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Sheikh Abd El-Gurna: Hermitage in Tomb 1152 and Chapel in Tomb 1151

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SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA

HERMITAGE IN TOMB 1152 AND CHAPEL IN TOMB 1151

Tomasz Górecki

This season (between 15 December 2006 and 28 February 2007) archaeological work at the site concentrated in the area north of the hermitage (already in front of Tomb 1151) and in the southern part of the monastic enclosure (in front of Tomb 1152 and inside it).¹ The program covered examination of various parts of the core hermitage, coupled with an effort to understand the role in the monastic complex played by the neighboring Tomb 1151, which yielded modest evidence of secondary occupation by the monks. The two tombs are both from the Middle Kingdom and their axes are perpendicular to one another, the entrances some 40 m apart.

1 The team directed by Tomasz Górecki comprised: Szymon Maślak, archaeologist; [Eliza Szpakowska](#), archaeologist-egyptologist; Zbigniew Polak, archaeologist; Grzegorz Ochała, archaeologist; Ewa Parandowska, restorer; Monika Więch, student of archaeology (University of Warsaw). The SCA was represented by Ms Amal Eweid Nasser Mohamed from the Islamic and Coptic Antiquities Inspectorate.

TOMB 1151

The ground in front of the entrance to Tomb 1151 was cleared of all modern rubbish and testing was completed of the archaeological dump from H.E. Winlock's excavations carried out in the 1930s.² This lies just north of the tomb entrance. Some objects from the Pharaonic period were recorded, these having been either missed or neglected at the time: ushebti fragments, bits of faience amulets, textiles [Fig. 1] and mummy bandages. Potsherds are less

numerous. The rare Coptic find is represented almost exclusively by pottery and a single ostrakon.

A rock niche just east of the tomb entrance yielded evidence of a small, perhaps one-time hearth and next to it, a storage container made of unfired clay.

In the entrance corridor the monks had introduced a pavement running 14 m inside the tomb. Most of it was a hard, neatly smoothed lime mortar except for some



Fig. 1. Fragment of a linen textile with representation of Re-Horakhty(?). H. figure c. 15 cm (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 2. Cross outlined in the floor of the corridor entrance (Photo T. Górecki)

2 Information about H.E. Winlock's excavations and relevant documentation, including a plan and section of Tomb 1151, were kindly provided, with permission from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, by Dr. Andrzej Ćwiek, who happened on them during his study of fieldnotes in the MMA archives.

tamped clay at the back which could be proof of later repairs or additions. The section just inside the entrance, forming a rectangle 2.90 by 1.52 m, was composed of small irregular limestone tiles set in a clay bedding. Fragments of ceramic tiles had been used to outline the shape of a cross with flaring ends, its horizontal bar being shorter than the longer one (1.32 m high vs. 1.06 m wide) [Fig. 2]. It did not occupy the entire surface of the passage.

Two low masonry benches occupied a position by the east wall and indeed their presence can be observed only as a ghost trace on the wall and floor of the tomb. The benches were apparently dismantled during Winlock's excavations. A mud-brick partition wall separated the benches. Of this wall plaster fragments with traces of an inscription in red painted directly on the whitewash have been preserved. It was possible so far to decipher two names: Marcos and Petros.

The opposite, east and west walls of the corridor were covered with non-figurative

murals. These geometric patterns were rendered in yellow and red paint exclusively and included outlines of crosses, intersecting circles, squares inscribed into circles, parts of longer inscriptions, the letters *alpha* and *omega*. The lime-mortar floor in front of these paintings has three cup-like hollows with blackening around them, indicative of lamps being burned there.

The character of this chamber leaves little doubt that the monks had adapted it for prayer instead of habitation. There were no utilitarian objects and surprisingly little pottery found anywhere inside this tomb or in front of it, unlike sites where hermits lived and executed their crafts (as in Tomb 1152 adapted to serve as a hermitage). Unfortunately, without diagnostic pottery and in the face of illegible inscriptions, it is impossible to date this chamber reliably. The modest evidence suggests that the chapel may have been in use concurrently with the earliest phase of the nearby hermitage in Tomb 1152, that is, in the first half of the 6th century at the earliest.

TOMB 1151

In front of Tomb 1152, clearing continued of the stone steps leading up to the courtyard hermitage. Down from the three long steps, which were rather like landings, made of specially selected slabs of stone [A in Fig. 3], there was yet another landing of tamped clay (B) mixed with large quantities of intentionally fragmented sherds, mostly from amphorae. From here one stepped over a stone threshold (C) set between two jambs made of big blocks of stone down onto yet another landing (D) formed of clay on a clay-and-sherds leveling layer compensating for the inclination of the rock slope.

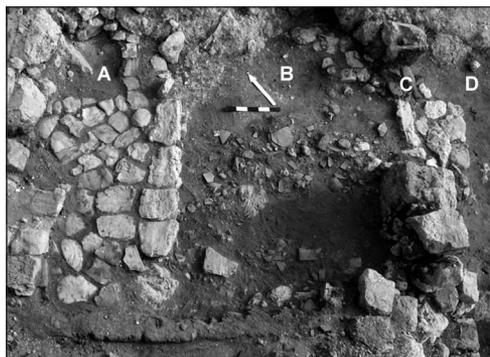


Fig. 3. Stone steps leading up into the hermitage courtyard (Photo M. Jawornicki)

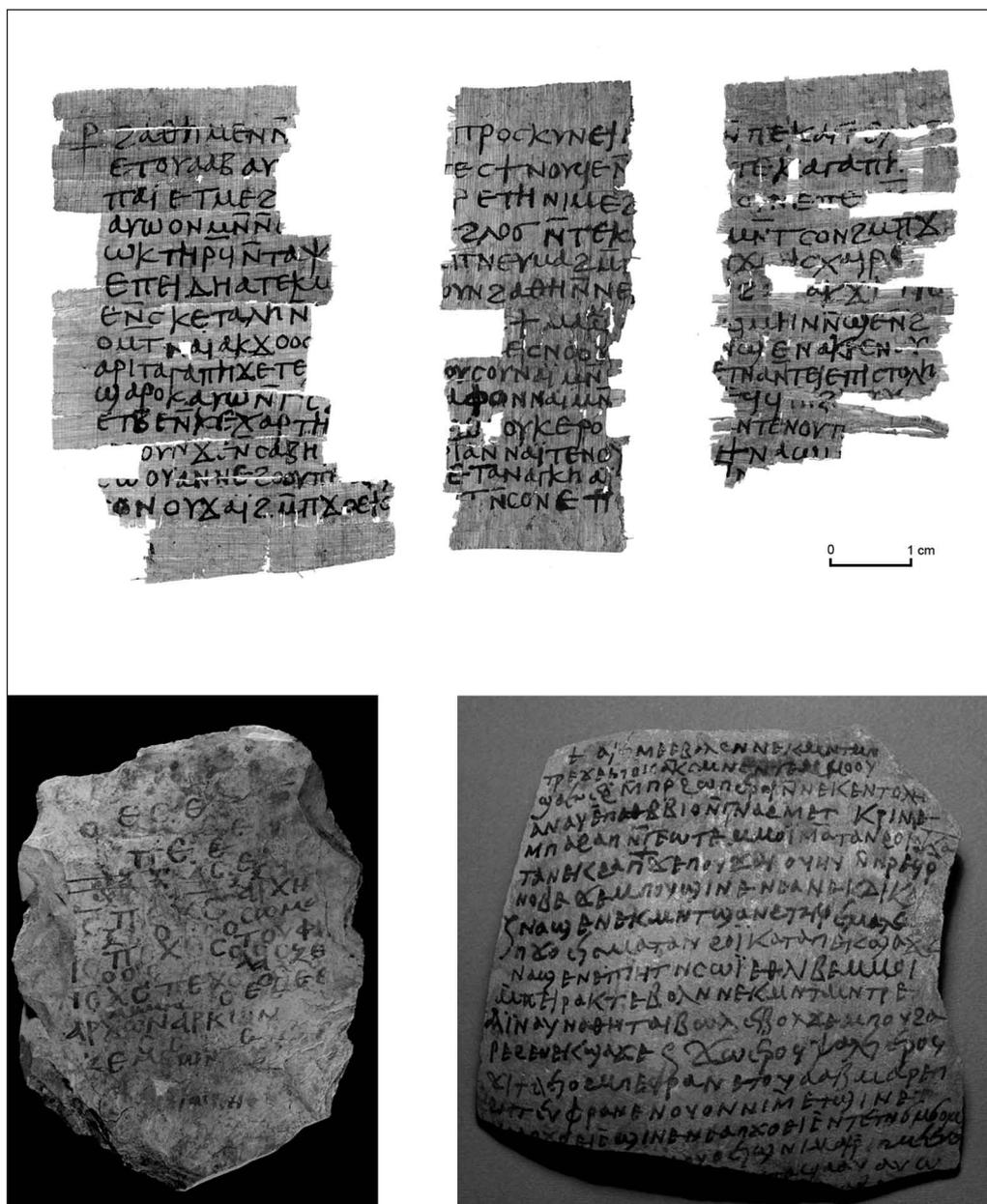


Fig. 4. Examples of writing and inscriptions from Tomb 1152: A letter in Coptic on papyrus (top), scale 1:1; Coptic ostracon C.O.282 with extracts from Psalms 104 and 118, on a sherd from an imported amphora, end of 7th century, H.13.7 cm, W. 14.3 cm (bottom right); limestone chip with writing exercise, H. 24.8 cm, W. 19.4 cm (Photo T. Górecki (bottom right); M. Jawornicki (bottom left); documentation scans of papyrus)

Some testing was carried out inside the corridor of the tomb-hermitage. A bench standing just inside the entrance was dismantled. The fill, which was subsequently sealed by a clay floor, contained organic refuse and stone rubble, as well as all kinds of rubbish: fragments of rope, yarn, cuts of leather, remain of textiles, potsherds broken mud stoppers and three fragments of letters written in Coptic on papyrus [cf. *Fig. 4*, top].³ A few meters further on (about 6.00 m from the entrance), excavations hit upon the entrance to a vertical shaft located just by the south wall of the tomb. The shaft [*Fig. 5*],

which was about 3 m deep, led to a small irregular subterranean rock chamber (approximately 3 square meters in area) utilized by the Copts as a store. It is difficult to be sure whether this was a secondary burial chamber from the Pharaonic (Late ?) period or whether the monks themselves excavated it in the rock. The fill inside it contained a mixed assemblage of Pharaonic and Coptic material, the most important of this set being a Coptic ostrakon [cf. *Fig. 4*, bottom right], a writing exercise on a limestone chip with the names of the presumed monks Simon and Joseph written at the bottom



*Fig. 5. Vertical shaft leading into a subterranean rock chamber
(Photo T. Górecki)*

3 The letter consists of three fragments (initially considered separate items) which were recently put together and translated by Anne Boud'hors who started to study the Coptic texts from Hermitage in TT 1152 in 2009. The author requests the addresses of the letter to pay a small amount of money still pending for the purchase of four rolls of papyrus. She has also identified the content of ostrakon C.O.282.



[cf. *Fig. 4*, bottom left]. Simon was presumably the one who wrote the text (last line) and Joseph the teacher who checked it (name below the text). A reed pen and two sketch designs of decoration on limestone chips were also found. The pottery deposit, mainly sherds of amphorae and a few water jars, also merits attention. Between the vertical shaft and the chamber the monks had introduced a shallow vestibule about 0.70 m deep; the walls were raised of mud brick with a barrel vault resting on two wooden beams ripped from wooden polychrome coffins. The walls and floors had been plastered with a kind of mud plaster by the Copts.

Back in the corridor, a limestone slab with traces of relief decoration noted in the previous season in the floor between the bench and the “cellar” shaft was now lifted, dismantling for the purpose a wall standing partly on these slabs and afterwards restoring it in the original order. The relief slabs, which constituted the original foundation of the wall, were replaced with modern limestone blocks of the same size. Upon preliminary analysis, one of the relief slabs [*Fig. 6*] was identified as a large fragment of a funerary stela from the Late New Kingdom (most likely the Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty) and the other as a fragment of a relief from a temple of the same period bearing a representation of an unidentified deity seated on a throne, holding an *ankh* in the left hand and a flower bouquet in the other one [*Fig. 7*].

Further inside the tomb, six narrow test pits were excavated along the walls of the corridor in places where the original stratigraphy of the rather low fill in this part of the tomb appeared to be undisturbed. Both leveling and occupational layers were recorded. A thin occupational layer attested directly on the rock had naturally evened out all the irregularities of the floor. On this lay a layer of ashes and burnt stone presumed to date from the earliest phase of use by the Coptic monks. This was then leveled with rock debris containing numerous very poorly preserved objects from the Pharaonic period, mainly *ushebti*, potsherds, textiles and cartonnages. This layer formed a bedding under the stone-tile floor of the Copts.

The present work has contributed to a better understanding of the chronology of the hermitage and the changes that the adaptation into a hermitage involved. It now appears that the monks inhabiting the complex in the earliest phase, in the 6th–early 7th century AD, were engaged in manufacturing textiles and basketry. In the middle of the 7th century the hermitage was abandoned for a few or a few dozen years and reoccupied in the second half of the 7th century. This second phase lasted through the end of the 8th century and perhaps a little longer. The occupation of the monks at this time seems to have been leatherwork, starting with simple utilitarian products like belts and sandals and ending possibly with codex covers and bookbinding.

top

◀ *Fig. 6. Lower part of a limestone funerary stela (H. 38 cm, W. 57 cm, depth of relief about 1 cm)*
(Photo T. Górecki)

bottom

◀ *Fig. 7. Fragment of a relief depicting a deity (H. 38 cm, W. 51 cm, depth of relief about 0.7 cm)*
(Photo T. Górecki)