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# REFUSE DUMP IN SECTOR B IN NAQLUN: EXCAVATION REPORT 2011

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**Abstract:** In excavation season 2011 works were carried out at the monastic refuse dump in sector B of the site. The deposits, dated to the 6th–7th centuries, were cut by a trench for a later, subterranean mud-brick structure. The intact strata yielded an extensive array of finds, including papyri, mud-stoppers, terracotta lamps and miscellaneous objects of leather, wood, glass, etc.

**Keywords:** Egypt, Naqlun, Sector B, 6th–7th century, refuse dump, mud-stoppers, lamps, botanical remains, textile production, plaster fragments

The 2011 season brought the continuation of exploration of a dump consisting of heterogeneous refuse discarded from the Naqlun monastery at an early phase of its existence (late 5th to mid-9th centuries). The layers of rubbish, apparently deposited by basketload, lay on a gentle, rocky slope in Sector B in the southwestern part of

the kom and were partly sealed by the floors of Building B, raised there at a later period. The work was part of the archaeological season conducted on site by a mission from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw (for that work, see Godlewski 2014, in this volume).

## LOCATION AND STRATIGRAPHY

The excavation was a continuation of work carried out in previous years. In seasons 1986, 1988, 1990 and 1992, a long (26 m, the width being 3.50 m) trench oriented north–south was excavated to bedrock along the western edge of the floor of building B. In 2008, a trench was opened under room B.26 and extended in 2009 to the north, exposing subterranean mud-brick structures that cut into the rubbish

layers and formed the northern limit of the area under investigation (Godlewski, Herbich, Wipszycka 1987–1988: especially 189; Godlewski, Derda, Górecki 1994: especially 209–212; see also Godlewski 1993; Derda, Dzierzbicka 2012).

In the 2011 season, two contiguous trenches were opened directly to the east of the trench which had been excavated to bedrock in 2008 and 2009 (for the

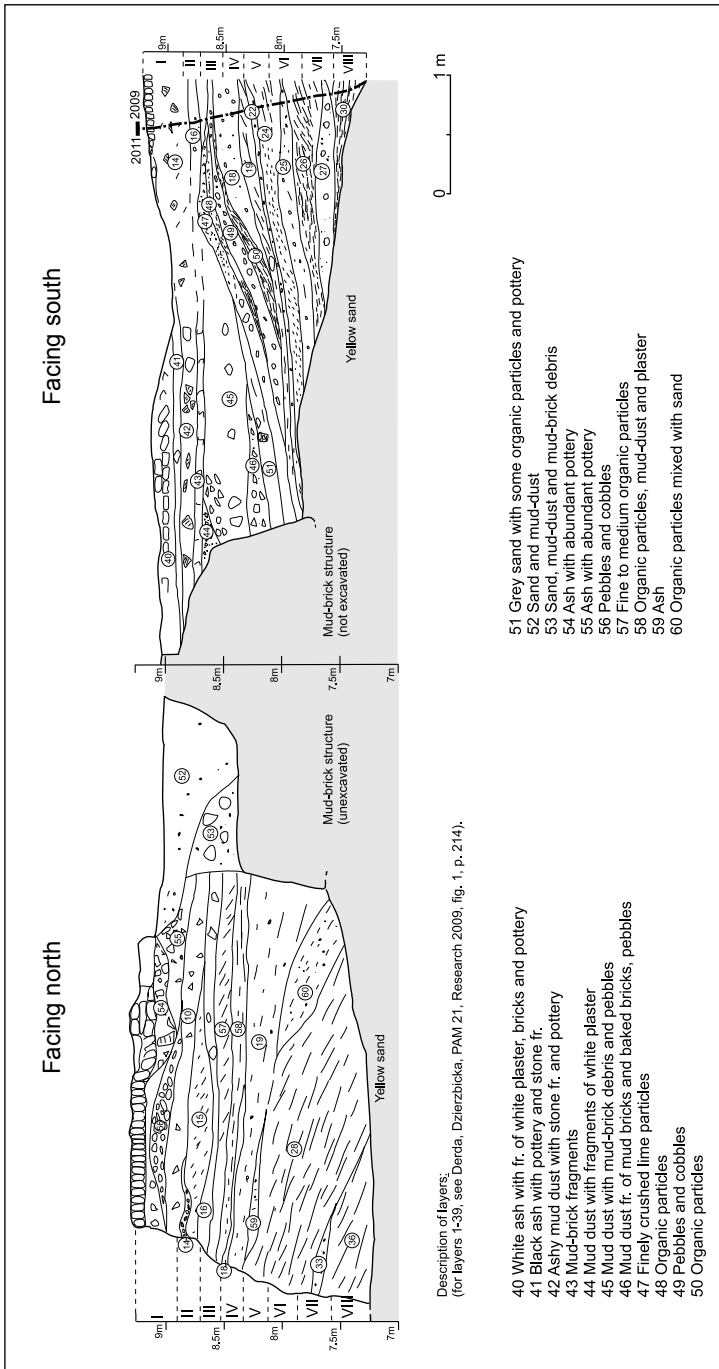


Fig 1. Latitudinal cross-sections through the excavated area (trench 1); Roman numerals indicate stratigraphic units (Drawing D. Dzierzbicka, PCMA archives)

location of the trench on the general site plan of Naqlun, see Godlewski 2014: inset on Fig. 1 on page 175, in this volume). In total, an area of approximately 7 m (N–S) by 6 m (E–W) was investigated. The first trench was opened directly to the north of room B.22, beneath the floor level of rooms B.24 and B.25. The second trench was a northward extension of the first. It was located to the north of B.25 and (partly) B.24 and east of the subterranean structure B.31 brought to light in 2009.

As in the 2009 season, it once again became evident that the layers of refuse had been cut by trenches dug in order to build subterranean structures. One such structure, perpendicular to the two uncovered in 2009 (see Godlewski 2012: 205, Fig. 18; Maślak 2012) was found in the southern part of the trench, immediately to the north of B.22. The pit that had been cut into the rubbish deposits, filled with practically clean sand, was visible on the surface. The fill of the structure was left unexcavated and further investigation is needed to determine its purpose, extent and dimensions.

The northern section of the trench was also cut by a pit, which appeared to be an eastward extension of the trench dug for structure B.31. In it, the layers of refuse had been removed practically down to bedrock, but no subterranean structure was erected and the pit was filled with sand. A possible cause of this may have been a rise of the bedrock in this place that would have made it difficult to keep the structure from emerging above the surface.

Fieldwork focused on undisturbed layers of the dump, which were explored to bedrock in eight arbitrary layers measuring about 20 cm in thickness. The natural layers of accumulated refuse

sloped gently from northeast to southwest and consisted of organic remains and sand, as well as lenses of ash and deposits of pebbles and cobbles, as well as mud-brick debris (see cross-sections N and S [Fig. 1]).

The dump contained kitchen refuse, waste produced during industrial, artisanal and building activity, as well as domestic trash (papyri, fragments of textiles and footwear). It seems therefore that the rubbish was generated in different parts of the monastic complex. In general, the first three arbitrary layers (I–III) consisted of ashes and abundant pottery that likely originated in a kitchen. Below, a leveled surface of sorts was discernible. Underneath it there were several layers, consisting mostly of organic particles.

Stratigraphic Unit I was the uppermost of the removed deposits, which contained surface debris, as well as material lying directly underneath the rooms B 24 and B 25. It consisted of gray, fine sand with a substantial admixture of ashes, and contained clusters of fragmentary mud bricks, baked bricks and stone rubble (see Fig. 1, layers 7, 14, 40, 41, 42, 54, 55, 56 in the sections). The unit yielded substantial amounts of pottery. Unit II consisted of the upper, fairly horizontal layers of the dump proper. It was composed of gray sand with lenses of organic particles (15, 16) and ashes rich in pottery (10), as well as a deposit of mud-brick fragments (43) and a layer of gray sand containing fragments of white plaster (44).

With Unit III, the layers of refuse begin to slope from west to east. The deposit consisted of gray sand containing mud-brick debris and pebbles (45). It also contained lenses of small fragments of lime (47), pebbles and cobbles (16, 49), as well as clusters of organic particles (48, 57).

Unit IV consisted of gray sand with some pebbles and brick fragments, (18, 45), as well as lenses of organic particles (50), some areas of which contained pottery and plaster fragments (19, 58). Unit V consisted mostly of organic particles with pottery and some plaster (19, 24). It also included clusters of pebbles and cobbles (49) and crushed lime particles (47) above a thin layer of gray sand with pebbles (22). In the north-west, a deposit of organic particles sloping from north to south (28) lay beneath a lens of ash (59).

Unit VI consisted of gray sand with pebbles and fine organic particles in the south (25, 26, 60) and of a continuation of the deposit of organic particles in the northwest (28). Unit VII consisted of remains of the layer of organic particles in the north-western part (28) and some underlying sand deposits in the south (27) and east (33), beneath which the bedrock emerged. The remaining deposit of organic particles with some thin lenses of ash (30, 36), which rested on bedrock sloping from east to west, was excavated as Unit VIII.

## FINDS

The excavated sector of the dump contained a large variety of material, which provided a great deal of data on several different aspects of monastic life in the central part of the complex in a period when this part of the dump was in use (approximately from the 6th to the first half of the 8th century). Because of the large number and diversity of the finds, which include pottery, textiles, wooden objects, architectural elements, botanicals and papyri among others, in-depth studies on them extend beyond ordinary archaeological analysis and require the cooperation of a number of specialists; the preliminary results of their research are presented here in synthetic form pending further expert studies.

The strata of refuse contained some, though not many, personal affects: fragments of garments, pieces of footwear, as well as Greek texts on papyrus. Most of the finds, however, offered information on the more general aspects of the functioning of the Naqlun community, like dining and consumption, architectural construction and interior decoration, lighting and

textile production, and these will be discussed in greater detail below.

### DINING AND CONSUMPTION

Kitchen refuse held a significant share among the finds and included fragments of storage vessels, kitchenware, as well as locally made and imported tableware. A wealth of information can be gleaned from them on the dining and consumption habits of the monastic community. Over 80 diagnostic glass fragments testified to the use of glass plates, bowls and cups belonging to the typical 6th and 7th-century repertoire. Common among the glass finds were stemmed glasses that were most likely used for drinking wine. A fragmentarily preserved wooden spoon (Nd.11.139) with a remarkably short, but certainly complete handle [*Fig. 2*] demonstrated that cutlery, though uncommon, was not absent from the monastic table.

Faunal remains and botanicals provided data on the monastic diet. Mollusks were consumed, as is to be inferred from the abundance of shells

of large snails. Fish seem to have played an important role in the diet at Naqlun, as indicated by fish bones and scales, which appear to be more abundant in the excavated strata than bones of other animals, perhaps with the exception of birds. The diet of the inhabitants of the monastery was also rich in fruit and nuts. Botanical remains, provisionally identified on the basis of parallels from previous seasons (Zieliński 2012), included stones of dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*), olives (*Olea europaea*), peaches (*Prunus persica*) and apricots (*Prunus armeniaca*), as well as pieces of grapevine (*Vitis vinifera*), skins of pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), and doum nuts (*Hyphaene thebaica*). Present, though rare, are shells of almonds (*Prunus amygdalus*), pistachios (*Pistacia vera*) and hazelnuts (*Corylus sp.*).

Mud-stoppers from the dump, including the 21 items recorded this season, have also contributed to our knowledge of monastic consumption. Stoppers with rim impressions matching wine amphorae recorded in the assemblage (diameters of 6–8 cm) show that at least a part of the vessels arrived at the monastery as sealed containers carrying wine. Twelve stoppers bore

fragmentary seal impressions, among which both inscriptions and geometrical patterns were identified.<sup>1</sup>

#### ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DECORATION

The material in the dump shows changes occurring in monastic architecture and interior decoration. Fragments of painted



Fig. 2. Wooden spoon (Nd.11.139)  
(Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

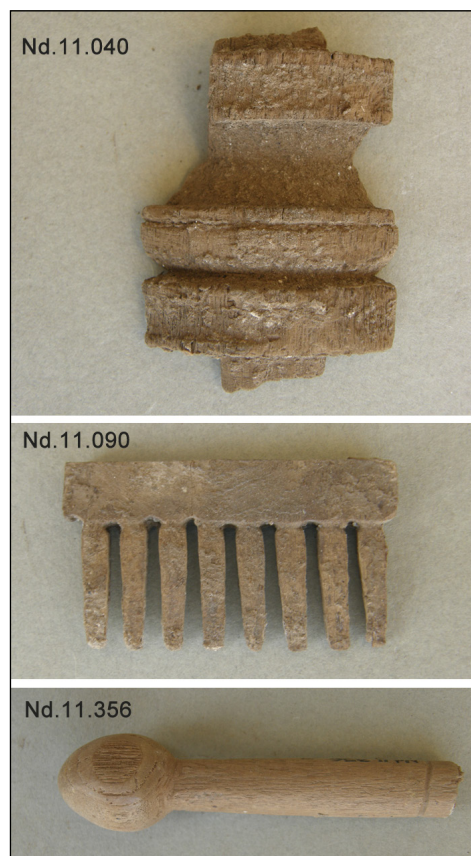


Fig. 3. Wooden objects: furniture finial Nd.11.040; weaving comb Nd.11.090; small peg Nd.11.356  
(Photos W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

<sup>1</sup> The assemblage is under study by the author as a separate research project.



and white plaster, mud bricks and baked bricks, as well as fragments of plaster with reed impressions from flat roofs seem to have come from clearance of structures that had fallen into disuse, were refurbished or adapted to new purposes. This is indicated by discarded mud-brick and baked-brick rubble, pebbles and cobbles that might have been used as beddings for floors, fragments of wall plaster and mud ceilings.

Some material recovered from the dump provides information on architecture that has either not been brought to light or, more likely, no longer exists because of later development. Fragments of sandy lime plaster painted purple were found in layers III–V which have been dated by ceramic finds to the first half of the 7th century. The shape of the plaster fragments suggests slightly rounded wall surfaces beside the usual flat ones, belonging to a structure built of baked bricks and bonded with mud mortar as indicated by still adhering remains of building material. Similar purple-painted

fragments of smooth floor plaster were recorded from the same strata. Layer II, dated approximately to the second half of the 7th century, produced some fragments of red-painted plaster and a much greater number of pieces of white lime plaster fallen from mud-brick walls, coated with two layers of paint, one blue and one red. Some fragments, undoubtedly from a decorated interior, exhibited bands of color and other obscure geometrical patterns in black, red, orange and yellow. The plaster fragments could not be matched to any known structure or phase of the monastic architecture uncovered hitherto.<sup>2</sup>

Fragments of wooden furnishings and tools were also found in the dump [Fig. 3]. Some fragmentary wooden objects were furniture parts, others were structural elements, such as various pegs, wedges and plugs, as well as parts of door locks. Stone elements were also present: indistinctive pieces of limestone, but also marble tiles. Found among the discarded debris were two corners of broken limestone capitals



Fig. 4. Pieces of limestone capitals with stylized acanthus leaves: Nd.11.218 (left) and Nd.11.318 (Photos W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Szymon Maślak for his comments on the plaster fragments.

with stylized acanthus leaves [Fig. 4]. It cannot be proven, but they could have come from the superstructures of tombs from the Byzantine-period cemetery (so-called Cemetery C) located nearby. The capitals may have found their way to the monastery and either suffered accidental damage or were prepared for reuse by intentionally hacking off the corner decoration.

### LIGHTING

The refuse layers also contained a variety of lamps. The glass finds included fragments of common conical lamps and stemmed *polycandelion* lamps, which, together with a nearly complete clay lamp and several wicks, constituted the monastery's repertoire of lighting devices. A clay lamp of elongated piriform shape, vertical loop handle and undefined base [Fig. 5] can be dated to the 6th–mid 7th century and finds a close parallel in

another Naqlun find, lamp Nd.08.342 (see Derda, Dzierzbicka 2012: 214, with references to parallels). It has a raised edge round the discus rim, extending to form a channel to the nozzle. The relief decoration consists of a wavy line on the shoulder and short, transverse strokes on the raised edge round the discus. Two straight lines in relief lead from the wick-hole to the filling hole and the space within the raised edge is filled with patterns composed of raised points.

### TEXTILE PRODUCTION

A large assemblage of objects provides data on the monastic industry. Waste from flax processing (chaff), as well as numerous unspun fibers, yarns and threads, may point to some kind of textile production. Examination by the team's textile restorer, Barbara Czaja-Szewczak, revealed wool in different stages of processing: dyed but not yet carded, unspun or partly spun fibers, as well as bundles of wool yarn [see Fig. 9]. To date, no testimonies of textile manufacture from this period have been found on site. This evidence is not necessarily an indication that the monks at Naqlun occupied themselves with spinning yarn and weaving textiles, but the monastery may have hired people who did. Nor is this material an indication of production on an industrial scale. The textiles need not have been for sale, although this of course cannot be excluded. It is much more likely that they were meant to satisfy the demand at the monastery itself. The manufactured objects may have been of simple sort. Besides fragments of garments (some of them decorated), the finds included utilitarian textiles, such as pieces of tablecloths and sacks, a bottom of a basket, as well as tablet-woven tapes and wicks.



Fig. 5. Lamp, Nd.11.037  
(Photos W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)



## APPENDIX

### TEXTILES FROM THE REFUSE DUMP IN NAQLUN

Barbara Czaja

Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

Archaeological excavations in 2011 in the refuse dump on site B in Naqlun yielded a small but varied textile assemblage, consisting of small scraps of linen and woolen shawls and tunics, both plain and decorated. The pieces were identified on the grounds of characteristic dress seams, hems and decoration (Nd.11.199).

A gamut of decoration techniques varying the textile surface was observed, including dyed thread in tapestry weave (Nd.11.046, Nd.11.109, Nd.11.170, Nd.11.241, Nd.11.304) and interweaving ornamental lancé technique (Nd.11.184; Nd.11.339). Fabric texture was attained with the bouclé technique (Nd.11.111) [Figs 6, 7].



Fig. 6. Examples of a plain textile with hem stitched overhand (bottom right, Nd.11.199) and decorated in the lancé technique (bottom left, Nd.11.184, top, Nd.11.339 seen from two sides) (Photos B. Czaja)

Other finds from the refuse dump included plied cords and rope of varying thickness (Nd.11.188, Nd.11.198, Nd.11.244), tapes (Nd.11.245) and shredded sacks (Nd.11.166) [Fig. 8]. Oil lamp wicks were also identified

(Nd.11.242) [see Fig. 8]. Most of these products were of linen, although woolen cords were also noted.

A separate category among the refuse was constituted by weaving waste products testifying to adroit production



Fig. 7. Examples of textiles demonstrating different decoration techniques varying the surface: dyed color thread in tapestry weave (Nd.11.046, Nd.11.170, Nd.11.241, Nd.11.304) and woolen fragment in bouclé technique (Nd.11.111)

(Photos B. Czaja)





*Fig. 8. Examples of cordage and weaving: plied cords (Nd.11.188, Nd.11.244) and knotted rope (Nd.11.198); knitted tape (Nd.11.245); linen sack in plain weave (Nd.11.166); used linen oil-lamp wick (Nd.11.242) (Photos B. Czaja)*



Fig. 9. Evidence of spinning: examples of spun linen yarn (Nd.11.137, Nd.11.197, Nd.11.183) and waste from spinning wool (Nd.11.309) and linen (Nd.11.191, Nd.11.256) (Photos B. Czaja)

in the monastery of simple items like all kinds of cordage, tapes and oil lamp wicks. One can distinguish unplied linen fiber, spun yarn (Nd.11.137, Nd.11.183, Nd.11.197) and batches of short minor fibers left over from spinning wool (Nd.11.309) and linen (Nd.11.191, Nd.11.256) [Fig. 9].

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