

Tomasz Górecki

Sheikh Abd El-Gurna Coptic Hermitage : First Interim Report

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SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA COPTIC HERMITAGE

FIRST INTERIM REPORT

Tomasz Górecki

The first season of work on the new site of Sheikh abd el-Gurna in West Thebes lasted one month, from March 15 to April 15, 2003.¹⁾ The site chosen for investigation was a relatively well-preserved hermitage situated on a small hill, off the beaten tourist paths and thus undamaged in modern times. The ruins rose on a rocky terrace in front of the entrance to a rock-cut tomb of the Middle Kingdom.²⁾ The surviving structures and walls, the remains of mural painting and considerable quantities of pottery, as well as a rubbish dump visible just below the terrace made it reasonable to assume that the site would turn out to be a fairly complete, chronologically homogeneous monastic establishment.³⁾

1) The work was carried out by the author with the invaluable assistance of Mr. Gamal Mohammed Muawad from the Coptic and Islamic Antiquities Inspectorate of the SCA.

2) PM I, 2nd, p. 668, map V. The authors mention only the explorations in neighboring pit 1151, where the courtyard and interior were cleared of rock debris by an MMA expedition in the 1920s. To judge by what can be seen in the field, an effort was made at the time to clear pit 1152 as well, but the digging was interrupted at an early stage.

3) In the years 1979-1982, 1996, 2000-2002, while participating in the work of Polish, German and Belgian expeditions working in Luxor, the author devoted his spare time to fieldwalking and recording unknown or no more than mentioned traces of the Coptic presence in the area: Pharaonic tombs turned into hermitages and Pharaonic temples adapted in part as chapels or churches. The monastic ruins in front of pit 1152 had been noted by H.E. Winlock, cf. H.E. Winlock, W.E. Crum, *The monastery of Epiphanius* (New York 1926), Part I, 10-11, map on pl. I.

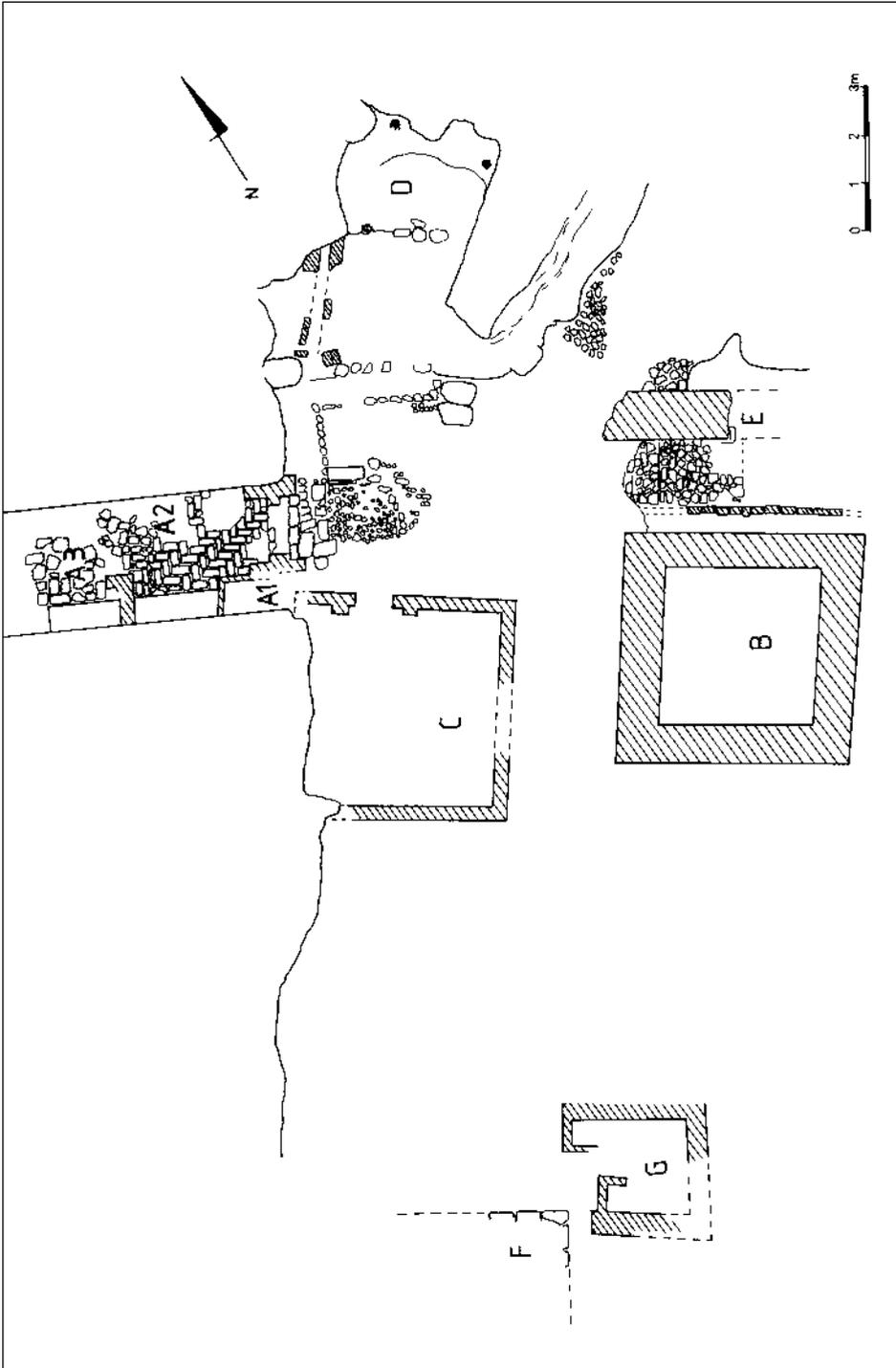


Fig. 1. Plan of the monastic complex in Sbeitk abd el-Gurna
(Drawing T. Górecki, T. Kaczor)

The first season was intended as a site reconnaissance preparing the way for regular excavations in the following year. Apart from tracing a preliminary plan of the ruins (*Fig. 1*), test pits were dug inside the corridor leading to the burial chamber.

Once the secondary fill from the 20th century excavations was removed, the test trench inside the corridor revealed partition walls of mud brick⁴⁾ forming three small rooms. Room A1 was open to the outside and was not connected with the

corridor. Two other rooms (A2 and A3) were furnished with low brick platforms for sitting or sleeping. These rooms were separated from the outside part of the complex (a courtyard perhaps) by a wall, which was pierced by a passage between mud-brick jambs. The threshold consisted of a palm-wood plank resting on a row of tightly set stone blocks. Holes cut into the rock walls of the corridor, about 2 m above floor level, once served to mount the wooden beams of the ceiling.



Fig. 2. Traces of Coptic painting on the north wall of the corridor leading to the inner room of the Middle Kingdom tomb (Photo T. Górecki)

4) All of the structures cleared to date (in A, B and C) were erected of reused mud brick (c. 13x18x40 cm), which could have been retrieved from the nearby temples. Poorly preserved stamps with cartouches have been noted on some of the bricks.

Flat baked bricks laid in a herring-bone pattern constituted the pavement in room A2. In A3, the floor, preserved fragmentarily, was made of irregular slabs of limestone of varying size.

Simple images and Coptic inscriptions were painted in red and yellow on the northern wall of the corridor (*Fig. 2*). The most important of the ten surviving wall paintings is a cross within an arcade decorated with a guilloche (*Fig. 3*), a Latin cross and a circle around a Coptic inscription.⁵⁾

The upper parts of walls of another room (C) were uncovered to the south of the entrance in front of the tomb and attached to the rock face. The plan approaches a square and was entered

apparently through a single doorway in the northern side.

The other and best preserved structure (B; *Fig. 4*) stood at the edge of the courtyard, already on the rocky slope in part. It was a high building – the surviving height is close to 6 m – built of mud brick on a square plan measuring c. 5 m to the side. The walls stood directly on bedrock except for the eastern side where they were erected on a row of stone blocks. This season the northern wall was cleared down to the foundations and a small test pit was excavated by the eastern wall, revealing a section of the foundation. The interior is filled with mud-brick debris from the walls and vaults of this structure. The function of this structure remains to be

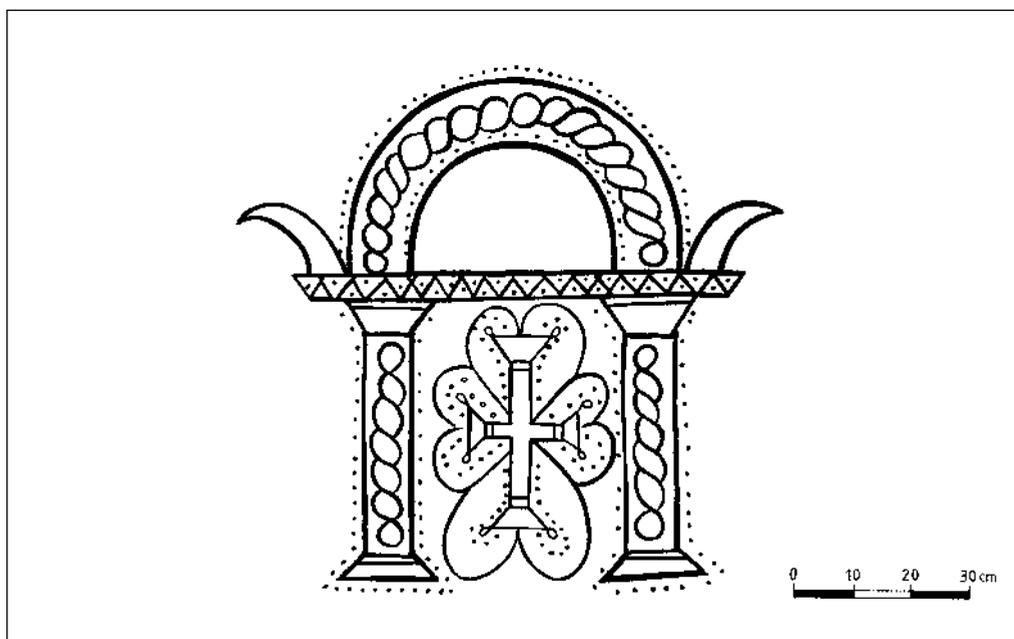


Fig. 3. Coptic wall painting depicting a cross in an arcade (cf. Fig. 2), preliminary reconstruction before conservation (Drawing T. Górecki)

5) At present, it is possible to distinguish two phases of wall painting, introduced on different layers of plaster and differing somewhat in the color range applied.

clarified: it could have served storage purposes and it could have been intended as a defensive tower, or it could have combined these functions.

A wall measuring c. 1 m in thickness was uncovered north of structure B. It ran parallel to the northern wall of B and should be seen rather as a casing for a sloping descent paved with limestone chips, leading from the courtyard outside the hermitage. A "curb" of mud brick delimited this descent on the southern side.

A rock-cut unit (D) can be traced north of the entrance to the tomb. It did not have a roof and opened onto the courtyard. This

was the kitchen, equipped with three places for cooking: shallow depressions in the rock adapted to hold cooking pots. Sherds of cooking pots in quantity, mixed with ashes and rock debris, filled this area. Two other, as yet unexplored rooms (F and G) were situated c. 7 m south of structure B and area C. The latter had walls of mud brick, the former included stone blocks alongside mud brick in the wall structure. A plaited palm-leaf basket was discovered in the upper layers of the fill, above room F. It contained the belongings of a presumably itinerant craftsman: a piece of tanned leather, leather straps, coils of



Fig. 4. The so-called tower B viewed from the north. State at the beginning of the season (Photo W. Jerke)

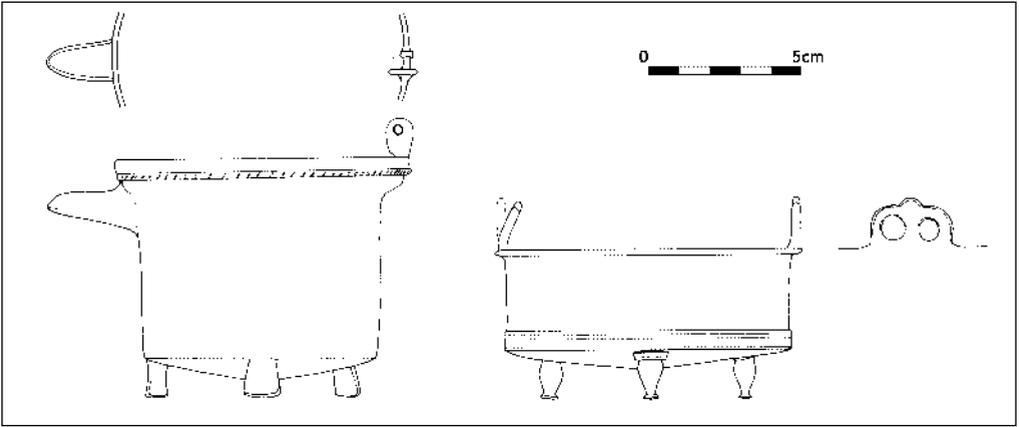


Fig. 5. Bronze vessels
(Drawing T. Górecki)

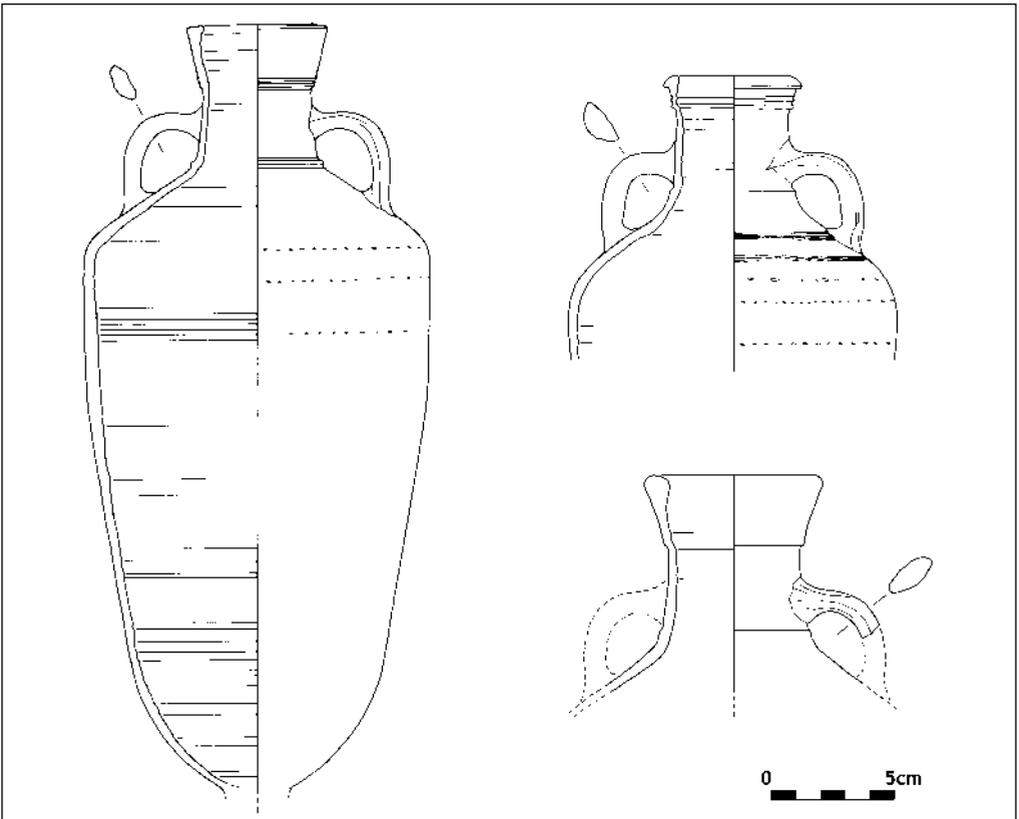


Fig. 6. Amphorae of the 7th century (?) imported from Tunisia (?)
(Drawing T. Górecki)

rope, an iron chain, a shell and three bronze vessels, of which two can be dated to the 6th century AD (Fig. 5).⁶⁾

Pottery is the prevalent category of archaeological finds from the site. Most of the ceramic assemblage is from room D. It is mainly kitchen ware, some table ware and parts of amphorae, the latter including

a most interesting group of imported amphorae presumably from seventh-century Tunisia (Fig. 6).

Coptic ostraca (Fig. 7) were discovered throughout the hermitage, but foremost in the vicinity of structure B. All in all, 9 texts were noted: 8 inscribed on sherds of amphorae and 1 on a limestone chip.

The fill above the Coptic layers, generated mainly by medieval plundering of the tomb and by early archaeological excavations by the American expedition in the 1920s, yielded pottery of the Middle and New Kingdoms, several dozen ushebtis, fragments of cartonnages, wooden sarcophagi, Canopic urns, faience amulets, wooden figurines, and animal and human bones.



Fig. 7. Coptic ostrakon found in room A2
(Photo T. Górecki)

6) The vessels are not intact: one (Fig. 5, left) is missing the two movable handles, the other (Fig. 5, right) does not have a lid. For parallels, cf. for the former, W.B. Emery, L.P. Kirwan, *The Royal Tombs of Ballana and Qustul* (Cairo 1938), vol. I, fig. 100.20, vol. II, pl. 75A,B; for the latter, *ibid.*, vol. I, fig. 100.22, vol. II, pl. 74E.