

Four encolpia from a monastery complex in Naqlun – a preliminary iconographic analysis

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Abstract: The article discusses the iconography of the four cross-shaped encolpia made of lead that were discovered in a monastery complex in Naqlun, Egypt, in 2011. The pendants were found together, apparently mislaid in the northeastern corner of the main room of building K.1 (Northern Building). The iconographic analysis of the decorative elements on these encolpia is based on a comparison with other objects of this type coming from a Byzantine culture context. The dating based on the iconographic analysis is compatible with the archaeological context placing the deposition before the end of the 10th century

Keywords: Naqlun/Nekluni, cross-shaped encolpia, iconography of the Crucifixion, Coptic art, Byzantine iconography, lead cross-shaped pendants

The four cross-shaped encolpia that are the subject of this paper were found in a deposit together with a lead plate inscribed in Arabic with an excerpt from Surah 112 and a copper bell (Godlewski 2014: 187). The artifacts were wrapped in a linen cloth and abandoned in one of the rooms of the so-called Northern or K.1 building at the northernmost end of the monastery compound at Naqlun, Egypt. Excavations by a team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw uncovered in 2011 not only this deposit, but also some Coptic and Arabic texts, written on paper, in a storage pit situated in the northeastern part of the building.

Other finds included some well preserved, locally produced amphorae, broken basins and storage jars found in the main two rooms explored in this part of the building. The building was destroyed by fire, the collapse of the burning roof sealing a deposit dated to the 9th or 10th century based on an evaluation of the pottery finds (Godlewski 2014: 187; Danys-Lasek 2014: 589).

The cross-shaped encolpia were made of lead. The seam lines at the edges of the pendants prove that they were cast from a mold made of stone, clay or metal. That these traces were not removed from the final product indicates serial production in

local workshops.¹ Any further remarks on the technique and craftsmanship require

technological analyses which are currently not feasible in Egypt.

ENCOLPIA FROM THE DEPOSIT: DESCRIPTION

Based on shape and decoration, the four encolpia found in Naqlun can be classified into two types: Type A (Nd.11.149.1, Nd.11.149.2, Nd.11.149.3; H. 4.86 cm, W. 3.16 cm) and Type B (Nd.11.150; H. 4.73 cm, W. 3.05 cm) [Fig. 1].

TYPE A

Form

Cross with the vertical beam broadening to either end and rounded at top and bottom. The horizontal beam is straight, the ends just a little concave. Pairs of ringed circular elements appear at the corners of the endings of each of the arms of the cross.

Decoration

The design on the obverse features a depiction of Christ in a long tunic (*colobium*). His head is inclined slightly towards the right arm and is framed by a nimbus marked with round spikes. The eyes are wide open. Nail marks can be observed on Christ's hands. Two crosses, with relief dots at the ends of equal-length arms, are located below his arms. Three lines ending in oval spikes spring from a single place above Christ's head. Below the feet is a round element. The moon and the sun are located in the upper part of the vertical arm of the cross.

On the reverse there is a figure in a long tunic. The head is inclined to the left

side and framed by a nimbus with round spikes. The eyes are wide open. The left arm, with the fist clenched, rests against the chest, while the right one is raised in blessing. On both sides of the figure there are two badly preserved heads of figures in medallions marked with a continuous line. A cross with triangular arms springing from a dotted circle at the center appears above the head of the figure in the center.

TYPE B

Form

Cross with broadening arms and convex endings, decorated with round elements one per corner. Additionally, the horizontal beam ends in an extra relief dot in the center of the arm of the cross.

Decoration

The obverse bears an image of Christ crucified. His head is pitched slightly to the right and is framed by a nimbus marked with a continuous line. His eyes are closed and he wears a loincloth (*perizonium*). There is a round element below his feet. Above Christ's head there is a cross with straight arms and split V-shaped terminals.

On the reverse is a cross with straight arms and split V-shaped endings, nesting relief dots between the tips. An arched band of relief dots, three on the horizontal arms, four on the vertical ones, parallels the convex endings.

¹ These observations come from metal conservator Władysław Weker (State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw), who conserved the artifacts at the site in 2011.

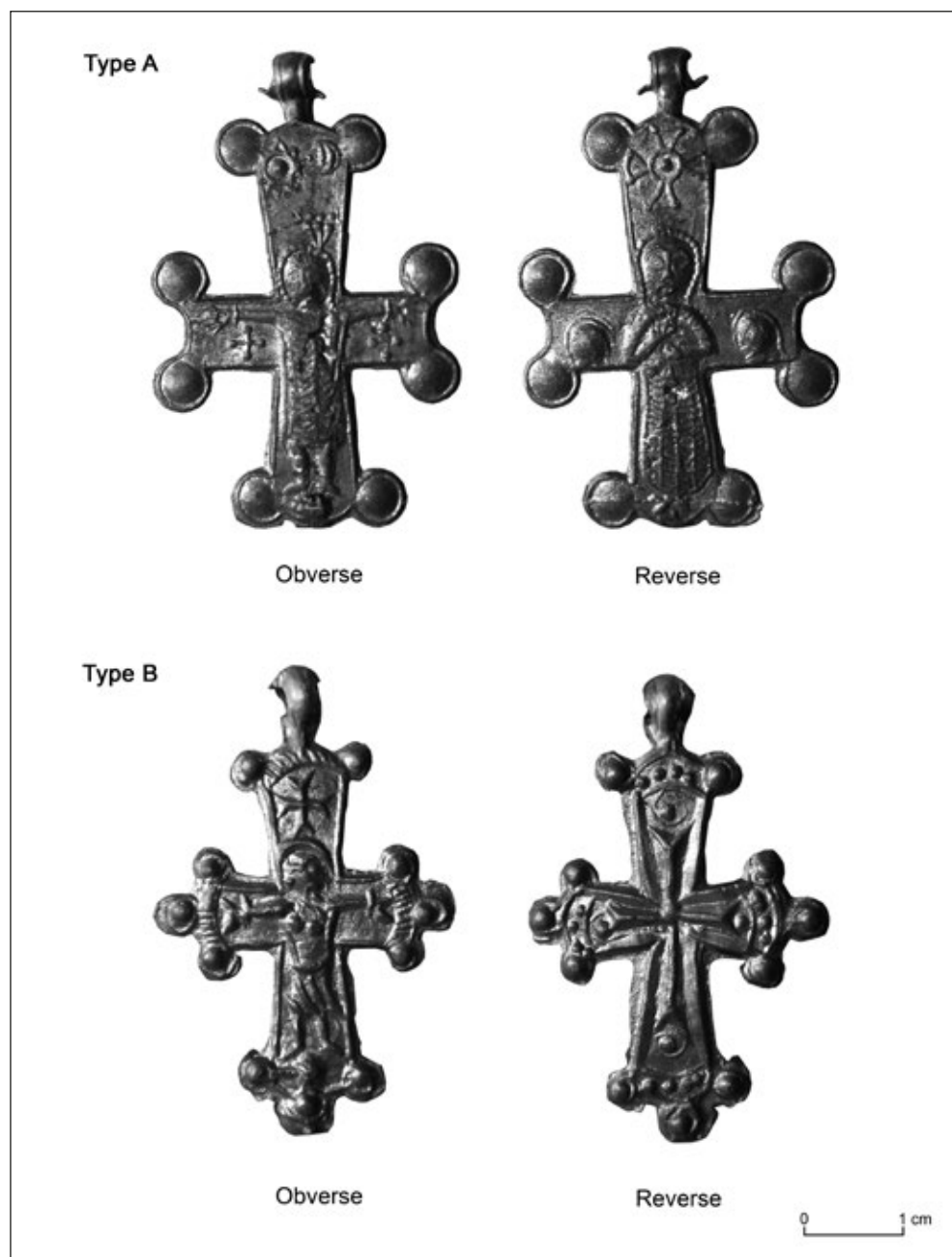


Fig. 1. The encolpia from Naqlun: top, Type A (Nd.11.149.1); bottom, Type B (Nd.11.150) (PCMA Naqlun Project/photos W. Godlewski)

ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Encolpia like the ones from Naqlun are seldom seen in Coptic art (Godlewski 2014: 187), hence the difficulty with finding direct parallels from Egypt. However, encolpia were very popular in the whole region influenced by Byzantine culture of the 6th century (Pitarakis 2006: 23). Being well documented, the latter are a good source for comparative analyses, placing the pendants from Naqlun in a broader cultural context and providing insight into the possible dating of these artifacts.

FIGURE OF CHRIST

The Crucifixion scene is depicted on the obverse of both types of encolpia from Naqlun. There are two iconographic types of the Crucifixion in the Byzantine tradition, coexisting for some time. The one that is earlier depicts Christ alive on the Cross and wearing a long tunic. The later shows Christ dead, his eyes closed and wearing only a loincloth. Instances of a mixed image, combining both types, can also be found, as, for example, in the so-called Theodore Psalter from 1066, originating from Constantinople and now kept in the British Museum in London. In one illustration, the crucified Jesus is shown with eyes closed and wearing a loincloth, in another Christ is in the same pose, but wearing a *colobium*. John Martin (1955: 191) believes that the transition period from one iconographic tradition to the other lasted from the late 9th century to the beginning of the 10th century. It corresponds well with Anna Kartsonis's research, suggesting that the two iconographic traditions were in use simultaneously until the end of the Macedonian period, that is, until the

middle of the 11th century (Kartsonis 1986: 68).

The crucified Christ is present on the obverse of both types of encolpia from Naqlun, but the representation is different. Christ on Type A pendants is wearing a *colobium*, a sleeveless kind of tunic, wider than a *chiton*; in Type B, he is shown in a loincloth, the so-called *perizonium*, which appeared in Crucifixion iconography after the 10th century. Moreover, in Type A, Christ's eyes are open, in Type B they are closed.

The motif of three lines terminating in oval spikes springing from the head of the crucified Christ merits attention as it is not found in representations on related objects. Nor are they present in the Byzantine iconography of the Crucifixion, although similar elements can be found in Coptic iconography.

The last page of the Glazier Codex from the 4th/5th century contains a depiction of a cross encircled by peacocks, sprigs and doves (Weitzmann 1979: Cat. No. 444a). The cross refers in form to the Egyptian hieroglyph sign *ankh*, which means 'life'. A similar kind of cross, encircled by floral elements, is also found in paintings from Kellia (Bolman 2007: Figs 20.2, 20.3). Sprigs and peacocks, often appearing in Christian art, symbolize peace and the Resurrection (Weitzmann 1979: 494). Therefore, it is probable that the element placed above Christ's head on the obverse of Type A pendants from Naqlun was meant to depict sprigs. It could also be a crest of feathers, like that on a peacock's head (for example, Leroy 1974: Pl. 2.1). The rendering of this element as three lines ending in round spikes is common.

Whichever the case with regard to the pendants from Naqlun, the main purpose of including this motif would have been to symbolize the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

SKULL OF ADAM

A skull is found in place of the *suppedaneum* below the feet of the crucified Christ in both types from Naqlun. This motif was supposed to be a reminder of the victory over death and a symbol of the Redemption (Pitarakis 2006: 58). In the description of the Crucifixion in the Gospels, the hill where Jesus died is called “Golgotha, place of a skull”. The skull shown under the cross symbolizes Adam’s grave, which in the Jewish tradition was located on one of the hills near Jerusalem. The Roman tradition referred to the hill where executions took place as Calvaria (Latin for the dome of the skull). This tradition is represented in the iconography of the Crucifixion. According to Pierre Maraval (1985: 56–57), the cross standing on the skull not only represents Golgotha, but is a symbol of Adam’s sin being washed away by the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, as André Grabar (1984: 239) pointed out, the skull is not present in depictions where the crucified Jesus is shown alive. In Byzantine iconography, it appears to have coexisted with representations of the dead Christ and appeared in the Crucifixion scene by the late 9th century.

The depiction on Type A pendants with Christ alive standing on Adam’s skull is incompatible with Grabar’s conclusion. It could mean that the pendants were of local production and the craftsmen making them were not aware of this complex symbolism. This is plausible considering that Egypt under Arab rule from the 7th century onward was isolated from Byzantine mainstream art.

SYMBOLS OF THE SUN AND THE MOON

A disk and a crescent, the sun and the moon, are depicted on the obverse of pendants of Type A, at the top of the vertical beam of the cross. These elements, which were typically situated above the *titulus* (missing on the pendants from Naqlun), became a standard component of the Crucifixion scenes after the period of the iconoclasm, although they could have appeared even earlier, as for example in an 8th century icon from Saint Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai.

The sun and the moon in the Crucifixion scenes could refer to the text in the Gospels (Lk 23, 44–45): “... and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour, and the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst ...”, and to the Old Testament prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah (Am 8, 9): “... the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day ...”.

In Byzantine art, the sun and the moon were shown in a schematic way: as a disc or a star and as a half-moon respectively, their appearance being not limited solely to the Crucifixion scenes. They appear, among others, in an ivory plate from the 6th century showing Justinian, which is now kept in the Louvre, as well as in the Joshua Roll from the 10th century, which is in the Vatican Library (Cutler 1991).

These symbols are not helpful in dating the object, because lunar and solar symbols are universal and do not change much through time. Thus, conclusions here are untenable.

TWO SMALL CROSSES UNDER THE ARMS OF CHRIST

Two small crosses under the arms of the crucified Christ, seen on the obverse of

Type A encolpia, are rather atypical for objects of this kind. However, a look at the iconography of the Crucifixion leads to assumptions regarding their symbolism. Early depictions of the Crucifixion, as presented for instance on an ivory plate stored in the British Museum, or as described in the Rabbula Gospels from the 6th century, comprise other figures beside Christ on the cross. They are: the Mother of God, John the Apostle, soldiers, weepers, angels. An assembly of figures limited to Mary, Saint John and angels, all above the cross, first appeared in the 8th century icon from Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. Despite a changing iconographic tradition of depicting certain figures in the Crucifixion, two figures, namely the Mother of God and John the Apostle, were regularly featured under the cross (Podskalsky and Weyl Carr 1991). The same rule was observed with regard to encolpia. Already in the early cross-shaped pendants, these two figures were depicted at the end of the horizontal beam (Pitarakis 2006: 56, Fig. 34). Therefore, two small crosses could symbolize the Mother of God and Saint John.

Another explanation is that these elements symbolized the other two crosses on Golgotha. In the Crucifixion iconography, the two crucified villains often appear next to the crucified Jesus. The use of perspective, meaning that the cross to which Christ is nailed is in the foreground, gives the illusion of His cross being bigger than the other two crosses. The craftsman who made the encolpia from Naqlun might have had this aim in mind, but a binding conclusion cannot be reached for lack of similar depictions on other pendants of this kind.

FIGURE ON THE REVERSE OF TYPE A ENCOLPIA

The figure depicted centrally on the reverse of Type A pendants most likely represents the Mother of God. It is a typical motif observed on the back of encolpia (Pitarakis 2006: 55–84). This juxtaposition with the Crucifixion scene on the other side emphasizes the divine and human nature of Christ, and highlights the important role of the Mother of God in the Incarnation of Christ (Pitarakis 2006: 57; Vassilaki and Tsironis 2000: 453).

The way that the Mother of God was depicted on encolpia changed over time. The most common type used from the 9th to the 10th century was the Kyriotisa Mother of God (Pitarakis 2006: 57–60); in the 10th century, a new iconographic type was introduced and developed into the most popular type until the end of the 11th century (Pitarakis 2006: 68–75). The Kyriotisa-type was replaced with Mary in the orans pose, her hands raised in a praying gesture, followed in the 11th century by the Hodegetria, the oldest and the most widespread depiction of Mary with Jesus in her arms. According to Pitarakis (2006: 76), the presence of such depictions on the reverses of encolpia corresponds with a dynamically growing cult of the Hodegetria icon in Constantinople.

The Mother of God on reverses of Type A encolpia from Naqlun holds her hands to her breast and is not holding Jesus Child. This type most likely resembles Mary of the Kyriotisa type. Pitarakis emphasizes the fact that in most depictions of this type Jesus is held in the arms of his Mother, although there are examples from the 9th and 10th centuries where the Child is not present (Pitarakis 2006: Cat. Nos 9, 10).

Mary on the pendants from Naqlun can be classified as a Kyriotisa based on the fact that such a depiction on the reverse was always accompanied by the crucified Jesus wearing a *colobium* (Pitarakis 2006: 57).

HEADS IN MEDALLIONS

Two elements visible on either side of the Mother of God on the reverse of pendants of Type A could depict human heads surrounded by a nimbus or placed in a medallion. Parallels for this element can be found on other encolpia from a Byzantium culture context. The reverse of early cross-shaped encolpia from the 8th century features a depiction of the Mother of God and the Child in the center and half-figures of archangels in each of the arms (Pitarakis

2006: 35). This form of decoration became very popular in later periods. Another popular type of decoration on the reverse comprised the Four Evangelists on the arms of the cross (Pitarakis 2006: Fig. 38). A third decorative style consisted of images of other saints placed on the cross arms: as half-figures (Pitarakis 2006: Fig. 35), in medallions (Pitarakis 2006: Cat. No. 95), or as whole figures (Pitarakis 2006: Fig. 36). Examples of pendants where the Mother of God is depicted alone are known as well (Pitarakis 2006: Fig. 46).

Therefore, the two elements on the reverse of Type A encolpia can be depictions of angels or of one of the Four Evangelists. It is puzzling, however, why there are only two figures and not four.

CONCLUSIONS

The iconographic analysis indicated that the pendants from Naqlun were local substitutes for objects of this kind originating from the Byzantine world. The decoration of the encolpia matched the Byzantine tradition in part, but there are also motifs without direct parallels, for instance, the peacock feathers above Christ's head on Type A pendants. Again, this can be proof that the encolpia from Naqlun were made in a local workshop. Neither type from Naqlun matches any of the types of cross-shaped pendants from an established Byzantine cultural context (Pitarakis 2006: 30–40). Their execution implies serial production, therefore it is probable that they were manufactured in a place where objects of this kind would have been merchandised on a large scale.

The iconography is useful also for determining the time when the pendants were produced, although in the case of the

encolpia from Naqlun, the coexistence of different motifs as well as iconographic types makes the dating more difficult. The earlier iconographic type of the Crucifixion, that is, Christ alive and in a *colobium*, on pendants of Type A, was in use until the mid-11th century. The later tradition, present on Type B pendants, depicting Christ with eyes closed and in a *perizonium*, started at the end of the 8th century and on cross-shaped encolpia in the 9th century. The two types coexisted until the mid-11th century. Moreover, on both pendant types from Naqlun Christ was depicted standing on Adam's skull. This motif was not present in Byzantine iconography of the Crucifixion in the 9th century and did not appear with representations of Christ alive.

The Mother of God image on the reverse of Type A pendants, assuming that it is the Kyriotisa type coexisting with

Christ wearing a *colobium*, narrows down the probable time of its production to the period between the 9th and 10th century. In turn, the cross on the reverse of Type B pendants is characteristic of pendants from the 8th century (Pitarakis 2006: 56), although such an early date is not commensurate with the image of Christ in a *perizonium* on the obverse.

Assuming that the presented objects are from the same period, they can be said to be from the mid-9th until the end of the 10th century. The dating derived from an iconographic analysis of the artifacts is compatible with the archaeological context, suggesting that the encolpia were deposited before the end of the 10th century.

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