

Ancient Christian texts discovered in Sudanese Nubia.

Archaeologists rescue important finds from flooding by a new High Dam.

When excavating a 10th century church in northern Sudan, archaeologists from Humboldt-University Berlin (Germany) made a sensational find: they discovered a nearly complete page with a homily of a church father, discussing the problem of adultery. The author argues that older – and powerful – men should not escape punishment for this sin. In this context he points out that already King David was rightly chided by the young prophets Daniel and Nathan for this offence. The recovered text is not only based on the Old Testament, but also uses elements of Greek philosophy.

That the text could be recovered in time is a lucky coincidence. The excavation of the Berlin scientists is situated at the Fourth Nile Cataract in northern Sudan, where a massive dam is being built at present. It is projected to flood c. 170 km of the rich cultural landscape of the Nile valley in 2009. The team of archaeologists of the *Humboldt University Nubian Expedition* has been working feverishly to document the archaeological sites of the region, which will be lost forever in the floods of the new reservoir.

Apart from the "adultery manuscript", the scientists discovered several hundred fragments of parchment and leather with Greek and Old Nubian texts in the excavated church on the river island of Sur. Of special interest are also numerous pieces of leather book covers with ornamental designs – an exceedingly rare find. A small schist plate, probably part of one of these book covers, shows the image of Jesus and the symbols of the four evangelists in relief.

The texts were found in the sacristy of the church, from which also further objects were recovered. Besides day-to-day objects, such as a massive key made of copper, bronze and iron, ivory buttons and numerous beads, several pieces belonging to the sacral equipment of the church came to light, among them a small bell and a spoon made of iron. In another part of the building a ceramic toilet was discovered.

With dimensions of c. 17 x 15 m the church on Sur is the largest church so far discovered above the Fourth Nile Cataract. It was constructed of sundried mudbricks. As common in the region, it has a cruciform ground plan with an apse in the east. Its inner walls were decorated with paintings, of which numerous fragments were found. Wooden panels with carved ornaments also belonged to its decoration. Small ceramic oil lamps, which were found in large numbers, were used for lighting the building. In several spots on the floor dripped-down lamp oil mixed with sand has been preserved.

Nubia, the region between Aswan and Khartoum, adhered to the Christian faith from the 6th to the 15th century AD. After the Arabic invasion in Egypt in 641 AD only limited contacts to the Mediterranean world and the Egyptian Coptic church could be maintained. Christianity in Nubia now followed its own path. The Nubian churches illustrate the ongoing rich religious life in this remote part of the Nile valley. However, while numerous churches have been excavated in Nubia, text finds have been extremely sparse. The newly discovered manuscripts have been the first such finds for many years and thus – once fully studied – promise rich information about the religious life of a rural community in Nubia a millennium ago.

More detailed information on the progress and the results of the *Humboldt University Nubian Expedition* can be found at www.nubianexpedition.com and www.daralmanasir.com.

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