

Karel Innemée

### **Costumes of Authority. The Image of Royalty and Clergy in Christian Nubia.**

The clothes that people wear tell a story of who they are or what they want or pretend to be. An individual who wears the clothes of a group in society that he or she belongs to has a certain freedom to choose variations within unwritten rules and schemes. In the case of uniforms there are more formal rules that show exactly the place of the wearer within a hierarchy, and inform on whose behalf he or she exercises authority. The costumes of ecclesiastical dignitaries and the historical dress of royalty and high officials are examples of such 'costumes of authority' and contain a vocabulary in which each element has a meaning. For the outsider they may look impressive in the first place, for their precious fabrics and elaborate decorations, but the insider knows that each garment and attribute carries a message about the place in the hierarchy of the one who wears them and the kind of authority he or she represents.

The research project will analyse the costumes that were worn by clergy and members of the royal family in the kingdom of Makuria, one of the Christian kingdoms in Nubia between the 6th and the 14th centuries, in order to learn more about the nature of the relationship between Church and State, external sources of influence, and indigenous tradition..

Among the best-known works of art from Christian Nubia are the wall-paintings that were salvaged during the UNESCO campaign of the 1960s, in particular the paintings from the cathedral of Faras, now in the National Museums of Warsaw and Khartoum. They were made between the 8th and 14th centuries. Faras, originally the capital of the kingdom of Nobadia, remained an important bishop's see in the kingdom of Makuria after the merger of both states. Since the 1960s archaeologists have discovered numerous other paintings in churches, monasteries and secular buildings. Many of them represent bishops, kings, royal mothers and other persons in positions of authority, depicted in their ceremonial or liturgical costumes. Such costumes and the paintings in which they are depicted can be 'read' as a visual language.

In the case of the costumes in Nubian paintings there are some clear similarities with Byzantine ecclesiastical and imperial outfits, which probably shows that in a certain period the Byzantine court and Church were seen as role models by the Nubians. One of the questions of the proposed research project is why the Nubians would try to imitate the symbols of status and authority from Byzantium, a state 2.5 thousand kilometers away. A possible explanation is that the Byzantine emperor was formally head of Church and State, and that the rulers of Makuria claimed a similar position and showed this by imitating imperial costumes. An intriguing topic is the relationship between Church and State in Nubia. The Nubian Church was officially under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Alexandria, but since the Arab invasion of 642, the patriarchs hardly had the means to impose their authority on Nubia. The fact that there were more Byzantine than Coptic characteristics in the Nubian liturgical costumes could be seen as a sign that the Nubian royal court had a say in the outfit of the bishops. This, in turn, begs the question how much power the king had in episcopal appointments. A third power in Christian Nubia were women at the royal court.. Unlike in the Byzantine patrilineal system of succession, in Nubia it was the sister of the king who was supposed to be the mother of the next king. The crucial role of the royal mother is probably expressed in her costume and attributes, which show similarities with those in paintings of the Virgin Mary. This iconography may have been part of the Nubian idea of divine kingship.

The interpretation of paintings of persons of authority as a form of non-verbal communication will be enhanced by reading of texts dealing with matters of authority and power.

A material result of the project will consist of the reconstruction of most beautiful costumes, which will be exhibited in the National Museum in Warsaw, next to the wall paintings that depict them. It will be possible finally to tell a story about the people who were wearing them.