

# Tomasz Górecki

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## Sheikh Abd El-Gurna (Hermitage in Tomb 1152) : Preliminary Report, 2005

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# SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA

(HERMITAGE IN TOMB 1152)  
PRELIMINARY REPORT, 2005

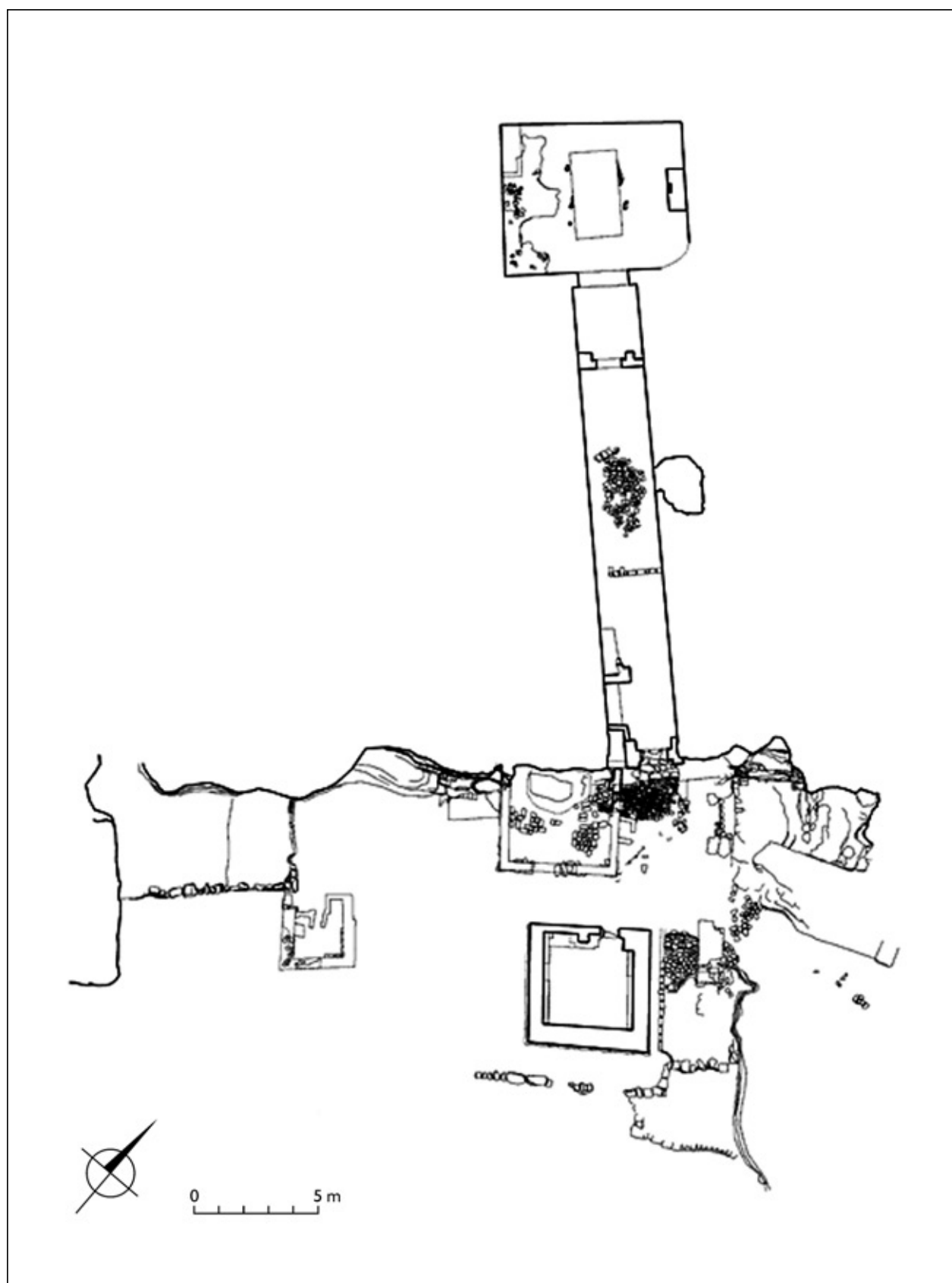
Tomasz Górecki

*The third season of excavations carried out at Sheikh Abd el-Gurna by a team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology lasted from January 31 to March 3, 2005.<sup>1</sup>*

*The team concentrated on exploring the inside of a Pharaonic tomb inhabited by monks in the Coptic period and a rubbish dump that had accumulated during the functioning of the hermitage on a rock slope to the south and east of Tower B, now sealed under a thin layer of eroded rock debris.*

1 The team was directed by Mr. Tomasz Górecki, archaeologist and ceramologist, and included Ms Eliza Szpakowska, archaeologist-egyptologist; Ms Małgorzata Czapińska and Ms Teresa Kaczor, architects; Prof. Dr. Maciej Pawlikowski, geologist; Mr. Maciej Jawornicki, photographer. Mrs. Janina Wielowieyska and Mrs. Izabela Mazur, book conservators, joined the team for a period from March 4 until the end of the season. Mr. Sayed Mohamed Ahmed Salim, inspector from the Islamic-Coptic Section of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, was attached to the Mission.

On behalf of the Mission, I would like to express our sincere thanks to Dr. Zahi Hawass, SCA Secretary General, for his far-sightedness and efficiency in making it possible for book conservators to join the mission at short notice, following the unexpected discovery of the Coptic codices. This decision helped ensure that the ancient books will be protected satisfactorily until a proper conservation program is set in motion. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Holeil Ghaly, Head of the Central Directorate of Upper Egypt and the Oasis and Mr. Ali el-Asfar, Director of Antiquities in el-Gurna, both of whom were generously ready to help the mission deal with the various logistical difficulties connected with the unexpected discovery



*Fig. 1. Plan of the excavations  
(Drawing M. Czapińska)*

## HERMITAGE INSIDE THE TOMB

The corridor and inner room of the tomb was cleared completely of the fill left by modern, more or less plunder 'excavations'. The occupational layer from Coptic times was cleared, uncovering a mud floor over virtually the whole surface of the inner room. Contrary to earlier assumptions, it turned out that the monks had used the entire interior of the tomb along with the inner room.

A pavement made of stone slabs, unworked stones and potsherds ran along the south wall of the inner room. In the southwestern corner, there was a sleeping place separated from the rest of the room by a low wall composed of two courses of brick (cf. plan, *Fig. 1*). A similar sleeping place was discovered by the opposite wall. Small irregular niches had been cut into the walls next to both these places.

The evidence indicates that the monks had adapted the inner room for living purposes, separating it from the front part of the hermitage with a thick mud-brick wall [*Fig. 2*]. A door 1.04 m wide with a monolithic threshold of dressed stone led through this wall. Debris from the collapsed upper part of the wall preserved some fragments of whitewashed mud plaster. Traces of a guilloche outlined in black appeared on some pieces, with patches of red and yellow-brown paint filling in the open spaces. The guilloche may have framed the door or perhaps a niche or window. The wall separating the inner room and part of the corridor from the front part of the corridor appears to have been erected in the final stages of the existence of the hermitage (possibly in the second half of the 7th century).



*Fig. 2. Mud-brick wall separating the inner room from the front part of the hermitage (Photo T. Górecki)*

The finds from this part of the hermitage consisted of mainly Coptic pottery, reed pens, a few ostraca, but also Egyptian pottery and two damaged and incomplete mummies left by whoever it was who had excavated the tomb, whether illicit diggers or archaeologists working in the area in the 1920s.

Once the fill was removed from the middle of the corridor, it turned out that this part, too, was paved with flat irregular slabs of stone. The tiles had been laid not directly on the rock floor, but on a layer of stones and windblown dust covering the entire length of the corridor.

An irregular chamber cut in the eastern wall of the corridor, seen in part in 2004, was also cleared. The walls here are of lighter color, indicating a shorter period of exposure

to erosion; perhaps it was cut later, already in the Coptic period. The entrance to this chamber was 0.80 m wide and c. 1.10 m high (equal to the height of the chamber). In the lowest part of the chamber, under secondary fill, the finds included, apart from pottery and organic material, more than 20 mud stoppers, each bearing one or two stamps: monograms, geometrical and figural motifs, made on a white or red ground. It would suggest that the monks had cut the chamber for use as a kind of storage area perhaps, where they could store amphorae full of goods.

Coptic objects, mainly pottery, predominated inside the tomb. The upper parts of the fill also contained various small finds from Pharaonic times: potsherds, ushebti, pieces of painted wooden coffins.

## COPTIC MANUSCRIPTS FROM A RUBBISH DUMP

Intensive explorations started on the rubbish dump spreading to the south and east of Tower B. It yielded huge quantities of pottery and organic material, as well as fragmentarily preserved baskets, ropes and textiles. Many Coptic ostraca were preserved as well, including about 20 on limestone chips [*Fig. 10*] frequently written on both sides.

In the southern part of the hermitage, on the outer edges of a dump of ashes and rubbish from an oven or kitchen, three books were discovered [*Fig. 3*]. Two of these were

books bound in leather, containing a Coptic text written on papyrus. The last was a collection of parchment cards set between two leather-bound wooden boards.

The first of the codices counted some 140 cards; it was 31 by 23 cm and 5 cm thick. The covers were made of leather. The bottom cover of one is almost entirely destroyed, the upper one, which turned out to be the front cover [*Fig. 5*] bore stamped decoration in the form of lines crossing in a rhomboidal pattern.<sup>2</sup> The stamps are virtually the same as ornaments found on Late Roman pottery

2 See similarly decorated covers with decoration impressed with a hot stamp on wet leather, especially B. van Regemorter, *Some Early Bindings from Egypt in the Chester Beatty Library* (Dublin 1958), Pl. 8, binding no. 5 (6th-7th century), distinguished by a stamp depicting a gamboling lion; cf. also E.A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London 1915), illustration on pp. XXXVII (MS Oriental 7027), L (MS Oriental 7028), LVII (MS Oriental 7029), all from the end of the 10th century; id., *Coptic Homilies in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* edited from the Papyrus Codex Oriental 5001 in the British Museum (London 1910), Pl. IV (7th century); *Ägypten. Schätze aus dem Wüstensand. Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil. Katalog zur Ausstellung* (Wiesbaden 1996), no. 249 on p. 229 (mid 9th century).





*Fig. 3. Coptic manuscripts upon discovery  
(Photo T. Górecki)*



*Fig. 4. Parchment book between wooden covers, at discovery  
(Photo T. Górecki)*





*Fig. 5. Canons of Pseudo-Basil, cover after provisional cleaning in 2005  
(Photo T. Górecki)*



*Fig. 6. The Enkomion of Saint Pisenthios after discovery (Photo T. Górecki)*



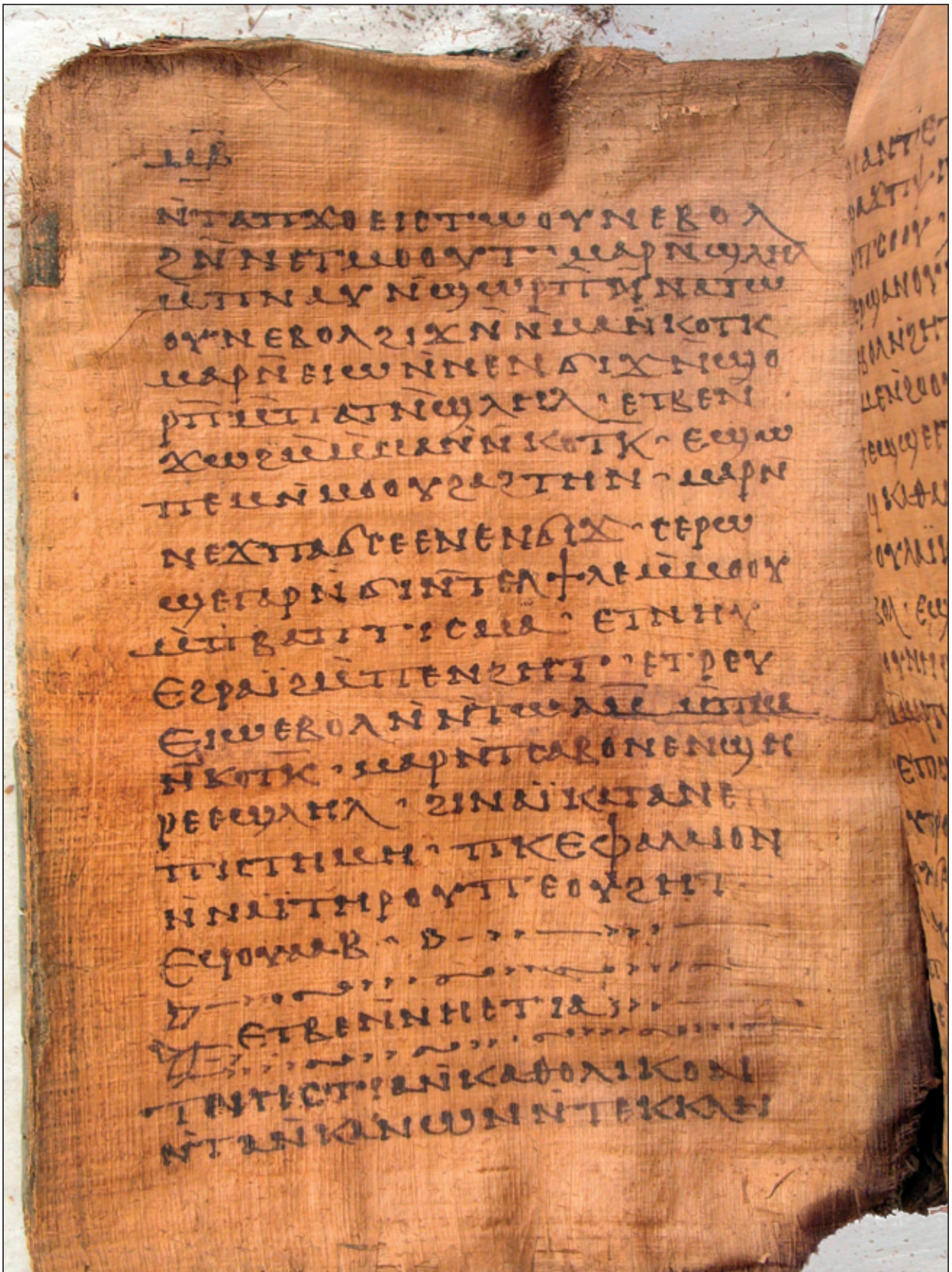


Fig. 7. Page from the Canons of Pseudo-Basil  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)



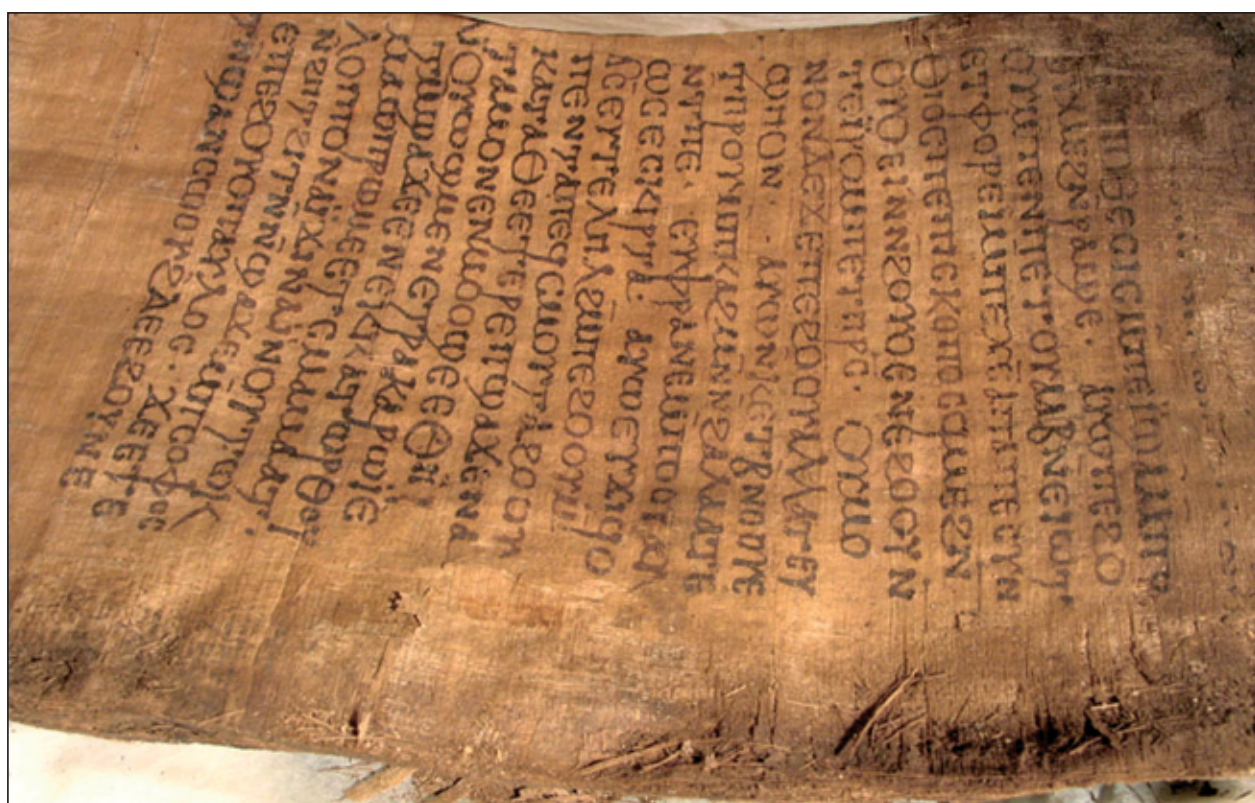


Fig. 8. Open page from the Enkomion of Apa Pisenhios (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 9. Open card with guilloche pattern from the parchment codex (Photo M. Jawornicki)

from the 6th-middle of 7th century AD. Dating based on parallels of this kind can approximate the time when the covers were made, but not the codex itself, the text of which is provisionally thought to come from the 8th century. There is no reason, however, to think that a cover from an earlier codex could not have been used to bind this particular manuscript, thus explaining the chronological discrepancy.

The text is written in one column containing from 21 (pages 42 and 43) to 24 (pages 74 and 75) lines in Coptic.

A translation of part of the text [Fig. 7] permitted this codes to be identified as a collection of rules and regulations (so-

called Canons of Pseudo-Basil) intended for a church community. It may be the only preserved full version of these canons in the Coptic language (Sahidic dialect). Previously, it was known only from a late version in Arabic.<sup>3</sup>

The second of the Coptic manuscripts (32.5 by 24 cm; 4 cm thick) was bound in leather covers with painted decoration [Fig. 6]. A “rosette” was painted presumably in the center of the front cover and framed with a guilloche. The book was tied with a thong, to which a painted wooden pointer was attached. There were some 70 cards in it. Like the other manuscript, the text here was also written in a single column, each

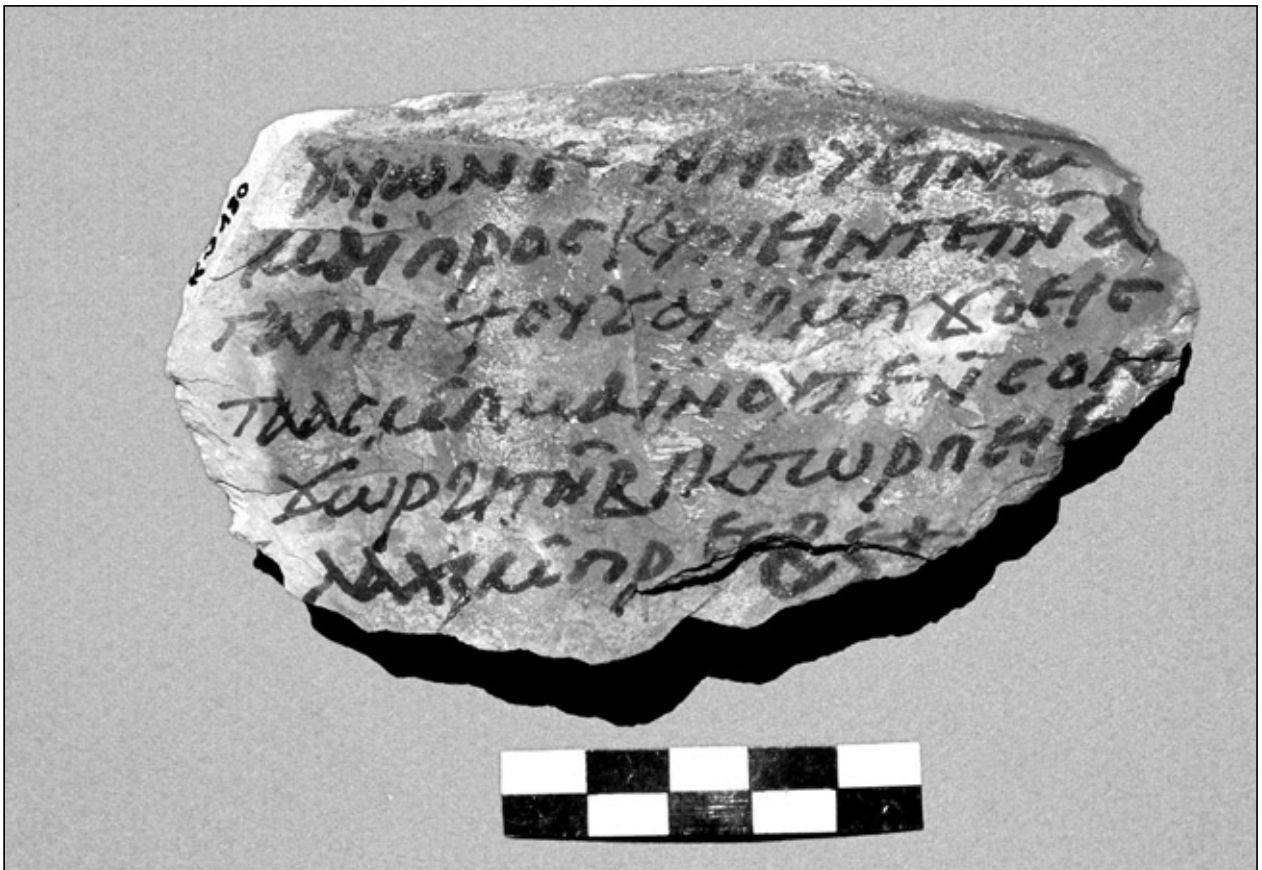


Fig. 10. Ostracum on limestone chip  
(Photo T. Górecki)

3 W. Riedel, *Kirchenrechtsquellen des Patriarchats Alexandrien* (Leipzig 1900).



page containing from 21 to 25 lines (although in one case 30 lines could be read).

On the second page of the codex [Fig. 8], which fell open naturally, the name of the saintly bishop Apa Pisenthios<sup>4</sup> can be read, permitting the manuscript to be identified very likely as *The Encomion of St. Pisenthios*, an eulogy to a Theban saint who lived in AD 568-632 and was bishop of the town of Koptos.<sup>5</sup>

The two codices have rather thick covers reinforced with waste papyrus in blocks. What these reused fragments of papyrus sheets contain will become apparent only after conservation of the books is completed and the particular layers of these covers separated.

The third book [Fig. 4] is a set of parchment cards, written in Coptic with the

exception of one which is in Greek. These cards were placed between two wooden covers (23 by 18 cm; 1 cm thick) faced with thin leather on the outside surface. Prior to conservation procedures, it is difficult to ascertain whether the cards formed a homogeneous text or were a collection of texts of various kinds. The texts that can be seen where the book falls open indicate two different writers. Ornaments painted in red and green and with black contour lines can be seen on the margins of some of the pages [Fig. 9]. There is a distinct guilloche pattern in one place and floral and figural (image of a bird?) ornaments elsewhere.

The codices were protected provisionally and examined by conservators to assess the extent of conservation work to be carried out in the future.

- 4 Not to risk damaging the codex, it was opened only where the cards fell open in a natural way; this turned out on pages 42, 43, 74, 75 and 138. A quick translation of pages 42 and 43 immediately after the discovery (accomplished by Father Prof. Wincenty Myszor from the Silesian University in Katowice) permitted Prof. Ewa Wipszycka from Warsaw University to identify the text. The said two pages contain a complete admonition about fasting. Preceding this was an admonition on hours of prayer and following it the beginning of an admonition concerning fasting on the day of the martyrs. In the German translation (cf. note 3 above) of a medieval Arabic manuscript, these canons appeared as numbers 28, 29 (on fasting) and 30.
- 5 So independently of one another: Father Wincenty Myszor (Silesian University) and Prof. Jacques van der Vliet (University of Leiden). Another *enkomion* on Bishop Pisenthios (Apa Pisenthios Pepiskopos in our text) was published by E.A. Wallis Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London 1913), 75-127 (Coptic text). The translation gives the title as "The Life of Bishop Pisentius, by John the Elder" (British Museum MS, Oriental, no 7026). The name of the bishop was written down as Pesenthios (fol. 20a, p. 39 copt.) or Pisenthios (fol. 20b, p. 40 copt., cf. also *ibid.*, Pl. LIII). A translation of the first page of this codex done by Father Wincenty Myszor is presented below, in an appendix to this report.

## APPENDIX

*ENKOMION OF ST. PISENTHIOS*  
FROM SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA

Wincenty Myszor

The following is a transcription and provisional translation of the beginning of an *enkomiion*, a laudatory text<sup>1</sup> praising the life of

Pisenthios, Bishop of Koptos, found at Sheikh Abd el-Gurna in 2005. It is similar to the opening part of the *Vie de St. Pesunthius*,

## TRANSCRIPTION

1 [ϚΕ]Ν ΚΟΥΙ ΝΨΑΧΕ ΝΕΝ  
2 ΤΑΥΧΟΟΥ Ν̄ΟΙ ΠΕΝΠΕΤ[ΟΥΑΑΒ]  
3 [Π]ΕΙΩΤ ΑΠΑ ΜΩΥΧΗC ΠΕΠΙ  
4 CΚΟΠΟC ΕΠΜΑΚΑΡΙΩΤΑΤΟC ΑΠΑ  
5 ΠΕΙCΗΝΘΙΟC ΠΕΠΙCΚΟΠΟC Ν̄  
6 ΤΠΟΛΙC ΚΒ̄Τ̄ ΕΛΑΨΩΠΕ ΔΕ ΕΨ  
7 CΥΜΦΩΝΕΙ Ν̄ΜΜΑΨ ΕΤΠΕΒΚΩ  
8 ΜΙΟΝ Ν̄ΟΙ ΙΩΖΑΝΝΗC ΠΕΨΜΑΘΗ  
9 ΤΗC ΠΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΨ ΨΕ  
10 ΜΑΤΟΙ ΕΝΤΑΨΞΕ ΝΑΙ ΔΕ ΑΝ  
11 ΖΩC ΕΨΜΙΝΕ ΝΟΥΒΙΟC ΑΨ  
12 ΚΩΛΥ ΓΑΡ Μ̄ΠΕΙΖΩΒ ΨΙΝ ΕΨΖ̄Ν̄  
13 ΤCΑΡΞ ΕΤΒΕ ΠΑΨΑΙ Μ̄ΠΕΨΘΕΒΒΙΟ  
14 ΕΨΠΗΤ ΕΒΟΛ Μ̄ΠΕΟΟΥ ΕΤΨΟΥ  
15 ΕΙΤ ΑΛΛΑ Ε̄ΝΤΑΨΞΕ ΝΑΙ  
16 ΕΨΤΑΕΙΟ Ν̄ΝΕΨΖΙCΕ

.....  
.....  
CΜΟΥ ΕΡΟΙ  
.....  
.....

## TRANSLATION

1. Some words, which  
2. were said by our saintly  
3. father, apa Moses,  
4. bishop, about the most venerated apa  
5. Pisenthios, bishop  
6. of the town of Keft, and  
7. in agreement with him as to the praise  
    (*enkomiion*)  
8. was John, his follower  
9. who is called  
10. "soldier" (?), who did not tell me  
11. that he was composing a life. He refrained  
12. in this matter, as long as he (bishop) was  
13. in body, because his humility was great  
14. and far from vain glory,  
15. but he told me  
16. about compensation for his suffering.

.....  
.....  
Bless me!  
.....  
.....

<sup>1</sup> On *enkomiia* in general, P. van Cauwenbergh, *Étude sur les moines d'Égypte depuis le concile de Chalcédoine (451) jusqu'à l'invasion arabe (640)* (Paris 1914), 29-39.



*éveque de Coptos*<sup>2</sup> and *Eloge de Pisentios éveque de Keft*.<sup>3</sup> An English translation was proposed by E.A. Wallis Budge.<sup>4</sup>

According to W.E. Crum,<sup>5</sup> Pisentius became bishop of Koptos about AD 598.

He was born in 568 and he took monastic vows very early in life in the famous Monastery of St. Phoibamon in Deir el-Bahari. He died about AD 631/632.

2 E. Revillout, Textes coptes extraits de la correspondance de St. Pésunthius, évêque de Coptos, et de plusieurs documents analogues, *Revue Égyptologique* 9 (1900), 177.

3 E. Amélineau, Étude sur le christianisme en Egypte (Paris 1887), 73

4 *Encomium in Onophrium anachoretam*: E. A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London 1915), 1206-1216

5 W.E. Crum, "Discours de Pisentius sur Saint Onnophrius", *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 20 (1915-17), 40.