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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 20, 467-482

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2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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# IN THE SHADE OF THE NEKLONI MONASTERY (DEIR MALAK GUBRAIL, FAYUM)

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**Abstract:** Investigations of two cemeteries, A and C, in Naqlun have presented a singular opportunity to study changes of burial practices occurring in the Christian community in Fayum over eight centuries, straddling a period of significant political, social and religious changes. Adaptation processes of Byzantine society in Egypt to the new legal and religious regulations introduced successively by the Fatimids and Ayyubids can be traced on the basis of the Naqlun graves.

**Keywords:** Fayum, Naqlun, cemetery, tomb, cartonnage, shroud, textiles, burial practices

The funerary customs of Christians living in Egypt in late antique and medieval times are not fully recognized, and the archaeological and anthropological investigations, especially those from the 19th and 20th century, are far from perfect. F. Dunand's summary of current research on Christian funerary ceremonial (2006) is the fullest given so far and recent findings from Naqlun in Fayum Oasis, from excavations on the sites of the late antique cemetery C and the medieval cemetery A, have contributed only complementary data (Godlewski 2005b: 184–186; 2005c; Godlewski, Czaja-Szewczak 2008; Czaja-Szewczak 2005a; 2005b; Łyżwa-Piber 2005; Zych 2008). In the context of studies of Christian funerary customs in the Nile Valley, one should note the importance of the extensive archaeological material from the Nubian kingdoms, especially Makuria, as it is not only extremely varied and

abundant, but also much better researched compared to Egyptian cemetery sites (Adams 1998).

Investigations in Nubia have demonstrated an important trait distinguishing burials of Christian date from earlier ones. Starting from the 6th century onwards, bodies were laid in the grave invariably in extended supine position with the head to west. Judging by the evidence solely from Naqlun, the custom was just as rigorously observed in Egypt in late antiquity and medieval times. The importance of graves from the territory of Nubia lay also in the identification of bishops' tombs at Faras (Dzierżykraj-Rogalski 1985; Godlewski 2006: 139–150), Qasr Ibrim (Adams 1996: 82–83; Adams 2010: 54–56; Aldsworth 2010: 27–36) and Dongola (Jakobielski 1995; Żurawski 1999), and in the opportunity to trace changes in mortuary rites across eight hundred years,

from the 6th to the 14th century thanks to the fairly good dating of Nubian cemeteries (Adams 1998).

The graves of monks and anchorites are the easiest relatively to recognize in Egypt; they have been uncovered at a number of monastic sites in Western Thebes, Abu Fana and Saqqara (Dunand 2006). Not all graves near monasteries can be identified as tombs of monks of course, especially if there are no funerary stelae preserved in place on the grave or in the cemetery, which is a rather common phenomenon in Egypt as well as in Makuria. The provenance of most stelae is insufficiently exact and can be referred only generally with certain regions of Egypt based on textual and stylistic criteria. There are also assemblages of stelae from specific locations, such as the burial ground of the monastery of Deir Anba Hadra in Aswan (Munier 1930–1931) and Saqqara, but archaeological and anthropological investigations of the cemetery itself have not been carried out.

In the light of the above, the two cemeteries at Naqlun, found in the context of the Nekloni monastery, Deir Malak Gabrail, that is, the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel, have contributed significant data for studies of burial customs and their transformation over eight centuries, from the 6th to the 14th century, at least in the region of Fayum Oasis. The Nekloni monastery in southeastern Fayum occupies a narrow belt of rocky desert between the oasis and the valley, to the south of Bahr el Yusuf, 16 km from Medinet el-Fayum. Excavations by Polish archaeologists are hard put today to stay ahead of modern development of the monastic complex, which has already outstripped the ancient monastery in size. In broad terms considered, the two cemeteries accompa-

nied a complex encompassing 90 rock-cut hermitages scattered in the hills and on the canal side of a relatively compact concentration of architecture in the middle of a sizable plateau at the foot of the hills (Godlewski 2005a). Neither of these burial grounds was a resting place for the anchorites or monks. Instead, they were used by the secular population of Fayum, most likely inhabitants of nearby villages [Fig. 1].

The earlier cemetery C from the 6th–7th century AD was located to the west of the medieval monastic compound (no. 3 in Fig. 1), already near the canal. Approximately 200 graves have been recognized, some of them destroyed in the course of the construction of new monastery buildings. So far only a few graves have been investigated (Godlewski 2005b; Zych 2008). The later cemetery A (no. 1 in Fig. 1) was in use from the second half of the 11th through the 14th century. It was situated in the ruins of the ancient monastery located east of the medieval complex. Almost 500 graves have been explored, which constitutes about 90% of the entire cemetery. Both have contributed a rich array of finds, including the coffins and matting on the coffins, body textiles and accessories, and assorted burial furnishings. Therefore, the opportunity to study changes in burial customs of the Christian community in Fayum over eight centuries is singular indeed, straddling as it does a period of significant political, social and religious change. It is possible on the case of the Naqlun graves to trace the adaptation process of a Byzantine society in Egypt to the new legal and religious regulations introduced first by the Fatimids and then Ayyubids, until it finally became a religious minority and lost economic importance to the Muslim community.

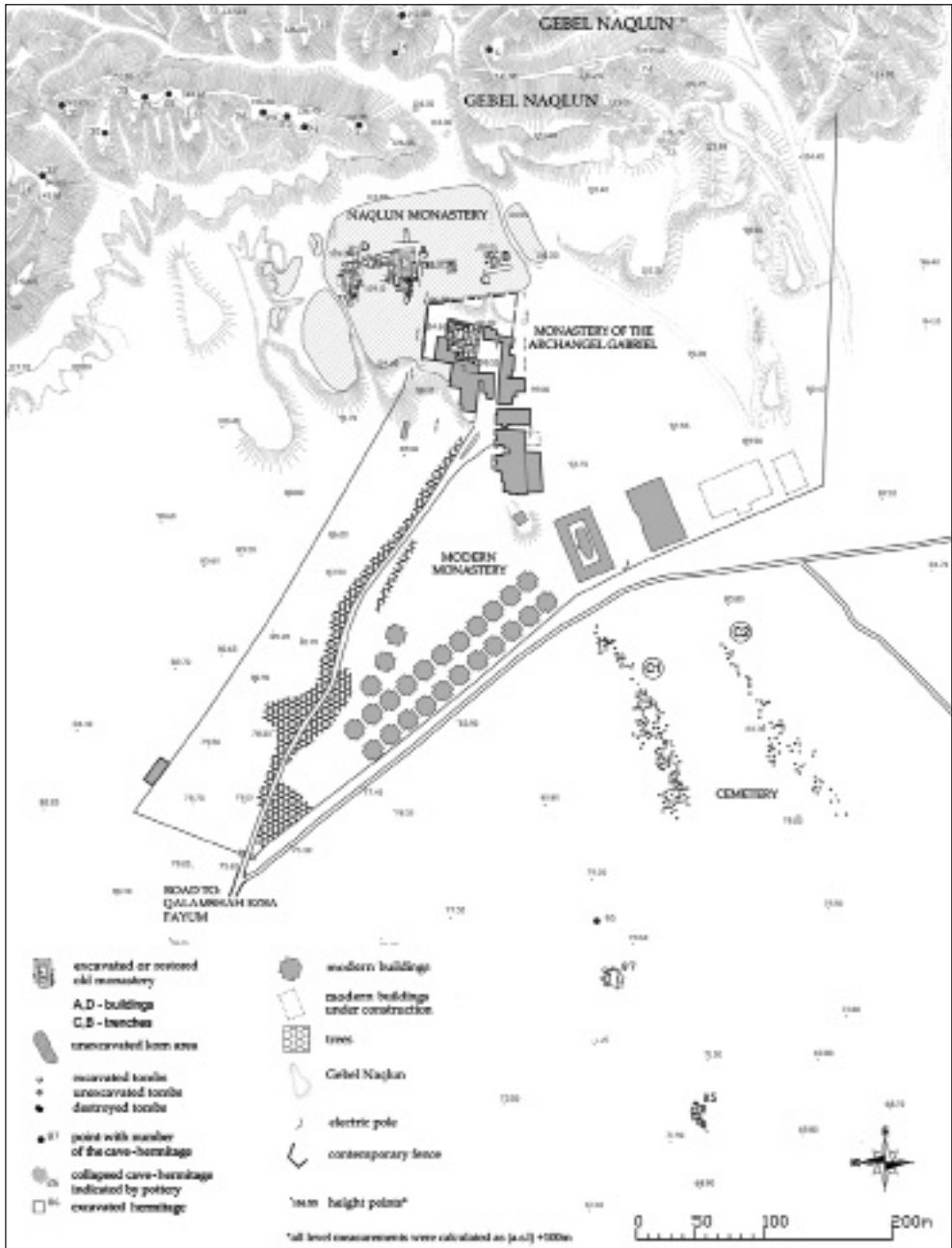


Fig. 1. The monastery in Naqlun. Central part with the cemeteries (J. Dobrowolski, W. Małkowski, PCMA archives)

The changes become much more evident when the evidence of the cemeteries is juxtaposed with written sources, texts in both Coptic and Arabic discovered in the territory of the monastery. The most

important of these is the archive of the family of Abu Bifam Giorgi containing 50 notary documents and letters dated to the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century (Mouton 2002).

## CEMETERY C

Greek funerary stelae associated with cemetery C, which were discovered in the monastery ruins (Godlewski, Łajtar 2006), have introduced some of the inhabitants of Fayum, both men and women, who were interred in the neighborhood of the monastery in the 6th and 7th centuries AD. Anthropological examinations of skeletons from cemetery C, wherever possible as the bones are in pretty poor condition, have confirmed burials of men. The laced shoes from one of the damaged tombs leave no doubt that a woman had been buried wearing them.

The heavily eroded surface of Cemetery C has left no trace of tomb superstructures, but their existence is more than certain. A few limestone funerary stelae in the form of aedicule facades [*Fig. 2*, top left] with centrally positioned cross have the bottom parts smoothed but not decorated, suggesting that they had been mounted in some kind of brick or stone structure.

The underground rock-cut graves had vertical shafts approximately 1.00 m deep which opened out on narrow niches or chambers 2.00–2.30 m long and 1.00–1.30 m wide. Standing in the shafts, frequently upside down, were empty LR 7 amphorae. Space between vessels was stuffed additionally with palm or linen fibers, as shown by tomb T.003 [*Fig. 2*, center].

The dead were buried in narrow niches, most often individually [*Fig. 2*,

top right], although in one case a second burial had been introduced into a broadened crypt (CT.005). The stelae occasionally evoked two and exceptionally three deceased (Godlewski, Łajtar 2006: 57–61). Cartonnages were constructed of wooden planks and palm-leaf ribs, wrapped in shrouds fastened in place with color tape forming an intricate net pattern on the surface [*Fig. 2*, bottom]. In keeping with an entrenched tradition, the head and feet had a more elaborate form (Godlewski 2005b: 184–186; Zych 2008: 237–241). Analogous cartonnages are known from the necropolis at Karara (Ranke 1926; Nauwerth 1993: 30–36; *L'art copte en Egypte* 2000: 124) and Bawit (*L'art copte en Egypte* 2000: 105). In most cases the graves in Cemetery C have been plundered and the cartonnages and grave goods destroyed or preserved only fragmentarily. Specially made burial shrouds of linen, often with simple decoration at the ends, have been found alongside numerous fragments of linen textiles with woolen or silk decoration (Czaja-Szewczak 2005a: 209, Figs 7–8; Godlewski, Czaja-Szewczak 2008: 251–260), leather shoes (Dzierzbicka 2008) and personal accessories, like a comb and a walking stick. Long well-cleaned linen fibers were found in the chamber of CT.003, placed there intentionally.

All the fragmentary steles, which have been preserved mainly reused in Building AA to the west of tower A and in

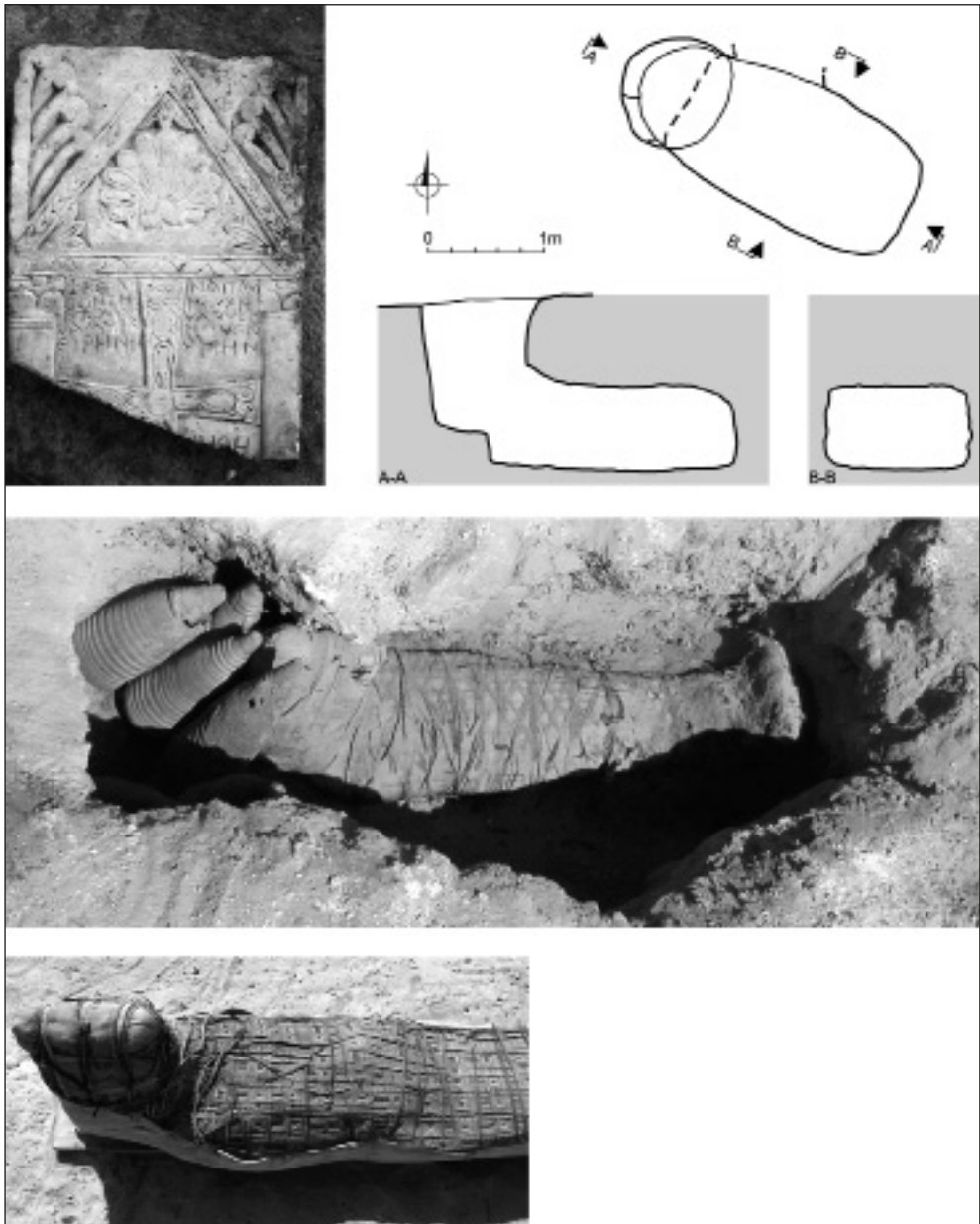


Fig. 2. Cemetery C: (top left) limestone funerary stela of Damianos from Naqlun, Nd.00.296; (top right) plan and sections of Tomb CT.005; (center) burial in Tomb CT.003, top view after opening of the chamber; (bottom) example of a cartonnage (Photos W. Godlewski; drawing W. Godlewski, D. Zielińska; PCMA archives)

Building J that had burned in the middle of 10th century (Godlewski 2001: 150–154; Godlewski 2002: 159–168), are inscribed in Greek and commemorate lay people. They fall into two basic types, in terms of the decoration, as much as the

text formula (Godlewski, Łajtar 2006), both of which have already been associated previously with the Fayum (Schaten 2005), but without attributing them to any specific cemetery from the territory of the Oasis.

## CEMETERY A

In the 11th and 12th century graves in cemetery A were occasionally situated in intentionally raised family mausolea or else inside the ruins of rooms surrounding the earlier church adapted for burial purposes for the chosen few.<sup>1</sup> The rule, however, was for the graves to occupy the streets around the church and the abandoned monastery ruins and in the last phase, in the 14th century, even the interior of the ruined church [Fig. 4]. By 2011, 500 burials had been excavated. Adults constituted 73.5 % of the population, the breakup by sex being 54.5 % men and 33.8 % women, children making up the remaining share (Godlewski 2005a).

The mausoleum M.1 by the northwestern corner of the church, most probably a family one, was a small rectangular room (2.70 m x 3.70 m) in which successively seven coffins of men, women and children were deposited. Almost the entire interior was filled by successively built, rectangular superstructures in the form of shells of brick lining an earth core and meticulously plastered on the outside.

Similar superstructures were occasionally encountered also around the church, to the north and south of it [Fig. 3], but for

the most part no preserved superstructures could be located. Taking into consideration the extent to which the ground surface in the cemetery has been destroyed, especially



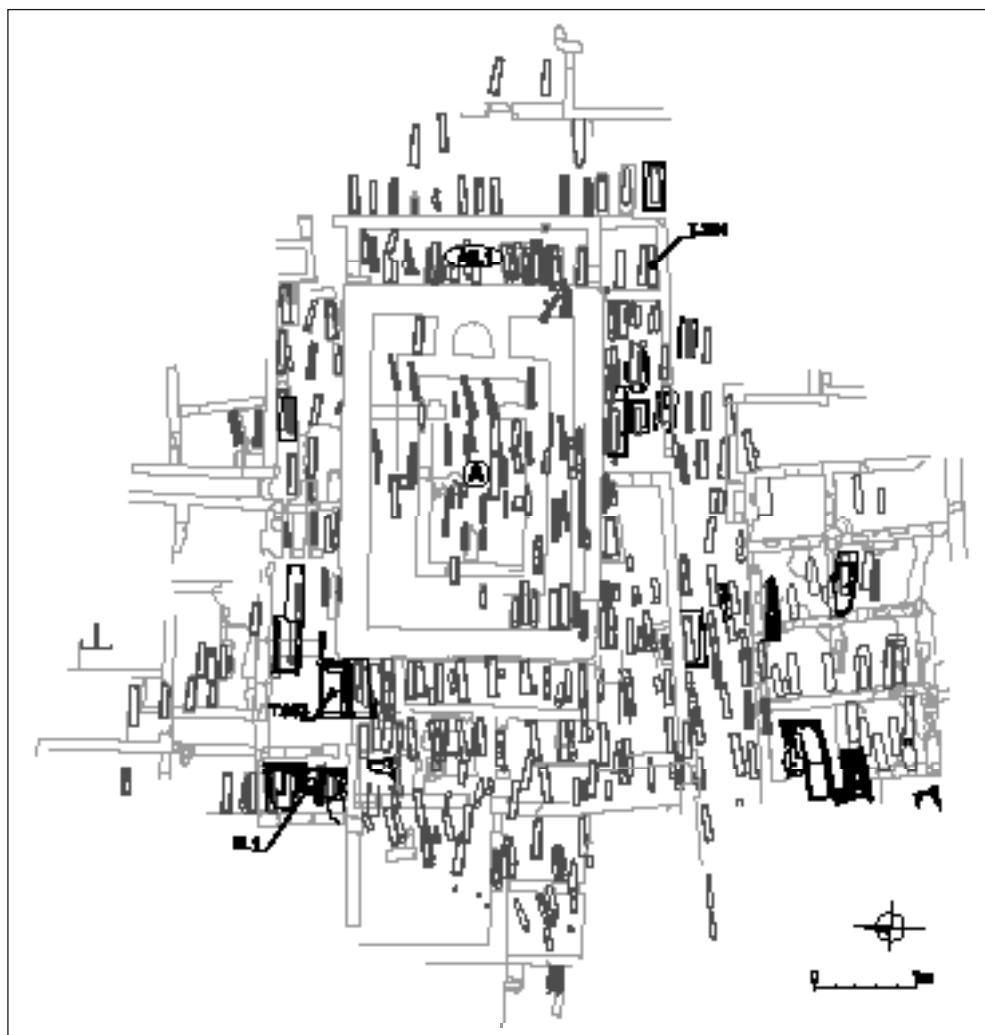
Fig. 3. Example of a tomb superstructure (T.063) (Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

<sup>1</sup> The first burials in Cemetery A in Naqlun were made in the second half of the 11th century, the last in the 14th century. This development of the graveyard found reflection in the topography. The oldest graves are situated to the east of the church, while the graves on the southern side of the sacral building, explored in the 2004 season (discussed in Łyżwa-Piber' 2011, in this volume) were for the most part of 12th century date and some of them even later.

on the western side, the actual ratio of burials with masonry superstructures to ordinary earth mounds is not easily established. There could even be graves without superstructures as was the case in the unit (AE.1) to the east of the church. In this room or rather long corridor, which

measured 11.10 m x 2.82–2.93 m, 31 successive burials were noted in three tiers. None of the burials preserved any traces of a superstructure of any kind.

Nor were there any stelae. In two cases there were fragments of wooden crosses in the fill. One had a partly preserved Greek



*Fig. 4. Plan of Cemetery A  
(Drawing D. Zielińska, S. Maślak, PCMA archives)*



inscription commemorating the priest Paulos on the horizontal beam (Łajtar 1994). Even so, the association of these crosses with graves of cemetery A is based purely on the archaeological context. The surviving superstructures show no trace of a place for mounting similar crosses. They could have been attached to standing walls inside the room.

The dead were buried in narrow grave pits dug in the ground 0.60–0.80 m deep and approximately 2.00 m long. Quite frequently the same pit was used for two coffins, most often an adult and a child, but sporadically also two adults. The coffins were made of planks that were either pegged together or nailed with iron nails, reinforced with crosswise slats, wider in the head part as a rule, mostly with flat lids although gabled lids have also been recorded (Zych 2005) [Fig. 5].

The coffins were covered with mats and sometimes also with large baskets (Łyzwa-Piber 2005). They could also be wrapped in one or two mats. Linen coffin shrouds were fastened to the coffin tops with linen palm-fiber ropes. Coffin shrouds often bore a band of inscriptions or pseudo-

inscriptions in Arabic. The shrouds on children's coffins were frequently painted with simple crosses.

Coffins could also be made of palm-leaf ribs, either joined together in the manner of *qafas*-crates or tied together with palm-fiber rope. Some of the dead rested on biers made of palm-leaf ribs (*jarids*) fitted with special reinforcements on either side of the head to keep it straight and looking up.

The dead were wrapped as a rule in burial shrouds, occasionally impregnated, occasionally bearing bands of pseudo-inscriptions in Arabic or embroidered with a geometric pattern. Sporadically, the shroud was made of well tanned leather. Leafy branches of aromatic plants were placed with the dead inside the coffins.

The head of the deceased was laid on a pillow filled with leaves or leafy branches of aromatic plants. Some of the pillows were decorated with embroidery; sporadically leather was used instead of cloth to make the pillow. Some of the pillows were undoubtedly used earlier in the home of the deceased, others were hastily basted together, suggesting they were made quickly specifically for a given

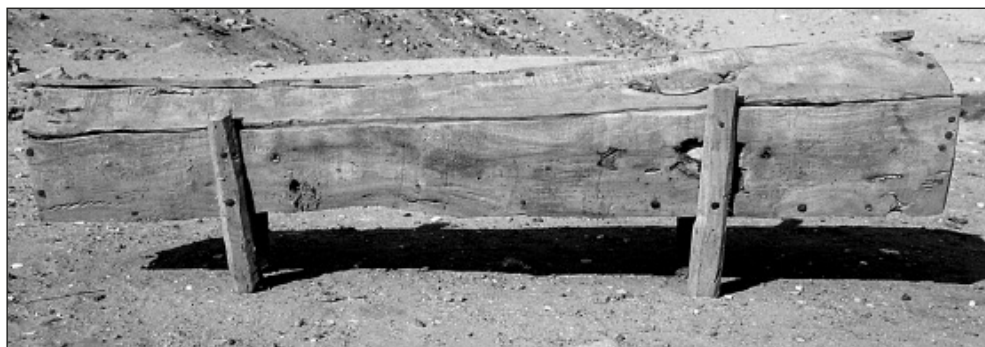


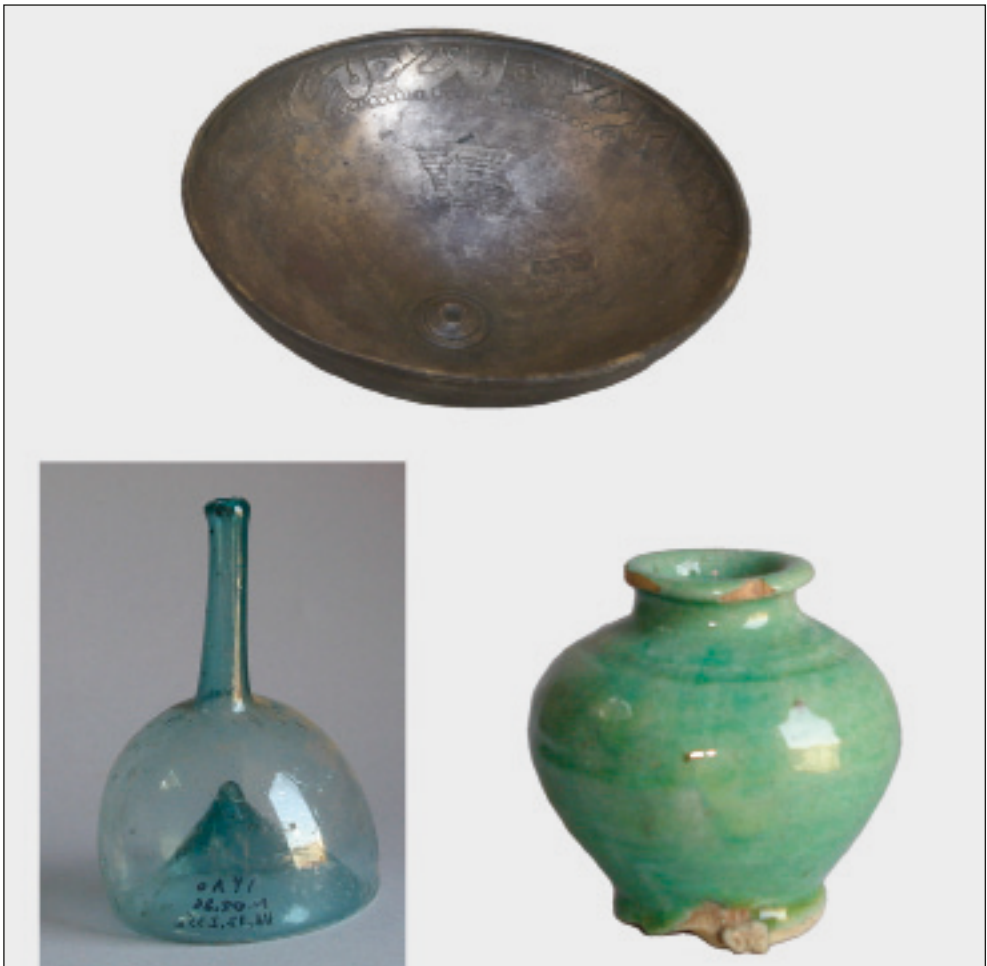
Fig. 5. Example of a coffin (T.323)  
(Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

burial (for more on this subject, see Czaja-Szewczak 2011, in this volume).

The dress of individual dead adults included sometimes leather belts with buckles of metal and sporadically crosses plaited from leather thongs. The latter could suggest that the owners came from the clergy, being either deacons or priests.

Palm-leaf wreaths, possibly wedding crowns, were recorded on the heads of two female skeletons.

Grave goods placed inside the coffins, most often by the head and/or feet of the deceased, included small glass vessels, sometimes in their own plaited cases (Mossakowska-Gaubert 2001; 2001b),



*Fig. 6. Vessels from the burials: glass bottle Nd.02.235-T.324 (bottom left), glazed ceramic jar Nd.02.041-T.259 (bottom right) and metal bowl Nd.04.070-T.352 (top) (Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)*

small glazed bowls (Łyżwa 2002), sporadically bowls of metal (Godlewski 2005b: 183, Fig. 3). Two vessels in the same coffin have also been noted. These vessels were likely to contain aromatic oils, which were exuded before the coffin was closed. The vessels were not sealed shut and were occasionally placed upside down [Fig. 6].

The dead were also furnished with personal accessories like combs and pencases with *kalamoi* [Fig. 7]. Pencases in the

coffins of adults could be proof of the owner's profession, while those in children's coffins of an interrupted education. The same symbolic significance can be assigned to wooden school tablets. Other items found in the coffins of adults include weaving utensils, bundles of hackled linen, textiles, carefully folded spare tunics and in one case dried bricks. These, too, could be interpreted as references to the deceased's employ in life.



Fig. 7. Pincase Nd.02.238-T.324  
(Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)



Fig. 8. Silver earrings: Nd.99.111-T.98 (left) and Nd.00.124–125-T.196  
(Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

In one coffin (T.324), the rich burial set included a comb, a pence, two glass vessels and a leather-bound codex with the full text of the Gospel according to St. John, written down in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic in the year 1100. The codex contained a single full-page illumination depicting a cross and some ornaments emphasizing important parts of the text (van der Vliet 2003).

The dead were laid to rest in their everyday clothes, which included pants and tunics; they were barefoot as a rule, often with little caps on their heads, shawls or turbans. Burial shrouds of canvas linen have been noted only sporadically. Tunics could be decorated with embroidery or silk inserts (Czaja-Szewczak 2005b). The shawls were the most decorative of all (Czaja-Szewczak 2010). Some were made in distant Andalusia (Helmecke 2005: 202). A few were made in the caliphs' workshops as indicated by Arabic inscriptions mentioning the names of the caliphs Al Hakim and Al Mustansir from the 11th century (Helmecke 2005: 195–198). In one grave only was a tunic and shawl found to be decorated with

Christian symbols and a Coptic inscription being a quote from Psalm 46,2–3 van der Vliet 2003; Czaja-Szewczak 2004; Czaja-Szewczak 2005a: 209–210). This was most probably the grave of a deacon or priest.

Christian symbols in the form of small pendant crosses of wood, ivory and nacre have been found solely in children's graves. Adult burials in two cases contained plaited crosses of leather. Painted crosses on the coffins of adults were recorded in two cases; they were more likely to be painted on the coffin shrouds, but only on children's coffins. It should be emphasized that the Arabic inscriptions embroidered on robes did not carry any evidently religious connotations. References to the Lord were neutral for both Christians and Muslims.

Jewelry was recorded in the female burials and included earrings, pins, rings, bracelets and strings of beads made of glass, semi-precious stones, eggshell, faience and aromatic plant seeds (Dziedzic-Dzierzbicka 2006) [*Fig. 8*]. In one case, there was a diadem made of Omayyad coins (Godlewski 2004: 145).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the evidence from the archives: the monastic one from Building G (van der Vliet 2005) and that of Banu Bifam (Gaubert, Mouton 2004), coupled with the archaeological evidence, namely, the alterations of the monastic compound and cemetery A (Godlewski 2005b; 2005c), one can put forward a number of conclusions concerning both the Coptic community of Fayum and the ties of the monastery with the community of Fayum, mainly the Coptic inhabitants, but also the Muslims.

1) A provisional study of the monastic archive from Building G suggests that in the 10th–11th century the monastery was still using Coptic, a Fayumi-Sahidic dialect, much more frequently than Arabic, for both ordinary correspondence and economic documents, like lists of workers, work contracts etc. The Arabic texts have yet to be examined in detail, but on the whole they seem to be contracts. The family archive of Banu Bifam (dated to the turn of the 9th century) was entirely in Arabic. Some of the texts were drawn up in

a notary's office at el-Lahun, thus justifying the use of the official language. However, a certain part of the texts written on paper did not have this official character and was presumably made up within the family. One is entitled to think that in economic correspondence outside the monastery Arabic was used for the same reasons as in the notary's office.

2) It follows from Banu Bifam's archive that an overwhelming majority of the villagers in Dimhuyeh (90% in fact) were Coptic Christians. M. Mouton's work on other private archives from the Fayum region also appears to corroborate this observation. In the first half of the 11th century, Fayum was still dominated by a Coptic community. Giorgi Bifam was very dynamic in his economic enterprises and he was unquestionably prosperous. The oldest graves of the cemetery, situated in room AE.1 to the east of the monastery and destroyed during the later functioning of the cemetery, yielded a few fragments of *tiraz*-type fabrics, featuring Arabic inscriptions mentioning the Fatimid caliphs (Helmecke 2005). These scraps came from robes offered to officials and they stand in confirmation of the role played by the Copts from Fayum in the official administration. There are no *tiraz* fabrics with inscriptions mentioning caliphs from a later period.

3) The development of the monastery in the 10th century, new buildings, new wall paintings in the church of Archangel Gabriel (Godlewski 2005a: 162–166), extensive economic activities all fit very well with a picture of a populous and affluent Coptic community in Fayum that served the monastery in good stead as benefactors. The monastic archive from Building G

also testifies to the economic strength of the monastery itself. The monastery appears to have been open economically to the entire local community, if the lists of wages written in Coptic and containing both Coptic and Arabic names are any evidence. Further proof is provided by contracts written either in Coptic or Arabic, presumably in observance of official regulations and depending on the language of the contracting parties.

4) The appearance of a cemetery for the Coptic community at Naqlun in the second half of the 11th century may have been connected with the special ties of the monastery with the family of Banu Bifam, which not only brought the family archive to the monastery, but also may have built a mausoleum for the dead (M.1) right by the church. It is the only mausoleum of the type found on the Naqlun cemetery and appears to be dated to the 11th century. Further, the first graves in room AE.1, with the honorific *tiraz* robes with inscriptions of the caliphs, should be seen as belonging to families of importance in Fayum. The later development of the cemetery, however, presumably resulted from the social changes taking place in the end of the 11th and in the 12th century, likely connected with the arrival of new Arab and Berber settlers, officially supported by the Arab administration. This process led to rapid and drastic changes in the status of the Coptic village communities, which quickly become a minority. While there is no direct evidence of administrative restrictions, the possibility of such should be taken into consideration, especially under the caliph al-Hakim and in the period of internal strife under caliph al-Mustansir. Hence perhaps the need for a new place

for a cemetery, in hallowed, but foremost secure ground.

5) The grave goods found inside the coffins (glass and glazed pottery, mats and personal effects) but even more so the robes and textiles testify to the Coptic community's far-reaching adaptation to the market. Many of the Arabic texts on the shawls are Muslim in character and they are undoubtedly the product of local workshops. The majority, however, is neutral, expressing sentiments that were inoffensive to Christian and Muslim alike (assistance from God, blessing from God, good luck, success and prosperity from God, often merely *baraka* or *allah*). The same is true of the choice of decorative motifs. Robes with Coptic or pseudo-Coptic texts appear seldom. Religious Christian symbols seem less exposed: pectoral crosses were found only in children's graves — presumably in connection with the ritual of baptism; crosses were painted on coffin shrouds apparently just before the burial. Robes ornamented with Christian symbols and plaited leather crosses turn up in

connection with male burials, presumably reflecting religious service in the church. There are not many such graves. The graves had no tomb markers.

6) In the village and bazaar landscape of Fayum, the local community appears to have been fairly homogeneous in appearance. The same kinds of clothes were worn and the same products bought at the market regardless of religious affiliation. Certain differences were observed in places of prayer and in ceremonies connected with religious initiation and burial. Any distinctness was emphasized inside the family home, in the church or at the monastery. Outside this sphere the rule was to adapt to the local market and social conditions. This attitude must have been of significance in the second half of the 11th century and later when the Christian community was pauperized and became a religious minority. Cemetery A at Naqlun provides an excellent illustration of this process and with the establishment of more precise criteria of analysis it will be possible to read this process correctly.

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