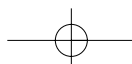
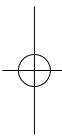
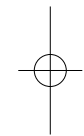
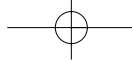
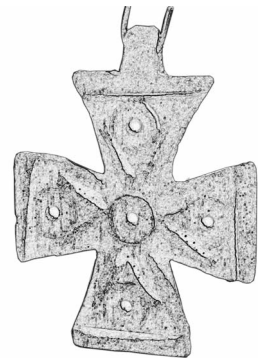


Włodzimierz Godlewski



NAQLUN





The Deir Malak Gubrail monastery, known also as Deir el Khashaba and as Nekloni in the Coptic texts, spreads over more than 4 km², in the picturesque hills of Gebel Naqlun and on a plateau at their foot, in the southeastern part of Fayum Oasis, near the Bahr el-Gharaq (Gr. Polemon) channel. When archaeologists from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology first arrived in 1986, the site was known from a few texts and reports by medieval historians and geographers. There were only two monks still living in the tiny monastery. But to believe the biography of Samuel of Qalamun, in the 630s when Samuel stayed there, it was among the biggest monasteries in Fayum, inhabited by 120 eremites and around 200 lay people. Samuel occupied one of the hermitages far from the church, on the outskirts of the monastery complex, and he came to the church only on Saturdays and Sundays.

A topographical survey of the site in 1986-1988 determined the size of the ancient monastic complex. The number of identified hermitages ran to 89. They were concentrated in two groups: more than 80 in the eastern group scattered among the hills and just seven in the west, situated by the channel. Between the two there extended a cemetery from the Byzantine pe-

riod, a medieval monastic complex with the Church of Archangel Gabriel and modern buildings, and an extensive kom to the east of the church concealing the ruins of monastic structures dating from the end of the 5th through the 13th century, next to which there lay a Coptic cemetery from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods (second half of 11th – early 13th century) which had sprung up in the ruins of the abandoned monastery around the Church of Archangel Michael and later inside the destroyed church as well.

Concurrently with the digging, which has continued for the past 20 seasons, the Polish Centre's team has also undertaken the conservation of 11th century wall paintings from the Church of Archangel Gabriel and a number of textiles and documents discovered in the course of the excavations.

HERMITAGES

The hermitages in Gebel Naqlun were cut into the rocky slopes, largely determining their architectural form. Most of them were executed in the 6th century by professional stonecutters. They followed a standard layout intended for two inhabitants, master and disciple. Each had an open courtyard closed off with an outer wall. Entrances led to two separate living quarters

and the domestic area. There were two chambers in each living unit, a big day room (c. 20m²) and a small bedroom. The walls of the main chamber were finely plastered and furnished with a number of niches; there was also a deep storage pit usually located by the window which aired and lighted the room. One of the niches in the east wall was finished with greater care than the others, sometimes even painted; it may have been a prayer niche. In Hermitage no. 2, there was even a graffiti on the wall by the eastern niche, depicting a fish and a tray with a chalice cup, an evident reference to the Eucharist and indirectly to the niche's function inside the hermitage.

The storage pits were usually about 1.80 m deep, carefully covered at floor level and accessible through only a small opening which must have been screened with a mat perhaps. Low benches, also carefully plastered, ran around the walls. The absence of oratoria in the hermitages stands in confirmation of Samuel's habit of attending church on Saturdays and Sundays for communal prayer. This must have been the church standing in the central part of the kom. Little of this building has survived except for a number of elements of the architectural decoration, mostly capitals and bases.

Of the two oldest hermitages explored so far at Naqlun, that of Phibamo as it is called (no. 44), lies at the northwestern end of the hillside hermitages. It features a different ground plan compared to the standard described above. Fitted into a small valley, it had two living units on either side of a central courtyard, each consisting of three chambers, a kitchen and storeroom, as well as a large hall used most likely as

a meeting place by villagers visiting the hermit. Phibamo appears to have been a physician, providing physical and spiritual assistance, as indicated by finds of medical instruments and magical texts written in Coptic. The hermitage is dated to the second half of the 5th century.

Also different in layout is the other oldest hermitage, no. 85, located near the channel in the smaller, western group. Here, the living unit consisting of two chambers was entered from a central courtyard, which also gave on a large public hall, a kitchen and oratory with prayer niche framed in an architectural aedicule. From an inner courtyard one also entered a small church. Ammone's hermitage, as it is also referred to, appears to have been inhabited by a single hermit, perhaps a priest. It is the first hermitage in Naqlun to have a church and the oldest of its type known from Egypt. It is dated to the early 6th century.

WALL PAINTINGS

The 1990s renovation inside the standing Church of Archangel Gabriel, known to have been erected in the 7th-8th century, revealed wall paintings concealed under modern plaster on the west and north walls of the building and inside the apse. A foundation inscription in the apse and another one commemorating the visit of Bishop Jacob of Atfil (AD 1033) placed the execution of these murals in the early 11th century.

The apse composition is unusual for a number of reasons and it finds no match in the Coptic iconography of Fatimid Egypt. Instead of the typical composition of Mary with the apostles in the lower part and Christ in glory in the conch of the apse, there is the more orthodox, at least in Coptic

eyes, depiction of an enthroned Mary and Child painted in the central niche, between St Mark the Evangelist and founder of the Alexandrian Church, and Athanasius, a 4th-century bishop of Alexandria, famed for his unwavering orthodoxy, in the lateral niches. Above the niches, the college of apostles includes the Apostle Peter in bishop's garb with *omophorion* and the inscription "Peter the martyr", thus suggesting a connection with the Bishop Peter of Alexandria who died a martyr's death in AD 311.

Some of the murals from the walls of the naos are no less surprising. Among the equestrian saints so popular in the iconography of monastic churches (Mercurios, Theodore, possibly George and Claudius) there is an image of St Piqosh, the first time ever that this saint has been recognized in Coptic iconography. And on the west wall of the naos there is a wall painting of Mary enthroned between archangels and a depiction of Christ sitting on a rainbow (?) in the center of a cosmic cross.

The oldest of the uncovered murals is the apse composition preceding the 11th century image of Mary enthroned. Once the younger painting was moved to a place in the naos, it was possible to conserve, in the central niche of the apse, an iconographically rare representation of the victorious cross with a bust of Christ (the Cross-and-Bust image). This painting has been dated to the 8th century.

MEDIEVAL MONASTIC COMPLEX

The earlier church on the site, that of Archangel Michael in the central part of the kom to the east of the present complex, had been raised on the earliest 6th century monastic buildings which had gone up in flames. An extensive complex of apparently

administrative and economic character sprang up around this church. Its northern part, referred to as Building D, appears to have contained living quarters, especially on the upper floor as indicated by numerous fragments of 11th century wall paintings. This complex, which included two tower-keeps, also incorporated a "library" of sorts, hinted at by finds of many codex cards, leather covers of such codices and even painted illuminations. Judging by the cut-offs of papyrus texts used in stiffening the covers, found on the ground-floor near a basin for soaking, and small furnaces for heating tools used in the decorating process, the books were bound on the spot. Buildings E and G yielded several dozen Coptic and Arabic texts — letters, contracts, receipts — reflecting the economic life of the monastery. Also found were several Abbasid and Fatimid dinars of the 9th-10th century and a die for striking coins.

GIRGA'S ARCHIVE

A large storage jar was found sunk into the floor of one of the rooms in Building E, located to the northwest of the Church of Archangel Michael. It contained 50 documents in Arabic belonging to the family of Girga ben Bifam, a wealthy Copt who had lived in the village of Damuya al-Lahun close to the Nekloni monastery in the end of the 10th and beginning of the 11th century. Some of the documents were written on big parchment sheets in the office of the notary in Lahun. These are property deeds for the purchase and sale of houses and gardens, dated between AD 992 and 1029 (AH 382-415). Some of the documents on paper are receipts for money loaned and taxes paid. The archive of Girga ben Bifam from Naqlun is one of the most important

sources for understanding the economic and social life in 10th and 11th century Fayum.

OTHER CODICES AND ARCHIVES

More than a thousand documents and fragments of documents, written on papyrus, parchment and paper in Greek Coptic and Arabic, have been found in the excavations at Naqlun, on the central kom as well as inside the hermitages. While mostly undated, these texts are inextricably connected with the life and activities of the hermits and the functioning of the Nekloni monastery from the early 6th through the 14th century. A large part of the texts is religious in character, private excerpts made from literary texts and prayers, but also whole or fragmentary cards from codices; fragments of psalms and a fragment of agricultural calendar. One Coptic codex contained the Gospel of St John. Four books written in Arabic and carefully deposited in a fine casket of Sicilian workmanship appear to have had nothing to do with the monastic community. More likely, the casket with its contents was abandoned for some reason in the ruins of the monastery. Two of these are fragmentary Quranic texts, the third is an extensive treatise on death and the last is so varied in content that it may have been a kind of private notebook.

Letters and economic texts constitute the biggest set. Some may have ended up in the monastery as part of a family archive or as scraps for reuse – many of the economic documents have other, mostly religious texts written on the back.

One small fragment from Hermitage no.1 caused a minor sensation when it was found. It was written in Latin, which is

rarely encountered in the Egyptian monastic environment, but it was rather the content that was so surprising. The fragment was identified as coming from the eleventh book of Livy's *History of Rome*. After a careful search and in-depth study, it was concluded that the scrap came from a codex prepared in the 5th century in a North African scriptorium and it ended up in Naqlun not so much as reading practice for the hermit as part of the waste material used to stiffen the cover of another codex.

COINS

Coins from the monastery are rare. A dozen or so low-denomination Byzantine coins of the 4th and 5th century came from Phibamo's hermitage, but these were hardly as interesting as the gold coins discovered in the ruins of the 10th-11th century monastic compound on the central kom. Gold Abbasid and Fatimid dinars were found in buildings D and G. Of these, the 13 Abbasid coins (AH 344-370) represented considerable monetary value, as indicated by the texts from the archive of Girga ben Bifam which give the prices of real estate in the oasis at the time. A house with garden cost an average of two and a half to four dinars depending on the size of the garden. The dies for gold coins found in the ruins of the monastery, provisionally dated to the 11th century, cannot be interpreted as proof of minting of any kind going on in the monastery. They were deposited in the monastery more likely for safekeeping.

CEMETERY C

The plateau between the monastic architecture and the western hermitages was occupied in the 6th century by a fairly

extensive cemetery. It must have functioned at the same time as the first monastery. The only tantalizing evidence of the tomb superstructures, nothing of which can be seen on the eroded desert surface, comes from a number of funerary stelae found in the vicinity. The actual burials were made in rock-cut oblong pits or, in the more deluxe version, in small burial chambers with rectangular access shafts on the west side. Many of these graves have been plundered at some time in the past, but where the burial has survived, the body is wrapped in several shrouds and stiffened with wooden boards or palm-leaf ribs to form a cartonnage. Care was taken to build a construction above the face and another, smaller one above the feet, imparting on the body a characteristic shape. As a last step, the whole cartonnage was wrapped in ornamental tapes in a variety of decorative net patterns. There is no doubt that professional workshops must have been involved in their making. The richly decorated burial clothes and shoes, as well as the funerary stelae associated with this cemetery leave no doubt that the men buried here (no women have yet been identified among the bodies) were lay people. Considering that the cemetery lies within the general area of the Nekloni monastery, one wonders who these people were — lay inhabitants of the monastery or perhaps the sick entrusted to the care of the hermits?

CEMETERY A

Another Christian cemetery functioned around the Church of Archangel Michael on Kom A and subsequently in the abandoned ruins of the monastery from the

second half of the 11th through the 13th century. The men, women and children buried here were deposited on the whole in coffins made of wood or palm-leaf ribs. Personal items, like combs, pen cases, a school tablet, weaving tools and in one case even a codex with the Gospel of St John were occasionally put into the coffins. More frequently glass bottles and small glazed vessels, presumably filled with aromatic oils, were found with the dead, as were also flowers and aromatic plants. A study of burial textiles has permitted a detailed classification of coffin shrouds, burial shrouds and burial tunics, the latter occasionally featuring woven Arabic inscription borders or ornamental imitations thereof. The rich array of robes, tunics and shawls, also decorated with woven inscriptions in Arabic and sometimes also Coptic, has provided a unique opportunity for reconstructing men's and women's fashions in Fatimid Fayum. Many of these robes were made locally, but a few, mostly shawls, obviously came from the exclusive workshops of the caliphs, as well as distant corners of the Arab world such as Andalusia.

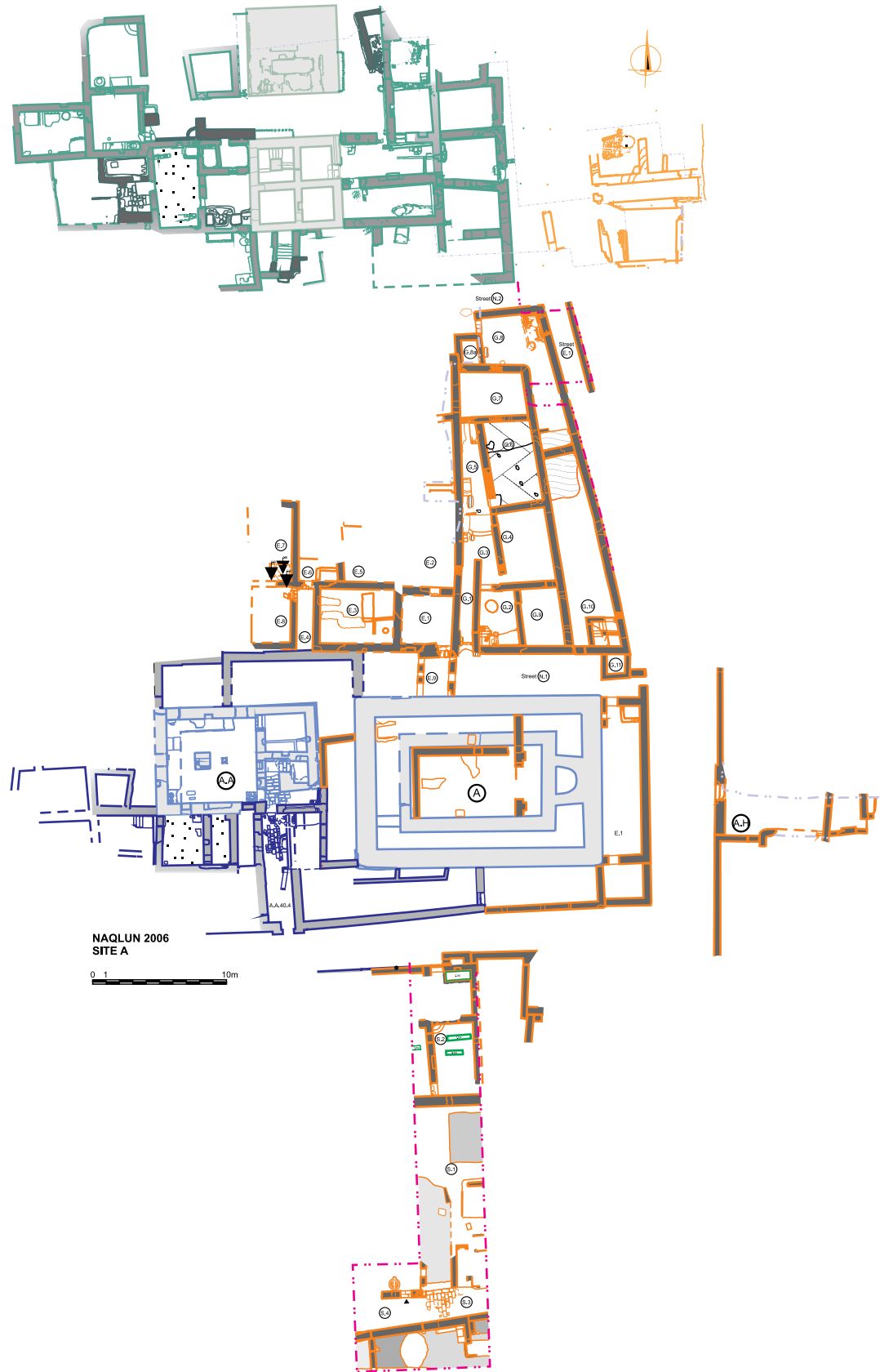
REVIVAL

In recent years the monastery in Naqlun has experienced a revival. A new complex of buildings meeting the sacral, economic and living needs of the monastic community has been erected inside a walled compound. A fine garden raised on the rocky ground of an inner courtyard has become a favorite, not only with the many monks now residing at Naqlun, but also with the hundreds of tourists and pilgrims regularly visiting the monastery today.

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Plan of the monastic complex on kom A
(PCMA Archives)





Naqlun, view from the hills
(PCMA Archives)

Hermitage 85 viewed from the west
(PCMA Archives)





Apse of the Church of the Archangel Gabriel, after conservation (PCMA Archives)

Cemetery C. Tomb T.013 with the two cartonnages in place (PCMA Archives)





Fragment of a curtain made of linen and wool, 6th century (PCMA Archives)

Fatimid glasses from the graves in cemetery A (PCMA Archives)

