
UNDER SAINT MICHAEL'S PROTECTION:
A TATTOO FROM CHRISTIAN NUBIA



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Archaeological rescue excavations took place between 1999 and 2007 in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract which had come under threat from the construction of a hydroelectric dam.¹ Over a thousand human remains were excavated during this period by several missions under the auspices of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society and the British Museum.² Site 3-J-23, located near the modern town of et-Tereif, upstream of the Fourth Nile Cataract, comprised of approximately 200 graves, mainly dating from the Post-Meroitic and Christian periods (**Fig. 1**).



Fig. 1.
View of the cemetery, © Sudan Archaeological Research Society

Most of the human remains recovered were skeletonised but several individuals had been naturally mummified by the arid climate and hot sand, and some hair and soft tissues have survived. The burial conditions and humidity levels, which appear to have varied across the cemetery, may have been dependent on the weather or the time of the year when the burial took place, allowing for some bodies to be mummified. The human remains were generously donated by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (Sudan) to the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, who in turn donated them to the British Museum, where they are now curated and researched.

Among these human remains, the mummified body of a woman found during the 2005 season (**Fig. 2**) is one of the eight mummies presented in the exhibition *Ancient Lives, New Discoveries*, organised at the British Museum.³ Aged between 20-35 years when she died, she was buried in a simple rectangular grave (Grave 50) and her body was protected by a layer of stone slabs. No objects were placed with her, a typical feature in Christian Sudan, and we do not know her name or her occupation. Radiocarbon-dating analysis indicates that she died between AD 655-775, at the beginning of the medieval period in Nubia (c. AD 550-1500). Her soft tissues are so well preserved that conservators at the British Museum found a tattoo and other markings on her skin. The tattoo reveals the monogram of Saint Michael, and attests to her Christian faith.



Fig. 2.

Mummified remains of a Christian woman, © The trustees of the British Museum

Examples of body decoration in ancient Egypt and Nubia are scarce, and skeletal remains do not provide any evidence for tattooing. The first tangible examples of Egyptian tattoos date back to the Middle Kingdom (about 2000 BC): several tattooed mummies of women were found at Deir el-Bahari in the Theban necropolis. These mainly consist of dots and dashes, often grouped into geometrical patterns such as lozenges, and are usually located on the chest, the abdomen, the arms or the legs.⁴

One of the Deir el-Bahari mummies is often interpreted as being a priestess of the goddess Hathor, whose patronage of music and dance is well established. Later in the Middle Kingdom, other examples of tattoos with very similar decorative patterns have also been found on 'natural mummies' from the Nubian C-group cemetery at Hierakonpolis (HK27C).⁵ It has been suggested that Egyptian tattoos may derive from Nubian traditions.⁶ Similar geometrical decorations are also commonly seen adorning Egyptian Middle Kingdom female statuettes. It is a matter of debate whether or not these actually represent tattoos.

As is often the case today, the meaning and function of tattoos may have varied, some showing affiliation to a social group, others having magical, medical or protective purposes. There is no doubt that the monogram of Saint Michael tattooed on the inner right thigh of this naturally mummified woman from Sudan (**Fig. 3**) had a religious significance. It combines in one symbol the six letters forming the name Michael (MIXAHA) (**Fig. 4**).



Fig. 3. Close-up of the tattoo (5x3.5cm) located on the inner right thigh of the woman, © The trustees of the British Museum

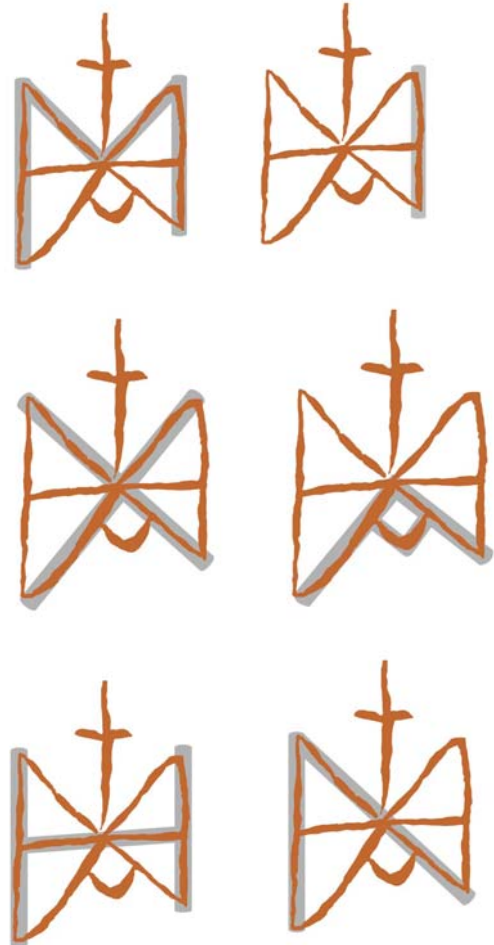


Fig. 4. Illustration showing the position of each letter of the name Michael inside the monogram, © The trustees of the British Museum, drawing by Claire Thorne



Fig. 5. Line drawing of a sherd from Soba (British Museum EA 74178), from Julie Anderson, "The Graffiti," in Derek A. Welsby, *Soba II. Renewed Excavations within the Metropolis of the Kingdom of Alwa in Central Sudan* (London 1998), p. 191, n. 87

Spelt in Greek or Coptic, as both languages use a very similar alphabet, this Christian symbol has also been found on pottery and medieval church walls⁷ (**Fig. 5**). The apotropaic value of these graffiti has already been recognized.⁸ In a Coptic text from Upper Egypt, Timothy, Archbishop of Alexandria, even explains the benefits of the use of Michael's name:

Because the name of Michael will be for them a strong armour. If a man writes these glorious letters upon the (? wall) of his house that is nothing of the enemy will come upon the house nor will the device of wicked men have power over it. But let everyone who shall write it for himself as an amulet take care concerning the compact lest he place it in a place where there is defilement, because great is the power of these marvellous names.⁹

This tattoo not only confirms the woman's Christian faith, it suggests that she had hoped to place herself under the protection of the Archangel Michael. As the patron saint of Nubia, he was very commonly represented and referred to, whether by his full name, as a monogram or as a cryptogram. Saint Michael was often represented on the walls of Nubian churches, such as the medieval cathedral of Faras. In a painting now on display in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum, Saint Michael is depicted holding a sceptre terminated in a cross and an orb, his wings made of peacock feathers—as was often the tradition in Nubia. Along with his full representation and his name, monograms were also frequently used. The presence of such a monogram on the body was, however, an unexpected discovery. It may have been used for protection or as a way of demonstrating one's faith.¹⁰

Magic seems to have been strongly associated with religion in Christian Nubia, but owing to a scarcity of surviving texts, popular religion during the medieval period is poorly understood. However, it is clear that the use of names, particularly when written on bowls, had magical properties and conferred apotropaic protection to the person using the vessel.¹¹ Religious names were even more powerful, especially considering that “‘*daemonicum*’ abhors ‘*sacrum*’.”¹²

The position of the tattoo on the inner side of her thigh above the knee indicates that it may not have been visible to others and may have had no aesthetic value: it was more probably used as a protection. In spite of a strong Christian faith, older pre-Christian beliefs were probably also prevalent amongst the Nubian population. The presence of dotted marks, possibly a form of tattooing, on the woman's upper right thigh is reminiscent of older traditions of body art, such as the ones found in the C-group mummies. In this case, the dot pattern does not appear to be geometric, unlike earlier tattoos from Egypt and this combination of differing tattooing style may represent a fusion of old and new beliefs.

NOTES

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¹ The area was flooded in 2008.

² <http://www.sudarchrs.org.uk/fieldwork/fieldwork-merowe-dam-salvage/>

³ John H. Taylor & Daniel Antoine, *Ancient lives, New Discoveries*, London 2014.

⁴ Ludwig Keimer, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l'Égypte ancienne*, MIFAO 53 (Cairo 1948), pp. 8-15.

⁵ Renée Friedman, "The Nubian Cemetery at Hierakonpolis, Egypt. Results of the 2003 Season. Excavation of the C-group Cemetery at HK27C," *Sudan & Nubia* 8 (2004) 47-52. Some of these tattoos have been recently enhanced by infrared and the marks are now more clearly visible (Joel Paulson, "The Lady in InfraRed," *Nekhen News* 24 [2012] 25; Anna Pieri and Daniel Antoine, "A tattooed trio at HK27C," *Nekhen News* 26 [2014], pp. 28-29). The C-group is attested in Lower Nubia between around 2300 and 1600 BC.

⁶ A mummy from the New Kingdom, recently found at Deir el-Medina, provides new evidence of tattooing in Ancient Egypt. Only the upper part of the body has been recovered, but it shows several tattoos. While waiting for a more detailed publication, information can be found here: <http://carriearbuckle.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/ucla-represents-at-arce/>. We thank Margaret Maitland for this information.

⁷ See for example Derek A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 65

⁸ Julie Anderson, "The Graffiti," in Derek A. Welsby, *Soba II. Renewed excavations within the Metropolis of the Kingdom of Alwa in Central Sudan* (London 1998), p. 185.

⁹ E.A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts* (London 1915), pp. 519-520, and 1028-1029; translation from Derek A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 65.

¹⁰ Tattoos are still used in this way by Copts who often bear a small cross inside the wrist as a spiritual symbol of their affiliation to a community.

¹¹ Bogdan Żurawski, "Magica et ceramic: magic and ceramics in Christian Nubia," *Archaeologica Polona* 30 (1992), pp. 87-107. Funerary ceremonies left more evidence of the magical practices, see for example Bogdan Żurawski, "The Nubian Mortuary Complex," in Tomas Hägg (ed.), *Nubian culture past and present. Main papers presented at the Sixth International Conference for Nubian Studies in Uppsala, 11-16 August 1986* (Stockholm 1987), p. 275.

¹² Bogdan Żurawski, "Magica et ceramic: magic and ceramics in Christian Nubia," *Archaeologica Polona* 30 (1992), pp. 87-107.