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## Female diaconate in medieval Nubia: evidence from a wall inscription from Faras

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### Abstract

This paper offers a re-edition and reinterpretation of a Greek inscription painted on a wall at the Rivergate Church at Faras in medieval Nubia and dated to the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries. This dedicatory prayer is the first evidence for the existence of the female diaconate in the entire Nile Valley. While the close reading of the text in its architectural and art-historical settings allows us to formulate some hypotheses about the functions of Nubian deaconesses, in a broader perspective, the inscription is also a valuable piece of evidence for the high position of Nubian women on the one hand and the “Byzantineness” of Christian Nubian culture on the other.

**Keywords:** Female diaconate; Medieval Nubia; Faras; Wall inscriptions; Wall paintings; Nubian Church; Nubian women

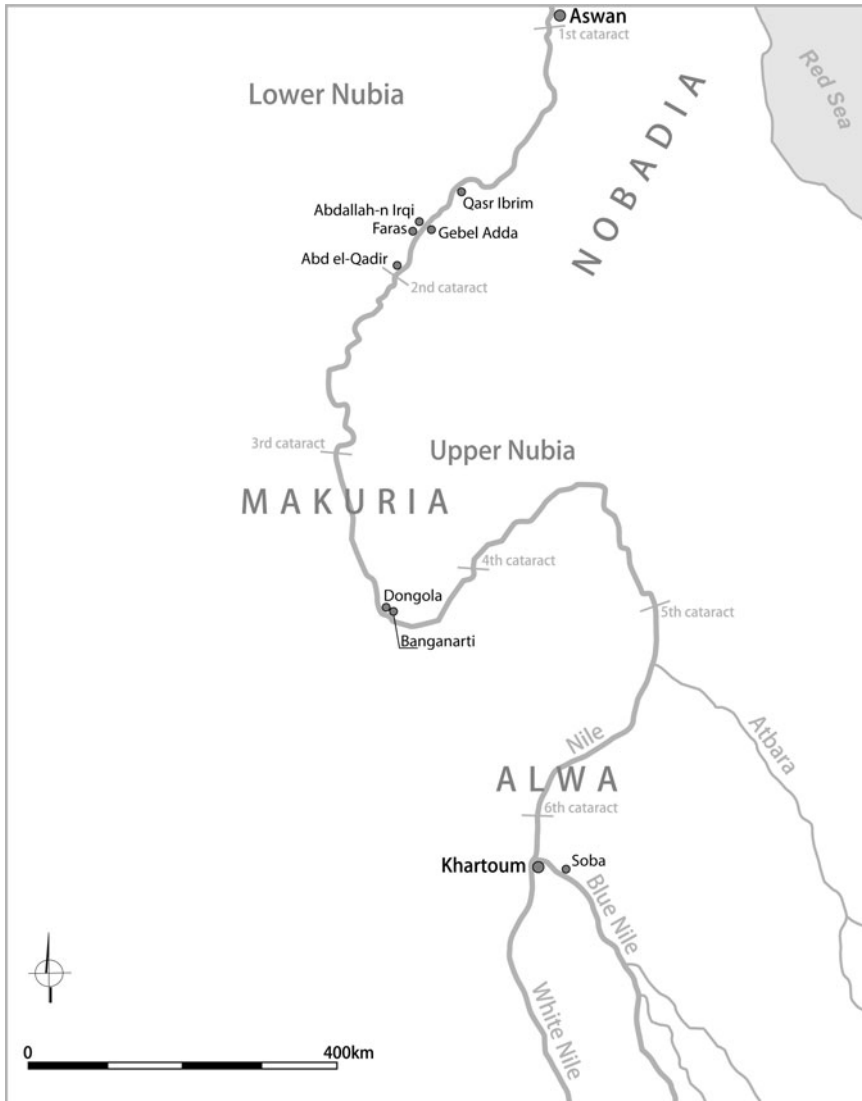
### 1. Introduction

Female diaconate is a well-attested phenomenon in Eastern Churches.<sup>1</sup> Available sources confirm the presence of deaconesses in the East from the third/fourth until probably as late as the twelfth century, peaking between the fourth and seventh centuries.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the miaphysite Church of Egypt seems to have been an exception in this respect. Until now, no hard evidence has surfaced to show the presence of female liturgical staff in Egyptian churches.<sup>3</sup> Although never discussed in the scholarship on female diaconate, the same situation appears to be tacitly applied to the Nubian Church, on account of its being subject to the Alexandrian patriarchate and in fact forming a single ecclesiastical organization with the Egyptian Church.

<sup>1</sup> See, principally, Martimort 1982 and Karras 2004; and also, e.g., Eisen 1996: 154–92 and Elm 1996: 169–82.

<sup>2</sup> Martimort 1982: 31–71; Eisen 1996: 160–77. Notably, in the later period, deaconesses are found only in Constantinople and Jerusalem (Karras 2004: 285). After the twelfth century, although the order itself disappeared, women continued to be involved in liturgical functions in the Byzantine Church (Karras 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Martimort 1982: 73–97. See, however, Zanetti 1990, who argues that female deacons (Copt.  $\text{\u039d\u0395\u03a1\u0394\u0399\u0391\u03a3\u039a\u039e\u039e\u0399}$   $\text{\u039d\u0395\u03a1\u0394\u0399\u0391\u03a3\u039a\u039e\u039e\u0399}$ , lit. “women serving as deacons”) are listed in the prayer for the deceased members of the Church in a tenth-century Sahidic Coptic euchologion of the White Monastery in Middle Egypt; he nevertheless points out that this may only be a reflection of a Syrian practice (p. 373). Note, however, that even if there were deaconesses in the White Monastery, they were most probably not ordained, as they are placed in the list between “those who abstain” ( $\text{\u039d\u0395\u03a1\u0394\u0399\u0391\u03a3\u039a\u039e\u039e\u0399}$   $\text{\u039d\u0395\u03a1\u0394\u0399\u0391\u03a3\u039a\u039e\u039e\u0399}$ ) and “eunuchs” ( $\text{\u039d\u0395\u03a1\u0394\u0399\u0391\u03a3\u039a\u039e\u039e\u0399}$ ), far below the three major ecclesiastical orders.



**Figure 1.** Map of Christian Nubia, with sites discussed in the paper (drawing by S. Maślak, G. Ochała, and D. Zielińska)

In the present article, I postulate a different opinion by bringing to evidence a wall inscription from the so-called Rivergate Church at Faras (medieval Pachoras) in northern Nubia (Figure 1). The text has been known for over a century and edited multiple times, but in its new reading and interpretation it contains the first explicit mention of a female ecclesiastic in the entire Nile Valley and hence constitutes a strong indication for the existence of female diaconate in Nubia.

The paper consists of two parts: the re-edition of the inscription, and its interpretation. The interpretive part proceeds on three planes, focusing first and foremost on what the text can tell us about the place and possible functions of deaconesses in the Nubian Church and then, more generally, about the role of women in medieval Nubian society. Finally, the inscription is viewed in a broader perspective of the “Byzantineness” and/or “Egyptianness” of the Nubian Church.

## 2. Re-edition of the text

During the excavation of the Rivergate Church at Faras in the winter season of 1911–12, the archaeological mission under the direction of Francis Llewelyn Griffith uncovered some thirty wall inscriptions (Griffith 1926: 66–86, inscriptions and paintings are discussed at 73–82). Unfortunately, most of them were badly damaged at the moment of discovery, some of them even beyond recognition (see Griffith 1926: pls 64–5). One of the best-preserved examples, the only one for which Griffith gave a full transcription and translation, was a dipinto of five lines recorded on the western face of a brick wall that was introduced at some point to separate the eastern part of the north aisle from the rest of the space (Figure 2; Griffith 1926: 81–2 [DBMNT 1587]).<sup>4</sup> The inscription accompanied a painted representation, unfortunately preserved only in its right part, of the enthroned Virgin Mary with Child (painting no. 40; Figure 3). To the right of the throne three male figures were visible, adoring the Virgin; the legend painted above the head of the uppermost man identified him as Χριστιανός, “Christian” (Griffith 1926: 81, pl. 65, no. 26 [DBMNT 1585]), which, according to Griffith’s interpretation, should signify that “the three represent the Christian world in adoration rather than the three Magi” (Griffith 1926: 80–1, pl. 60.5). The inscription under scrutiny here was located beneath the painting, between the legs of the throne, forming an integral part of the composition. On archaeological and architectural grounds, the whole composition should most probably be dated to a late period, perhaps thirteenth–fourteenth centuries (Griffith 1926: 82).

Unfortunately, neither the painting nor the inscriptions survive, as a few hours after their unearthing, the whole fragment of the plaster crumbled to dust. Luckily, the discoverers had managed to prepare basic documentation before this happened. The tracing of the inscription published in Griffith’s report (Figure 4), the only form of documentation available to us,<sup>5</sup> seems faithful enough to establish a credible reading.

The dipinto in question represents a typically Nubian category of texts traditionally interpreted as dedicatory inscriptions. Because they always accompany wall paintings, with which they form, more or less obviously, a single composition, it is believed that they commemorate persons who donated those paintings (Jakobielski 1972: 180).<sup>6</sup> The most numerous examples of such texts come from the Cathedral of Faras,<sup>7</sup> but they are also known from other churches, including Abdallah-n Irqi,<sup>8</sup> Abd al-Qadir,<sup>9</sup> Dongola,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The number refers to the Database of Medieval Nubian Texts, available online at <http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl> [accessed 8 November 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Griffith mentions the existence of a photograph on the basis of which the drawing of the painting was prepared for publication (Griffith 1926: 81), but this photo was never published.

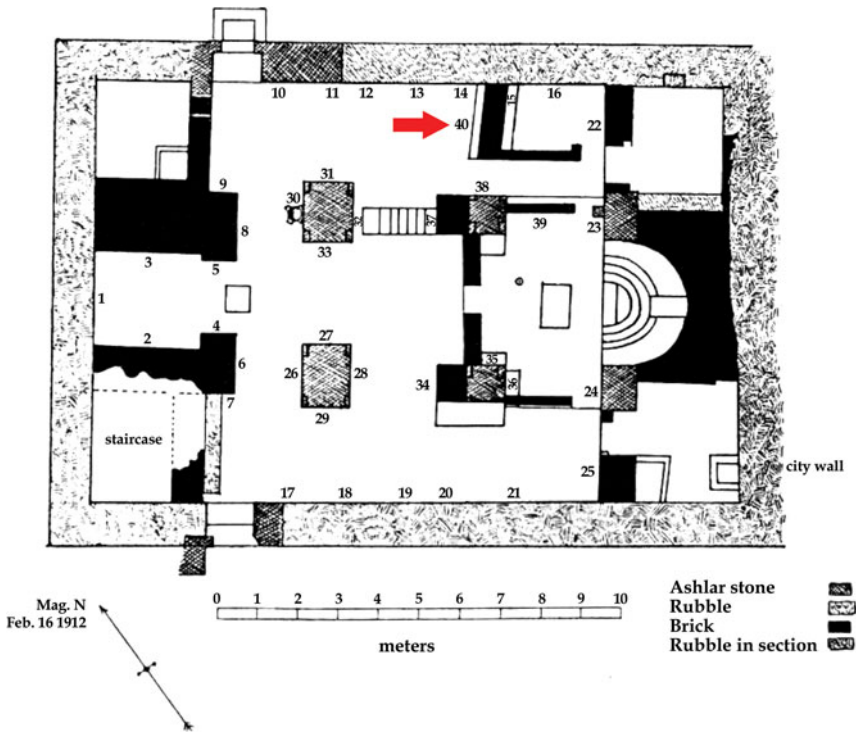
<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this is not explicitly stated in any example.

<sup>7</sup> In all, 11 examples were identified: inscription of Petros (Łajtar 2009: 111–15 [DBMNT 1834]), inscription of Mariakouda (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 249 [DBMNT 716]), inscription of Mariami (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 275 [DBMNT 1853]), inscription of Marteri (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 271 [DBMNT 1854]), inscription of Paimi (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 266 [DBMNT 1855]), inscription of E... daughter of Mar... (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 269 [DBMNT 1856]), two inscriptions of Staurosinkouda (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 257 and 278 [DBMNT 1857 and 1858]), inscription of Ioseph (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 275 [DBMNT 1859]), and two anonymous inscriptions (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 230 [DBMNT 2795] and 261 [DBMNT 4418]).

<sup>8</sup> Inscription of Iesoukouda (Van Moorsel, Jacquet, and Schneider: 1975: fig. on p. 34, no. 8 [DBMNT 2378]) and two anonymous inscriptions (Van Moorsel et al., fig. on p. 34, nos 1 and 4 [DBMNT 2371 and 2374]).

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps inscription of Mariankouda, eparch of Nobadia (Jakobielski 2013: 332–5 [DBMNT 1708]) and an anonymous inscription (Monneret de Villard 1935: 216, no. 28 [DBMNT 1720]).

<sup>10</sup> There are about a dozen of them from the so-called Monastery on Kom H and Church BV on the citadel. Only those from the monastery have so far been published: inscription of St--- (Łajtar and Van der Vliet 2017: 30, no. X [DBMNT 3190]) and an anonymous inscription (Łajtar and Van der Vliet 2017: 28–9, no. IX [DBMNT 3189]). Information on inscriptions from church BV I owe to Adam Łajtar (personal communication).



**Figure 2.** Plan of the Rivergate Church at Faras with the location of wall paintings; the position of the inscription of Iesousanya marked with an arrow (after Griffith 1926: pl. 46)

and Banganarti.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the same type of text could be placed on portable religious representations, such as icons and sculpted plaques.<sup>12</sup>

The inscriptions are very uniform in their structure. They consist of two parts: the prayer, and the presentation of the donor. The first part, exclusively in Greek, is the intercessory prayer for the donor. It starts with the invocation of Jesus Christ, usually followed by an invocation of the holy figure depicted in the painting, and continues with a set of second person singular aorist imperatives, including φύλαξον, “guard!”, εὐλόγησον, “bless!”, σκέπασον, “protect!”, and βοήθεισον, “help!”. The protagonist is introduced in the next part, which can be in either Greek or Coptic. The protagonist’s name is preceded by the accusative τὸν δούλόν/τὴν δούλην σου, “Your (i.e. Christ’s) servant (m/f)”, and followed by their title or function and/or patro- or metronymic.

Our inscription has been published five times so far: Griffith 1926: 81–2; Bilabel 1931: no. 7476; Monneret de Villard 1935: 196; Hondius 1937: no. 862; and Kubińska 1974: no. 50 (basically repeating Hondius’ edition). While none of them had any difficulties with deciphering and understanding the prayer part of the inscription, they appear to have misinterpreted the presentation of the donor. I would like to propose here the following re-edition of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Two anonymous inscriptions (Łajtar 2020: nos 515 and 444 [DBMNT 3643 and 3711]).

<sup>12</sup> A plaque from Attiri representing St Epimachos (Tsakos 2012: 205–23 [DBMNT 2636]) and an icon from Dongola representing Mary (Godlewski, Kusz, and Łajtar 2018: 147–54 [DBMNT 4525]).

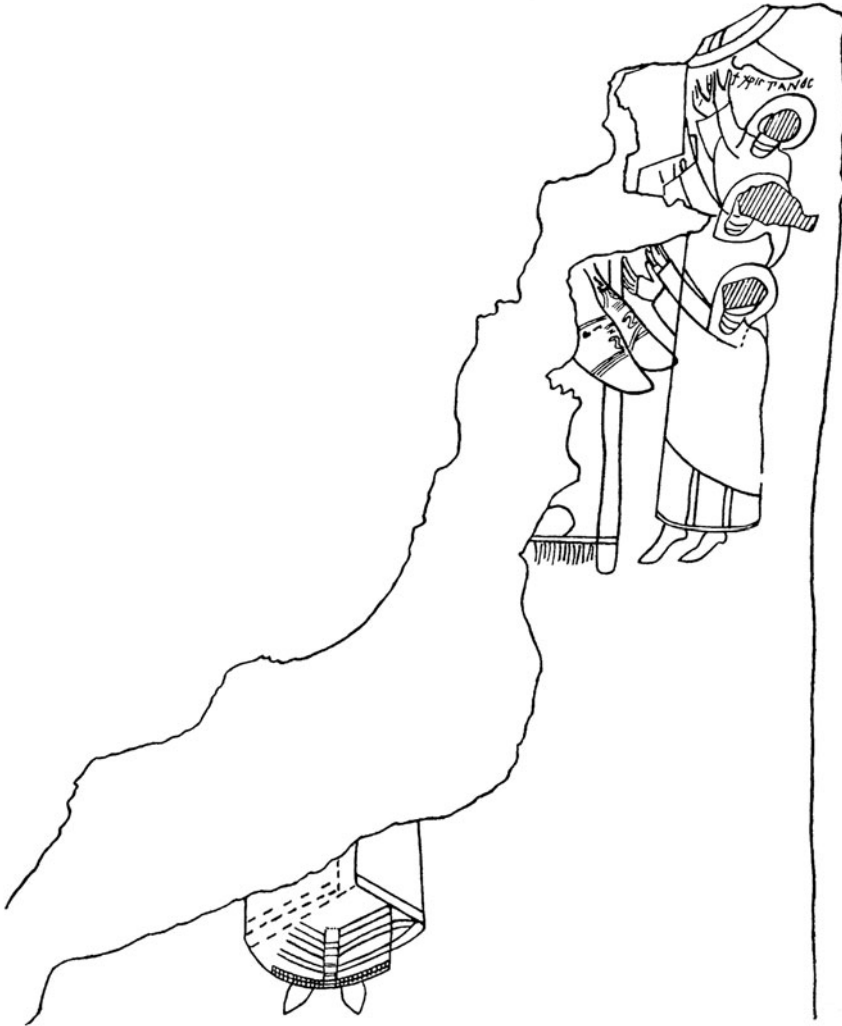


Figure 3. Fragment of the painting donated by Iesusanya (after Griffith 1926: pl. 60.5)

† Κ̄Ε ΙΥ Χ̄Ε ΦΥΛΑΞ̄ΟΝ ΕΥΛ̄  
 ΟΙΚΤΕΙΡΙΣΟΝ ΤΗΝ ΔΟΥΛΟΝ  
 ΣΟΥ ῙΑΨΑ ΠΑΧΩΡΑΣ Ῑ  
 ΔΙΑΚΟΝ // ΥΓ̄ΑΡΑΣ ΜΑΡ  
 ΔΗ ΟΥΟΣΑ: ~~~~~

Figure 4. Inscription of Iesusanya daughter of Marianos Osa (after Griffith 1926: pl. 65, no. 28)

**Diplomatic transcript**

† κ̅ε̅ ι̅γ̅ κ̅ε̅ φυλαξον εγλω  
 οικτειρισον την δοϋλον  
 σογ ι̅α̅ψα παχωρας ι̅ε̅  
 4 ΔΙΑΚΟΝ [θ]ΥΓΑ ΤΡΑΣ ΜΑΡΙ  
 ΑΝΟΥ ΟΣΑ : —

**Reading text**

† Κ(ύρι)ε Ἰ(ησο)ῦ Χ(ριστ)έ, φύλαξον, εὐλό(γησον),  
 οἰκτερίσον τὴν δοῦλόγ  
 σου ι(ησογ)αψα Παχώρας Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς  
 ΔΙΑΚΟΝ, [θ]υγάτρας Μαρι-  
 άνου οσα : —

1. Ἰ(ησο)ῦ om. Bilabel; ΕΥΛΟ[ΓΗCON] Griffith (as if in lacuna) || 2. 1. οἰκτείρησον; 1. τὴν δοῦλήγ || 3. Ι(ΗCOY)CAΨΑ Griffith, Ἰ(ησοῦ)σαψα Bilabel, Ἰ(ησοῦ)σανα Hondius and Kubińska (all most probably because of the lack of appropriate font); ΠΑΧΩΡΑCΙΟ (?) Griffith, Παχώρας ι̅ο̅ [ ] Bilabel, παχωρας ι̅ο̅ Monneret de Villard, Παχώρας ι̅ο̅ Hondius and Kubińska || 4. διάκον(ον) Bilabel, διακόν(ου) Hondius and Kubińska; 1. θυγατέρα || 4–5. ΜΑΡ[Ι]ΑΝ ΟΥΟCΑ Griffith, Μαρί[αν] Οὔοσα Bilabel, Hondius, μαρ [ι]αν ογοσα Monneret de Villard, Μαρίαν Οὔσα Kubińska (as if in l. 4)

† *Lord Jesus Christ, protect, bless, have pity on Your servant Iesusanya, deacon of (the Church of) Jesus at Pachoras, daughter of Marianos Osa.*

2. οἰκτείρισον does not belong to the standard repertoire of requests in prayers for intercession known from Faras, which always includes φύλαξον, εὐλόγησον, σκέπασον, ἐνδυνάμωσον, and βοήθησον. It is, however, characteristic of the Dongolese region (Dongola and Banganarti). On the basis of differences in the use of verbs, Adam Łajtar has recently proposed that two traditions of the prayer existed, originating from Faras and Dongola respectively (Godlewski et al. 2018: 152).

τὴν δοῦλόγ. The confusion of genders is common in Nubian Greek (see Tibiletti Bruno 1963: 521–2). It is assumed that the phenomenon is rooted in the lack of grammatical gender in the Old Nubian language (cf. Browne 2002: §3.1).

3–5. There is a confusion in the scholarship as to who is who in the presentation of the donor of the painting. In the original edition, Griffith read Ι(ΗCOY)CAΨΑ ΠΑΧΩΡΑCΙΟ (?) ΔΙΑΚΟΝ ΘΥΓΑΤΡΑΣ ΜΑΡ[Ι]ΑΝ ΟΥΟCΑ, “Marian-Wosa [?] daughter of Iesusanya the deacon in (sic) Pachoras”. His edition and translation of the phrase was repeated by two other editors: Hondius translated “servam suam Mariam Vosam, filiam Iesusanae diaconi” and Kubińska “ta servante Maria Vosa, fille de Iesusana, diacre”. Bilabel apparently disagreed with Griffith, which he stated in the apparatus, but he did not propose a counter-interpretation. Monneret de Villard, in turn, somehow considered Marian Wosa (?) the son of Iesusanya, not his daughter (“un donatore μαρ[ι]αν ογοσα figlio di Iesusanya, diacono di Pahora”).

However, Griffith’s original translation is far from intuitive and, moreover, goes against the rules of stating filiation that we know from Nubia and elsewhere, as it assumes the inversion of the elements of presentation, with the name of the father preceding the name of the child (for Egypt, e.g., Depauw and Broux 2017: esp. 43–53). Taking this into account, I see no reason why the presentation should not be understood in its normal order: Iesusanya as the child and the other person as the parent. This has two serious implications for the interpretation: first, Iesusanya was a woman ([θ]υγάτρας); and second, Iesusanya bore the title “deacon”.

As for the former, the name Iesusanya belongs to a broader category of local Nubian names formed with the Old Nubian element -αψα, “the one who lives, living”, which is attached to names of holy entities (e.g. Jesus, Mary, Raphael, Holy Trinity) or nouns denoting sacred objects (e.g. cross). Names belonging to this class appear to be gender-neutral: they could be borne by both men (e.g. Maranya Georgios, builder of Ami, ancestor of King Mouses Georgios: Łajtar 2009: 89–97 [DBMNT 699]) and women (e.g. Toskanya

sister of Penatti: Browne 1991: no. 45 [DBMNT 1029]). The masculine form δοῦλον can hardly constitute an objection to the feminine gender of the person, as it is frequently found in reference to women in Nubian epigraphy, most notably in some dedicatory inscriptions from Faras (inscriptions of Mariami [DBMNT 1853], Marteri [DBMNT 1854], Paimi [DBMNT 1855], and E... [DBMNT 1856]; see above, n. 7). The apparently masculine title ΔΙΑΚΟΝ (see below) cannot be taken as an indication of gender either, as Eastern sources clearly show that διάκονος could label both men and women, sex being differentiated with the use of respective articles or adjectives (Karras 2004: 280 with n. 36; Eisen 1996: 154–92).

The name of the parent also needs reconsidering. The form ΜΑΡΙΑΝ ΟΥΟϞΑ or similar, has not been attested elsewhere as an anthroponym, but there appears to be a way to improve its understanding. If we agree that the filiation expression assumed a standard order here, we expect a genitive after [θ]υγάτρως. Unfortunately, we do not have a photograph to verify this, but we could suppose that the space between ΜΑΡΙΑΝ and ΟΥΟϞΑ visible on the drawing is just an interpretation of the transcriber and/or editor. If so, another division of the cluster ΜΑΡΙΑΝΟΥΟϞΑ could be proposed, namely ΜΑΡΙΑΝΟΥ ΟϞΑ. In this way, we obtain the required genitive Μαριάνου of the name Μαρίανος. This male name is well attested in Christian Nubia, especially at Faras, where we find it in as many as 13 occurrences referring to 11 persons. The only problem that remains is the meaning of the final three letters οϞα. Taking the context into account, this may be either Iesusanya's father's title or his second name/nickname. While οϞα has so far been unattested as a Nubian title or designation of function, the word should probably be compared to ὨϞΑ found as an element of presentation of a certain Anna in her epitaph: ΤΗΑΚΑΡΙΑ ΑΝΝΑ ὨϞΑ (Qasr Ibrim – Faras area, tenth century; Richter 2013: 149–51, no. 68 [DBMNT 526]). The editor interprets ὨϞΑ as the second name of the deceased, hence his rendering “Anna Osa” in the translation, but this is by no means certain. Since the interchange of ο and ω is common in late-antique Greek (Gignac 1976: 275–7) and Old Nubian (Browne 2002: § 2.1.1), οϞα and ωϞα seem to be variants of the same word. Their possible etymology can be derived from the Old Nubian verb οϞ-, “to take out, take off, release” (Browne 1996: 128), to which the onomastic formant -α was added. Otherwise, it could be compared with ωϞε, apparently a Blemmyan name found in two leather documents from Gebelein (Kiessling 1971: nos. 10552 and 10553).

3. Παχώρας Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς. All previous editors, following Griffith's drawing and edition, transcribed ἰο at the end of line 3. In a very laconic commentary, Griffith stated that this is “the Old Nubian locative postposition ἰο or ἰά ‘in’” (Griffith 1926: 82), an interpretation that was also accepted by Hondius, who noted in the critical apparatus: “ἰο: postpositio Nub. = in”. This, however, is an obsolete view: Griffith considered -ἰο *et var.* and -ἰα *et var.* to be variants of the Old Nubian postpositions -λο *et var.* and -λα *et var.* respectively (Griffith 1913: 80 and 100), but such forms as ἰεροϞαλεμιό and ἰεροϞαλημεια, quoted by Griffith, should in fact be interpreted as ἰεροϞαλεμι-λό and ἰεροϞαλημει-λα under the loss of *lambda* preceded by a vowel (Browne 2002: § 2.5.6.a). Moreover, it would be very strange to find an Old Nubian postposition attached to the Greek form of the toponym παχώρας, instead of its Nubian rendering παρα/παρσι. The fact that the two letters stand between the toponym (Pachoras) and the designation of function (deacon) in the next line is telling. A current pattern in presentation of Nubian clergymen, as observed in numerous examples, is name + toponym + name of church + function, as, for example, δαγθεν ἱε μετ' ΔΙΑΚ' = δαγθεν Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς μέγ(ας) διάκ(ονος), “deacon of the Great (Church of) Jesus at Jagje” (Łajtar 2020: no. 349 [DBMNT 2201]). Assuming that we are dealing here with the same pattern, the two letters must represent the name of a church. If so, Griffith's ἰο is most probably a misreading of the *nomen sacrum* ἱε standing for “(the Church of) Jesus”; the trema visible on the drawing seems to be just a

misinterpreted supralinear stroke, all the more so since it is positioned off the axis of the *iota*, a situation highly unusual for Nubian palaeography. The whole phrase should thus be rendered “Iesusanya, deacon of (the Church of) Jesus at Pachoras”.

The Church of Jesus at Pachoras is hardly attested in our sources. Apart from the present text, it occurs in one more inscription, a visitor’s memento left by a certain Petrou in the so-called Anchorite’s Grotto near Faras (Griffith 1927: 91 [gr. 19], pls. 64.2, 73.19 [DBMNT 1673]).<sup>13</sup> Like Iesusanya, Petrou is also labelled “deacon of (the Church of) Jesus of Pachoras”, ΔΙΑΚ(ΟΝ) ΝΙΣ ΠΑΧΩΡ[---] (Griffith translated “deacon of Pachoras ...”). We have no direct evidence for pinpointing the actual building that was thus named at Faras, but dedicatory inscriptions from Faras Cathedral and the Dongolese church BV provide some reasons to suppose that this was the Rivergate Church. In those texts, certain donors are designated as clerics of “(the Church of) Mary” and “(the Church of) Raphael”, whereas it is otherwise known that Mary was the patron of Faras Cathedral (Jakobielski 1972: 176–8, 180; Van der Vliet 1999: 91 with n. 42) and Archangel Raphael of the church at Dongola (Łajtar 2015: 112–3). These two cases are definitely not enough to formulate a general rule, but they at least hint at the fact that one tended to fund a painting where one served as a cleric. If so, we may assume that the designation Church of Jesus in our inscription refers to the Rivergate Church itself.

4. ΔΙΑΚΟΝ. Because there is no graphic indication of abbreviation, I prefer to treat ΔΙΑΚΟΝ not as an abbreviated version of the Greek δῆκονος, as other editors of the text have done, but as its Nubianized variant (Łajtar 2020: no. 403, comm.).

### 3. Iesusanya and the female diaconate in Christian Nubia

Formulaic and laconic as it is, the inscription of Iesusanya does not furnish us with direct information on the female diaconate in Nubia. However, when considered in a broader perspective, involving comparison with other texts of this type on the one hand and the architectural and art-historical contexts on the other, it at least allows for speculation. Let us then challenge the information that can be gleaned from our text with what we know of the Eastern female diaconate.

The text of the inscription does not reveal the social background of Iesusanya: we only learn that she was a daughter of one Marianos, whose status remains likewise unknown. We can, however, infer her position from contextual information, both text-specific and more general. If the text was indeed a dedicatory inscription accompanying the painting, a straightforward implication is that Iesusanya was wealthy enough to commission the execution of the mural. If so, we can speculate on the origin of her welfare. According to Byzantine practice, to become a deaconess, a woman had to be unmarried or separated from her husband in one way or another. Thus, only nuns,<sup>14</sup> wives of newly ordained bishops,<sup>15</sup> or widows, especially rich widows,<sup>16</sup> were eligible for this function. None of these options can really be excluded for Iesusanya. It is true that if she wore a monastic habit, we would expect it to be mentioned in the text, but note that our knowledge of female monasticism in Nubia is too meagre for us to be completely positive

<sup>13</sup> See Ochała 2019a: 188, for a corrected reading of the name of the visitor.

<sup>14</sup> From the fourth century onwards, abbesses and nuns with liturgical functions were typical candidates for female diaconate (Karras 2004: 279–82).

<sup>15</sup> Since the Council in Trullo (691/2 CE), wives of newly ordained bishops were supposed to enter monasteries and as such could also receive ordination to the diaconate (Noce, Dell’Osso, and Ceccarelli-Morolli (eds) 2006: canon 48; see also Karras 2004: 281–2).

<sup>16</sup> Elm 1996: 175–82. Karras (2004: 274 n. 12) even suggests that the ordination of deaconesses was introduced as a means of both “satisfying wealthy and powerful widows and controlling them”.



about this.<sup>17</sup> We are even less certain about her being or not being the wife of a bishop.<sup>18</sup> Even if Iesusanya were indeed married to a bishop, it is highly unlikely that such a piece of information would ever be included in her inscription, as indicating the wife or husband of a person in (self-)presentation is extremely rare in Christian Nubia. Thus, the safest assumption here is that Iesusanya was a rich widow: assets that she would have inherited from her husband would open the door to the diaconate on the one hand and allow her generous pious activity on the other.

The location of the whole composition within the sacred space is also telling.<sup>19</sup> Its place in the northern aisle conforms with the location of the paintings donated by women in Faras Cathedral (see Jakobielski 1974: 297), a fact that is believed to indicate that the northern aisle of Nubian churches was reserved for women (Jakobielski 1972: 60; Sulikowska-Belczowska 2016). This practice was no doubt adopted from Byzantium.<sup>20</sup> However, the location of Iesusanya's painting diverges from the cathedral's practice in that in the latter the women's paintings are concentrated in the western part of the aisle,<sup>21</sup> while here its eastern end was chosen, even though the western wall of the aisle apparently remained empty (cf. Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> This eastern location of the painting donated by the deaconess corresponds perfectly with the place of deaconesses during the divine liturgy in Byzantium: they were to be found in the eastern part of the northern aisle, outside the sanctuary but still close enough to it (Taft 1998; cf. Karras 2004: 276 with n. 19).<sup>23</sup> Of course, the mere presence of an inscription mentioning a female deacon can hardly be a proof of her physical presence there, apart from the moments when she commissioned the execution of the composition, oversaw the work, and admired the final effect. It is believed, however, that both Nubian wall paintings and inscriptions were in fact acts of *intercessio perpetua* (e.g. Mierzejewska 2010). If, therefore, such compositions as that of Iesusanya were constantly praying for the salvation of their donors and/or authors *in absentia*, it is not inconceivable that they indeed reflected the donor's/author's habitual place in the church where he/she was praying in person.

<sup>17</sup> For what little is known about female monasticism in Nubia, see Obluski 2019: 240–1.

<sup>18</sup> That Nubian bishops could be married is explicitly proven by the recurrence in our sources of persons labelled as the sons or daughters of bishops, e.g. Iesusiko daughter of Bishop Markos (epitaph from Qasr Ibrim, 1034 ce; Richter 2013: no. 65 [DBMNT 569]) or Iesou son of Bishop Ioakim (wall inscription from Kenisa, unknown date; unpublished, my reading from the photo in Leclant and Clerc 1991: 261, pl. 98, fig. 100 [DBMNT 2237]).

<sup>19</sup> What follows is based on the assumption that the Rivergate Church is identical with the Church of Jesus at Faras.

<sup>20</sup> Pace Jakobielski 1972: 60, who extrapolates it from the modern practice of the Coptic Church. Much more cautiously, Sulikowska-Belczowska (2016: 121) claims that the “longevity [of the practice, G.O.] in the Eastern Churches permits the assumption that the aforementioned rules were also observed in Nubia”. For the place of women in Byzantine rite, see Taft 1998: 65–70, who argues that women could have occupied the northern aisle from the sixth century onwards (cf. 34–6 [discussion of Procopius, *De aedificiis* 1.1, 55–8] and 86–7 [conclusion]), which is exactly the moment of Christianization of Nubia.

<sup>21</sup> See Ochała 2022: fig. 9. These are the inscriptions of Mariami (DBMNT 1853), Marteri (DBMNT 1854), Paimi (DBMNT 1855), and E... (DBMNT 1856); for references, see above, n. 7.

<sup>22</sup> According to Griffith (1926: 69–70, pls. 46, 49.2), the western wall was constructed of bricks, as was the one on which Iesusanya's painting was executed, which suggests a similar date of construction.

<sup>23</sup> Such a location had a practical justification: the supervisory functions of the deaconesses over other women attending the liturgy and their role as chanters situated exactly opposite the male choir in the southern aisle (Karras 2004: 287). Note, however, that the only source explicitly mentioning such a special space is Constantius Porphyrogenitus, *De caerimoniis aulae Byzantinae* (1.44 [35]), dated to the tenth century and referring to the Hagia Sophia. There is no reason, however, to suppose that this was a recent development, as at that time the female diaconate was already in decline.

#### 4. Iesusanya and the Nubian gender studies

That Nubian women enjoyed considerable social and economic status has already been indubitably shown: women appear in our sources as “having” churches, that is, being patrons of ecclesiastical buildings as their founders or legal owners (Łajtar and Van der Vliet 1998: *passim*, esp. 42–3), founding wall paintings (Rostkowska 1982: 210–11 and above, section 2 with n. 7), and trading in real estate (Ruffini 2012: 235–44, esp. 236–7). Yet, apart from the designations referring to the female members of the royal family, “queen-mother” (Greek μήτηρ βασιλέως, Old Nubian 𐩪𐩣𐩬𐩰𐩪𐩰)<sup>24</sup> and, possibly, “queen-mother-elect” (Old Nubian 𐩪𐩣𐩬𐩰𐩪𐩰𐩪𐩰; see Ochała 2019b: no. 7a), Nubian women have not so far been attested as bearing any kind of title indicating their engagement in official structures of either Nubian state or Church. The inscription of Iesusanya, if the reading and interpretation proposed above are correct, shows Nubian women in yet another role, as members of the clerical staff of a church.

One wonders in this context what cultural differences existed between Egypt and Nubia that prompted the Nubians to accept the female diaconate and the Egyptians, apparently, to reject it. As we can infer from the portraits of royal mothers painted on the walls of Faras Cathedral (Godlewski 2008) and a scene of a ritual dance apparently connected with the birth of an heir to the throne from the South-West Annex to the Monastery on Kom H at Dongola (Van Gerven Oei 2017), the figure of the queen mother not only had a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of the royal lineage, but was also invested with religious significance. A parallel between the queen mother and the Virgin Mary is clear: just like the latter was the mother of Christ, the former was the mother of a future Makurian ruler, Christ’s deputy on earth (Łajtar and Ochała 2021: 368). It seems reasonable to assume that this peculiar position of the royal mother was at least partly extrapolated to all women of Nubian society. The popularity in Nubia of names, both female and male, deriving from the name of the Virgin clearly bespeaks the special cult which the God-bearer enjoyed in Nubia. There are 29 names of this type, occurring 212 times and designating 169 individuals, which amounts to circa 5 per cent of attestations of all names (4,478) and persons (3,594) occurring in Christian Nubian sources. The proportions are even more striking when we take into account only women. Here, for 483 attestations of female names and 404 persons bearing them, six Mary-names constitute as many as circa 20 per cent (96 attestations and 75 persons).<sup>25</sup> Virgin Mary, who had strong ties to fertility in Nubia (Van Gerven Oei 2017: 129–31), was thus surely the most important role model for Nubian women. If then the Nubian women were perceived as carrying in them a portion of Mary’s sanctity, their apparent high social standing would be a natural consequence of the reverence towards them as mothers. Their admittance to the role of deaconesses, whose primary function was to oversee other women during the liturgy, could thus be viewed as an extension of their motherhood.

#### 5. Iesusanya and the question of Nubia’s “Byzantineness”

The inscription of Iesusanya sheds light on yet another question, that of the origins of Nubian Christianity.<sup>26</sup> Although in current scholarship, emphasis is placed on the

<sup>24</sup> However, it remains uncertain whether this was an honorific title or whether it designated an actual office (see, e.g., Łajtar and Ochała 2021: 376).

<sup>25</sup> Calculated on the basis of the Database of Medieval Nubian Names, currently being prepared for publication online. By comparison, there are 468 occurrences of the name Maria (TM Nam 22425) in Egyptian documentary sources recorded in the Trismegistos People database for the period between the second and eighth centuries CE, which gives the rate of only 0.3 per cent of all 157,656 attestations of names in this period; note that the figure includes also the Nubian attestations.

<sup>26</sup> For the Christianization of Nubia, see, most recently, Dijkstra 2008: 282–92.

Egyptian input into the evangelization of Nubia in the mid-sixth century,<sup>27</sup> a broader Byzantine connection can still be detected in many aspects of Christian Nubian culture. Even more importantly, in some cases this influence seems to have come directly from Constantinople or Syro-Palestine, with the omission of neighbouring Egypt as an intermediary.<sup>28</sup> While some of these Byzantine features could have reached Nubia at any given moment,<sup>29</sup> many of them must have been there already from the time of Christianization.

Given the total absence of female deacons in Egypt, Nubia's closest neighbour and most immediate source of cultural and religious inspirations, the Rivergate Church dipinto should most probably be viewed as a piece of evidence of Constantinopolitan influence on the shape of Nubian Christianity. Since the order of deaconesses had disappeared in Constantinople well before the time of Iesusanya, its adoption in Nubia must predate the inscription. This could have happened even as late as the eleventh–twelfth centuries, when there is still evidence for ordained deaconesses in Constantinople. However, from as early as the beginning of the eighth century the significance of the order started to diminish and, moreover, from the ninth–tenth centuries onwards, it seems to have been reserved only for nuns (Karras 2004: 311), which does not seem to be the case for Iesusanya. It seems much more probable that the female diaconate was introduced into Nubia when the order was still thriving in the empire, between the middle of the sixth, marking the Christianization of the Nubian kingdoms, and the end of the seventh century. In fact, we could easily attribute this to the work of the very missionaries who evangelized the Middle Nile Valley in the mid-sixth century and laid foundations for the structure of the Nubian Church. Since at that time deaconesses constituted an important element of the Eastern ecclesiastical milieu, it cannot surprise us that they could have become a part of the Nubian Church, too.

## 6. Conclusion

The inscription of Iesusanya is a perfect example of how text, image, and context worked in Nubian sacred space, and how epigraphy, art history, and archaeology should be used comprehensively to decode the meaning of all these elements. In this way, even such laconic sources as the inscription discussed here bring valuable input into our understanding of Christian Nubian culture. Thanks to Iesusanya's dipinto, both content- and context-wise, we now know that:

1. Female diaconate existed in medieval Nubia as late as the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, well after its disappearance elsewhere;
2. Nubian deaconesses could be recruited from among the rich echelons of society;<sup>30</sup>
3. The place of Nubian deaconesses during the Eucharist was most probably in the eastern part of the northern aisle.

Unfortunately, the evidence is too meagre to learn anything more about Iesusanya herself. However, with a little bit of imagination, the raw picture emerging from the above

<sup>27</sup> Viewed rather as a long-term acculturation process than a single event, e.g. Van der Vliet 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Thus, for example, in the case of the Byzantine office of *kimeliarches*, “treasurer”, whose attestations are not to be found in Egypt: Łajtar and Ochała 2018.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast to what is traditionally believed, the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 CE did not cut off the Middle Nile Valley from the rest of the Byzantine world, thus preventing the transmission of cultural elements from the north.

<sup>30</sup> The fact that Iesusanya commissioned the execution of a painting seems enough to assume her elevated social status. It does not necessarily mean, however, that all Nubian deaconesses were members of the upper social class.

discussion can be fleshed out. Iesusanya's story could thus be told in, for example, the following manner:

Iesusanya, daughter of Marianos, married a prominent and wealthy member of the late Christian Nubian elite. When her husband died, she was left with a considerable estate. A large part of it, of course, fell to their children, but her own share was still fairly impressive. The children were already adult and living on their own, so she had no more earthly duties to fulfil. Therefore, being a pious woman, she decided to join the ranks of the clergy. What remained of her inheritance, she chose to use for the needs of the congregation of the Jesus-Church in Faras, to which she once had belonged as one of the faithful and in which she had just started her service. Her contribution to the interior decoration of the church was most welcome because, after recent reconstructions, some of the walls remained miserably empty. Coincidentally, a new division wall had been introduced in the eastern part of the north aisle, in the very place that was attributed to her as a deaconess. She had to think about a painting that would fit the character and function of the northern aisle. After paying another visit to the cathedral church, she already knew. As usual, she attended the mass from the northern aisle, but this time she was praying at its western end, just in front of the painting of the enthroned Virgin with Jesus Child donated by her pious predecessor, Mariami daughter of Marianta (DBMNT 1853). After all, which representation would fit better the female part of the church than that of Mother Mary? This, however, could not have been a simple copy of Mariami's painting; extraordinary lady as she was, Iesusanya desired something original. Having spent hours discussing the issue with her fellow clerics, she could finally tell the artist what to paint: the throne, the Virgin, the Child, and six human figures in adoration on both sides of them, three women to the left and three men to the right. As the old priest, most advanced in theology, claimed, this could be perceived in two ways by the faithful. First, thanks to its location near the Nativity scene, such a representation acquired features of Theophany, the revealing of Christ to the people.<sup>31</sup> Second, in such an arrangement the composition became a symbolic depiction of a church building, where Mary and Jesus represented the sanctuary, the women the northern aisle, and the men the southern one.<sup>32</sup> Several months later, the new decoration was ready. Iesusanya brought the women of the congregation to the divine liturgy and, despite the solemnity of the moment, she could not help smiling. Her heart was rejoicing at the divine work that she did, and the sight of her own name so masterfully inscribed on the wall filled her with certainty that from that moment on, Mother Mary and Jesus Child would always hear her prayers and reward her in the approaching eternal life.

Other scenarios are certainly possible, but at least parts of this one seem quite compelling. If Iesusanya indeed was not a nun, her ordination to the diaconate may be seen as proof of the persistence of religious traditions in Nubia on the one hand, and their independence from the mother Church on the other. Once adopted in Nubia, the order of ordained deaconesses appears to have remained unchanged for virtually the whole Christian period, unaffected by the development (or rather devolvement) it underwent in the empire. Thus, the case of Iesusanya the deaconess shows that Christian Nubia, or at least some elements of her culture and religion, may be perceived as Byzantium of the Justinianic age caught in motion.<sup>33</sup> One has, of course, to carefully

<sup>31</sup> In Nubian churches, the Nativity scene was traditionally placed at the eastern end of the northern aisle; at the Rivergate Church, this is painting no. 22 (Figure 2). I thank Dobrochna Zielińska for this suggestion.

<sup>32</sup> The painting is without analogy in the whole East and, moreover, its left-hand side was missing already at the moment of discovery. One can, therefore, hypothesize on its reconstruction and symbolism in a number of ways.

<sup>33</sup> Like Nubian wall painting which is an extremely valuable source for studying pre-iconoclastic Byzantine iconography (see, e.g., Szolc 1975: 296–7).

peel off cultural layers of local origin accumulated over centuries, but what hides underneath, its kernel, is not infrequently of sixth-/seventh-century date, a formative period of the Nubian Christian state.

Apart from its value for studying the history of Christianity in the Middle Nile Valley, the inscription of Iesusanya has another, more practical dimension concerning the recognition of gender in Christian Nubian sources. While the case of Iesusanya the deaconess is certainly the most evident, Nubian texts may conceal more such instances, not easily recognizable at first sight. Given the difficulties or even impossibility of discerning the gender of Nubians on the basis of their names, especially when the name belongs to the local Nubian onomastic stock, it may well be true that such persons as Matara (Ruffini 2014: no. 71 [DBMNT 2791]), Ogojkemi (Ruffini 2014: no. 72 [DBMNT 2792]), or Michaelko (Łajtar 2020: no. 32 [DBMNT 3257]), all labelled as deacons, were in fact women.<sup>34</sup> A desideratum is thus perhaps not to treat all Nubians bearing the title “deacon” automatically as unambiguously male figures and to investigate all such cases with due care.

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<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, Ruffini 2012: 241, on one Taparā, *thel* ( ) of Kaktine.

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