



Was King Merkourios (696 - 710), an African ‘New Constantine’, the unifier of the Kingdoms and Churches of Makouria and Nobadia? – A re-examination and alternative suggestions

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Abstract

This article examines the existing sources on King Merkourios and the unification of Nobadia and Makouria with the intension to shed light on the King’s probable contribution to this unification and the fact that he has been called a “New Constantine” by at least one source and by modern scholars. The article highlights the fact that there was no royal fanatical disposition against the Melkite Orthodox Church and that the unification of the two kingdoms was the result of economic, practical, military and political reasons rather than religious ones, which were probably secondary. The examination of sources from Merkourios’s reign, the pre-Merkourios period and the post-Merkourios epoch leads to new interpretations and suggestions as well as to alternative hypotheses.

Keywords: Nobadia, Makouria, Merkourios, Melkite Orthodoxy, Miaphysite Orthodoxy, *exarchos*, *eparchos*, *Novus Constantinus*, Nubian foundation and key stones, papyri, graffiti.

Introduction

A number of kings in Late Antiquity have been honoured by the Christians of that period with the title of “Second Constantine” or “New Constantine”, because they were responsible for introducing or legitimizing Christianity in their respective countries, or simply because of some likeness with Constantine the Great¹.

King Merkourios of Nubia has also been honoured in this way by his contemporaries. However, only one source has expressively referred to him as a ‘New Constantine’, namely John the Deacon, secretary and biographer of the Coptic Patriarch Michael I (744-768). His work, originally written in Coptic has been preserved in the *Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum*, which was compiled and composed and/or translated in Arabic by Severus of Al’Ashmunein in ca 1000 AD or by Mawhūb Ibn Manṣūr Ibn Mufarriğ a bit later (Den Heyer,

¹ Christopher Haas (2008:101-126) examined the cases of the “mountain Constantines”, King Ezana of Aksum and King Mirian III of Iberia, while Scott McDonough (2008:127-141) analysed the case of the Sasanian King Yazdgard. The first two introduced Christianity in their kingdom, while the case of Yazdgard is different, since the Christians of his kingdom gave him this distinction (wrongly) believing that the ruler would give freedom to Christianity and perhaps impose it. He finished persecuting them. Even a 15th/16th Century King of Kongo, Afonso I (ca. 1456-1545) was considered a ‘Second Constantine’ because he imposed Catholicism to his Kingdom (O’bweng-Okwess Kizobo 2016:137-143).



1989; Pearse, 2005:1-5; Vantini, 1981:74; Hendrickx, 2018: 1). John the Deacon writes the following on Merkourios:

“...there was at Dongola a city of the Nubians, a king named Mercurius, who was called the New Constantine, for he became by his beautiful conduct like one of the Disciples: and the Lord gave him a son whom he named Zacharias. When king Mercurius died, Zacharias did not choose to become king, but occupied himself with the word of God and the salvation of his soul, gave up his rank as king, and appointed to the kingly office a kinsman of his, named Simon, who was orthodox, and walked in the excellent path of Mercurius.”
(Vantini 1981:74).

The text of John the Deacon is almost contemporary with the reign of Merkourios and with the life of his son, Zacharias. The author clearly states that it was the Nubians who gave him the name of *Novus Constantinus*. This text lays at the base of the fact that many, if not most, modern scholars have credited the king with the unification of the kingdoms of Nobadia and Makouria into the United Kingdom of Nubia as well as with the unification of the Miaphysite Nobadian Church with the Melkite Makourian one into one Nubian Miaphysite Orthodox Church. However, the text of John the Deacon does in fact not even hint at such unifications. Therefore, all sources referring to Merkourios must be re-explored to find out when exactly and why these unifications took place and who were the actors involved.

In this article, the researcher discusses and analyses (a) the traditional dates for the unification of the Kingdoms and Churches, (b) the contemporary epigraphic evidence for Merkourios as well as some contemporary papyri, (c) the *dramatis personae* of the foundation stones of the Cathedral of Faras and the Church at Tafa, and the problems arising, (d) a monogram in the Holy Trinity Church of Dongola, and (e) a later graffito at Aswan in the so-called Monastery of St. Simeon, founded by Apa Hatre. In the course of my examination of the pre-Merkourios period I will also use several earlier inscriptions which may shed light on the dates of the unifications, on persons involved and on relevant institutions. Note that no murals have been found, portraying Merkourios, in contrast with the astonishing number of Nubian rulers whose portraits have been found in Nubian churches.

The traditional dates for the unification of the Nobadian Kingdom and Church with the Makourian ones.

While many scholars believed that Merkourios was the unifier of the Kingdoms of Makouria and Nobadia as well as of the Churches of both kingdoms, others have separated the two issues. Many who mention several possibilities without making a choice, state the argumentation for each possibility. It is therefore often difficult to have a clear picture of what exactly modern scholarship has succeeded regarding the finalising of the dates and forms of the unifications.

Theories on the separation of Royal versus Ecclesiastical Unification

This school of scholars has suggested that the unification of Nobadia and Makouria took place – in one form or another – on the occasion of the Persian occupation of Nubia (in 616) or as a result of the (second) Arab invasion leading to the *baqt*² (651/2). According to this school, Merkourios was therefore not the unifier of the two Kingdoms.

² Fadl Hassan (1967:19-28). – For the *baqt* and the war between the Nubians and the Egyptian Muslims as well as the black African soldiers in the Roman /Byzantine army, see Hendrickx (2012: 95-114) - The term *baqt* (πάκτον) derives from the Latin *pactum*, treaty, tribute (Sophocles 2004: 831). Sophocles also remarks that *πακτώω* means: to make one tributary, to compel one to pay tribute (the verb has this



According to Kirwan the unification of the Kingdoms took place between 580 and 652. The Sudanese scholar Fadl Hasan (1967: 5, 18-20) follows the general lines of reasoning given by Kirwan (1935: 60-61), but suggests a more precise *post* and *ante quem* date between 616 (the Persian onslaught) and 641 (the first Arab invasion). He does not discuss or mention the unification of the two Churches, neither makes any reference to his title of *Novus Constantinus*. Fadl Hassan's dates thus would indicate that Dongola was already the capital of the two Northern kingdoms in that relatively early period. The unification would have taken place *before* 696 and perhaps at the time of the Egyptian attack on Dongola and the peace with Qalidurut (652) or even somewhat earlier, namely at the time of the first Muslim attack on Nubia in 641-2 (cf. full discussion in Hendrickx, 2011: 305).

From the Nubian side, it was Qalidurut (Qalaydurūth), king of Makouria, who agreed to this *Baqt* (Welsby, 2002: 69-71; Munro-Hay, 1982/3: 96, 135), while Nobadia was not even mentioned in the Arab sources, neither in the different versions of the *Baqt*.

Edwards (2004: 237), referring to Godlewski (1998: 52-73), suggests that the unification possibly may have taken place during the Persian occupation of Nubia, but the former also mentions the possibility that "*the Arab army's passage through Nobadia on the march to Old Dongola precipitated the collapse of the northern kingdom*". Jakobielski (1992:103), Török (1978: 289) and the author of this article (Hendrickx, 2011:305) have come to a similar conclusion, while Jakobielski, in another of his studies, written with Van der Vliet as co-author (2011:15–37), accepts that the political unification may date from Qalidurut's time, Merkourios being nevertheless the unifier of the Churches.

Historically, between Qalidurut (652), who was the Nubian (Makourian) King agreeing to the *baqt*, and King Merkourios, we do not know of another Nubian King. Then follow the Merkourios inscriptions, which will be discussed further in this article.

In her doctoral thesis, Efi Zacharopoulou (2011: 36, 137-141) refers to different possibilities. She has dissociated the unification of the Churches from the religious events in Byzantium as well as from the political and military unification of Nobadia and Makouria. She believes that the union of both kingdoms has certainly taken place *before* the renewal of the Faras cathedral (in 707), where the foundation stones refer to Merkourios. Zacharopoulou suggests that a kind of agreement or a loose alliance between Nobadia and Makouria most probably existed at that time, thereby underlining that the Arabic sources on the invasions and the *baqt* unanimously state that it was the Makourian Nubian king, Qalidurut, who had agreed to the *baqt*. Efi Zacharopoulou also believes that the ecclesiastic unification took place in the 7th-8th centuries, i.e. during the reign of Merkourios, as a result of historic necessity. Byzantium played no determinant role in these events, according to the author.

The suggestions by Zacharopoulou have – in my view - the advantage of presenting a possible solution for the contradiction between the sources (and consequently among scholars) regarding the factual and constitutional unification of the two Kingdoms. A kind of alliance or a practical peace-deal (or deals) between Nobadia and Makouria may have been formed in face of the Arab invasions, but may well have disintegrated or become stressed to breaking point and may have led again to hostilities after the signature of the *baqt*. I therefore consider it as plausible that at a later date a second and final unification took place, probably under

meaning in Constantius Porphyrogenitos [AD 959], Admin., 197 [Bonnae 1829-40]). - For and African approach to the *baqt*, see Spaulding (1995: 577-594). Ruffini (2012: 7-8) has followed the definition of the *baqt* in terms of equal value and as gift exchange, rejecting the notion that the *baqt* was a kind of tax payable to the Muslim Egyptians.



Merkourios, and that the Kingdom of Nubia then acquired and created its constitutional institutions and ideology.

There are also those who support that the unification either of the two Kingdoms or the two Churches, but not of both, was due to Merkourios. Thus, Michalowski (1966: 5, 10-11) has accepted that Merkourios, the “New Constantine”, was the unifier of the two kingdoms and that bishop Paulos constructed the new cathedral as replacement for the first one, which was destroyed by water. I will return later to the destruction of this church, when interpreting the text of Merkourios/Paulos’s foundation stones.

Vantini (1981:58) places the merging of both kingdoms in ca 697. He believes that King Merkourios of Dongola was named a “New Constantine”, either because he converted an Egyptian temple into a Christian church at Tafa, or because he supported the Coptic Church in Egypt during the difficult time of Muslim occupation, or even because he was baptized as a Monophysite and not as a Melkite (as were his predecessors)³. He thus concludes that “*it seems legitimate to deduce that under Merkurios and [bishop] Paulos the Nubian church passed from Melkite jurisdiction to that of the monophysite Patriarch*” (Vantini 1970:187-188). He notes, nevertheless, that the Copts believed that Makouria converted to Monophysitism between 637 and 700, i.e. *before* the reign of Merkourios.

Theories promoting the simultaneous unification of the Kingdoms and Churches

Several modern historians have proposed the thesis that the political and religious unification happened at the same time, considering that the political union was the result of the ecclesiastical situation in Egypt and the advantages which the adaptation of the Miaphysite creed would bring along.

In general, modern scholars have believed that Merkourios united the Churches under the umbrella of Monophysitism (Miaphysitism) for political reasons and in order to unite the two opposed Christian factions. For practical reasons it was better for Christian kingdoms to collaborate with Coptic Egypt, which was nearby, rather than with Byzantium, which was effectively cut off from the African continent. Merkourios was not a fanatic. Christides (1992:348) remarks that “*it is clear that there is not any struggle between Melkites and Monophysites in Nubia with any detailed theoretical discussions, usurpation of churches and other hostile actions. In spite of this lack of interest in such disputes, the Nubian Church depended on the state of the Egyptian which acted within the frame of the conditions imposed upon them by the Moslem rule.*” Indeed, the determinant reason for Merkourios opting for Miaphysitism may be the fact that the throne of the Melkite Patriarch was vacant for more than 90 years until ca. 740, and that consequently during that time no bishops could be appointed for Nubia by the Greek Patriarch, but only by the Coptic Monophysite one (Christides 1992:348; cf. also Skteslet 1987:110; Eutybios, 45-46; Papadopoulos, 1985:468-472).

Niall Finneran (2010:199-223) accepts that the two Nubian states merged under Merkourios, but “*it is not readily clear which form of Christianity was adopted in the unified state*”. This statement implies that the unification of the two kingdoms included this of the Churches too. The same author sustains further – contrary to Christides - that the historical sources show that “*Nubia was a central ideological battleground between the melkite and anti-chalcedonian factions, and more than anywhere else this struggle mirrored wider geopolitical struggles*

³ While the two previous claims are plausible, the monophysite (miaphysite) baptism of Merkourios is not attested anywhere, and not certain.



within Byzantium.....” (Finneran, 2010:207). Finneran’s thesis on the “struggle” of the two creeds, however, is neither confirmed by the sources nor accepted by other modern scholars.

Lajtar (2009: 84-85), while noting that Merkourios was called a second Constantine, prudently and with reservation, states that the union was made with the “presumption” (*Vermutung*) that he united Dongola with Nobadia as well as the Churches of both Kingdoms under the patronage of the Coptic Patriarch.

Abba Mina’s “Life of Isaac” and the correspondence between Patriarch Isaac and the Nubian kings and the date of the unifications

The alleged correspondence between the Patriarch of Alexandria, Isaac, and the Nubian Kings has played a considerable role in the argumentation over the dating of the unification of the two Kingdoms and has considerably complicated the proposed theories. The acceptance of the authority and authenticity of this correspondence indeed would exclude Merkourios being the unifier of both Nubian Kingdoms and Churches. But, the acceptance of two different dates for the political and the religious unification also leads to consequences which previous researchers have not satisfactorily assessed. Indeed, if the political unification took place before or in the time of Qadilurut – is it then plausible that Markos was the first *eparchos* in 696, thus at least 40 years after the political union? Jakobielski wisely concludes (1972:37) that Markos was “*one of the first – if not the first “eparchos”*”. Would Nobadia and Makouria during that time follow different dogmas? And why would the kings of Makouria wait that long for unification, since the Arab danger did not really increase under Merkourios? As a result of the complications created by Isaac’s alleged letter(s) a number of historians have believed or at least considered the possibility that the royal as well as the ecclesiastical unification could *not* have taken place *before* the end of the 7th century (cf. Adams, 1984: 453-454 and 1991:96-99; Michalowski, 1964: 199; Vantini, 1981: 71; Munro-Hay, 1982-3: 96-00; Welsby, 2002: 83-84; Edwards, 2004: 236-237; Zacharopoulou, 2011:139), although they have or may have preferred other options.

Up to a point, Christides’s statement, discussed above, reflects Jakobielski’s earlier research. Jakobielski (1972:36-37) believes that “*the adoption of Monophysitism by the whole of Nubia can be dated as being between 690 ... and 707*”, because - he says – in 690 Makouria was still Melkite and 707 was the year of the foundation inscriptions in Faras. As for the date of 690, Jakobielski refers to a letter allegedly sent by the King of Makouria to the Miaphysite Patriarch of Alexandria, Isaac (690-692), complaining that the Nobadian King did not allow his candidates for consecration to pass through the Nobadian realm. Jakobielski concludes that thus “*in 690 Nubia had still not been united and Makuria had not adopted the Monophysite religion.*” He concludes then that “*the adoption of Monophysitism by the whole of Nubia can be dated as being between 690 (when officially Makuria was still Melkite) and the year 707*” (Jakobielski, 1972: 36).

Vantini (1981:71) writes that the same Patriarch wrote letters to both Nubian Kings, warning them that as Christians they should make peace with each other, and he confirmed that some scholars accept that at that time the King of Makouria must already have belonged to the Miaphysite Church, whereas the Nobadians were Melkites (sic !). Even Niall Finneran writes that although Merkourios united both states, “*it is not readily clear which form of Christianity was adopted in the unified state*”. In fact, both Churches, the Melkite one and the Miaphysite one, considered themselves as Orthodox. A considerable number of historians avoid using the letters mentioned in the text, while – in general – following the thesis of Jakobielski, without re-examination, or – differently – cast doubt on the whole unification process which would have involved Merkourios.



Let us consider what Abba Menas, the Coptic author of the Life of Isaac (Menas, 1910), writing in ca. 700, says about the correspondence between the Kings and the Patriarch⁴. The 'letters' written to and by Isaac must be dated to ca. 690, thus *before* the reign of Merkourios:

"In those days, it happened that the king of Makuria sent some delegates to the archbishop [=Isaak] with letters to inform him how the bishops had decreased in number in his country... since they were not allowed, according to the order of the king of Mauretania (sic!), to make the journey as long as peace was not made with him ... It happened, when the archbishop read the letters of the king, and understood the contents fully, he felt a deep sorrow... He, at once wrote letters to the king of Mauretania giving him advice and instructions in the words of the Holy Scripture, also adding: 'and both of you are Christians'. After having addressed to him many words to strengthen his soul in the orthodox faith of the Son of God, he then wrote to forbid the people of the kingdom which lay upstream from crossing his own country too come to receive their bishop, so that the churches might not become deserted: that would be a great shame before God." (Vantini, 1975: 36-37).

The text poses several important problems: (a) Which are the dates of the Coptic Patriarch Isaac? (b) To which Kingdom does Mauretania refer? (c) who are the *dramatis personae*: the king of Makouria, the archbishop, and the king of Mauretania? (d) What is meant with "Orthodox faith" and "the kingdom which lay upstream"? (e) The unclear references to "he and him" in the text need clarification. Moreover, there are the problems of veracity, authenticity and authority of the documents, mentioned in the text.

Isaac's dates differ among different scholars: they are given as 686-689 (Vantini, 1975:36 86-689); alternative date of death (692 AD) mentioned in Vantini (1975: 36, n.1); 690-692 (Jakobielsky, 1972:36); or 690-693 (Papadopoulos, 1985: 911). Consequently, Isaak was Miaphysite Patriarch during the vacancy of ca. 97 years of the Melkite line of patriarchs, starting following tradition from 634-5 or 637 (Fadl Hasan, 1967: 9; for a full discussion and alternatives, cf. Skreslet, 1987: 108-112) and ending in 731. Therefore, the Nubian kings could send their envoys and requests for consecration of bishops only to the Miaphysite Patriarch. The "*miaphysitization*" of the Nubian rulers and their countries took thus in practice place during the period between 634 and 731.

Mauretania has been explained as a mistake for Makouria, or for Nobadia (Vantini, 1981:171) or for Northern Nubia (Kirwan, 1939: 50 and note 14, where he states that in the Synaxarium [in *Patr. Or.*, vol. V, 24] "*Mauretania is replaced by Nubia, and Makuria by Abyssinia*"), even for the kingdom of the Beja or for Sukkot (Vantini, 1975: 36, n.2). The "*kingdom which lay upstream*" is probably Makouria, or still more probably Alodia (Alwa).

In view of these complications, some scholars avoid to directly connect Merkourios with the unification process and explain the text of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* regarding the King being a 'Second Constantine' differently. Thus, Jakobielski (1972: 36) believes that Merkourios was named a 'New Constantine' because of his services to the Miaphysite Church, while Welsby (2002:38) proposes that Merkourios was called a 'New Constantine', "*perhaps as a result of his zeal in stamping out paganism.*"

None of the above discussed scholars have used the epigraphic and papyrological evidence for Merkourios in the framework of the *Novus Constantinus* title or in comparison and junction with the evidence (epigraphy, papyrology, narrative sources) of the pre- and post-Merkourios period and the possibility of earlier dates of the unification.

⁴ For the *History of the Patriarchs* as a main source for the reconstruction of the correspondence between the Miaphysite Patriarchate of Alexandria and the Ethiopian and Nubian Churches, see Hendrickx 2018 and 2018a.



The epigraphic evidence for King Merkourios: the foundation stones

Our basic and most important sources are contemporary Greek and Coptic foundation stones in churches in Nobadia, where Merkourios figures.

* The **Greek Foundation Stone in Faras** (Judwiga Kubinska, 1974: 4-15,17) reads as follows:

- + Εν ὀνόματι τῆς ἀγίας ζωο-
ποιοῦ κ(αὶ) ὁμοσίου Τριάδος Π(ατ)ρ(ό)ς
κ(αὶ) Υ(ἰο)ῦ κ(αὶ) ἀγίου Πνεύματος ἐπὶ ἱα' τῆς βασι-
4 λείας τοῦ θεοσέπτου κ(αὶ) φιλοχ(ρίστο)υ
βασιλέως Μερκουρίου κ(αὶ) εὐκλε(στάτου)
καὶ σοφοτ(άτου) Μάρκου ἰλλου(στρίου) κ(αὶ) ἐπάρχ(ου) διέπον-
τος τὰ βασιλεϊκὰ κ(αὶ) ἐπινεμή(σεως) ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ζ'
8 ἀνανέωσεν κ(αὶ) ἔκτησεν τὸν σεπτὸν τόπο(ν)
τῆς καθολ(ικῆς) καὶ ἀποστολικ(ῆς) τοῦ Θ(εο)ῦ ἐκκλη(σίας)
ὁ ἀγιώτ(ατος) ἡμῶν π(ατ)ήρ Παῦλος.
ὁ Θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐ(ρα)νὸ(ν)
12 ἐν συνέσει κ(αὶ) θεμελιώσας τὴν γῆν
ἐπ' τὴν ἀσφάλειαν αὐτῆς, ὁ κτίστης
καὶ δημιουργὸς τῶν ἀπάντων ἔπιδε
κ(αὶ) ἐπὶ τὸν προειρημένον ἀγιώτ(ατον) ἄνδρα
16 ἄββα Παῦλ(ο)ν ἐν τῷ κράτει τῆς ἰσχύος σου
θαρρήσαντα καὶ τὸ κτίσμα τοῦτο ἀνεγεῖρα[ι]
θελήσαντα κ(αὶ) θεμελίωσον αὐτὸ ἐπὶ τὴν
στερεὰν πέτραν ἣν κ(α)τ(ὰ) τὴν σὴν ἀφθαρ-
τον φωνὴν οὐκ ἄνεμος οὐχ ὕδωρ οὐχ
ἕτερον τι καταβλάσαι ἐνισχύσε κ(αὶ) εἰς πλή-
ρωσιν αὐτὸ ἀχθῆναι κ(αὶ) τῶν οἰκείων πό-
νων ἀπολῦσαι αὐτὸν εὐδόκησον καὶ
24 εἰς μακρὸν γῆρας καταστήσαντα χάριτι
καὶ φιλαν(θρωπ)ίᾳ τοῦ Κ(υρίου)υ ἡμ(ῶν) Ἰ(ησο)ῦ Χ(ριστο)ῦ Ϡθ: ~
Ἔτους τῶν χρόνων Διοκλητ(ιανοῦ) υκγ.

“In the name of the Holy Trinity, generatrix of life and consubstantial, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In year 11 of the reign of King Merkourios, crowned by God and Christ-loving, when the very famous and very wise Markos, illustrius and eparchos, directed the affairs of the Kingdom in the sixth indictio, our very saint Abba Paulos has renewed and founded this holy place of the church of God, catholic and apostolic.

O Almighty God, who in your wisdom have created the heaven and strengthened the earth on solid foundations, founder and creator of all things, throw our eyes also on the man whose name is mentioned here above, the very saint Abba Paulos, who has had confidence in the force of your power and has decided to construct this building and rendered more solid its foundations on the strong rock which, according to your incorruptible word, neither the wind, nor the water, nor anything else has the force to damage, and allow that this building may come to its achievement and that he himself (= Paulos) may profit of his troubles



when having acquired an advanced age by the grace and goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The year 423 of the era of Diocletian” (my translation)

Adam Lajtar (2009:85-87) has corrected the dates as read by earlier scholars such as Kubinska, who gives 14 December 710 (1974:19). Lajtar based his correction, giving 28 August 707, on the chronological reform of Justinian in 537 (Feissel, 1993:171-188).

*The **Coptic Foundation Stone of the Cathedral of Faras** (Jakobielski, 1972:40-41) is very similar to the Greek one, but is longer and has some differences, which will be taken into consideration for further discussion.

“In the name of the Holy Trinity, consubstantial and life-giving, the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. In the reign of him whom God crowned and the Christ-loving King Merkurios in the 11th year of his reigns, while the all praiseworthy and most famous Lord Markos, the most noble (illustrios) and the great eparch administered the Kingdom; in the sixth indiction, in the 423th year of the era of Diocletian the foundation of this holy place was established as worthy for service in it of the catholic and apostolic Church by the care and eager desire for the things of God of the most saintly and the most virtuous holy Father Abba Paulos, the proedros and the bishop of the city of Pachoras [Faras].

In order that Lord - God Almighty, He who had accepted all these labours for His Holy Church until He had established the immovable foundation which Christ hath built upon the strong rock that is to say, He also, who shall cause his remembrance to remain with the Church of the First Born, which is in Heaven and He shall make him worthy of the mouth and the voice full of joy with which He greeted the great Apostle Peter: - Thou art Peter, and upon this rock shall build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it and he shall guard him, as He taketh care of His Holy Churches with a great era of peace and He shall set under His feet every enemy who shall think evil against him and He shall give power to him and He shall cause him to be a strong foundation for the union and prosperity of His Holy Churches through the representations and entreaties of the Twelve Apostles, and all the intelligent powers, which are gathered in this place, worthy to do reverence to Him who is there, saying: For Thou art the Helper powerful in every matter, the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, Life-giving, now and for ever until all ages of ages, Amen

*+Written in month of five additional [days] + first (?) [day].
[Jakobielski’s translation]*

The date, given by Jakobielski (1972:44) as between 24 and 28 August 707, has been confirmed by Lajtar (2009:85).

*The **Greek Foundation Stone in the church at Tafa** (Maspero 1910:17-20 – Kubinska 1974:18-19 – Lajtar 2009:87-88) gives a different date for the reign of Merkourios.



- + Ἐν ὀνόμα(τι) τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ Πατ(ρός)
(καὶ) τοῦ Υἱοῦ (καὶ) τοῦ ἁγί-
ου Πνεύματος + Εγγράφ(η) μη(νός)
4 Χοίαχ η´, ἰνδι(κτιῶνος) θ´
ἠπὶ τοῦ Διοκλητιανοῦ
θκξ´ + Ἐπὶ τοῦ ιγ´ ἔτ(ους)
τοῦ φιλ(οχρίστου) βασιλ(ίσκου) Μερκο-
8 ρίου ἐγένετο οὕτω
ἔργων ἀγαθόν, ἐπὶ
τοῦ ἔτου ε´, ἐπὶ
θεοφυλ(άκτου) πρ(εσβυτέρου) Ἰω-
12 άννου, τοῦ ἁγιασ-
μοῦ τοῦ...ου τούτου,
ἐν μη(νὶ) Χοίαχ η´
Ἀμὴν +

“In the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Written the 18th of the month of Khoiak, 9th indictio, the year 427 of Diocletian. And in the year 13 of the Christ-loving King Merkourios, this good building has been finished for the sanctification of this place in the 5th year of the priest, guarded by God, John, the 18th of the month of Khoiak. Amen.”

The inscription was made on 14 December 710, according to Lajtar’s calculations (2009:85). Adam Lajtar (2009:86-87) has also established the date of Merkourios’s coronation between 29 August and 14 December 696 (or perhaps on the latter datum itself). Since the date of the Tafa inscription should read 14 December 710, the *post quem* date for Merkourios’s death and the end of his reign must be this very date.

Contemporary papyrological evidence on Merkourios

A Coptic sales deed (*prasis*) addressed by a certain Thekla, of the town of Kelsei on the east bank of the Nile, to a sailor, Joseph, assigns to the latter and his heirs her estate (*kteima*) as repayment for a loan of 19 *solidi* (Crum, 1905:209-211, no. 447). The document itself can be dated to the time of King Merkourios, by whom Thekla swears to abide by the contract, or rather after his death, with fits in with the other documents in which Thekla appears. Some other papyri referring to Thekla may support the later date. Indeed, Thekla is also mentioned – as grandmother – in at least one other manuscript (a will [ἰαθήκη] of Eudoxia of Kelsei), again in the context of the *prasis* to Joseph, who had died in the meantime. The latter document dates to the time of King John (Ioannes), who died either before 822 or ca. 850 (Crum, 1905:211, no 448; Welsby, 2002:260). A Thekla is also mentioned in yet another document, also a *prasis* (Crum 1905:214-5, no 450), where she is named as “*Thekla daughter of [...] native of Kyrshê*” and sold certain lands to “*Abra[am] son of [...] and Menanta*”, his wife. This document is dated to the reign of King John (Ioannes), a certain George being a high dignitary. Thekla is here also mentioned as mother of Maria. In the *prasis* where Thekla assigns to the sailor Joseph and his heirs her estate (*kteima*) as repayment for a loan of 19 *solidi*, we also find a Maria, daughter of Thekla, as a witness. The possibility exists that again we have to do with the same Thekla, but this cannot be sustained with certainty.



The title *exarchos* is found in the list of witnesses of the *prasis* of Thekla's estate to Joseph, in the penultimate line of the list. Every such line begins with *ANOK* (which means 'I'), followed by the name of the witness. The name of the *exarchos* is not preserved. The mention of an *exarchos* at the end of this document may appear problematic. Unfortunately, the context is not there anymore, and we do not know which was the function he held. Had he the same function(s) as *exarchos* Joseph, mentioned in the inscriptions of Kings Eirpanome and Tokiltoeton? Can he be a "Roman" military officer or a local Nubian officer, appointed by the King? Or has this man some connection with registering deeds of sales or debts, or is he simply some assistant to a bishop and a clergyman and thus an official of the archives of the state? Judging from the many preserved sales and other deeds from Nubia, witnesses can be any person with some relation to the relevant deed, and certainly persons of some dignity, such as members of the local clergy, which I suggest was the case in this document.

The *dramatis personae* of the foundation stones and papyri, and the arising problems

There are four persons mentioned in the three foundation stones: King Merkourios, *eparchos* Markos, bishop Paulos and the priest John. The term *exarchos* is also used in Thekla's papyrus. King Merkourios seems to be used – as well as Markos – for dating purposes, but also as an expression of reverence for the dignitaries' names and functions, which are given in a hierarchically descending line: King – *eparchos* – bishop - priest. The Faras inscriptions are the oldest documents coming to us that mention an *eparchos*, although it should be noted that there is in the National Museum of Warsaw a fragment of an undefined and undated inscription, mentioning in Coptic the title of *eparchos* (Jakobielski, 1972:16). Finally, the use of *eparchos* versus *exarchos* and of *basileus* versus *basiliskos* will be discussed.

Bishop Paulos and the Miaphysites in Nobadia

Nobadia officially accepted Christianity in ca 543 as a result of the mission work of a priest Julianus, sent by Empress Theodora, who supported the Miaphysites against the official dogma of the Melkites, promoted by her husband Justinianus (Michalowski, 1966: 7; Jakobielski, 1972:23; Welsby, 2002: 32; Edwards, 2004: 216-217; Zacharopoulou, 2011: 57-58). Probably a first church was built in the 5th century, on top of which at the end of the same Century a royal stone palace was constructed for a pagan king (for the dismantling of the Cathedral of Aetios and the erection of the cathedral of Paulos, see Godlewski, 2006: 43-56). The final dating of the Cathedral of Paulos and its conception is discussed in depth by Van der Vliet (2003:7) and especially Godlewski (2006: 71-73), who have underlined the great building activity of Paulos, the latter also emphasizing the great changes in the Nubian Church under Paulos's episcopate after "*King Merkurios' fateful decision to subordinate Nubia to the Alexandrian patriarch of the Coptic Church*" (2006: 80).

In 651/652 the Arabs under Abdullah invaded Nubia, progressing until Dongola, where they destroyed the city's walls and the Great Church (Michalowski, 1966: 10; Edwards, 2004: 227). Michalowski believes that this expedition was "*punitive par suite de la rupture du Baqt par les Nubiens*", which is doubtful, because the *Baqt* is generally accepted to be the result of the second Arab incursion in 652. The tradition, to which Michalowski refers, is also mentioned by Fadl Hasan (1967: 19 and 219 n. 12, 13) and Welsby (2002:69) and stems from some Arab chroniclers, among whom 'Abd al-Hakam and Al-Maqrizi, who relate that the Nubians broke the *baqt* and raided the South of Egypt after the first invasion, leading to the second campaign.

Perhaps, a more intriguing question is: Why are there two Faras founding stones in different languages? The opinion that in Faras there was a large Coptic-speaking population group that necessitated the use of this language is no longer accepted, and there is general consensus among specialists that the use of Coptic indicated the new connection of Nubia



with the Miaphysite (Coptic) Church of Alexandria. Greek on the other side continued to be used as a liturgical language (Kubinska, 1974: 69-81; Hendrickx, 2009:36).

Much more important is the interpretation of the differences between the two versions, where – without doubt deliberately - a different set of Biblical extracts has been chosen (Kubinska, 1974: 20-23). Jakobielski (1972: 43-46) has strongly suggested that in the Coptic version, Paulos has expressed and underlined his own important role as the rebuilder of the cathedral, but also as the strong man of the new faith, i.e. miaphysitism. Indeed, when reading the foundation inscriptions, and especially the Coptic one, one might get the impression that Paulos, who is mentioned as the founder of the church, seems to have taken over personally the contents of the inscriptions in order to aggrandize himself and his own importance. Thus, Jakobielski (1972:44) interprets the care and power, which God confers on Paulos against evil and in order to overcome the enemies, as referring to the “enemy” dyophysite Church. There is no doubt about the miaphysite belief of Paulos, but there is no reason or real argument to believe that he was an arrogant fanatic. Jakobielski’s interpretation may indeed appear as very plausible, but other interpretations have occurred. Very important is the rather convincing argumentation regarding the destruction and reconstruction of the Faras cathedral, presented by Michalowski (1966: 10-11, n. 44; cf. also Griffith 1926, pl. XXXVI) , explaining the verb ἀνετέωσεν in the extract from St Matthew (16, 18) in the Greek text of Paulos as an « *allusion à la destruction de la Grande Eglise, construite très bas près du canal, qui fut miné peut-être par une crue du Nile particulièrement haute et s’écroua sous l’action des violents vents du Nord* », a statement, to which Jakobielski (1972 : 46) has referred, but which he did not use in his argumentation.

While Jakobielski has examined the third part of the Coptic foundation stone of the Faras Cathedral strictly within the parameters of the Bible, thereby stating that this part is uniquely applicable to bishop Paulos, Kubinska (1974: 22-23) has developed some alternative interesting ideas, which - however – she did not always develop further. Contrary to Jakobielski, throughout her book she has compared Coptic and Greek texts from the Faras inscriptions with Ethiopian liturgical texts and ideas, all of them being Monophysitic. As for the Coptic foundation stone, she writes that lines 14-16 can be approached to a passage of the Ethiopian prayer for the King, which belongs to the sacerdotal prayers, thereby referring to Vela (1966: 201):

“Soumets-lui ses ennemis sous ses pieds, afin qu’on jouisse d’ une paix abondante partout et dans tous les pays, pour de nombreux jours, de nombreuses années et de longs hivers. » (French translation by Kubinska).

“Place his enemies in subjection under his feet so that abundant peace can be enjoyed everywhere and in all countries, for many days, many years and long winters”.

This, she says, is not the direct source for the Faras inscription’s text, but expresses the same idea found in some Old and New Testament texts, such as: (i) Psalm 109:1 (or 110:1) states: *The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet;* (ii) Isaiah 13: *For the people turneth not unto him that smiteth them, neither do they seek the LORD of hosts.* (iii) Mattheus 22: 44: *The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right until I put your enemies under your feet;* (iv) 1 Corinthians 15:25: *For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet;* and 27: *For he “has put everything under him”.* While none of these texts has been *literarily* repeated in the Coptic foundation stone, it is evident that all these texts refer to Kings: the Biblical texts to Christ as King, and the non-Biblical graffito and images to kings (see footnote 7). It is therefore quite intriguing that the text in the Coptic Stone should directly and exclusively – in the sense as expressed by Jakobielski - refer to Bishop Paulos.



Indeed, the acceptance of self-glorification by Paulos in the Coptic text, might be difficult to prove, because would it not be *hybris* vis-à-vis the Nubian king (and *eparchos*), who themselves were church builders and took pride in it, considering it as a holy duty?

The citation from Matthew 16, 18 (which in the Coptic version corresponds to the Sahidic version of the New Testament), is also found in the Abyssinian Jacobite liturgy (Brightman, 1896: 126; Kubinska, 1974: 2) and in the Coptic Jacobite one (Brightman 1896: 183).

The 'rock' symbolism is found in both the Greek and the Coptic foundation stones. However, neither of these passages do directly refer to or glorify bishop Paulos. In the Coptic stone the text refers to Petros, but one understands that there is a comparison with bishop Paulos. In the Greek one, the image is simpler and refers to the danger of destruction by water. In view of the earlier studies of Griffith (Griffith, 1926: pl. XXXVI) and Michalowski (1966: 10-11, footnote 44), one must accept that the original cathedral was destroyed by storm and water ("*crue du Nile particulièrement haute*"), but that the message of the foundation stones states that new cathedral would not undergo the same fate.⁵

Basileus and basiliskos

As we have seen, Maspero (1910: 17-20) edited line 7 of the Tafa text as "του φιλ[ο]χρίστου βασιλ[ίσκου] Μερκου-", following the inscription of Silko who called himself *basiliskos*, thus implying that the kings of Nobadia used the latter title. Kubinska (1974: 18) copied the text of Maspero. Hägg (1990: 147-177; cf. also Hendrickx, 2005: 325-342), however, rejected this interpretation and restored the title in the text to *basileus*, on the ground of later inscriptions of the Nubian Kings, who only used the *basileus* title. Recently, Lajtar (2009: 83-89: 88) has reaffirmed the view of Hägg, thereby stating that *basiliskos* is used in the pagan context, but that the later *Christian* Kings abandoned that term, replacing it by *basileus*. Neither of these scholars have explained *why* the later Christian Kings would abandon the *basiliskos* title. Hatke (2013) has given an alternative explanation for this replacement. He states that Silko established the Kingdom of Nobadia, but he found it curious that "a ruler claiming dominion over *all the Ethiopians,*" i.e., *all the Nubians,* should have contented himself with the title of βασιλίσκος, "kinglet," when the more grandiose Βασιλεύς would seem to have been more appropriate." He argues that in Ezana's Greek inscription recording his victory over the Beja in the first half of the 4th Century (Eide, Hägg, Holton Pierce & Török 1998: 1094-1100, no 298; Hendrickx 1984: 53-55, no 10), the term *basiliskos* was used for the subdued Beja chieftains, who became subjected to Axum. He further argues that Silko, who was not a vassal of Axum, was most probably a semi-autonomous federate of the Roman emperor.

Salim Faraji (2015: 331-342), in his re-examination of the roots of Nubian Christianity under King Silko and his triumphant inscription, translates the title *basiliskos*, which is used by Silko to call himself king, and states that "it is clear that Silko positioned himself as the 'king of kings' and therefore viewed the Blemmyes as a subordinate state and political vassal of the Noubadian-Meroitic Empire". Faraji did not comment on the Blemmyan ruler Phonen's title of *basileus*, used in his letter to Abourni, Silko's successor (Skeat, 1977: 159-170), which certainly contradicts Silko's alleged position of "king of kings", proposed by Faraji.

⁵ For the history of the early buildings under the cathedral and the cathedral itself (cathedral of Aetios), see Godlewski 2006: 24-41).



In fact, the later Nubian kings, when writing in Coptic, know only one form for the royal title, i.e. *prro*, corresponding to both the Greek *basiliskos* or *basileus*, as illustrated in the almost parallel Coptic and Greek founding stones of Merkourios in Faras. This proves that in the mind of the Nubians there is no real and fundamental difference between the two titles, already since the times of Silko and Phonen as for the *rank* and *dignity* of the rulers, using these titles, especially in their relations and correspondence with other rulers within the Nubian-Ethiopian geographical and political framework. The geo-political context, in which originally the *basiliskos* was used as distinct from the full *basileus* title, totally changed with the Persian and Arabic invasions and conquests, leading to the Byzantine disappearance in Africa, thus effacing the *raison d'être* itself of the *basiliskos*-title.

Exarchos and eparchos.

It has generally been accepted that Markos was the first *eparchos* of Nobadia and that the unification of Nobadia with Makouria was the work of Merkourios. In that case Markos would be appointed by Merkourios in or after 696.

Vantini's hypothesis (1970: 53) that already in the inscriptions of King Eiparmene (559 or 574) and Tokiltoeten (late 6th century) an *eparchos* was mentioned, suggesting that the term *exarchos*, which is used in these inscriptions, was a mistake for *eparchos* (twice!). This suggestion has not been accepted by scholars, and Vantini himself (1981: 42-43) soon conceded his error. The title of *exarchos* was an existing Byzantine title of that period, referring to ecclesiastics and Roman officers of different rank (Hägg, 1990: 160-161, Hendrickx, 2005: 334-335; Edwards, 2004: 238).

The Coptic inscription of King Eirpanome in Dendur, at the occasion of the transformation of the Temple of Augustus into a Christian church in 559 or 574 also refers to a series of dignitaries, comprising the King himself, followed by Joseph, *exarchos* of Talmis, Theodoros, Bishop of Philae and Abraham, a priest (Welsby, 2002: 37; Edwards, 2004: 238). Therefore, since the *exarchos*, although called "*the [man] zealous in the word of God*" in the inscription (Welsby, 2002:37) precedes in the list of dignitaries Bishop Theodoros, it is impossible that he is the latter's assistant or subordinate. This is also confirmed by the epithet *ευγενέστατος* (= *nobilissimus*) given in the Greek text of Tokiltoeten's inscription to the *exarchos* of Talmis.

I consequently consider that the position of *exarchos*, mentioned in the epigraphs of Tokiltoeten and Eirpanome, was a Roman commander, and that he was abolished under Merkourios, if indeed he was the (final) unifier of the two Nubian Kingdoms, and that the *exarchos'* military function became then part of the functions of the *eparchos*, who also had a military command.

Between the inscriptions of Tokiltoeten (570-580: Edwards, 2004:228) and Merkourios there is a gap of more than one hundred years, during which we do not have royal Nubian inscriptions, but this gap is partly filled by very important events, known from Arabic narrative sources.

The epigraphic evidence relating to the mentions of Joseph as *exarchos*, Markos as *eparchos*, and an unknown *exarchos* in Thekla's *prasis* do not lead to a clear and definitive picture of the events and of Merkourios's role in the union of Makouria and Nobadia, nor his alleged imposing of Miaphysitism on both Kingdoms.

The monogram in the church of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Dongola

An inscription on a keystone in the church (a three-aisled basilica) of the Holy Trinity Monastery in Dongola (Jakobielski, 2008: 283-302) has the shape of a monogram.⁶ The monogram shows different symbols: a cross, with on top the possible or probable image of a winged figure, referring to a *Nike*, an angel, a bird? The first one can be rejected, being a non-Christian emblem⁷. A bird is improbable; the use of a bird indicating the Holy Spirit is not used for the Trinity in Nubia. The vertical line of the cross in Mercurius's monogram is prolonged as a spear, and this line forms the middle line of the letter M. The published photograph by Chmiel is not very clear, but it is possible that within the cross a X and P (= rho) can be read [for XP(ICTOC)]. Jakobielski (2008:285) suggests that it may be a monogram referring to King Merkourios, but that this is not sure, since it may also refer to the popular Warrior-Saint Merkourios, who killed Julianus Apostata. Jakobielski also remarked that perhaps – as a third possibility - the constructor of the rebuilding of the church (beginning of 8th century), which is not probable, since no other parallel examples are known in Nubia.

Keystone with a monogram of Merkourios.
Drawing by Raita Steyn after photo by W. Chmiel.



The Monastery compound dates to the 7th century and was extended in the 10th to 13th centuries, the church being the oldest part, where a bilingual inscription dating to 668 or 670 was discovered of the former Miaphysite Bishop of Aswan, Joseph (Jakobieski, 2008: 283-302; Jakobielski & Van der Vliet, 2011: 15–37). A first rebuilding of the church took place

⁶ Monograms have also been found in Faras referring to bishop Pilatus and bishop Paulos (Jakobielski, 1972: 30-32 and 49). However, these monograms include letters referring to the names of the relevant bishop, and even possibly the sentence ΠΟΛΛΑ ΤΑ ΕΤΗ, which also differentiate them from the Merkourios one.

⁷ Such references have been found earlier in the pre-Christian Nubian context, e.g. in connection with King Sherkerer and the first Nobadian King, Silko (Hendrickx, 1984: 44, 75-80 no 16; Raita Steyn, 2017: 73-95)



already at the beginning of the 8th Century, thus during King Merkourios's reign. Perhaps this inscription is referring to this first reconstruction, and to King Merkourios. I believe that this is very probable, since St Merkourios is always pictured as a warrior. The monogram, found in the Holy Trinity in Dongola, is nowhere else used in connection with the Saint. Knowing that Merkourios became King in 696, the monastery and church were thus not built during Merkourios's reign, but during the reign of the unknown predecessor of this king. Although Joseph of Aswan was a Miaphysite bishop, he is buried in Dongola, but he was not the bishop of Dongola. He died in 668 before the reign of Merkourios. Could the Miaphysite Joseph also be the founder of the monastery? Jakobielski believes that Joseph's case strengthens the opinion that at that time Dongola was still Melkite, placing the ecclesiastic unification of Makouria and Nobadia after that date.

The enigmatic Merkourios Phoros Rex in the inscription (graffito) on King Kudanbes (Kerenbes) at a Monastery near Aswan

A scribe left an inscription (graffito), referring to King Kudanbes (Kerenbes), at a ruined Monastery, founded by Apa Hatre near Aswan, and wrongly known as the Monastery of St Simeon (Griffith, 1928: 134; Welsby, 2002: 248). The chronology of King Kudanbes is not certain and differs according to different scholars. There is even confusion about his name. Nevertheless, the graffito is clear: the Christian Copts know him as Kudanbes. Maqrizi (Quatremère, 1811: 114-116; Griffith, 1928: 142-143; Welsby, 2002:248) calls him Kerenbes, which name is repeated by Welsby. Vantini (1970: 109, 150-1, 270) gives the king three different names.⁸ It is from Maqrizi that we know some (confused) details on Kerenbes, who allegedly brought tribute as a fine for having killed his brother, to the ruler in Cairo in February 1312. In September 1315 the Egyptian ruler Nasir Ibn Qalawun sent an expedition to Dongola, followed by a second one a year later. Meanwhile the Nubian throne changed occupants between Kerenbes, Abdallah Barshambo, Kanz Ad-Dawla and Abraam. In 1323 the Sultan restored with the help of an Egyptian army Kerenbes to the throne, but when the soldiers returned home, Kanz Ad-Dawla retook the throne, being the first Muslim King of Makouria, under whose reign the Throne Hall at Dongola became a mosque, putting an end – it was earlier believed - to the Christian State of Nubia. However, some Christian kings and kinglets have been cited in later documents, epigraphs and graffiti (Vantini, 1970: 151; Welsby, 2002: 248-249; cf. also Ochala., 2011:149-156; Lajtar, 2008: 321-331).

The graffito at Aswan has as date the year 1038 from the Martyrs, the 12th day of Pharmuthi, and corresponds to 7 April 1322 (Julian calendar) (Griffith, 1928: 143; Welsby, 2002: 248).

The inscription/graffito, published in 1928 by Griffith, has not yet been duly and correctly translated or interpreted as a result of the debased Greek, mingled with Nubian terms, in which it was written, and also because of the lack of clarity of the used terminology. Thus, the exact meaning escapes us and there are moreover some problems with the contents of the inscription itself. Griffith (1928: 140) warns his readers that his translation is not certain and perhaps wrong.

The following lines of the graffito refer to King Merkourios:

“(9) καὶ πάλιν κοίρανον Μερκούριος Φόρος ἐπίδοξος μέγας καὶ πάλιν Κουδανπέ(ς) (10) καισάρων πρόεδρος καὶ πάλιν θεοσεβῆς μονολόγιστος ἀρχιεπίσκοπος ὀρθοδόξων καὶ πάλιν· (11) βασιλεὺς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ πάλιν θεοσεβῆς Ζωῆς μοναχός ἐμφανέστατος θεός. (12) Ἰωὴλ ρίξ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ ρίξ καὶ Μερκούριος Φόρος ρίξ ἀναπαύσης Μακάριος θεοσεβῆς (13) ἀναπαύσης

⁸ The third name, Karbis, comes from Ibn Khaldun's text, cited by Vantini, 1970: 109-110. Cf. also Vantini 1981:186-192 for more details and interpretations.



Σενοῦτιος θεοσεβῆς ἀναπαύσης καὶ πάλιν ρίξ Κουδα[νπέξ] (14) ἔτη τριακόσια βασιλεὺς ἄγιος ἀμήν καὶ γένοιτο ἀμήν καὶ πάλιν.”

Griffith translates as follows:

“(9) also the sovereign Mercurius Phorus, the famous and great; also Kudanbe[s] (10) the president of Caesars; also the pious, single-minded archbishop of the Orthodox; also (11) the king Isaac...; also the pious Zoes, the most conspicuous and pious monk. O God, do thou rest (12) Joel rex and Isaac rex and Mercurius rex, do thou rest Makarus the pious (13) do thou rest Senutius the pious. Moreover rex Kuda[nbes], (14) a king worthy of three hundred years (of reign). Amen, so be it, Amen, and again.”

The name of King Merkourios appears twice in the inscription/graffito.

The term *Phoros* (*Phorus*), connected to Merkourios, and his title *rex* are not used in any other text referring to Merkourios or to any other Nubian ruler. In Late-Roman and Byzantine Greek, except for the known example of the *Phoros tou Augoustaïou*, south-west of the old acropolis of Byzantium, which was upgraded by Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) and then by Constantine the Great (324-337), who called it *Augusteion* in honour of the mother of Queen Helena (Plakogiannakis 2001:335-336, note 332). As adjective, φορός is listed in Sophocles's Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (2004:1150) with the meaning of 'favourable'.⁹ Is it possible that in the Kudanbes inscription also a 'favourable' meaning is attributed to the great Merkourios? I doubt it. In fact, the suggestion by Griffith (1928: 145) that *Phoros* may have been the Coptic *pero*, *prro*, *pouro* (*king*) for 'Pharaoh', is much more plausible. But, then again, why did the scribe not write straight forward the Coptic title?

The Latin title *Rex* clearly indicates that Merkourios was a King and not a bishop with the name of Merkourios. The title *rex* however is not found to my knowledge in any other Nubian inscription¹⁰. The Latin title for King (*rex*, *rix*) was used by the East Roman (Byzantine) administration and diplomacy for 'barbaric' rulers, whose 'kingship' was thus 'recognized', but in an inferior way to indicate a lesser king vis-a-vis the *basileus* of Constantinople (Karayannopoulos, 1972:195)¹¹. In this way, one can recognize a parallel between the relation *basiliskos-basileus* in Africa, and the *rex-imperator/Caesar/basileus* series in West Europe.

The title *kaisaron proedros*, attributed to Kudanbes, is of great significance for the Nubian institutions, both terms being Roman and Byzantine, and being used in Roman Egypt's Thebaid (Hendrickx, 2011: 306), and confirming the ruling of the Nubian king over several *eparchoi*, bringing us back to the unification history of the Nubian kingdoms.

The inscription has been seen as the political-religious "testament" of the Christian monarchy of Makouria, Kudanbes arguably being the last Christian ruler (e.g. Griffith 1928:143-144; Vantini, 1981:190). The first lines of the inscription might suggest such an interpretation. In that case, could the inscription be devised to laud the first and the supposedly or arguably last Christian ruler of Makouria, although now we know the existence of later Christian rulers, such as King Joel (of whom there is a sales deed from as late as 1463) and a King Siti in the 1330s (Lajtar, 2011: 130; Ruffini, 2012:254).

⁹ Sophocles hereby refers to the meaning of "favourable (wind)" used by Polyb. 1,60,6 – Diod. 14,55 and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus 8,15. Can one suggest that Merkourios Rex was a favourable ruler for Nubia, giving direction to the country? It cannot be proved.

¹⁰ The terms ρεξ, ρηξ (*rex*, *rix*) do not figure in F. Preisigte, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden mit Einschluss der griechischen Inschriften Aufschriften Ostraka Mumienbilder usw. aus Ägypten*, Berlin, I-III, 1925, 1927, 1931.

¹¹ Classen (1977: 105-210 and *passim*) has analyzed in detail the relationship between the Byzantine *diplomatica* and this of the late Roman and medieval Germanic, Vandal, Langobard and Frankish kingdoms and assessed the Byzantine influence on the west-European *Urkunden*. Unfortunately, the African states, such as the Nubian ones, have not been included. In fact, such a study or studies must still be written.



The text refers to a number of bishops, priests, kings and other dignitaries, for whom the graffito's scribe asked "grace (rest)" from God. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify all the rulers, ecclesiastics and *reges* named in the inscription, while the chronological (?) order of the persons named does not help either.

In the context of our research on Merkourios it must be stated that it is without doubt remarkable that at such a late stage in the history of Christian Nubia the memory of Merkourios has been so well preserved and greatly respected, and appears to have been connected with the end of official and royal Christianity *in the mind* of the Christians themselves of Kudanbes's time. The *praeses*-information moreover may infer that even the institution of *eparchoi* has survived, which may have been created by Merkourios.

Conclusions

It can be accepted that Byzantium did not play any important role in the political or religious unification of Nobadia and Makouria. Nonetheless, the originally strong Byzantine influence continued although with far less vigour. The strong political and military collaboration with Constantinople during the late Roman period effectively ended with the fall of Egypt to the Arabs. One sees the resulting consequences in the replacement of existing functions or titles by other ones (e.g. *exarchos*, *eparchos*), the changes in the meaning of titles and functions and the gradual translation or replacement of Greek titles by Nubian ones during the later period. The Coptic Church as an indigenous form of Christianity was the great beneficiary of the situation to the detriment of the Greek Melkite Church. This is of course reflected in the ecclesiastic power shift from the Dyophysite (Melkite) to the Mono/Miaphysite Patriarchate of Alexandria, involving Ethiopian and Nubian Christianity.

It is evident that the thorough examination of the contemporary epigraphic source evidence on King Merkourios has led to a series of problems related to (i) the dating of the unification of Nobadia with Makouria, with reference to the controversy on the *exarchos-eparchos* problem as well as to the political relations between Byzantium, Alexandria and the Nubian states, including the use of the *basiliskos* versus *basileus* title; and (ii) the dating, the origin and the progress of the unification of the Melkite and Miaphysite Churches in the Nubian kingdoms, with reference to the role of the bishops named in the epigraphs and some Arabic sources. These questions inevitably led to the examination of a series of other chronological, political, institutional and religious problems, referring to the period *before* Merkourios with references to earlier inscriptions, papyri and narrative sources. The discussion of these problems has led to direct answers, hypotheses, suggestions and new perspectives.

The unification of Nobadia with Makouria took almost certainly place at the time of the reign of king Qalidurut (ca. 651/2), when the Egyptians beleaguered Makouria, leading to the *baqt*, but possibly, if not probably, internal strives led to a new contemporary split between the two kingdoms, culminating at the end in a final re-unification under Merkourios. The military *exarchoi* of the Nobadian kings were no longer requested because Byzantine Egypt was conquered by the Muslim Arabs, and the Nubian (Makourian-Nobadian) kings, cut off from the Byzantine Empire, replaced them with *eparchoi*, i.e. viceroys for Nobadia.

The unification of the two competing Churches, Melkite and Miaphysite, arguably also followed during the reign of Merkourios (696-710). Merkourios introduced a policy of religious tolerance between the two Christian factions, of which Miaphysitism was the official line. This is made clear by the further ecclesiastical history of Nubia, where no persecutions of the Melkites have been noted.



The *basiliskos* title of the earlier Nobadian rulers, indicating their relationship as *foederati* to the Romans/Byzantines, was replaced by the title *basileus*, not because they became Christians, but because the relationship with Byzantium came to an end. Merkourios was named a “New Constantine” because of his zeal for Christianity and the strong foundation of Miaphysitism for the new Nubian Kingdom as well as his commitment to the building of churches and monasteries. Bishop Paulos assisted the King in this unification, but should not be seen as the instigator of this union. Merkourios’s name (fame) was still intact in the 14th Century. He had continued to model his kingdom and court according to Byzantine prototypes, while Greek and Coptic were the official languages at his time.

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