

# Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica V: The Names of the Four Creatures of the Apocalypse in Christian Nubia\*

[*Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica V:*  
El nombre de las cuatro criaturas del apocalipsis en la Nubia cristiana]

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**Abstract:** The fifth paper in the series brings the focus onto the inscriptions accompanying the famous wall paintings from Christian Nubia, more particularly the legends naming the Four Creatures of the Apocalypse. The identification of a very probable source of inspiration for the particular names used in Nubia turns the attention to the ritual power of such names and the role of orality in the transmission of such textual traditions.

**Resumen:** El quinto artículo de la serie está centrado en las inscripciones que acompañan a las famosas pinturas murales de la Nubia cristiana, concretamente las leyendas de nombres de las Cuatro Criaturas del Apocalipsis. La identificación de una muy probable fuente de inspiración para los nombres particulares utilizados en Nubia lleva al poder ritual de tales nombres y al papel desempeñado por la oralidad en la transmisión de estas tradiciones textuales.

**Key words:** Christian Nubia. Four Creatures of the Apocalypse. Nubian wall paintings. Texts of ritual power. Orality.

**Palabras clave:** Nubia Cristiana. Cuatro Criaturas del Apocalipsis. Pinturas murales nubias. Textos de poder ritual. Oralidad.



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## Introduction

One of the most renowned artistic achievements of Christian Nubia are the mural paintings which decorated both secular and religious spaces during the millennium of the medieval era in what is today northern Sudan. The focus of the archaeological works on the monumental remains of the past have inevitably provided much more evidence of such artworks from the Nubian churches than from either private houses or public buildings of profane character. The wall decoration of the Nubian churches has furthermore been one of the better-studied aspects of the Christian Nubian civilization. These studies have focused mainly on three levels: the iconography and the program; the painting technique itself; and the accompanying inscriptions (legends, visitors' graffiti, dipinti). Among the latter, earlier research managed to pinpoint unique epigraphic attestations for both the Western and the Eastern Christian world. The most characteristic example of such a unique text is the legend accompanying the Shepherds in the famous Nativity from the Cathedral of Faras, naming them as APNIAC and ΛEKOTHC.<sup>2</sup> In other instances, the difficulty to decipher partly destroyed inscriptions and the linguistic particularities of their texts have either discouraged closer analysis altogether or have led to the relegation of the texts' content to the vague category of the 'variant' or 'deviant' from any known parallel textual evidence. However, the number of publications and studies of manuscripts from the Coptic world is constantly increasing the chances of identifying possible sources of inspiration for the textual traditions prevalent in Nubia, given the strong and uninterrupted influence exercised by Egypt on the societies along the Middle Nile already since the Bronze Age. In the present paper, I will discuss in more detail a characteristic case of text transmission between the Coptic North and the Nubian South. This case study concerns the legends identifying the Four Creatures of the Apocalypse accompanying in Nubia

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<sup>2</sup> G. Vantini, "Remarks on the Shepherds of the Faras Nativity", in M. Krause (ed.), *Nubische Studien* (Mainz am Rhein, 1986), pp. 399-401 (specifically p. 400).

two iconographic types, namely representations of the Holy Trinity and an apocalyptic apparition of Christ, traditionally called *Maiestas Domini*.<sup>3</sup>

### The evidence from Nubia

#### Iconography

In a small number of wall paintings representing the Holy Trinity and in most representations of the *Maiestas Domini*, the heads of four figures are placed on the diagonals of the central figure of Christ. These bodiless creatures (hence one of their collective names in Greek, ἄσώματα) are an angel, an eagle, a lion, and an ox. A lot has been written about their significance, already since the time of the Fathers of the Early Christian Church. The main two interpretations are that they represent either the Four Creatures bearing the throne of the apparition of the Lord (from the narrative in Ezekiel 1:5 ff.) or the four Evangelists (as analyzed in Irenæus, *Adversus haereses* III 11, 8).

The main study for the iconography of the Four Creatures in Nubia is a section in the publication of the wall paintings from the Monastery on Kom H at Old Dongola.<sup>4</sup> Their images are characterized as very common,<sup>5</sup> and their positioning around the figure of Christ as very consistent. With only one possible exception,<sup>6</sup> all the known representations of the Four Creatures place the angel on the top left corner and moving clockwise there follows the eagle, the ox, and finally, at the bottom left corner, the lion.

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<sup>3</sup> F. van der Meer, *Maiestas Domini. Théophanies de l'Apocalypse dans l'art chrétien* (Vatican, 1938). Quite often the *Maiestas Domini* should be called *Maiestas Crucis*, because a Cross is occupying the center of the composition.

<sup>4</sup> Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings from the Monastery on Kom H in Dongola*, «Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology Monograph Series», 3 (Warsaw, 2011), pp. 180-184.

<sup>5</sup> M. Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> M. Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*, pp. 182-183.

The identification of the figures can only be achieved by means of the legends accompanying the painted scene. We can discern the following possibilities:

1. The Four Creatures are identified as the four Evangelists and thus the angel is Matthew, the eagle is John, the ox is Luke, and the lion is Mark. However, there is no example from Nubia identifying the Four Creatures with the four Evangelists.
2. The Four Creatures are seen praising the Lord with the Trisagion from Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy Lord Sabaoth, the whole earth is full of his glory”. Despite the high frequency of the use of the Trisagion (ἄριος, ἄριος, ἄριος) in other instances of the appearance in art or text of the Four Creatures, this praise is only recorded in Nubia in the legends of the Maiestas scene from the church at Abdallah-n Irqi.<sup>7</sup>
3. The Four Creatures are accompanied by names found in the apocryphal literary traditions of the Coptic Church. This is the only legend attested in Nubia that identifies directly the Four Creatures, and these names appear all four on two murals from Faras, three of them on one mural from Abdallah-n Irqi, while one more mural from Faras and one from Dongola preserve just one name each.<sup>8</sup>

The legends accompanying the Four Creatures

The instances preserving the names of the Four Creatures show that the Nubians were quite consistent with the names they chose to use. In more detail:

<sup>7</sup> P. van Moorsel, “Une Théophanie Nubienne”, *Rivista di Archaeologia Cristiana* XLII (1968), pp. 297-316. For the precise inscription see p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> S. Jakobielski, in K. Michalowski, *Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw* (Warsaw, 1974), Inscr. nr. 23, p. 294; M. Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*, p. 182; Van Moorsel, “Une Théophanie Nubienne”, *Rivista di Archaeologia Cristiana* XLII (1968), p. 300.

1. At the northern vestibule of the Cathedral of Faras two scenes of a “Maïestas Crucis” preserve all four names: the angel is called μελιτων, the eagle αγραμματαπ, the lion παραμγρα, and the bull πεισογροθιον (I follow here the conventional reading as proposed by Stefan Jakobielski, but see below for a suggestion of improvement).<sup>9</sup>
2. The third mural from the staircase of the Cathedral of Faras preserves only the legend accompanying the lion. It reads again παραμγρα.
3. At the church of Abdallah Nirqi, a similar representation of the “Maïestas Crucis” preserves three of the four names: μελιτων, αγραμματαπ, παραμγρα.<sup>10</sup>
4. At the monastery on Kom H at Old Dongola, there are preserved traces of what seems to be the name πεισογροθιον, identifying a stylized head of a man with the ox of the Four Creatures.

This consistence is important to underline because it contradicts the general tendency, since the first attempts to trace the transmission history of these names, stressing the ‘normality’ of finding variations of these names in almost each attestation recorded and studied.

The main listing of the attestations available today was provided by Angelicus Kropp in his *Ausgewählte Koptische Zaubertexte*. It was based on four manuscripts from the vast corpus of magical literature in Coptic, namely:<sup>11</sup>

1. Berlin 11347
2. London Ms. Or. 1013 A

<sup>9</sup> S. Jakobielski, in K. Michalowski, *Faras*, Inscr. nr. 23, p. 294

<sup>10</sup> Here I correct the initial reading proposed by Van Moorsel, “Une Théophanie Nubienne”, *Rivista di Archaeologia Cristiana* XLII (1968), p. 300, where it is proposed to read αγραμμαπαπ and παραμγρα. π for τ and γ for ρ are easy to mistake in these badly preserved inscriptions.

<sup>11</sup> A. Kropp, *Ausgewählte Koptische Zaubertexte*, vol. III (Brussels 1930), p. 129, n. 3. For the identification of the works cited by Kropp, see concordance list in A. Kropp, *Ausgewählte Koptische Zaubertexte*, vol. II, p. ix-xv.

3. London Ms. Or. 5525
4. Wien Kopt. Papier 17354

There the variants offered are:

1. For μελιτων: περιτων, πεμηριτων, μεραθανλ, περιτων
2. For αγραμματαπ: ακρανατα, πεταγραμματα, αγραμματωνανηλ, ανανκατα
3. For παραμυρα: παραμαρα, παραμηρα, φαλμεραηλ, παραμηραω
4. For πεισογρογθιον: ζωρωθιον, σο[ , zoʒ[ ]ηηλ, σογρινον

The following observations must be made:

1. The name μελιτων seems unattested in the four cases assembled by Kropp. However, all the variants seem to be related to a first syllable πε- or με-/μη-; to a second syllable ρι- or ρα-, where ρ and λ are easily interchangeable; and to a third syllable των- or τον-, where the ektasis of ο to ω is very common.
2. The name αγραμματαπ seems well attested, despite the strange π in the end of the Nubian versions from both Faras and Abdallah Nirqi.
3. The name παραμυρα is the one most securely identified, with a variant mainly between γ and η or λ.
4. Finally, the name πεισογρογθιον should be corrected in my opinion to πεισογρογθιον, since both Faras attestations show that the letter in question is not an ο but a c. Moreover, it is indicated by all examples from Kropp that the initial letter of the name of this Creature was a c or a z. This correction explains the main wording of the name as σογρογθιον, where πει should be understood as the demonstrative pronoun in Coptic. σογρογθιον then or ζωρωθιον should be understood as a variant of ζωον (meaning ‘animal’ in Greek) with the ending -ρογθιον, which in Greek again can only be found in the word στρογθιον for ‘bird’. In sum,

πεισογρογοιον could be rendered as meaning ‘this is (πει) the flying animal (σογρογοιον)’.

The question arising after these observations is of course whether there was a single source from which the Nubians obtained the four names as we see them being used on the murals from Faras, Old Dongola, and Abdallah-n Irqi. Based on the above observations, I have identified a very probable candidate for this source in a Coptic manuscript from the library of Heidelberg.

#### **The Coptic manuscript P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686**

Angelicus Kropp was the editor of a codex of 16 pages from Heidelberg formerly designated P. Heidelberg Inv. Nr. 1686 and subsequently registered as P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686.<sup>12</sup> The Coptic text was purchased in Egypt, brought to Germany in the beginning of the 20th century, got lost during World War II, but has now been found again. Since the first edition by Kropp, it was made available in English by Marvin Meyer in *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*,<sup>13</sup> and a new study is now under preparation.

In this very interesting example of magical literature in Coptic, among other names invoked for their ritual power, in line 112 one can read the names of the Four Creatures of the Apocalypse: μελιτον, ακραματα, πσογρογοιον, παραμηρα.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that this is the closest parallel to the names as preserved in all four attestations of legends identifying these Four Creatures in Nubia. Some more remarks are appropriate here:

<sup>12</sup> A. Kropp, *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael (vormals P. Heidelberg Inv. Nr. 1686)* (Brussels 1966).

<sup>13</sup> M. Meyer & R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco 1994), pp. 323-341.

<sup>14</sup> M. Meyer & R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, pp. 28-31 & 87.

1. The slight differences preserved in the orthography of  $\mu\epsilon\lambda\iota\tau\omicron\nu$  and  $\mu\alpha\rho\alpha\mu\eta\rho\alpha$  are easy to explain (see above, observations ns. 1 & 3).
2. The readings  $\alpha\kappa\rho\alpha\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$  and  $\mu\sigma\upsilon\gamma\rho\omicron\gamma\theta\omicron\nu$  are in my opinion earlier phases in the text transmission. More precisely:
  - a. The change of  $\kappa$  to  $\gamma$  is phonetically very probable, while from  $\alpha\gamma\rho\alpha\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$  to the  $\alpha\gamma\rho\alpha\mu\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$  with the geminated  $\mu$ , I suggest that the interval is an interpretation of the name as something or someone without knowledge or possession of letters.
  - b. If it is correct that  $\tau\iota$  in  $\mu\sigma\upsilon\gamma\rho\omicron\gamma\theta\omicron\nu$  is the definite article, then some copyist or scribe or the common use of the name itself changed the article for the pronoun, creating the aforementioned nominal sentence.

It is impossible to identify all the stages between the Coptic manuscript and the legends on the Nubian murals, but it seems that at least one more transmission level should be considered as intervening between the two end stages under examination.

3. Another interesting observation concerns the sequence of the names. If compared to the sequences offered by Kropp, the one from the manuscript from Heidelberg offers the only instance that the four names are following each other in a manner that is meaningful for the painted representation of the Four Creatures too. In other words, in the four texts sampled by Kropp it is impossible to rotate around the center of the composition reading the name of one Creature after the other without crossing over the figure of Christ. Therefore, in the text of P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686, I have identified not only the closest textual parallel to the Nubian legends for the Four Creatures, but one that also allows the ‘reading’ of the painted image itself: for the informed spectator of the murals in Nubia, the angel is followed by the eagle, the eagle by the ox, and the ox by the lion in a clockwise rotation.



4. Finally, if one turns to the suggested date for the manuscript Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686, it has been shown that it is no earlier than the 10th century, on both paleographical and codicological grounds.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the earliest murals from Nubia with the relevant inscriptions are also dated in the late 10th century.<sup>16</sup> The question that naturally arises is what is the significance of this proximity in time: Was there direct influence coming to Nubia from the (unknown) place of production of the Coptic manuscript of the library in Heidelberg? Or could it be that the transmission of such Coptic texts of ritual power to the legends accompanying the murals decorating the Nubian churches happened through the oral use of these names by members of the Christian communities in both Egypt and Nubia who believed that when these names were spoken out (and/or written down) they had an effectiveness of magical order?

#### **The significance of the parallel find for the relations between Coptic Egypt and Christian Nubia**

The present paper has examined the attestations of the names of the Four Creatures of Christian apocalyptic literature as preserved in a small group of legends accompanying murals representing the Holy Trinity or the Majesty of the Lord. The purpose of the paper was neither to analyze the iconographic types nor to explain the etymology of the names. However, the closer examination of the forms of these names in comparison with their attestations in five manuscripts (all of magic character) from Coptic Egypt permitted the identification of transformations effectuated in the

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<sup>15</sup> See M. Meyer, *The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685)* (Heidelberg 1996), pp. 2-6.

<sup>16</sup> See Van Moorsel, "Une Théophanie Nubienne", *Rivista di Archaeologia Cristiana* XLII (1968), pp. 300-301. The Faras paintings can be dated in the 11th century, see Michalowski, *Faras*, pp. 239-240. The painting from Old Dongola can be dated in the 12th-13th centuries, see Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*, p. 38.

course of the texts' transmission through time and space. One manuscript (namely P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686) stands out as the most probable source of inspiration for the form of the names of the Four Creatures as used in Nubia.

Furthermore, its dating sets it very close in time to the first murals from Nubia preserving the names of the Four Creatures. This observation may be the result of coincidences in the archaeological record (or of the market through which manuscripts came to European libraries) rather than a trustworthy image of a reality as perceived by the users of these texts. However, unless new finds present a different picture, it is legitimate to ponder momentarily upon the meaning of this chronological proximity. Given the indications that certain shifts in the writing of the names were caused by the phonetic similitude of the letters changed (e.g. ρ in ἀγραμματαῖν for κ in ἀκρματαῖα), I suggested that the transmission from Egypt to Nubia of the textual tradition concerning the names of the Four Creatures can be seen as taking place on the level of oral communication.

It has, in fact, been stressed time and again in the studies of texts of ritual power that orality was very important in the creation, execution, and transmission of the magical literature.<sup>17</sup> It should, therefore, be of no

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<sup>17</sup> The significance of orality for texts and acts of ritual power has been linked with the linguistic theory of "speech act" developed by John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge (Mass.) 1962). Two examples of the application of this theory in studies related to magic are: Peter T. Struck, "Speech Acts and the Stakes of Hellenism in Late Antiquity", In: P. Mirecki & M. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden-Boston-Cologne 2002), pp. 387-403 & Stanley J. Tambiah, "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View", In: R. Horton & R. Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* (London 1973), pp. 199-229. About the importance of orality in Coptic literature more generally, see the remark at J. van der Vliet, "Literature, Liturgy, Magic: A Dynamic Continuum", In: P. Buzi & A. Camplani (eds.), *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends. Studies in Honor of Tito Orlandi* (Rome 2011), p. 555: "...the religious things that make up the greater part of what is conventionally labeled «Coptic literature» were meant to be performed orally and received aurally." For the importance of orality in Nubia more generally, see J. van der Vliet, " 'What is Man?' The Nubian Tradition of

surprise that it was also a ‘normal’ means for introducing from Coptic Egypt to Christian Nubia sacred names that were seen as carrying ritual power. The belief in this power was a shared religious experience for the Christians inhabiting the Nile Valley both under the independent Nubian Christian kingdoms and the Arabic Islamic Caliphate. In conclusion, the present case study opened for us a window through which we can contemplate one aspect of the shared religious world of Copts and Nubians.

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