster 1982 [= Nubian Studies, Cambridge 1978], pp. 95–99; M. ŁAPTAŞ, Comments on wall paintings from “House A” in Old Dongola, [in:] Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit. Akten des 6. Internationalen Koptologen Kongresses Munster, 20.–26. Juli 1996, Vol. I, S. Emmel, M. Krause, S.G. Richter, S. Schaten (Eds), Wiesbaden 1999, pp. 230–237.

<sup>9</sup> A.N. DIDRON, Christian Iconography. The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages, London 1886, pp. 18ff., 63, 73, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Part of a legend for exp. extant above the head of the central Person of the Holy Trinity in a mural from Dongola depicting an unidentified Nubian king (*Cat. No. 18*) refers to the individual as καὶ Υἱοῦ – see below, and also legends noted in Palestine: Y.E. MEIMARIS, Μελετηματα. Sacred Names, Saints, Martyrs and Church Officials in the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Partaining to the Christian Church of Palestine, Athens 1986, pp. 74–76. In Ethiopian art the second Person of the Trinity also features in the middle of a composition comprising figures of the same iconography.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Christ was always depicted in majesty, even when enthroned he was never represented in imperial dress, modelled on the robes of imperial office. In this instance, the throne itself was an attribute of his Majesty, cf. A.O. POILPRÉ, Maiestas Domini. Une image de l’Église en Occident. V<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris 2005, p. 78. In contrast, Christ is usually shown holding an ornately bound Book of the Gospels in his left

This vestment, an attribute of imperial office, was too closely associated with the political power of an earthly emperor.<sup>12</sup> In depictions of Christ, his majesty, dignity and glory are represented by other iconographic formulae borrowed from the art of antiquity – e.g. the throne or the portrait type of the philosopher.<sup>13</sup> The *himation* either envelops the entire figure of Christ, or is draped over the left shoulder revealing the chest and right arm,<sup>14</sup> which is usually raised in a gesture of benediction. The left arm, covered by the mantle, is bent at the elbow, the hand holding a Book of the Gospels with a richly decorated cover. The colours of the robes are those traditionally used in the iconography of Christ, conveying the symbolism of royal power, dignity, wisdom and spirituality.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the *chiton* is usually purple,<sup>16</sup> whilst the *himation* may be either purple or white. The *chiton* is embellished with two *potamoi* at the front of the garment. Its neckline is wavy in pictures of Christ, unlike the even ones seen in portrayals of other figures. The undulating neckline of the *chiton* is probably an archaic feature replicating the traditional iconography of Christ seen in images *not produced by human hands –acheiropoietoi*, such as those preserved on the Holy Mandelion (*Hagion Mandelion*) and the Holy Keramion (*Hagion Keramion*). The first is a cloth bearing an image of Christ's face and is linked to a legend about Abgar, King of Edessa; the second is a ceramic tile or brick from Syria, with a copy of the same likeness. Both artefacts were brought to Constantinople in the Tenth century and were held in the chapel of the Grand Palace until the invasion of the Crusaders in 1204. These two images of Christ – on the tile and the holy cloth – were considered to be miraculous likenesses of God himself. Representations of them survive in miniature paintings, and they were also used by Byzantine iconographers as a model for depicting the head of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

In the murals Christ's *himation* is often undecorated; however, the rich drapery of this robe, rendered in a combination of thick and thin brushstrokes, its contours contrasting

---

hand. Perhaps by doing this the artists wanted to express the dual nature of Christ – as a man in plain garments, but also in majesty and glory, cf. H. MASSEY, J.R. SHEPHERD, Christology. A Central Problem of Early Christian Theology and Art, [in:] K. Weitzmann (Ed.), Age of Sirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art. Third to Seventh Century, New York 1979, p. 112; E. PILTZ, Le costume officiel des dignitaires bizantins à l'époque Paléologue, Uppsala 1994 [= Costume officiel], p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> C. PERDRIZET, L'Archange Ouriel, *Seminarium Kondakovianum* II, 1928, pp. 241–278; C. LAMY-LASALLE, Les aranges en costume impériale dans la peinture murale italienne, [in:] GRABAR, HUBERT (Eds), Synthronon, p. 197, n. 31.

<sup>13</sup> A. GRABAR, Les voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne Antiquité et Moyen Age, Paris 1979 [= Voies de la creation], pp. 72–74.

<sup>14</sup> A. Grabar defines Christ's mantle as *exomis* (*op. cit.*, p. 34).

<sup>15</sup> ... and his garments became white as snow (Mt 17:2) – a reference to Christ's robes. On the subject of the symbolism of colours, cf. L. RYKEU, J.C. WILHOIT, Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, 1996 [Polish Translation Słownik symboliki biblijnej, Warszawa 2003, p. 308]. Purple and gold were personally reserved for emperors, cf. PILTZ, Costume officiel, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> The colour purple in Nubian painting depends on the pigment used. It can take the form of a red obtained from burnt ochre, its shade and intensity depending on the content of iron oxides. Most often though, the colour in question is that referred to in publications on Nubian art as dark purple. Paint of this hue was obtained using natural pigments derived from the powder found inside lumps of ferruginous sandstone.

<sup>17</sup> In a miniature from an Eleventh-century manuscript of John Climacus', *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, housed at the Vatican Library, Rossinensis 251, fol. 12, and in a miniature from the Georgian Alaverdi Gospel (Tiflis, Sion, No. 484, fol. 320v, cf. GRABAR, L'iconoclasme, pp. 19–21, n. 1, Figs 67, 68).

with the background, and the decoratively depicted edge of this mantle, which Christ holds in his hand, nonetheless give the impression that it is very ornate and monumental. An exception to this is the decoration seen on the robes in the composition of Christ and the Apostles, from Chapel 13 (**Fig. 1**) of the monastery from Dongola. The hem of the *chiton*, the cuffs of the sleeves and the edges of the *himation* are embellished with a strip of yellow trim bordered by pearls and lozenges of red and green.

In the several Nubian murals Christ wears the mantle in white colour decorated with eye motifs, which, according to the Apocalypse of Saint John (5:6) is one of the eschatological attributes of Christ (**Fig. 2**). The eyes on Christ's robe reflect his Divine qualities<sup>18</sup> in the role of the omniscient one who *sees all*<sup>19</sup> and the Redeemer as the Paschal Lamb (*Agnus Dei*). Two images of Christ holding a chalice and clad in garments featuring eye motifs, indicating that they are luminous and radiating light, were painted in the *prothesis* of Faras Cathedral<sup>20</sup> and at the church in Sonqi Tino,<sup>21</sup> now in Khartoum Museum. Both paintings are also an excellent doctrinal analogy for the murals from Dongolan monastery. The robes with eye motifs are seen on the Persons of the Holy Trinity in the painting featuring a king (**Fig. 15**) and Christ within a medallion from cell 27 (*Cat. No 57*). The white mantle of Christ in Majesty from Faras Cathedral (**Fig. 2**), is also adorned with the same pattern of eyes.<sup>22</sup> This motif is also seen in a mural from Meinarti (currently in Khartoum). All of these paintings date from various periods of Nubian art, evidencing that the iconography of Christ clad in a mantle with eye motifs remained unerringly popular in Nubia, regardless of the period.<sup>23</sup>

In Nubian iconography, in those instances where Christ or the Holy Trinity are depicted as independent paintings, not thematically linked to any composition, Christ's right hand is always raised in the *benedictio graeca* gesture or in the same manner points at the Book of the Gospel (**Figs 1, 4, 10**). In this gesture of benediction the ring finger and little finger are bent downwards and held in place by the thumb, the three digits symbolising the Holy Trinity; the index finger and middle finger are held straight, touching one another, symbolising the dual nature of Christ.<sup>24</sup> This gesture appears to have a universal significance; however, in murals where Christ and the Holy Trinity make up part of a larger composition,

<sup>18</sup> On the subject of Christ's qualities and robes with eye motifs, cf. T. DOBRZENIECKI, Maiestas Domini z katedry w Faras w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie (cz. 1), *RMN* XXIV, 1980, pp. 302–324; Id., Maiestas Domini... (cz. 2), *RMN* XXXI, 1987, pp. 340–353.

<sup>19</sup> Nothing can be concealed from the eyes of God; they are open to all human actions (Jer 32:19; Heb 4:13; Ps 139:16).

<sup>20</sup> K. MICHALOWSKI, Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand, Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln 1967 [= Die Kathedrale], p. 80, Fig. 11.

<sup>21</sup> S. DONADONI, Les fouilles à l'église de Sonqi Tino, *KuGN*, 1970, pp. 213, 214.

<sup>22</sup> K. MICHALOWSKI, Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw 1974 [= Wall Paintings], pp. 177–178, Cat. No. 35; G. GALAVARIS, Observations on the iconography of a Faras "Maiestas" and its relatives, [*in:*] Nubian Studies, Cambridge 1976, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> Eyes also feature on the robes of Christ in Ethiopian painting, cf. S. CHOJNACKI, The Four Living Creatures of the Apocalypse and the imagery of the Ascension in Ethiopia, *BSAC* XXIII, 1981, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> F. TRISTAN, Les premières images chrétiennes. Du symbole à l'icône: II<sup>e</sup>–VI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris 1996 [= Premières images], p. 528; E. SMYKOWSKA, Ikona. Mały słownik, Warszawa 2003, p. 83.

their hands are seen in various gestures integrally linked with the persons depicted. Thus, for example, where Christ appears in a composition from Dongola, in a mural portraying a king (**Fig. 15**), the right hand of the central Person of the Trinity lies on the king's crown, the hands of the remaining Persons of the Trinity being placed on the king's shoulders, one of them also handing him a sceptre. In another painting, the hands of the Persons of the Trinity, although executing the *benedictio graeca* gesture, are not raised, but lie horizontally on the halo of the Archangel Michael, clearly blessing him from above (**Fig. 16**).

In Nubian painting Christ is nearly always depicted in sandals (**Fig. 2**).<sup>25</sup> The broad sole is secured in place by two straps, both attached at the point between the big toe and its neighbour, which are then tied in a knot, separating at the instep and passing around the back of the heel.<sup>26</sup>

Among the paintings at Dongola there is only one extant full figure of standing Christ, in a scene depicting the Pool of Siloam. His feet are, however, clad in black shoes (**Fig. 9**). In contrast, the feet of the Persons of the Holy Trinity in the church monastery are bare (*Cat. No 137*). In paintings of Christ as the Child on the Virgin's arm, his feet are also always bare (*Cat. Nos. 58, 86 and 97*).

The image of Christ's face in murals does not diverge from the types prevalent in Byzantine art.<sup>27</sup> Differences largely stem from inaccuracies in execution or from the simplification of a generally accepted model. The face is framed by locks of shoulder-length hair, two strands lying on the forehead. The tips of the earlobes are visible at the sides of the head. Further features include a short, pointed beard. In Nativity scenes, or when held by the Virgin, the Christ Child is always depicted with the face of an adult (**Fig. 13**), though without a beard. Christ is also portrayed as a young man, as mentioned earlier, in a scene of his baptism (**Fig. 8**). Conversely, the faces of the Holy Trinity (**Figs 11, 15**) represent a noble and dignified man – Christ Pantocrator.

The head of Christ, as well as that of each of the three Persons of the Trinity, is almost always framed by a circular halo – a mark of holiness and a symbol of God's glory<sup>28</sup> (**Figs 1, 3, 6, 11**). A cross was always inset within the halo. Originally, the arms of the cross were straight (latter half of the Eleventh century), at a later period (by the Twelfth century) taking the form of a Maltese cross. The halo is always painted yellow, imitating

<sup>25</sup> For example: MICHALOWSKI, Die Kathedrale, Fig. 53.

<sup>26</sup> The authentic shape of these sandals is confirmed by a find from the times of Jesus, discovered during excavations held at Masada, see: Y. YADIN, Masada. Herod's Fortress and Zealot's Last Stand, London 1966, Fig. on p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> On the subject of the development of the canon of Christ's image in art based on the traditions of the *acheiropoietos* (not made by human hand) image, cf. TRISTAN, Premières images, pp. 442–458; G. DE JERPHANION, L'image de Jésus-Christ dans l'art chrétien, [*in:*] La voix des monuments. Études d'archéologie, Rome-Paris 1938, pp. 8–16; GRABAR, L'iconoclasme, pp. 16–17, 20–21. A. Grabar explains the iconology of two types of image of Christ – Pantocrator and Emmanuel – (*ibid.*, pp. 41–44). The iconography of Christ is also discussed in: A. GRABAR, Les ampoules de Terre Sainte, Monza-Bobio-Paris 1958, p. 59; Id., Christian Iconography. A Study of Its Origins, Princeton 1968, pp. 119–122; TRISTAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 442–458; H.L. KESSLER, Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art, Philadelphia 2000, pp. 70–87.

<sup>28</sup> On the subject of halos, cf. A.N. DIDRON, Christian Iconography. The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages, London 1851, pp. 25ff.

gold – a symbol of Divine luminosity. In most cases, the arms of the cross are green – a symbol of eternal life, hope and spiritual awakening. The Greek letters O, Ω and N are seen on the cross. In Byzantine tradition, cruciform halos of this sort, incorporating these three Greek letters, featured in the iconography of the Pantocrator,<sup>29</sup> thus it is no surprise that, along with many other elements deriving from this tradition, it also constituted one of the attributes of Christ in Nubian art. In most cruciform halos from Nubia,<sup>30</sup> the letters are laid out as follows: the letter Ω features on the left arm of the cross, O is painted on the upper arm, and N on the right. Hence, the phrase was read starting from the top arm, proceeding left and ending on the right arm. Since the heads of the Persons of the Trinity were painted very close to one another, the crosses of neighbouring halos have a shared horizontal beam. Thus, the artist only laid out the letters on the cross of the central Person, the arms of the cross of each of the Persons at the side being arranged so that they would not be repeated. Hence, the cross of the Person on the left features the letter N instead of Ω, whilst that of the Person on the right has Ω in place of N. Nevertheless, the ‘Nubian’ principle was also upheld in this instance. The layout of the three Greek letters ought to correspond to the Greek phrase ὁ ἦν – *He who is*. In Byzantine art these letters are variously laid out. Most often they follow the same pattern as that noted in Nubia; however, there are also different versions: the letter O on the left, Ω on the upper arm, and N on the right. The letters are distributed in yet another manner on the cross of Christ Emmanuel in painting *Cat. No. 55* from the monastery at Dongola. The letter N features on the top arm, Ω on the right, and O on the left. Does this departure from the ‘Nubian’ rule point to a mistake made by the artist, or does it stem from the Arabic principle of reading from right to left? The increasing influence of Arabic culture (also reflected in iconography) is a factor which deserves to be taken into account. Perhaps the artist was unfamiliar with the doctrinal meaning of these three letters, and knowing only that he ought to paint them on the arms of the cross in Christ’s halo, he laid them out at random. Whatever the case, the above observations point to the existence of local, native Nubian designs, which were copied for centuries, as demonstrated by murals painted during various periods and by various artists. This is further borne out by other native features of representations, such as that of the Child Jesus, whose head is depicted against the backdrop of a cross not enclosed within a halo, as seen in three paintings from Dongola (*Cat. Nos 78, 75 and 108*) and in murals from Faras Cathedral.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Thus Theodore Studites comments on the Byzantine tradition of incorporating the Greek letters O, Ω and N in Christ’s halo: J. MEYENDORFF, L’image du Christ d’après Théodore Studite, [in:] GRABAR, HUBERT (Eds), *Synthronon*, p. 117; DIDRON, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, all representations of cruciform nimbi in the wall paintings from Faras Cathedral in MICHALOWSKI, *Die Kathedrale*, Figs 51, 69, 85, 90, 96.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Figs 69, 72, 76, 78, 80. It has to be concluded that this was one of the modes used in representations of the Child Jesus, as both at Dongola and Faras, the Child is also depicted with a cruciform halo encircling his head. This iconography is also noted in Byzantine art: see images of Christ on coins of Justinian II (669–711) and Michael III (838–867) in GRABAR, *Voies de la creation*, Fig. 88.a,b). A. Grabar also highlights a similar deviation from typical representations of Christ’s cruciform halo when discussing the halo seen in one of the murals from the church at Castelseprio, cf. *A propos du nimbe crucifère à Castelseprio*, and *Les fresque de Cas-*

Those depictions of Christ which are inspired by antiquity show him holding a *rotulus* in his left hand; however, he is most often depicted with a *codex*. The book (Figs 1, 2, 5, 15) is always bound in a yellow (gold) cover and has red page edges. It is often held shut by clasps studded with pearls (white dots). The cover is usually very ornate, all of the motifs imitating diamonds and cabochons in gold and silver settings. Precious jewels arranged in the shape of a cross frequently form the central feature of the cover.<sup>32</sup> The most lavish decoration is seen in a mural of Christ from Dongolan monastery (Fig. 1).

This short review of the Nubian wall paintings in which Christ is depicted, clearly shows, that the iconography of this principal figure was consistent with the model which evolved over the centuries in Byzantine art. Thus, Christ was represented as an ancient philosopher, clad in a full-length *chiton* and a Greek-style *himation* covering his shoulders. His head was usually encircled by a cruciform halo embellished with the Greek letters Ω, O and N. The face, with its straight nose and large eyes, essentially replicates traditional portrayals inspired by ‘images not made by human hands’. Christ’s right hand is usually raised in the *benedictio graeca* gesture, the left hand holding a Book of the Gospels, or, when portrayed as the Child seated on the Virgin’s knee, a *rotulus* – an element borrowed from antiquity. This general iconographic programme could be slightly modified and enriched with a variety of attributes, depending on the particular form of a given painting, its theological and dogmatic content. A notable feature characteristic of Nubian painting is the depiction of the Holy Trinity in the form of three identical busts of Christ. Another frequently observed type of Trinity was that in which one Person is depicted with three heads (*Trinitas Trifrons*). It is striking that there are no *Maiestas Domini* images among the Nubian murals. Images of the Four Living Creatures described in biblical visions appear very frequently in the Dongola murals, but usually as an important element of Holy Trinity, and not *Maiestas Domini*, representations. There were clearly certain preferences, which may have arisen from particular iconographic programmes devised by a specific group of artists, or may have stemmed from other causes.

Malgorzata Martens-Czarnecka  
Warszawa  
[mmartensczarnecka@gmail.com](mailto:mmartensczarnecka@gmail.com)

---

telseprio et l’Occident, [in:] GRABAR, Christian Iconography. A Study of Its Origins, Princeton 1968, pp. 984–985, 987–993, Fig. 1).

<sup>32</sup> On the subject of book cover decoration, cf. A.O. POILPRÉ, Maiestas Domini. Une image de l’Èglise en Occident, V<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris 2005, pp. 154–161.



1. Standing Christ. Dongola, Monastery, Cat. No. 68 (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



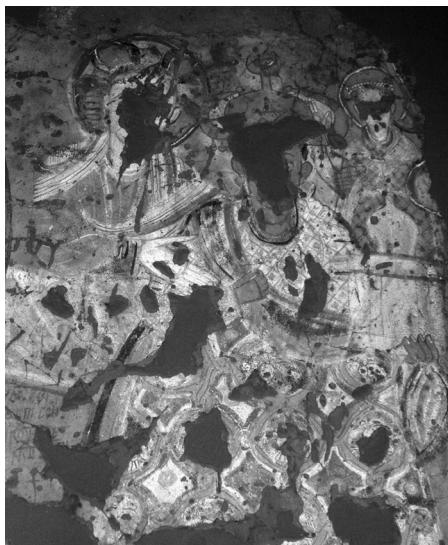
2. Christ sitting in majesty on the throne. Faras Cathedral (after: K. MICHALOWSKI, Wall Painting, p. 242).



3. Christ with hands raised in gesture of the orant. Abd el-Gadir Church (after: F.LL. GRIFFITH, Oxford Excavations in Nubia: The Church of Abd el-Gadir, LAAA XV(3–4), 1928, Pl. XLII,1).



4. Christ depicted at the intersection of the arms of the crosses. Faras Cathedral (after: MICHALOWSKI, Die Kathedrale, No 89).



5. Christ represented as a half-figure emerging from a cloud with the gesture of benediction, protecting and crowning the main figure in the votive composition. Abd el-Gadir Church, National Museum in Khartoum (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



6. Christ represented in glory, surrounded by the Living Creatures. Faras Cathedral (unpreserved).



7. Head of Christ inscribed in a shield of Saint Menas. Dongola Monastery, Cat. No 63 (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



8. Baptism in the Jordan. Dongola, Monastery, Cat. No 78 (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



9. Healing of the Blind Man at the Pool of Siloam. Dongola Monastery, Cat. No 48 (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



10. Christ Victor trampling evil powers. Dongola, House "A" (Drawing: H. Lewak, after: S. JAKOBIELSKI, [in:] Nubian Studies, Cambridge 1978, Fig. 12).



11. Christ represented as the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Dongola Monastery, Cat. No 65 – fragment (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



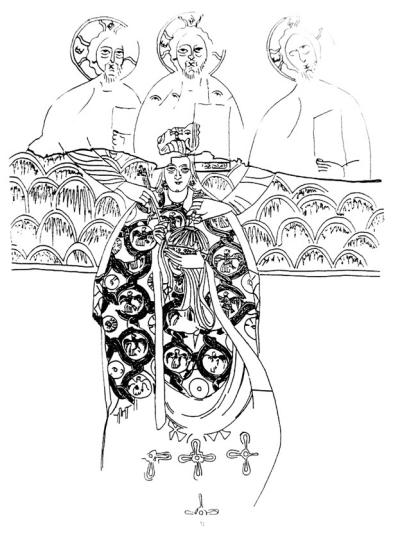
12. Figure of Christ with three identical heads (*Trinitas Trifrons*). Abd el-Gadir Church, National Museum in Khartoum (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



13. Christ as the Child. Faras Cathedral (after: MICHALOWSKI, Die Kathedrale, No 78).



14. Nativity scene. Faras Cathedral, National Museum in Khartoum (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).



15. Scene of coronation by the Holy Trinity.  
Dongola Monastery, Cat. No 18 (Drawing: M. Martens-Czarnecka)



16. Archangel Michael and The Holy Trinity. Dongola Monastery, *Cat. No 65* (Phot. M. Martens-Czarnecka).