

# WORKED WOOD FROM COPTIC DEIR EL-BAHARI

## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

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Recent excavations in the Chapel of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari (cf. Szafrński 2005: 226, 229-230; 2007a: 247-251) brought to light an extensive assemblage of worked wood from the furnishings of the monastery church of St Phoibammon (Godlewski 1986). Contrasting with the not very characteristic and difficult to identify fragments of wood from the Coptic period

(including a large number of thin black-painted boards with holes pierced through the ends) is a group of elements originating from the furnishings of the church and monastery: pieces of furniture, doors and altar screen.

The most important group is composed of elements of the *bigab* or altar screen (Godlewski 1986: 35-36). Belonging here

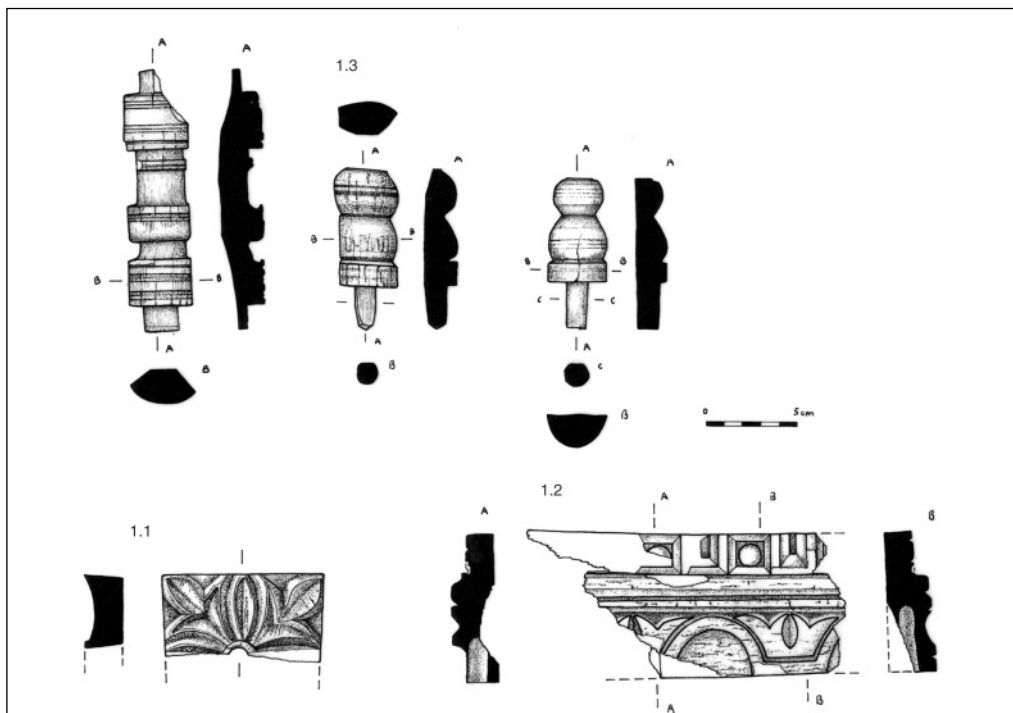


Fig. 1. Decorated worked wood elements: 1 – panel, 2 – cornice frieze, 3 – balusters and finials (Drawing G. Zborowska)



Fig. 2. Hexagonal panels from the bigab of the St Phoibammon church in Deir el-Bahari (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 3. Examples of mounting of the altar screen elements (Photo M. Jawornicki)

is a set of hexagons (179 fragments) of small size from the decoration of the screen [Fig. 2]. These are small panels with a central hole for a wooden peg; occasionally iron nails were used for fixing the piece in place. The shape of these panels are irregular and asymmetric, it is difficult to find two pieces that would be the same. A few still have the wooden pegs in them, reaching 5 cm in length, and/or forged iron nails c. 4.5 cm long with elongated heads [Fig. 3].

Another element of the *bigab* decoration are the 17 pieces of slats forming the structural frame. Some of these slats have the back cut at right angles, perhaps for the purpose of joining elements. The hexagons and slats feature the same uniform decoration consisting of three grooved lines between painted stripes by the edges. The colors in this case are



Fig. 4. Slats with painted floral scrolling  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

red, green and yellow in different combinations.

Despite the fact that three fragments of the background have been preserved, the pattern of the decoration is difficult to determine. In different places it is possible to observe sets of two holes each: round for the wooden peg and square for the iron nail. Irregular paint stains (green and red) can also be seen, suggesting that particular



Fig. 5. Leaf-shaped wooden finial  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

pieces were painted only after they had been fixed in place.<sup>1</sup> Traces of more or less hexagonal cuts can be treated as guidelines for mounting elements. The technique of fixing elements to the background can be reconstructed on the grounds of two fragments [Fig. 3]. The general appearance of the *higab*, however, is to be reconstructed solely on the basis of parallels from other Coptic churches.

The same parallels indicate that the geometric decoration of the *higab* could have been accompanied by small plaques with carved images of crosses, floral motifs and animal figures. The finds from the Chapel of Hatshepsut presumably fall in this category. The only completely preserved panel is decorated with a representation of a four-legged animal, possibly a dog, although the identification is uncertain (Szafranski 2007b). It is surrounded by a vegetal ornament. The background is painted black. The ornament preserves traces of other colors: red on the animal's head, yellow on the body. All the side edges are splattered with red paint. A peg hole is positioned in the central part. Two poorly preserved halves of similar panels have also been discovered.

A different kind of panel was decorated with floral ornament. Half a panel of this type, made of high quality wood, is broken exactly at the peg hole [Fig. 1.1]. The background is black, the ornament yellow and green. Edges are smudged with pink paint.<sup>2</sup>

Fragments (single arms) of most likely nine crosses with grooved or painted

decoration were also found. The engraved decoration is mostly reduced to parallel lines at the ends of the arms. In one case, a small fragment bears deeply cut simple hatching. The painted ornaments are chiefly geometric, imitating inlaid gems. The crosses may have been part of the altar screen, like the panels,<sup>3</sup> but they could equally well have been connected with burial places (Rutschowskaya 1991: 2231). Two fragments of crosses are distinctive for their painted leather casing (studied by T. Górecki). The entire vertical piece from one of these objects has survived, and one of the vertical arms from the other. The ornamental motifs include geometric figures, representations of saints and Christ in a tondo at the ends of the arms.

Pieces with floral scrolling are richly represented, both grooved [Fig. 1:2] and painted [Fig. 4]. The former demonstrate a fineness of execution with deep engraving. They could have been part of a frieze surmounting the top of cupboards or other furniture.

Other elements of furniture pieces were also found: balusters, carved finials [Fig. 1:3]. They are preserved, as a half, quarter or third of the circumference. Similar elements were published among the finds from the monastery of St Epiphanius (Winlock, Crum 1926: 57, Fig. 18, Pl. XV C, D).<sup>4</sup> Among the more interesting finds was a leaf-shaped finial from the *higab* or perhaps from a door [Fig. 5].<sup>5</sup> Small elongated pieces with two pierced rectangular mortises are difficult to

1 Although the logical way would be to paint the slats from which the hexagons were later cut.

2 A similar plaque, of which half has been preserved, was published by Godlewski 1986: 121, Fig. 87.

3 I am indebted to Tomasz Górecki for this suggestion.

4 According to Winlock's interpretation (Winlock, Crum 1926: 56, Fig. 17) they were intended to be seen from one side only; since they were not three-dimensional in our case, they could have decorated the fronts of niches, a piece of furniture or the altar screen for that matter.

5 A similar fragment of Pharaonic attribution (Twentieth Dynasty?) was published by W.M.F. Petrie, who described it as a wooden *khaker* (sic!) ornament, cf. Petrie 1927: 47, Pl. XL 77.

interpret. One of the surfaces is decorated with three lengthwise grooved lines. A similar fragment was published from the monastery of St Epiphanius where it was interpreted as an element of a balustrade (Winlock, Crum 1926: 47, Pl. XV C, D).

A few elements of the wooden furnishings of the church bear traces of inscriptions. Five fragments featured single engraved letters, while fragments of tablets revealed a painted text, possibly an invocation of the monks.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Kindly suggested by Renate Dekker from Leiden University.