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Naqlun 2007 : Preliminary Report

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NAQLUN 2007

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Włodzimierz Godlewski

A mission from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, directed by Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski,¹ completed another season of excavations on the site of the Nekloni monastery in Fayum between 8 September and 22 October 2007. The season's prime objectives were research on the site of the western hermitages, specifically Hermitage 87 to the west of cemetery C, and an updating of site topography using state-of-the-art surveying equipment. Textile restorers continued the conservation of textiles excavated from cemeteries A and C. The mission's arabist studied the Arabic documents discovered in 2005, while other team members concentrated on documenting the Arabic and Coptic texts on paper and parchment uncovered at Naqlun during excavations in 1986–1989 and presently stored in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. The activities have also been reported in Godlewski 2008.

1 The staff included: Barbara Czaja-Szewczak and Mirosława Machulak, textile restorers; Dr. Christian Gaubert, arabist; Wiesław Małkowski, topographer and archaeologist; Szymon Maślak, archaeologist; Dr. Maria Mossakowska-Gaubert, archaeologist; and Katarzyna Danys and Łukasz Krupski, students of archaeology.

The work of the Mission proceeded effectively and efficiently thanks to the all-encompassing assistance of the SCA authorities, in Cairo as well as in Fayum. The Mission would like to express its gratitude to Mr. Ibrahim El-Ragab, SCA inspector, also in charge of the Mission Storehouse in Naqlun. The hospitality of the Fayum Coptic monastic community and the personal involvement of Abuna Abraam in creating the proper environment for effective work are greatly appreciated.

TOPOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

A comprehensive map of the entire site, including the identified hermitages on Gebel Naqlun and the western group of hermitages by the canal, as well as the mound containing the ruins of the Nekloni monastery east of the modern monastic complex erected around the Church of the Archangel Gabriel and cemetery C to the southwest, had been made by Jarosław Dobrowolski in 1986–1988 (Godlewski *et alii* 1994: 202, simplified map; Derda 1995: Pl. II, detailed map of the gebel with localization of hermitages except for the southern part of the hills, encompassing the kom and modern monastic architecture; a full map of the site has yet to be published). Since then the excavation of the site has progressed, uncovering monastic architecture from the 6th through the 10th–11th century on the kom. The construction of a new monastery, which started in 1999 and partly encroached on the already surveyed area, also changed the topographical situation. An updating of the general map was in order and this was accomplished in 2007. Using state-of-the-art topographical equipment, Wiesław Malkowski completed a full topographical survey, producing a new map of the site based on Dobrowolski's earlier effort [*Fig. 1*].

The present survey covered the area of the monastery, c. 19.80 ha (including the excavated area inside the old monastery complex, the medieval monastery and modern buildings). Topographical measurements were carried out also on cemeteries C.1 and C.2 (c. 3.25 ha), situated close to the modern monastery wall in the southwestern part, and in two hermitages of the western group (no. 85 explored in 2006 and no. 87 excavated this year). Measurements were taken with a state-of-the-art electronic tachometer (Total Station Leica TCR 407).

All level values were calculated from a reference point situated inside the excavated part of the old monastery complex (height 7.27 m a.s.l + 100 m to eliminate the minus values of survey points localized in the western part of the site).

More importantly, this new topographical survey provided an opportunity to revamp the original archeological nomenclature which had lost its original clarity in the wake of intensive development of the modern monastery. The new designations of the different parts of the archaeological site are as follows:

- 1) Eastern group of hermitages situated in the valleys and hollows of Gebel Naqlun, altogether 81 identified rock-cut complexes; the number may yet grow.
- 2) Western group of hermitages located near the canal, eight complexes at present; three of these are dated to the middle and second half of the 5th century.
- 3) Cemeteries C.1 and C.2, dated to the end of the 5th and the 6th century, currently west of the monastery enclosure wall opposite the western gate.
- 4) Site A (main kom) to the east of the later medieval monastery, including monastic architecture from the end of the 5th and the 6th century, as well as later structures dated to the 10th and 11th century when the Nekloni monastery reached a peak in development. In the second half of the 11th and in the 12th century, an extensive cemetery grew around the Church of the Archangel Michael on Site A (Cemetery A). It was still in use in the 13th century.
- 5) Church of the Archangel Gabriel, erected in the 8th century and refurbished in the beginning of the 11th century, encompassing a partly preserved complex of medieval architecture (Dobrowolski 1990).

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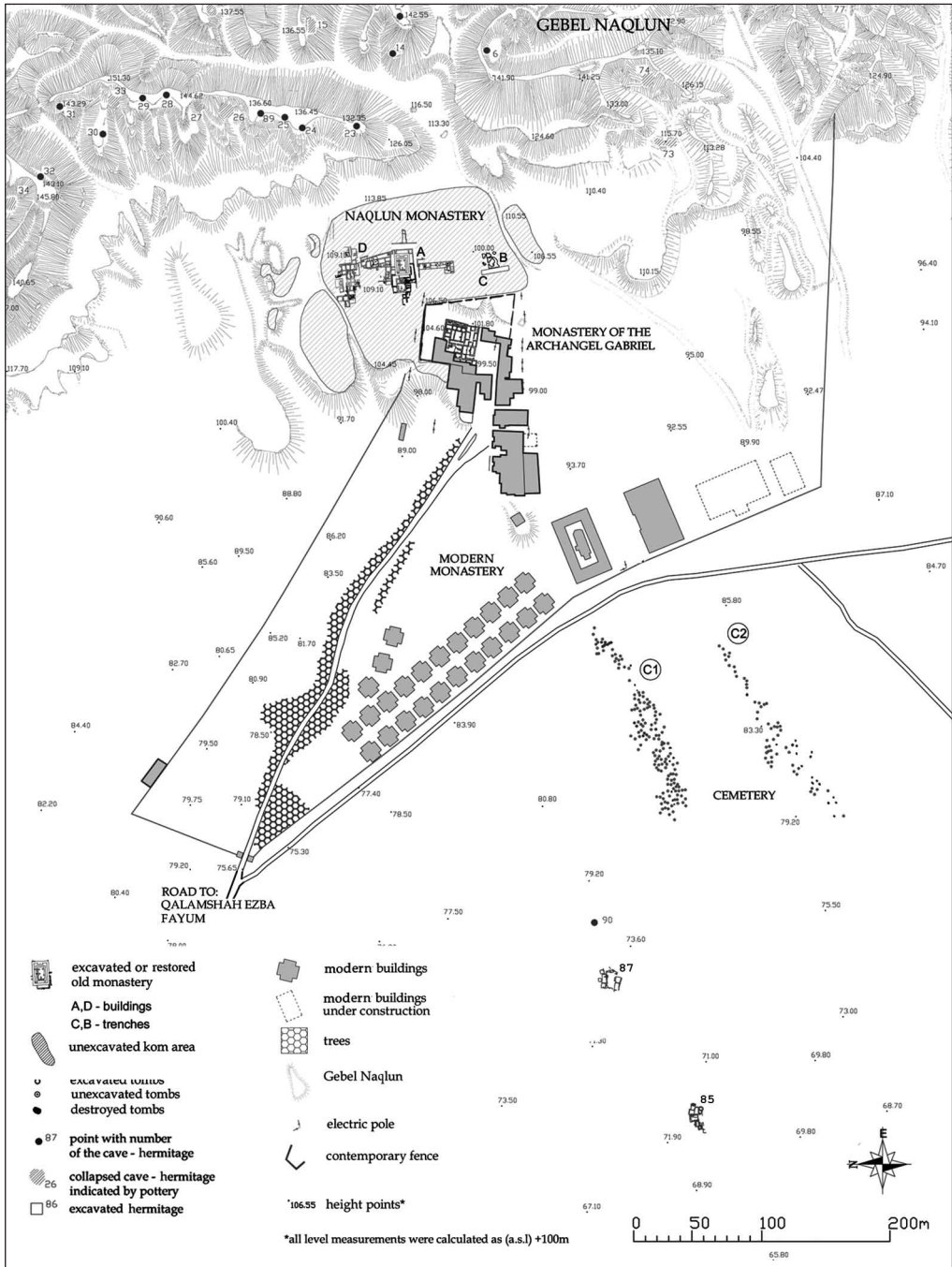


Fig. 1. Topography of Naqlun including new monastic architecture. 2007
(Mapping W. Malkowski)

The complex was surrounded by walls and accessible through a still existing western

gate. It was modified in modern times and refurbished in the 20th century.

EXCAVATIONS IN HERMITAGE 87

Hermitage 87 is part of the western group of complexes cut in rock in the neighborhood of the canal. It made use of a small hollow just north of the location of Hermitage 85 and the nearby complex of Hermitage 90. A wall of broken stone could be seen separating the hermitage from a wadi serving as a community road. The potsherd-strewn

surface of the hollow promised a site which had not been disturbed recently, unlike Hermitage 85 which had proved to be the site of illicit excavations in the not so distant past.

The entire hermitage consisting of 14 rooms was cleared [Fig. 2]. The units were located around a central courtyard with

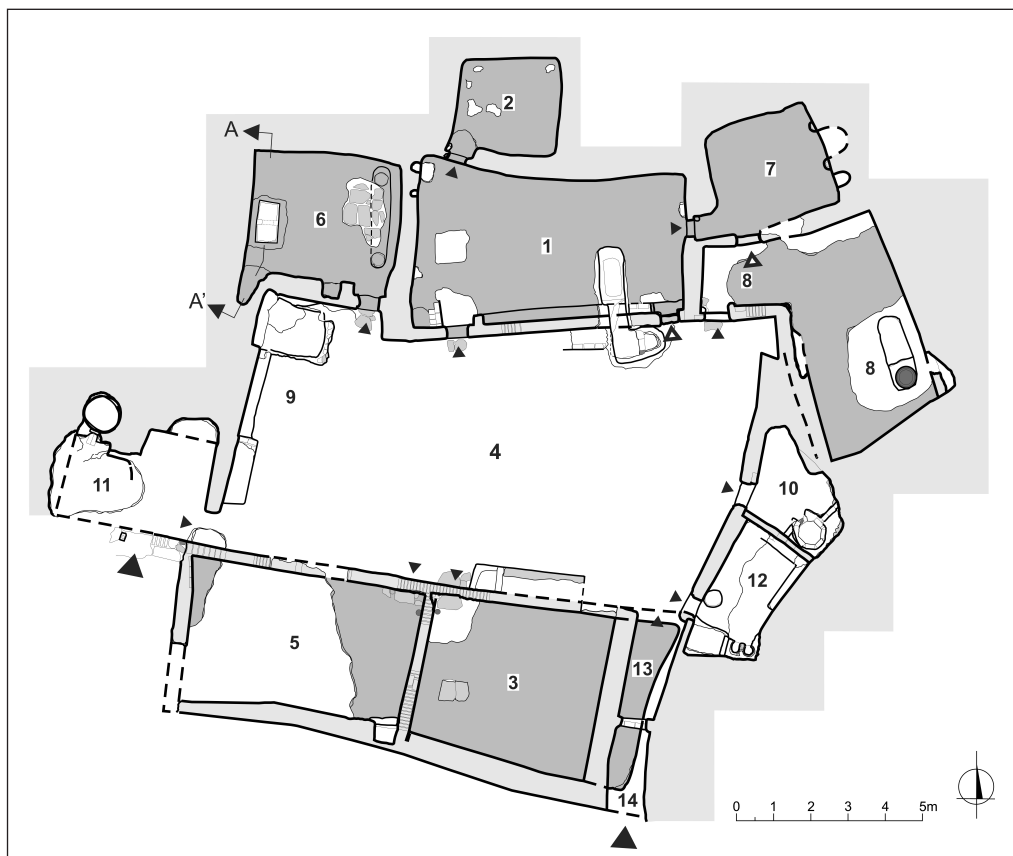


Fig. 2. Plan of Hermitage 87
(Drawing S. Maślak, W. Godlewski, W. Małkowski)

most of the rooms on the north, east and west being cut in soft rock sandwiched between a hard limestone layer at the bottom and a compact layer of conglomerate at the top. The latter formed natural ceilings in the complex where individual walls were lined with brick or rock chips and subsequently plastered. The rooms on the south of the courtyard were built of brick or broken stone. The entrance was located in the southeastern corner of the complex (rooms 13 and 14). It was constructed in the second phase of occupation, the original one having been situated probably in the southwestern part, although the evidence for this is far from satisfactory. All the rooms were accessible from the courtyard. The

function of particular rooms was précised thanks to the interior furnishings cleared inside them. Living quarters were found on the northern side of the courtyard. Domestic units were located on the east and west, and included a kitchen space and bread ovens. On the south side, there were two rooms of unspecified function.

The residence of the hermitage owner was arranged in the center of the eastern part [Fig. 3]. It was composed of three interconnected units: a larger room (87.1), a smaller one (87.2) and an oratory (87.7). All the rooms had mud floors and finely plastered walls. The larger room had a low bench by the south wall and a storage bin excavated into the floor in the southeastern



*Fig. 3. Northern part of Hermitage 87, view from the east
(Photo W. Godlewski)*

part. In the last phase of occupation, this bin was enlarged in a southerly direction and became accessible from the courtyard. The eastern room, interpreted as an oratory, was furnished with a prayer niche in the east wall [Fig. 4]. It was preserved only up to 70 cm of its height, but it retained its architectural framing consisting of two semicircular pilasters with capitals bearing a decorated arcade. The stylized palm leaf ornament on this arcade could be fully reconstructed based on two surviving fragments [Fig. 5]. A small niche was preserved on the south side of the described arcade. The interior arrangement of this room brings to mind a similarly designed oratory discovered last season in Hermitage 85. It should be added

that for a while room 87.7 was also accessible from the south, presumably for the benefit of other residents of the hermitage.

A second living unit consisting of a single cell (87.6) was fitted into the northwestern corner of the hermitage. Much care had been put into the interior finishing of this room, which was accessible straight from the courtyard. There were two large niches in the south wall and two tiny ones in the west wall [Fig. 6]. Apart from this there were two installations in the floor. One was a long depression 2.70 by 0.43 m, 0.32 m deep, with circular hollows at either end, the southern one 0.26 m in diameter, the northern one 0.40 m [Fig. 7]. Stone slabs were fitted into the floor lining the western

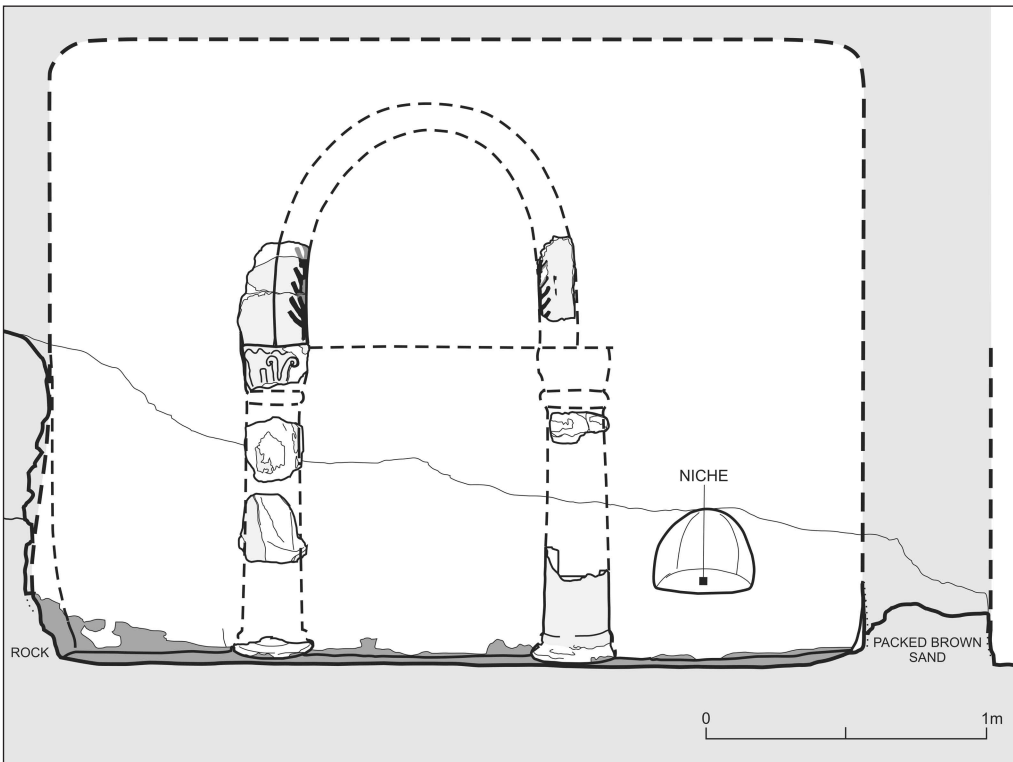


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the presumed oratory in Hermitage 87 (S. Maślak, W. Godlewski)

edge of this cut. This installation, which resembles that discovered in Room 3 of Hermitage 85, must have been used for some household purpose. After a while it was filled in and overlaid with a floor partly made of stone slabs. The other installation was a storage bin set into the floor by the west wall [Fig. 7, left, cf. Fig. 6]. At the top it measured 1.00 by 0.57 m, and it was 1.14 m deep. The opening in the floor was divided into two square parts fitted with *jarid* frames leaving no doubt as to the presence of trapdoors.

An L-shaped room (87.8) to the northeast of the courtyard and south of the oratory appears to have been a third living unit, 21.50 m² in area. It was added most probably in the second occupation phase [cf. Figs 2, 3]. The entrance was from the



Fig. 5. Fragment of arch with painted decoration from the oratory in Hermitage 87 (Photo W. Godlewski)

courtyard and it may have had a connection with the oratory for a period of time. A storage bin was found excavated in the floor in the southeastern part of this room. In the southern part of this bin there was a big storage jar, 98 cm high and 57 cm in rim diameter; the inner ledge on the mouth of these vessels suggests that they had once been closed with lids.

The courtyard with a surface area of 95.30 m² was furnished with benches by the south and west walls, most likely also by the north wall. It had a kind of silos in the northwestern corner, measuring 1.28 x 1.63 m, preserved flush with the walking level of the courtyard. Grain was found at the bottom of it. All of the above-described living units were entered from this courtyard, as well as two large rooms on the south side, 87.5 and 85.3; the walls of these rooms were raised in mud brick and broken stone. The eastern room (87.3) was bigger originally (6.00–6.70 by 4.45 m) and it had a fine floor and plastered walls, as well as presumably a wooden ceiling. In the second phase of use, it was reduced in size, its eastern end apparently being transformed into the main entrance to the hermitage. No furnishings of any kind were found here except for a cooking pot set into the floor by the west wall in the entrance to this room.

The western of the two rooms (87.5) with an area of 29.90 m² was also finished with a mud floor and finely plastered walls. It had a niche in the southeastern corner and a cooking pot set into the floor by the east wall in the entrance. No benches or storage bins, which could further identify the function of these units, were found here. Nonetheless, they could be entered only from the courtyard and thus formed an integral part of the complex.

The small unit (87.11) cut in the rock on the west side of the courtyard was furnished with a niche in the north wall. A bread oven,

1.00 m in diameter, had been installed in it. It is only partly preserved having originally two ceramic rings placed one above the other, giving a full height of 0.80 m. An air hole carefully lined with bricks was recorded at the bottom front of the installation.

On the opposite, eastern side of the courtyard there were two units — a kitchen (87.12) and a bakery with bread oven (87.10). The former incorporated a two-burner 'stove' set into a niche in the south wall [Fig. 8] and benches alongside the east

and north walls, a basin excavated in the rock floor, 0.47 m in diameter, and hence sufficient to house a storage jar, and finally a large niche in the south wall. In turn, the bakery had a round bread oven made of bricks and equipped with an air vent in the front wall [Fig. 9].

The south wall of the hermitage separating it from a narrow wadi was constructed of broken stone bonded in mud mortar. It was much more massive than the other hermitage walls, securing the complex and

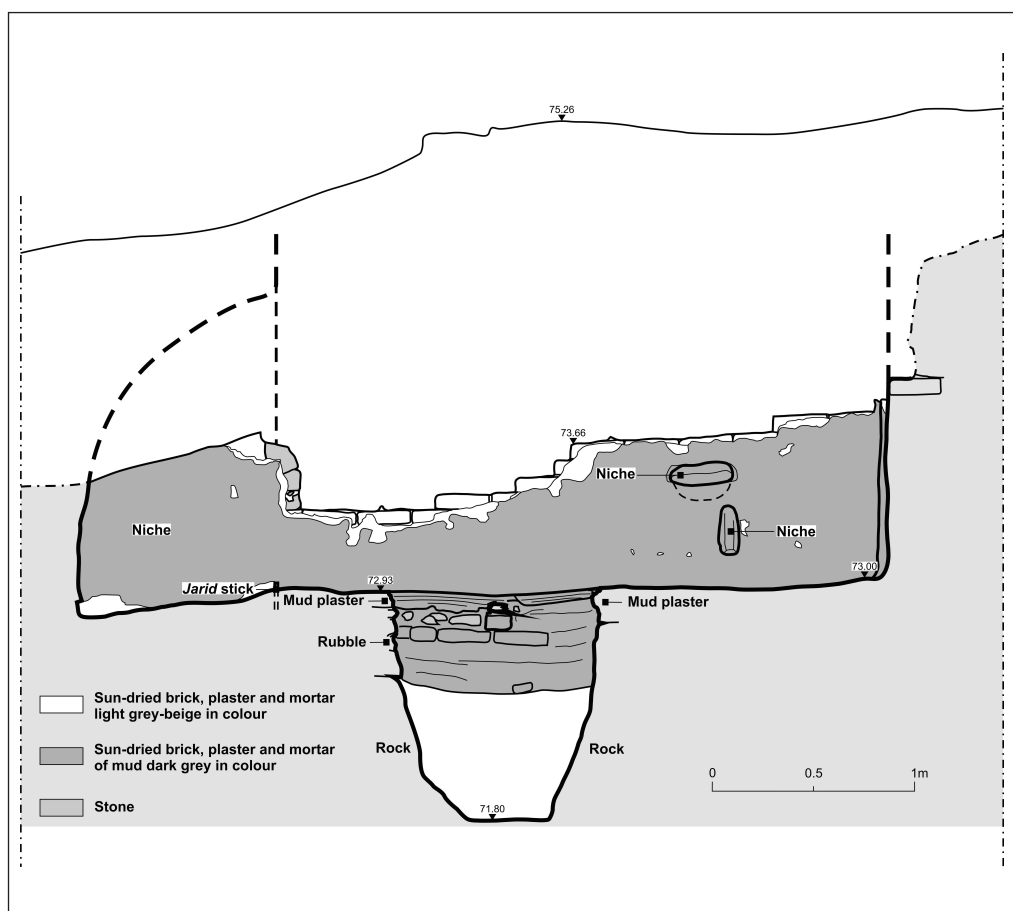


Fig. 6. Room 6 in Hermitage 87. Cross-section looking west (through the installation by the west wall) (Drawing S. Maslak)

isolating it from the outer world. The hermitage was entered from this side. The entrance from the second phase (87.13–14) is well preserved. It takes on the form of a narrow passage carved out of the eastern end of room 87.3. Its width is no more than 1.02–1.10 m and it was additionally



Fig. 7. Installations in Room 6 of Hermitage 87: by the west wall, view from the north (left) and by the east wall, view from the south (Photos W. Godlewski)

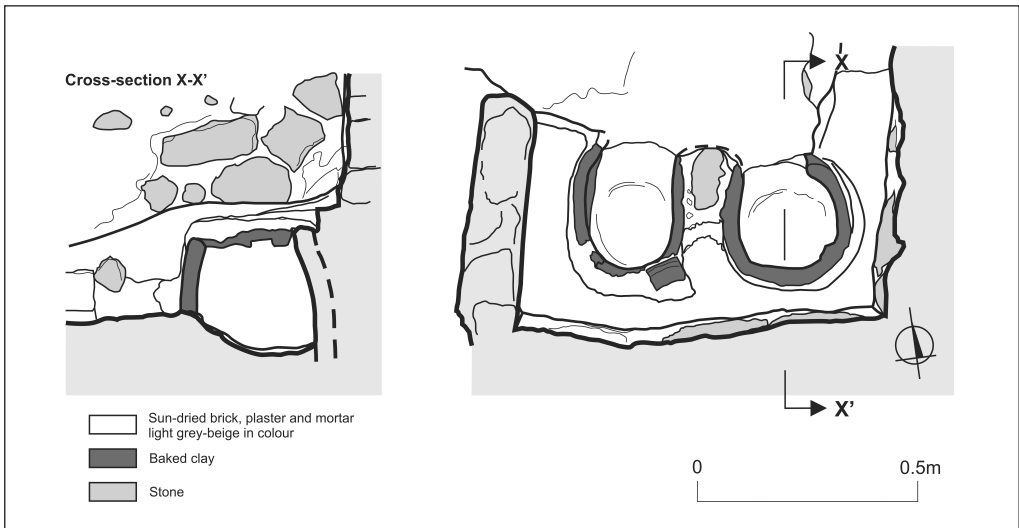


Fig. 8. Two-burner “stove” in unit 12 of Hermitage 87, plan and cross-section looking east (Drawing S. Maślak)

subdivided into a small outer vestibule (87.14) and an inner one (87.13). The two vestibules were separated by a door which protected against unsolicited entry. The original entrance must have been at the western end of the south wall, where some fragmentary evidence for it was discovered in the form of a threshold with door-pivot hole and the eastern jamb already by the west wall of room 87.5. It led to a small room (87.11) with another bread oven located in its western end. A door in the east wall of this room led to the courtyard (87.4).

Hermitage 87 appears to have been erected in the middle of the 5th century, this dating based on the ceramic evidence

coming from the domestic parts of the complex. Two plates, unfortunately only partly preserved, are clearly imports from North Africa. One fragment belongs to a flat-based dish (Nd.07.065) with curved wall and most probably plain rim (LRA form 62A), the stamped decoration on the floor being in style B, that is, five palm branches alternating with modified *planta pedis* stamps, all radiating from a grooved circle in the center [Fig. 10, right]. Hayes dates this form with B-style ornament to AD 350–426 (Hayes 1972: 107–109, 219–220). Of the other dish only the floor with decoration in A.III style, that is, popular palm branches with toothed rings



Fig. 9. Bread oven in unit 10 of Hermitage 87, view from the northwest
(Photo W. Godlewski)

enclosed between grooves, has been preserved (Nd.07.130) [Fig. 10, left]. It can be identified as LRA form 61, dated by Hayes to AD 410–470 (Hayes 1972: 100–107, 219). A few fragmentarily preserved amphorae are identifiable as larger versions of *spatheia* (Keay 26), dated by Mackensen to the late 4th–mid 6th centuries (Mackensen *et alii*, 2006: 185–188). Moreover, there are several dozen sherds of LRA 1 amphorae, including a few necks of small diameter. Local wares are represented by more than a hundred local LR7 amphora (toe count), a few dozen bottles and *gullas* mostly of marl clay, dishes, carinated bowls with painted decoration below the rims, small red bowls with flange rim, one fragmentarily preserved piriform lamp with concave top and three filling holes.

A fairly abundant assemblage of pieces of plates and footed bowls suggest a rich and varied set of glassware used by the hermitage owner. Room 11 also yielded a scrap of papyrus with a fragmentary Greek text identified as a letter (T. Derda, pers. comm.) tentatively dated to the 5th century [Fig. 11]. A few graffiti preserved on vessels



Fig. 10. Late Roman dishes, Nd.07.130 (left) and Nd.07.065 (Photo W. Godlewski)

points to one of the inhabitants of the hermitage being called Abraham. The coins from the hermitage are also dated to the middle of the 5th century (for a commentary, see B. Lichočka in this volume).

An analysis of the wall construction and the changes in interior furnishing of particular rooms indicates at least one phase of major rebuilding. At this point the entrance to the hermitage was moved to the eastern end, the room with the bread oven (87.11) went out of use, replaced by a new bread oven in room 87.10. Rooms 87.1–2 and the oratory (87.7) seem also to have been abandoned after their roofs had collapsed.

Based on the ceramic evidence, the hermitage was abandoned in the 6th century, probably after the rooms in the northern part of the complex were destroyed.

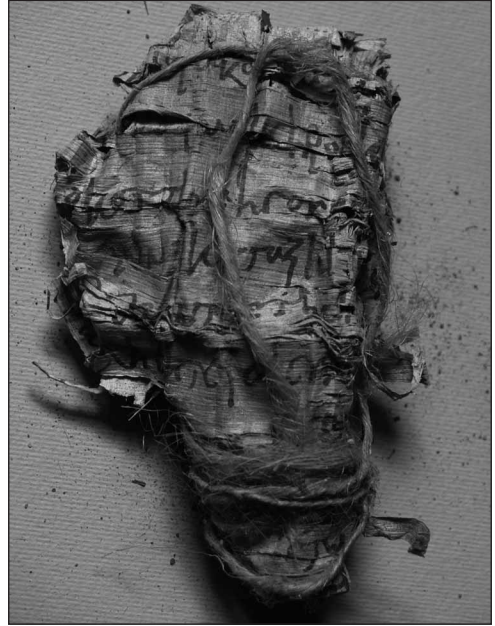


Fig. 11. *Letter on papyrus, Nd.07.228*
(Photo W. Godlewski)

SALVAGE WORK IN CEMETERY C.2

Cemetery C, which is situated to the west of the monastery enclosure wall opposite the west gate, is composed of two parts located on low eminences running from east to west. Sections of the northern part (C.1) had been explored in 2004 (Godlewski 2005: 184–186) and in 2006 (Zych 2009), while the southern part (C.2), not investigated until now, was heavily disturbed in the summer of 2007 in the absence of the Mission. The 15 graves that had been robbed were spread along the entire length of the cemetery C.2. A provisional appraisal of the damages shows that most likely the graves had already once been penetrated. The reopening increased the destruction, seriously limiting any anthropological examination of the remains and documentation of the damaged cartonnages.

Not having planned to work on the cemetery this season, the Mission backfilled the tombs to secure them. Only tombs T.201 and T.202 in the central part, which were cleared completely and documented in order to verify the dating and nature of this necropolis.

The rock surface around both these tombs was found to be heavily eroded, leaving no trace of potential grave superstructures. Tantalizing evidence of these was provided by a fragment of limestone stele lying on the surface in the central part of the cemetery. This piece (Nd.07.001), very finely carved, represented part of an *arcosolium* (Godlewski, Czaja-Szewczak 2009: Fig. 2) with the capital of the right column, constituting the framing for a relief cross and inscription of the same kind as can be

seen on practically all the funerary stele known from Naqlun.

The tombs, both cut in soft rock, comprised a vertical shaft opening into a burial chamber located on the east side. T.201 had a circular shaft measuring c. 0.85 m across and 1.18 m deep. The burial chamber was 1.94 m long (2.70 m including the bottom of the shaft) and 1.03 m wide, 0.94 m high at the most, although leeway should be left for damages incurred during the two separate instances of illicit digging [Fig. 13].

The fill still inside the tomb and the dump from the latest plundering yielded two broken LR 7 amphorae presumably from the blocking of the shaft [Fig. 12], as well as a few pieces of red brick, measuring 23 x 11–12 x 6.5–7.0 cm, which may have come from the tomb superstructure or from the closing of the entrance to the burial chamber.



Fig. 12. Amphora LR 7, Nd.07.290 (Photo W. Godlewski)

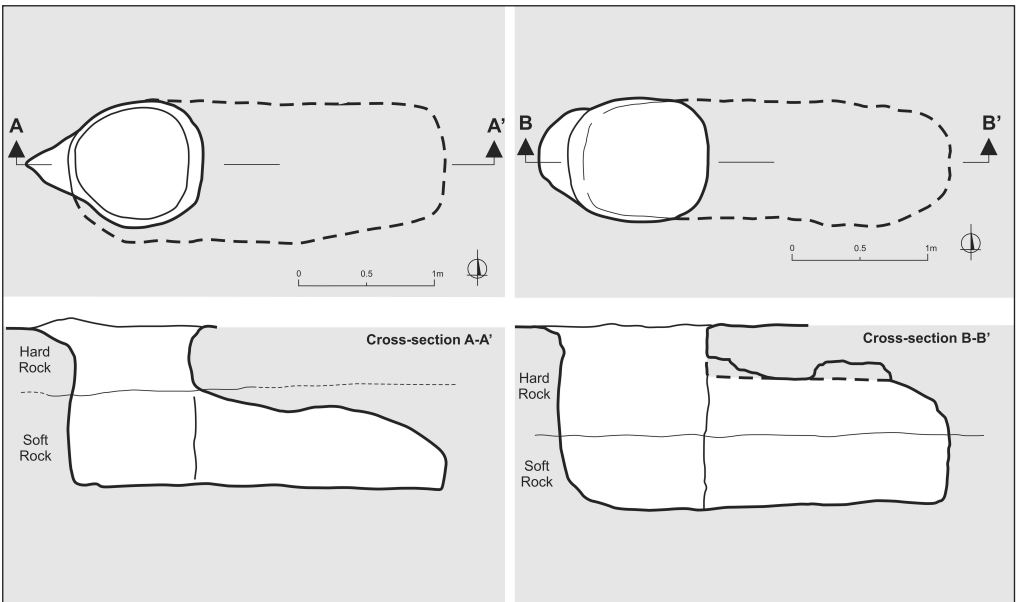


Fig. 13. Tombs T.201 and T.202 in Cemetery C.2 (Plan and section W. Godlewski, S. Maślak)

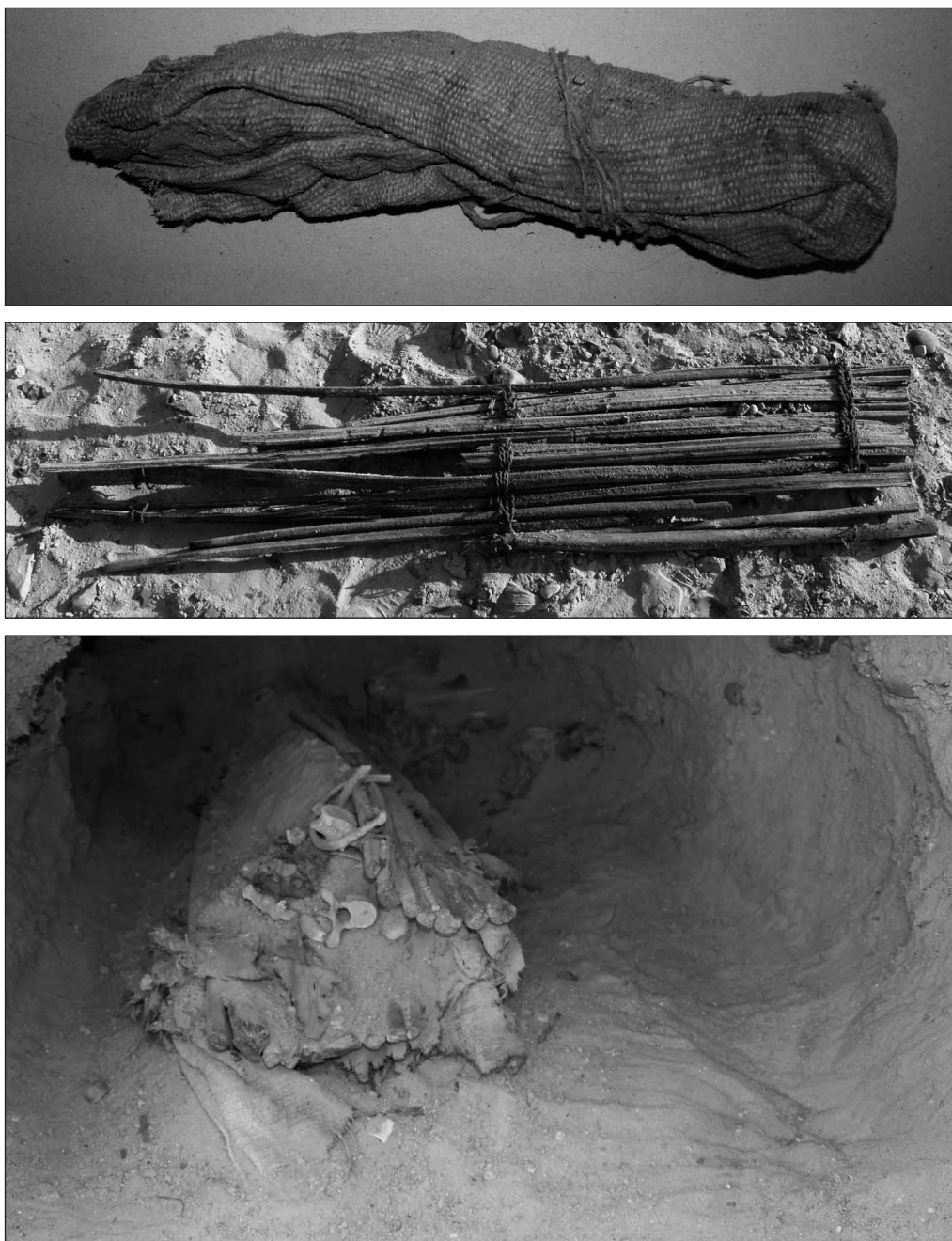


Fig. 14. Coffin from tomb T.201, in situ with a jarid frame for stiffening the side (bottom) and preserved section of the board after lifting (center); at top, rolled up shroud from the stuffing of the cartonnage from tomb T. 202 (Photo W. Godlewski)

Fragments of a destroyed cartonnage were removed from the burial chamber [Fig. 14]. Among the recorded finds were scraps of textiles from the robes and shrouds wrapping the corpse, rolled up pieces of shrouds [Fig. 14, top] used in building up the cartonnage superstructure above the head and broken pieces of a board made of jarids tied together with palm-fiber rope to stiffen the frame of the cartonnage (L.+155 cm; W. 34 cm) [Fig. 14, center].

Tomb T.202 had a vertical shaft (1.00 by 0.82 m at the mouth, 1.42 m deep) opening into a burial chamber 1.82 m long (2.84 m together with the bottom of the shaft),

0.92 m wide and 0.85 m high [cf. Fig. 13]. Part of the burial was preserved inside the chamber. The corpse was wrapped in shrouds and placed inside a coffin made of jarids tied together with palm-fiber rope [Fig. 15]. The preserved part of the coffin measured 0.74 m. The fill of the grave contained pieces of robes, a long-sleeved tunic and fragments of shrouds. One incomplete amphora may have come from the fill of the tomb shaft [cf. Fig. 12].

Each tomb contained apparently one burial, but the preserved skeletal material was too fragmentary for anthropological examination.

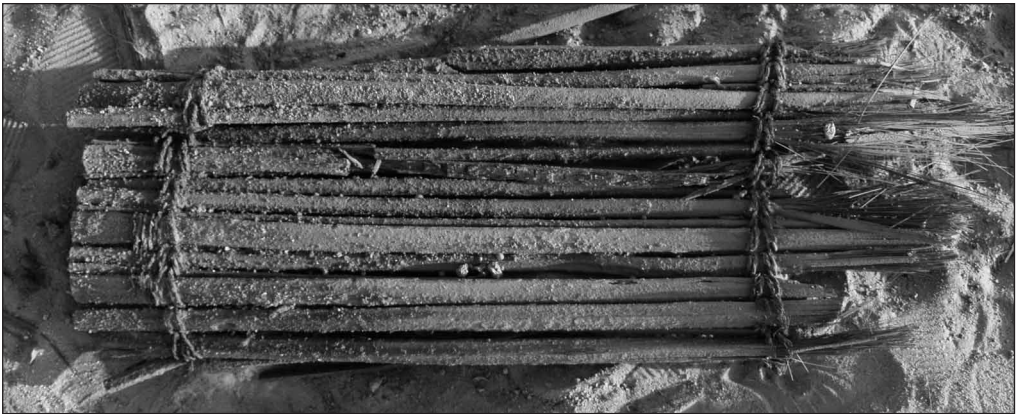


Fig. 15. Part of a jarid board from Tomb T.202
(Photo W. Godlewski)

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