



I made you bear a son, and you shall call his name Mena! **The Saint, the Egg, and Medieval Nubia¹**

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Abstract: This article examines the Old Nubian Miracle of St Menas, preserved in the British Library Ms. Or. 6805, as a unique testimony to Christian traditions in medieval Nubia. While sharing certain motifs with earlier miracles known from Coptic, Greek, and Arabic sources, this text presents a distinctive narrative absent in other traditions. The article is structured around two main sections: the historical and cultural context of medieval Nubia and a detailed analysis of the miracle, focusing on its connections to other Menas traditions. The analysis employs a comparative method, juxtaposing the Old Nubian text with earlier textual sources. Material evidence, including paintings and inscriptions, is also incorporated to contextualize the miracle within broader Nubian Christian practices. The text, either translated into Old Nubian or partially composed in this language, references symbols and concepts familiar to a local Nubian audience.

Keywords: Medieval Nubia; Cult of St Menas; Hagiography

1. Ab ovo

It seems appropriate to begin the article *ab ovo* – in this case, quite literally, with the egg. The egg (κωμπος in Old Nubian) plays a pivotal role in the only known Old Nubian miracle of St Menas. Throughout the narrative, it serves as a companion to the protagonists, a symbol of hope and renewal, a valuable offering to the saint, and, ultimately, the proof of sin. This distinctive element not only shapes the plot but also differentiates the text from Coptic, Greek, and any other tradition. However, before delving into the specifics of St Menas and the egg, it is necessary to step back, start *ab ovo*, and outline

¹ The research presented in this article has been funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) under the project “Across centuries, languages, and cultures: The Miracles of Saint Menas as a historical source, literary composition and liturgical text”, project no. UMO-2021/41/B/HS1/00550.

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the broader cultural and historical context of the community for which this text was prepared.

In the fifth century, the Middle Nile Valley saw the emergence of three new political entities on the ruins of the former kingdom of Meroe: Nobadia in the north, with its capital at Faras; Makuria in the central region, with Dongola as its capital; and Alwa in the south, extending beyond the Fifth Cataract, with its center in Soba³. By the sixth century, all three kingdoms had become part of the Christian *oikoumene*. While the general outlines of Nubia's Christianization are known from external sources, many details remain unclear. What is clear is that these efforts began during the reign of Emperor Justinian, with Egypt playing a significant role in the process⁴. The adoption of Christianity brought the Nubian kingdoms into the broader Mediterranean Christian world, not only in terms of faith but also through the adoption of Greek as the primary liturgical language and the assimilation of cultural norms and traditions.

Until the end of Christianity in the region, Nubian sees remained under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Based on fragments of liturgical calendars, it can be concluded that the liturgical calendar followed the Egyptian civil model⁵. To complicate matters further, it is important to note that throughout this period, Greek served as the primary language for the performative parts of the liturgy, while the persuasive parts were conducted in the native language, Old Nubian⁶. Moreover, there are numerous attestations of readings, homilies, and lives of saints in Coptic, suggesting that, to some extent, it was also employed in liturgical contexts.

³ For the history of the medieval kingdoms of Nubia see D.A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*, London 2002; G.R. Ruffini, *The History of Medieval Nubia*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Nubia*, ed. G. Emberling – Bruce B. Williams, Oxford 2021, p. 759-771.

⁴ R. Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien. Geschichte und Gestalte einer afrikanischen Kirche*, "Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte" 48 (2013) p. 35-65; J.H.F. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion. A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298-642 CE)*, Leuven – Paris – Dudley 2008, p. 271-304.

⁵ G. Ochala, *The Nubian Liturgical Calendar: The Evidence of the Nubian Lectionaries*, "Le Muséon" 128 (2015) p. 1-48.

⁶ A. Łajtar – G. Ochala, *Language Use and Literacy in Late Antique and Medieval Nubia*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Nubia*, ed. G. Emberling – B. Williams, Oxford 2021, p. 787-805.

2. Cult of Saints in Medieval Nubia

Like many other aspects of Christian Nubia, the veneration of saints in this region remains underexplored⁷. This is partly due to the scarcity of sources, particularly the absence of synaxaria. The available evidence for reconstructing the cult of saints includes fragments of hagiographic texts, dedications in inscriptions, wall paintings with accompanying legends, as well as prayers and hymns mentioning the venerated figures. Additional insights into the popularity of specific saints can be drawn from dedications of sacred buildings and the prevalence of certain personal names, both among the clergy and laypeople. Unfortunately, many textual sources with relevant information remain unanalyzed and are often mentioned only briefly in general studies of archaeological sites. Since few of these sources contain references to actual ritual practices, this section focuses primarily on textual and visual attestations of the veneration of saints.

Unsurprisingly, the Virgin Mary occupied a central role in local religious practices, as evidenced prominently both in iconography and in textual sources⁸. At the same time, the Archangels, particularly Michael, were among the most highly revered figures⁹. Both the Theotokos and the Archangels played a crucial role as intermediaries between humanity and God, who remained beyond direct human reach.

Other venerated figures are known only to a limited extent and include apostles and other figures from both the New and Old Testaments, martyrs, Church Fathers, and anchorites – primarily those already prominent in Eastern Christianity. The only confirmed local cult identified so far is that of St Anna (most probably a male figure), whose sanctuary was discovered in the monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola¹⁰.

The following numerical data regarding attestations of the veneration of saints in textual sources mainly comes from the Database of

⁷ A brief overview of the topic can be found in: Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, p. 381-401.

⁸ Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, p. 367.

⁹ M. Łaptaś, *The Position of the Archangel Michael within the Celestial Hierarchy: Some Aspects of the Manifestation of His Cult in Nubian Painting*, in: *The Archangel Michael in Africa: History, Cult, and Persona*, ed. I.S. Gilhus – A. Tsakos – M.C. Wright, London 2019, p. 95-107; A. Deptuła – A. Cedro, *Inscribed Vessels from Banganarti*, in: *Banganarti Studies II*, ed. B. Żurawski, Warsaw 2023, p. 71-154.

¹⁰ A. Łajtar, *Anna, the First Nubian Saint Known to Us?*, “Bulletin de La Société d’archéologie Copte” 56 (2017) p. 91-110.

Monuments of Nubian Territory (DBMNT)¹¹, where 4,518 sources are currently recorded. These include all texts that have been published or at least mentioned in the literature. However, it should be noted that many texts, including the largest collection from Qasr Ibrim, remain unpublished and are, therefore, only partially included in the database.

Undoubtedly, the most detailed information comes from hagiographic works, of which 26 identified texts are recorded in the DBMNT. Additionally, around five more were recently mentioned in an article published by Adam Łajtar¹². Among these are several copies of the martyrdoms of Saints George¹³, Mercurios¹⁴, and Epimachos, as well as those of Iulitta and Kyrikos, Mark the Evangelist, Hilaria, Marina, Dioskoros of Alexandria, and Menas¹⁵. Interestingly, the vast majority of these texts are preserved in Coptic. Only the accounts of George and Mercurios are known in Greek, while only Menas and Epimachos are each represented by a single manuscript in Old Nubian. The predominance of Coptic might seem surprising, especially since Greek was the primary language of the liturgy, while a significant portion of the liturgical texts, such as readings and sermons, is believed to have been conducted in the native language, Old Nubian. However, it is important to remember that most of the finds come from Faras, Qasr Ibrim, and Qasr el-Wizz, located in the northern part of Nobadia near the border, areas where contact with Egypt was much

¹¹ The DBMNT is an online databank designed by Grzegorz Ochała, which contains metadata for all written sources from Christian Nubia. It is available at www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl (accessed: 30.11.2024).

¹² A. Łajtar, *Literary Manuscripts and Writing Supports in Christian Nubia in Context. Three Case Studies: Qasr Ibrim, Faras, Dongola*, in: *Coptic Literature in Context (4th-13th Cent.): Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology. Proceedings of the Third Conference of the ERC Project "Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature. Literary Texts in Their Geographical Context ('PAThs')"*, ed. P. Buzi, Rome 2020, p. 183-209.

¹³ W.H.C. Frend, *Fragments of a Version of the Acta S. Georgii from Q'asr Ibrim*, JbAC 32 (1989) p. 89-104. New edition of the Greek fragments from the same site is now being prepared by Adam Łajtar and Agata Deptuła.

¹⁴ W.H.C. Frend, *Fragments of an Acta Martyrum from Q'asr Ibrim*, JbAC 29 (1986) p. 66-70.

¹⁵ All these texts remain unpublished. A list of hagiographical works from Faras and Qasr Ibrim, including their titles, is appended to an article by Adam Łajtar (*Literary Manuscripts*, p. 198-204).

more frequent. It is also possible that Coptic communities were present in the region¹⁶.

Both hagiographies and church paintings indicate the significant popularity of warrior saints¹⁷, reflecting a broader Byzantine trend where such figures gained prominence in the 5th and 6th centuries. These saints were especially revered for their ability to defeat demons, a trait that symbolized their role in protecting humanity from evil, securing their place in popular piety¹⁸.

In Nubia, the pantheon of warrior saints includes Mercurios, Georgios, Theodore, Epimachos (despite not being a professional soldier), Sisinnios, and Phoibammon. In paintings, they are frequently portrayed on horseback, capturing the moment of vanquishing their foes – whether demons or emperors persecuting Christians. It also appears that many of these depictions served an apotropaic function, offering protection against evil influences¹⁹.

The cult of St Menas, one of the most popular saints of Egypt, was also known in Nubia. Churches devoted to St Menas are mentioned a few times in Nubian documentary sources: in an Old Nubian land sale from Qasr Ibrim²⁰, in a private letter from Ab Kanarti²¹, and, last but not least, in the three inventories of churches from Qasr Ibrim²². However, the only church confirmed in archaeological sources is the one dedicated to St Menas in Selib, where excavations were conducted between 2011 and 2016 by a Polish archaeological team led by Prof. Bogdan

¹⁶ A. Tsakos, *Religious Literacy in Greek from the Christian Monastery at Qasr El-Wizz, Lower Nubia*, in: *Graeco-Africana et Afro-Byzantina: Proceedings of the International Conference on Graeco-African and Afro-Byzantine Studies at the University of Johannesburg (27 October-1 November 2014)*, ed. T. Sansaridou-Hendrickx – B. Hendrickx, Johannesburg 2016, p. 220-230.

¹⁷ W.H.C. Frend, *The Cult of Military Saints in Christian Nubia*, in: *Theologia Crucis – Signum Crucis. Festschrift für Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. C. Andersen – G. Klein, Tübingen 1979, p. 155-163; Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, p. 394-396.

¹⁸ C. Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition*, London – New York 2003, p. 33-40.

¹⁹ Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, p. 394-395.

²⁰ G.M. Browne, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim*, v. 3, London 1991, cat. no. 34 (i).

²¹ G.M. Browne, *An Old Nubian Document from Ab Kanarti*, “Le Muséon” 116 (2003) p. 9-14.

²² Browne, *Old Nubian Texts*, cat. nos. 77, 78 and 79.

Żurawski²³. The identification of the building was made possible due to the decipherment of inscriptions discovered on-site²⁴. The dedicatory inscription left by King Zacharias in honor of St Menas suggests that the building functioned as a prominent cultic center near Dongola, the capital of one of the Nubian kingdoms. Additionally, texts written on the walls by visitors, as well as those on pottery sherds, suggest that the site attracted pilgrims. According to Żurawski, St Menas was likely venerated alongside Thecla, who is believed to have had an early sanctuary at a site north of the Church of Menas. However, her identification relies solely on a terracotta object with repeated stamped representations of a female figure surrounded by animals²⁵.

The popularity of the name Menas further demonstrates the saint's significance in the region. The DBMNT records 40 attestations of the name, likely reflecting both secular and religious figures. Notably, Menas is listed as one of the first bishops of Faras²⁶. The name Menas was also borne by two bishops who attended the synod held in Dongola in the ninth century²⁷, the eparch of Nobadia²⁸ and a vice-eparch²⁹. Additionally, there are attestations of individuals (at least six) bearing a compound name characteristic of Nubia. Name ΜΗΝΑΚΟΥΔΑ combines

²³ B. Żurawski, *Banganarti and Selib in 2011/2012 and 2013*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" 24/1 (2015) p. 369-388; B. Żurawski, *Banganarti and Selib in the 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 Seasons*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" 25 (2016) p. 349-402; B. Żurawski, *Banganarti and Selib. Season 2010*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" 22 (2013) p. 273-294; B. Żurawski, *Banganarti and Selib. Season 2011*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" 23/1 (2014) p. 323-342.

²⁴ A. Deptuła, *Inscriptions from Saint Menas' Church in Selib*, in: *Nubian Voices*, v. 2: *New Texts and Studies on Christian Nubian Culture*, ed. A. Łajtar – G. Ochała – J. van der Vliet, Warsaw 2015, p. 119-135.

²⁵ B. Żurawski, *The Altar Casket with a Representation of St Thecla ad bestias from the Vicinity of the St Menas Church in Selib (Northern Sudan)*, "Études et Travaux" 29 (2016) p. 203-224.

²⁶ S. Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions*, Warsaw 2017, p. 190-195.

²⁷ T. Derda – A. Łajtar, *Organization of the Church in Medieval Nubia in the Light of a Newly Discovered Wall Inscription in Dongola*, "Jahrbuch Des Österreichischen Byzantinistik" 69 (2019) p. 135-154.

²⁸ P. QI 2 22.

²⁹ A. Łajtar, *A Survey of Christian Textual Finds from Gebel Adda in the Collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto*, in: *The Fourth Cataract and beyond: Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies*, ed. J.R. Anderson – D.A. Welsby, Leuven – Paris – Walpole 2014, p. 956-958.

the saint's name with the Old Nubian word -KOYΔΔ, meaning 'servant'³⁰, clearly referencing devotion to the saint.

Unfortunately, we have only three confirmed depictions of St Menas – in which he is unambiguously identified by accompanying inscriptions: in the Northwest Annex³¹ and the sanctuary of St Anna in the monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola³² and Meinarti³³. However, it is very likely that another image of a mounted warrior without an inscription also represents St Menas.

3. The Old Nubian Miracle of St Menas (British Library Ms. Or. 6805)

Evidence of the cult of Menas in Nubia also includes manuscripts recounting his miracles. So far, two examples are known, though only one has been published. The first is a fragment from Qasr Ibrim containing a Coptic version of the miracle of *The Barren Camel*³⁴. The second is a complete manuscript discovered outside Nubia, in Southern Egypt. However, the fact that it was written in Old Nubian indicates that it was prepared for a Nubian audience. Notably, this is one of only two known hagiographic texts translated into the local language. The manuscript containing the miracle of St Menas was purchased by the British Museum in the early 20th century and later became part of the British Library's collection. The exact provenance of the manuscript is unknown; however, it was part of a larger collection consisting of twenty-four codices. Half of these, including the manuscript under discussion, were acquired and subsequently sold by the amateur archaeologist Robert de Rustafjaell. In his journals, the dealer claimed that the artifact originated near a Coptic monastery located close to Edfu. However, the circum-

³⁰ H. Satzinger, *Das altnubische Nameselement -KOYΔΔ: "Diener"?*, in: *The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt: Studies Presented to László Kákosy by Friends and Colleagues on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday*, ed. U. Luft, Budapest 1992, p. 519-521.

³¹ M. Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings from the Monastery on Kom H in Dongola*, Warsaw 2011, cat. no. 63.

³² A. Łajtar, *Dongola 2010: Epigraphic Report*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" 23/1 (2014) p. 285-295.

³³ W.Y. Adams, *The Murals of Meinarti*, "Nubica et Aethiopica" 4/5 (1999) p. 9.

³⁴ Currently being studied by Joost Hagen. It is also referenced in: Łajtar, *Literary Manuscripts*, no. 52.

stances of the discovery remain unclear, as the manuscripts were not recovered through professional excavations, and de Rustafjaell's account has been met with skepticism³⁵.

Based on information contained within the manuscripts, it seems quite certain that the entire collection originated from southern Egypt, near the frontier zone with Nubia, specifically from the region around Edfu and Esna. In scholarly literature, this assemblage is commonly referred to as the 'Edfu-Esna hoard'.

The texts, preserved on both parchment and paper, were mostly written in Sahidic Coptic. However, the colophons of some manuscripts indicate that they were intended for Nubian communities, either settled in Southern Egypt or located in the Middle Nile Valley. These texts were prepared for places such as the Church of Our Savior Jesus Christ in Illarte (Or. 6744)³⁶ or the Church of the Cross in Serra (Or. 6799)³⁷. Additionally, some manuscripts were commissioned by Nubians, as evidenced by typical Nubian names appearing in the colophons³⁸. The collection contains a single manuscript composed entirely in Old Nubian, making it unique within the group. This manuscript is the key element discussed in this article.

The manuscript, cataloged as British Library Ms. Or. 6805, can be dated to the period between 960 and 1060. It comprises eighteen numbered parchment leaves arranged in three quires and is bound in a brownish leather cover. The text is written in black ink, with red used for the colophons and decorative elements on the first page. The script is identifiable as Old Nubian majuscules.

The book contains two texts: the *Miracle of St Menas*³⁹, which spans seventeen pages and is followed by an illustration of the saint on the final page of that section. The remaining pages (19-34) include a fragment

³⁵ J. van der Vliet, *Nubian Voices from Edfu: Egyptian Scribes and Nubian Patrons in Southern Egypt*, in: *Nubian Voices II: New Texts and Studies on Christian Nubian Culture*, ed. A. Lajtar – G. Ochała – J. van der Vliet, Warsaw 2015, p. 265-268.

³⁶ B. Layton, *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts in the British Library Acquired since the Year 1906*, London 1986, p. 84-85.

³⁷ Layton, *Catalogue of Coptic Literary Manuscripts in the British Library Acquired since the Year 1906*, p. 89.

³⁸ Van der Vliet, *Nubian Voices from Edfu*, p. 271-272.

³⁹ The text has been published several times, most recently by El-Shafie el-Guzuuli and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (*The Miracle of Saint Mina – Gis Miinan Nokkor*, Hague – Tirana – Doha 2012). A discussion of the text, along with detailed bibliography, can also be found in Lucia Langener, *Über eine ungewöhnliche Menas-Darstellung:*

labeled in the text as the (*Pseudo-*)*Nicene Canons*⁴⁰, however, it would be more accurate to describe it as a set of instructions on proper conduct in the church, which, according to Detlef Müller, functioned as a homily explaining selected canons⁴¹. There are notable similarities between this text and a collection preserved in the Coptic tradition, known as the *Gnomai of the Council of Nicaea*⁴². While the Coptic text is significantly more extensive, the two are similar in form and share some overlapping instructions⁴³. Furthermore, the Coptic text is also unrelated to the Council of Nicaea itself; its title derives from the first known codex in which the text was attributed to the Nicene Synod⁴⁴.

Both the *Miracle of St Menas* and the (*Pseudo-*)*Nicene Canons* appear to form a cohesive collection, deliberately compiled in a single codex. Both texts are introduced by a colophon with a title set apart from the main text. Additionally, each begins with an Old Nubian direct appeal to the congregation: *ONTAKPAPOYĒKE*, which can be translated as ‘beloved’ and frequently recurs in homilies⁴⁵.

The *Miracle of St Menas*, which occupies the first part of the codex, can be summarized as follows: A wealthy but barren pagan woman from a village near Alexandria, grieving over her lack of a child, heard of St Menas’ miracles. Since all her slaves and livestock also cannot conceive, in desperation, the woman vowed to St Menas that if one of her fowl laid an egg, she would dedicate it to him. When this occurred, she

Das nubische Menasmirakel London Or. 6805, “Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte” 38 (1999) p. 99-125.

⁴⁰ Most recent publication: Gerald Browne, *Literary texts in Old Nubian*, Vienna – Mödling 1989.

⁴¹ D. Müller, *Die Homilie über die zwei Canones von Nikaia: Analyse und Einordnung eines altnubischen Textes*, in: *Nubische Studien. Tagungsakten der 5. internationalen Konferenz der International Society for Nubian Studies, Heidelberg, 22.–25. September 1982*, ed. M. Krause, Mainz 1986, p. 341-346.

⁴² A.C. Stewart, *The Gnomai of the Council of Nicaea (CC 0021): Critical Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, Piscataway 2015.

⁴³ Special thanks are due to Przemysław Piwowarczyk for drawing my attention to the existence of the Coptic text. The relationship between the Coptic and Nubian traditions certainly merits further investigation, but this is a topic for a separate article.

⁴⁴ Codex MONB.EF, this particular part is now kept in Naples; for more see: <https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/359>.

⁴⁵ E.g. *Stauros-Text* ed. G.M. Browne, *Literary Texts in Old Nubian*, Vienna 1989, p. 22-29 and Ps.-Iohannes Chrysostomus, *In venerabilem crucem sermo*, in: G.M. Browne, *Literary Texts in Old Nubian*, Vienna 1989, p. 28-45.

entrusted the egg to a sailor in Philoxenite to offer it at St Menas' church. However, the sailor deceived her, eating the egg instead of presenting it. Later, while praying in the church of the Virgin Mary, he had a vision in which St Menas, on horseback, confronted him. The Saint kicked the sailor in the head, causing the egg to reappear as a live fowl. St Menas then returned the fowl to the woman, blessing her household. She bore a son, whom she named Menas, and her entire household – including her servants, cows, and fowl – became fertile. Grateful, she and her family converted to Christianity, dedicating their lives to the church⁴⁶.

Upon initial examination, the story appears similar to accounts of St Menas' miracles known from other traditions, and many canonical elements can be observed in the narrative. First and foremost, the motif of a wealthy woman without children seeking help is known from the miracle *The Female Pilgrim (Sophia)*, which is preserved in the manuscript from the White Monastery (IFAO inv. 315-322)⁴⁷. Interestingly, in the Coptic version, the toponym "Philoxenite" also appears. Sophia is also known from a Greek version⁴⁸, where she is described as a childless widow intending to leave her wealth to Menas. However, in all these accounts, the emphasis is on the woman being childless, not infertile, and the central motivation is the lack of an heir, prompting her decision to dedicate her fortune to Menas rather than hope for conception. Only in the Arabic version does the narrative emphasize barrenness⁴⁹, and in the end, St Menas enables the woman to conceive a son, whom she names Menas in gratitude.

Also, in none of these stories is the woman portrayed as a pagan seeker who, upon hearing of St Menas' miracles, promises to convert to Christianity in exchange for help. This concept, however, can be found in

⁴⁶ The summary is based on the translation prepared by Vincent van Gerven Oei (el-Guzuuli –van Gerven Oei, *The Miracle of Saint Mina*).

⁴⁷ Published by Seřna Bacot, *Quatre miracles de saint Mėnas dans un manuscrit copte de l'Ifao (Inv. 315-322)*, "Bulletin de l'Institut franais d'archéologie orientale" 111 (2011) p. 35-73. The beginning of the same miracle is preserved also in the codex from the monastery of Archangel Michael in Hamuli (Pierpont Morgan Library M.590) published in: J. Drescher, *Apa Mena: A Selection of Coptic Texts Relating to St. Menas, Edited, with Translation and Commentary*, Le Caire 1946.

⁴⁸ Miracle number 3 according to the *Miracula S. Menae Graece: Zhitie prepodobnago Paisiia Velikago i Timořeia patriarkha Aleksandriřskago poviestvovanie o chudesakh*" sv. Velikomuchenika Miny, ed. I. Pomialovskii, Saint Petersburg 1900.

⁴⁹ Miracle number 9 according to sigla of Felicitas Jaritz (*Die arabischen Quellen zum heiligen Menas*, Heidelberg 1993).

the miracle *The Foal with Three Legs*⁵⁰, where the main character, Prinos, is a pagan man who is seeking Menas' assistance with a barren mare. Ultimately, both Prinos and his entire household converted to Christianity following the miracle.

Another key element in which the Nubian version follows *The Pilgrim woman (Sophia)*⁵¹ is the journey to St Menas' sanctuary in Abu Mina, during which the seeker faces danger. Yet, this is where the similarities end, as the Nubian version introduces unique elements with no direct parallels. The story adopts a more anecdotal tone: instead of delivering the egg, the sailor eats it. St Menas intervenes, kicking him to retrieve it. Remarkably, the motif of a soldier attempting to assault the woman is absent. Instead, the focus shifts to the sailor's deceit, highlighting themes of trickery and divine justice.

Following the deception, all the miracles feature the saint's epiphany, typically with Menas appearing on horseback, holding his spear. The same occurs in the Nubian miracle: although the sailor seeks mercy in front of the image of the Theotokos, his plea does not shield him from punishment, as Menas enacts justice directly.

The story concludes canonically with the conversion and devotion of both the seeker (the woman) and the deceiver (the sailor). Both, having witnessed the saint's power, dedicate the remainder of their lives to serving at Menas' sanctuary. Similarly, the Samaritan woman and the would-be assailant remained in the service of the sanctuary in the miracle *The Samaritan Woman*⁵².

Moreover, the egg seems to play a significant role as an additional character in the story, absent from any other known tradition. This raises the question of whether the egg is merely a random object chosen by the woman as an offering to St Menas. Given her wealth, one might expect her to donate a portion of her fortune, as is seen in the miracles of *The Isaurian Pilgrim* and *The Female Pilgrim (Sophia)*. By comparison,

⁵⁰ The miracle is preserved with some minor variations both in Greek, Coptic and Arabic tradition. Cf. P. Piwowarczyk, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Miracles of St Menas*, VoxP 94 (2025) p. 35-64.

⁵¹ The motif of a journey to the sanctuary also appears in other miracles. Notably, in *The Isaurian Pilgrim* and *Eutropius and the Silver Plates*, the pilgrimage takes place by water. Both miracles are preserved in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic traditions (cf. Piwowarczyk, *Prolegomena*, VoxP 94 (2025) p. 38), but I primarily rely on the edition by Drescher (*Apa Mena*, p. 112-116).

⁵² Cf. Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 123.

the egg seems like a simple offering whose significance in this context remains open to interpretation.

Eggs, particularly ostrich ones, were sometimes suspended as part of church decorations – such as at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai and the Monastery of St Anthony⁵³. Many indications suggest that similar lamps were also used in churches in Nubia⁵⁴. However, the symbolic role of the egg in this particular narrative seems distinct, especially since the text clearly specifies that it is an egg from the fowl of her household, explicitly excluding the possibility of an ostrich egg. The symbolic meaning is further emphasized by the woman herself, who declares that she is offering it in that church so that the God of St Menas may give it the seed of mankind.

4. The egg

Instead, the egg's importance likely lies in its symbolic meaning. At the beginning of the story, we learn that not only is the woman herself barren, but so are all her servants and livestock. Thus, the first laid egg would hold exceptional significance. Beyond its practical rarity, it seems that the egg carries profound symbolic weight.

In the Christian culture, the egg has long represented the beginning of life and the promise of resurrection. However, its symbolic significance predates Christianity. Across various cultures worldwide, the egg has independently emerged as a symbol of life and has often been integral to creation myths. It also serves as an emblem of the world's renewal through rebirth⁵⁵.

The symbolic power of the egg made it an essential element in popular beliefs and magical practices⁵⁶, serving both as a medium for

⁵³ N. Green, *Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam*, "Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean" 18 (2006) p. 34-35; G. Galavaris, *Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church Candles, Lamps and Ostrich Eggs*, "Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies" 4 (1978) p. 69-78.

⁵⁴ T. Gołgowski, *De lucernis et de ovis struthiocamelinis – symbolika jaj strusich w Kościołach wczesnochrześcijańskich*, in: *Hereditatem cognoscere: studia i szkice dedykowane Profesor Marii Miśkiewicz*, ed. Z. Kobyliński, Warszawa 2004, p. 21-26.

⁵⁵ V. Newall, *Easter Eggs: Symbols of Life and Renewal*, "Folklore" 95/1 (1984) p. 21-29; V. Newall, *An Egg at Easter: A Folklore Study*, Bloomington 1971.

⁵⁶ C. Riley Augé, *Field Manual for the Archaeology of Ritual, Religion, and Magic*, New York 2022, p. 4-5.

inscribing spells⁵⁷ and as part of ritual acts⁵⁸. Among archaeological finds very fragile eggshells are difficult to capture, however ostrich eggs are easier identifiable due to their durability. Fragments of such shells have been uncovered in a variety of contexts, ranging from the tombs of pharaohs to private homes⁵⁹ and churches, including those in Nubia⁶⁰. Their function is not always clear, but it is rather unlikely that they represent only post-consumption leftovers.

In many cultures, the egg is also associated with fertility, a belief Christianity adopted from earlier traditions⁶¹. While this connection is not clearly evident in sources from Christian Nubia, ethnographic accounts suggest that a related custom persisted into the twentieth century in some villages, where painted ostrich eggshells were hung in the bedrooms of women wishing to conceive as a symbol of fertility⁶². Notably, many practices concerning women's issues in Nubia have remained unchanged since Christian times. Therefore, the egg, given its symbolic value, stands as both an exceptionally precious offering and a representation of entrusting the woman's potential fertility to the Saint.

5. Menas and Theotokos

An additional significant element in the narrative is the symbolic presence of the Virgin Mary, which is not attested in any other preserved tradition, however, she plays an important role in the *Encomium on St Menas* (cf. below). Although she does not take an active part in the events, it is in the church dedicated to her that Menas' epiphany occurs, and the divine response to the sinner's actions takes place. This may reflect

⁵⁷ O.-P. Saar, *Jewish Love Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity*, Leiden 2017, p. 101-102. Also from Nubia from Funj period we have examples of eggshells inscribed with magical text cf. T. Barański, forthcoming.

⁵⁸ e.g. PGM XII.96.

⁵⁹ D. Dzierzbicka – A. Deptuła, *Courtyard A at the Monastery on Kom H*, in: *Dongola 2015-2016. Fieldwork, Conservation and Site Management*, ed. W. Godlewski – D. Dzierzbicka – A. Łajtar, Warsaw 2018, p. 79-99.

⁶⁰ K. Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, Einsiedeln – Zürich – Cologne 1967, p. 71.

⁶¹ Newall, *An Egg at Easter*, p. 113-141.

⁶² J.P. Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zār Cult in Northern Sudan*, Madison 1989, p. 61-66.

the exceptional role Mary holds in Nubian beliefs as an intercessor and defender of women.

A special connection between Mary and women's issues is evidenced by both iconographic and textual sources. A particularly intriguing example is the dedication of the Southeast Annex of the monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola. The iconography clearly indicates that the complex was devoted to Mary, emphasizing her role as the Mother of God, and the inscriptions underscore her function as a protector of women during childbirth⁶³.

The visual program in this space features depictions associated with womanhood and motherhood, such as the *Theotokos Galactotrophusa*, the Nativity, and the Annunciation⁶⁴. These scenes are accompanied by representations of female donors and inscriptions requesting support during childbirth. Notably, an Old Nubian inscription near the famous dancing scene explicitly asks for Mary's favor to aid a royal sister during labor pains⁶⁵. It appears that this area was intended as a sacred space for women seeking Mary's intercession during childbirth. It is possible that in Nubia, the whole church dedicated to the Theotokos could have been perceived similarly – as a place where women sought help and support in maternal concerns. This may explain why, in the local version of the miracle, part of the story takes place within a church dedicated to the Mother of God, where her patronage is explicitly expressed.

The question arises as to whether Menas could have played a somewhat similar role in Nubia with regard to women. While the Virgin Mary was seen as a protector during childbirth, St Menas, for example, may have been sought before for assistance with conception. This idea is tempting, however, given the limited data currently available, this remains a hypothesis. Menas' sanctuary in Abu Mina was similarly frequented by women⁶⁶, but the specific reasons for their visits remain unknown.

⁶³ A. Łajtar – V.W.J. van Gerven Oei, *Women in the Southwest Annex*, in: *Dongola 2015-2016. Fieldwork, Conservation and Site Management*, ed. W. Godlewski – D. Dzierzbicka – A. Łajtar, Warsaw 2018, p. 75-78.

⁶⁴ Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*.

⁶⁵ V.W.J. van Gerven Oei, *A Dance for a Princess: The Legends on a Painting in Room 5 of the Southwest Annex of the Monastery on Kom H in Dongola*, "The Journal of Juristic Papyrology" 47 (2017) p. 117-135.

⁶⁶ G. Stafford, *Evidence for Female Pilgrims at Abu Mina*, in: *Transmitting and Circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine Worlds*, ed. M. Ivanova – H. Jeffery, Leiden 2019, p. 11-43.

Additionally, several Coptic and Greek miracles address fertility, whether concerning people or animals⁶⁷.

It is also worth noting that one of the few identified depictions of St Menas in Old Dongola is located in the Northwest Annex of the sacred complex⁶⁸, whose layout mirrors that of the church itself. He appears alongside representations of Mary as the Mother of God. According to Dobrochna Zielińska, this section of the church was likely intended for women⁶⁹. A similar situation can perhaps be observed in Meinarti.

The connection between St Menas, the Virgin Mary, and fertility seems evident in hagiographic texts. *Encomium on St Menas* emphasizes that the very existence of the Saint was attributed to the Virgin's intercession⁷⁰. His mother, Euphemia, was barren and conceived only after praying to an icon of Mary during her feast. Unfortunately, we lack direct evidence about whether, or in what form, this version of Menas' life was known in Nubia.

6. Conclusions

While comparative material for the Old Nubian miracle of St Menas is limited, it stands out as unique compared to other traditions. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the clear transmission of motifs, particularly the miracle of *the Female Pilgrim (Sophia)*, which is central to the earliest Menas miracles and attested in Coptic, Greek, and Arabic sources. Minor elements also align with other stories about Menas. It remains uncertain whether the lack of direct parallels reflects the loss of similar traditions or a deliberate adaptation for a Nubian audience, employing symbols and concepts accessible to the local community.

The symbolic presence of the egg in this miracle serves not only as a narrative device but also reflects its perception, deeply rooted in

⁶⁷ E.g. already mentioned *The Barren Camel*, *The Foal with Three Legs* and the Arabic versions of *The Female Pilgrim (Sophia)*.

⁶⁸ Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings*, cat. no. 63.

⁶⁹ D. Zielińska, *The Iconographical Program in Nubian Churches: Progress Report Based on a New Reconstruction Project*, in: *Between the Cataracts. Proceedings of the 11th Conference for Nubian Studies, Warsaw University, 27 August-2 September 2006*, v. 2, ed. W. Godlewski – A. Łajtar, Warsaw 2010, p. 643-651.

⁷⁰ The *Encomium* is edited and translated in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 108-125. For general information about this text see E. Wipszycka, *The Birth of the Cult of St Menas*, VoxP 94 (2025) p. 11-12.

both Christian and older cultural traditions, as a promise of new life and a symbol of fertility. This promise is ultimately fulfilled through the divine intervention of St Menas and, by extension, the Theotokos – both of whom may have been invoked in Nubia when assistance was needed to bring new life into the world.

Whether it was an adaptation or a translation of an existing text, the story's selection was undoubtedly intentional, as its symbolism and familiar motifs would resonate with local society. The choice of Old Nubian further underscores the intent to reach a broader audience. Most hagiographic texts from Nobadia were written in Coptic, a language primarily understood in ecclesiastical settings, it seems clear that translating the text into Old Nubian was meant to ensure accessibility for the local community. Moreover, both texts in the codex – the Miracle and the *(Pseudo)Nicaean Canon* – directly address their readers, suggesting they were intended for use during communal celebrations.

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