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Deir El-Naqlun, 1990

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In the sixth field season in Deir el-Naqlun (October 25 to November 14), a mission from the PCMA¹ concentrated work on the excavation of Hermitage 89 and on a preliminary investigation of the wall surrounding the existing monastic complex of Deir el-Malak Ghubrail.²

HERMITAGE 89

Hermitage 89 lies immediately to the north of Hermitage 25, which was excavated in the 1989 season. Like the other hermitages, it was cut in a rocky ridge, which is the eastern edge of a plateau where the complex of monastic buildings had been built.

This hermitage consists of six units, two of which were constructed entirely of mud brick, stone, bricks and sherds upon a courtyard in front of the original hermitage complex (Fig. 1). Notwithstanding, the plan of this hermitage does not fall into the same scheme as that of hermitages 1, 2 and 25 discovered so far. Only units A.1-2, constituting the core of the hermitage, may be considered similar to the units inhabited by the anchorites. Complex A.1-2 consists of two units. A large space A.1 (5 x 5.50 m) was

¹ The mission led by Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski included: Mr. Tomasz Derda, papyrologist, Mr. Jarosław Dobrowolski, architect, Mr. Tomasz Górecki, ceramologist, Mr. Piotr Jeute, archaeologist, Mr. Olaf E. Kaper, egyptologist and arabist, Mr. Adam Łajtar, epigraphist, Mrs. Bożena Mierzejewska, archaeologist, Mr. Bogusław Okupny, photographer, Mr. Muhammad Ahmed Halim, inspector of the Islamic and Coptic Section of the EAO in the Fayum. We are greatly indebted to EAO staff in Cairo and Fayum for their constant help during the season.

² J. Dobrowolski, Naqlun – Deir el-Malak Ghubrail: the existing monastic complex, *Nubica* 1-2, 1990, pp. 161-170.

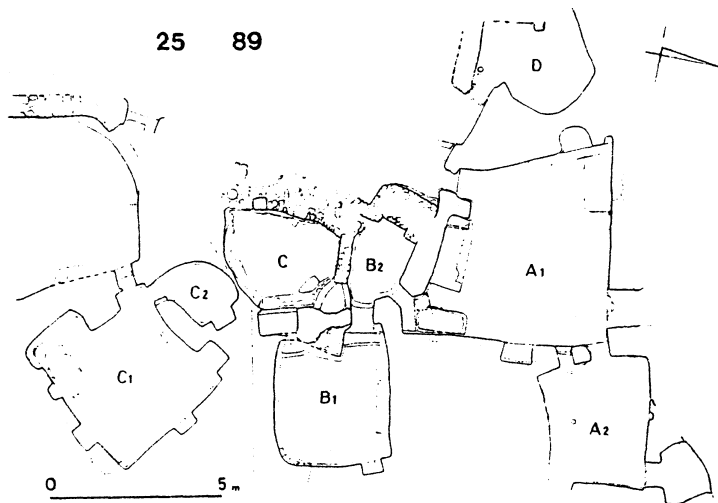


Fig. 1. Plan of hermitage 89.

meticulously plastered and equipped with a storage bin cut in the floor in the southeastern corner, a bench along the western wall and a bed located just by the doorway. There were also several niches cut in the walls, the one in the eastern wall doubtless serving as a prayer niche.

The other room (A.2) was much smaller and remained unplastered. Beside a niche in the eastern wall, it had a spacious niche, a small room in fact, in the southeastern corner, with a floor raised about 1 m above the walking level in this room. This niche presumably served as a place for sleeping.

Both the equipment of the larger room and the various changes made in its interior are evidence for a rather long occupation of this complex. In the second phase, when the storage bin was filled in and covered with a floor, when a comfortable bed with a profiled headrest was added just by the southern wall and a hearth for cooking meals located in the northwestern corner, the complex seems to have functioned together with unit B.1, communicating through an enlarged window previously set in a niche in back of the storage bin.

Unit B.1 is small (3.40 x 3 m), cut in rock and carefully plastered with mud and a layer of lime plaster. It had two benches by the northern and western walls and a prayer niche in the eastern one. The niche had a painted frame, of which only small fragments have survived. On the outside there was a band of floral decoration – a sort of wreath, with possibly palm leaves at the bottom. Inside the niche there presumably was a cross upon a podium: remnants of the latter survived as the sole evidence of the composition.

It would appear then that in the second phase of the utilization of complex A.1-2, unit B.1 served as a sort of oratory. It was visited often by pilgrims who left numerous Coptic and Arabic graffiti giving names of visitors sometimes accompanied by their functions and their places of origin. All of the writings are undoubtedly Christian and seem to have been made in Late Medieval times.

In the last phase of the hermitage's habitation a small vestibule B.2 was added in front of unit B.1; the new structure was built upon the original courtyard.

Hermitage 89 had two other units, which are only just traceable. Unit D in the northern part of the complex was preserved at barely walking level: the kind of plaster floor in the interior suggests it had been a living space. The walls of unit C were of bricks and sherds set in mud, the roof was of reeds. Considering the character of the fill in this unit, it must have served as a domestic area, perhaps a pen: donkeys seem to have been kept here for some time.

A large part of the original courtyard, presumably connected with the A.1-2 complex as well as possibly with units C and D, and at one time built over with units B.2 and C, has not been excavated, especially the southern and southwestern parts. Presumably part of the courtyard, just as the northern and southern ends of unit D, had been damaged.

The fill of the rooms of hermitage 89 contained several objects connected with the daily life of the anchorites. These included fragments of clothes: both thick and thin tunics, and pieces of shoes,

mainly sandals, with the upper soles decorated very carefully with impressed geometrical designs. A large portion of the finds are mats, ropes and baskets which may have been produced in the hermitage or may have simply been used here, for they were found mainly in unit C. Numerous wooden objects were either part of the spiritual life of the hermitage's inhabitants (fragments of crosses) or constituted elements of the equipment: pegs for setting in the upper parts of walls, pieces of tools.

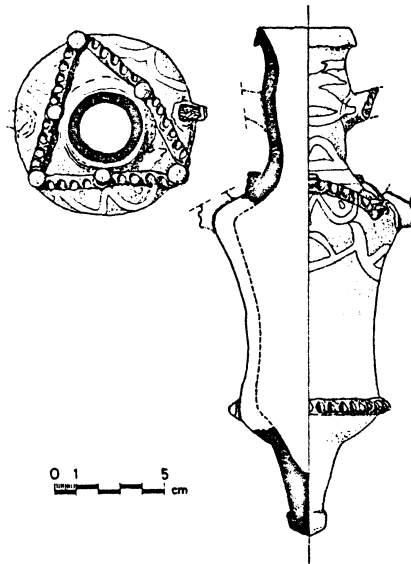
Apart from the pottery, on which below, written documents constitute the most important finds. Several were found written both on papyrus and paper, in three languages: Greek, Coptic and Arabic. The Greek and Arabic texts are especially interesting, being of the nature of contracts and agreements.³ Small pieces of a papyrus codex in Coptic additionally contain illustrations placed on the margins of the pages.

The ceramic assemblage from Hermitage 89 falls into two groups: the pottery from unit C and the pottery from the storage pit in unit A.1.⁴ Typologically, these two groups are not homogenous, although both are the result of the same circumstances, that is both were deposited as rubbish in two separate spots, but at a similar time. In both groups domestic vessels, primarily amphorae and cooking pots, predominate. Storage vessels and tableware are much less frequent. Among the finds from unit C there stands out a three-handled pithos with painted decoration, not figural, of the type black and red upon white (slip). Of interest are also small tableware pieces representing local imitations of Late Roman wares, made of Nile silt (group K) and marl clay from the Aswan region (group 0).

The contents of the pit in unit A.1 is much more interesting. Apart from numerous household pots, it included a group of about

³ See papers by Tomasz Derda and Olaf E. Kaper, below, pp. 54ff and 57ff.

⁴ The information concerning pottery comes from Mr. Tomasz Górecki, who is responsible for preparing the ceramic material for publication.



N 40/90

Fig. 2. Miniature amphora with painted and applied decoration.

40 vessels, handmade of Nile silt, decorated either with ornamental openwork, impressed or applied patterns, ornaments painted in white. The most frequently encountered form is an incense burner (about 10 pieces), next were small storage pots (four objects), small amphorae (three) (Fig. 2) and chalices (two).

Apart from the pottery there were fragments of unfired vessels belonging, as far as form and material are concerned, to the same group; doubtless the vessels must have been produced and decorated in the hermitage or its immediate vicinity. As in unit C, a small number of tableware objects were found, all imitations of Late Roman groups K and O.

The dating of both chronologically coexistent dumps and their pottery contents is not certain. On the grounds of a few imported amphorae and a large assemblage of so-called chocolate amphorae

of Egyptian production, the two deposits from the pit in unit A.1 and unit C may be dated to the end of the 6th and the 7th centuries. The group of handmade pots should be dated to not earlier than the middle of the 7th century in view of its similarity to Early Islamic unglazed pottery with openwork decoration. It would seem then that both deposits date to the beginning of the second half of the 7th century.

The rare finds of pottery from the upper layers of the fill in units A.1, D and B.1 are similar to the pottery discovered last year inside Hermitage 25 and can be dated to the 9th-10th centuries.