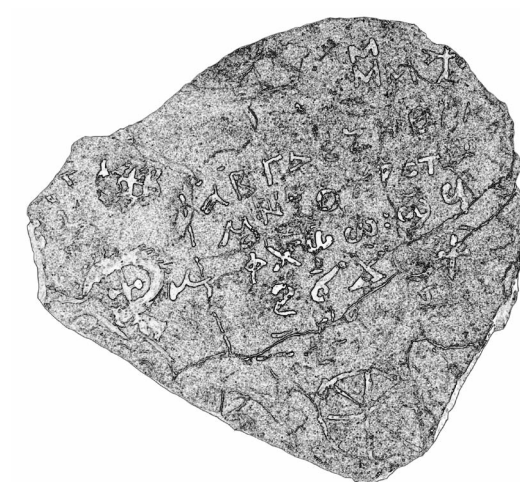
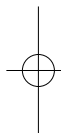
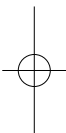


Tomasz Górecki



**SHEIKH ABD
EL-GURNA**





In 2003 Polish archaeologists started work in Sheikh Abd el-Gurna in West Thebes where many relics of Coptic architecture — monasteries, churches and hermitages — can still be seen, including parts of a settlement inside the temple at Medinet Habu. Although the remains are fairly abundant, they are poorly preserved on the whole, most often almost entirely destroyed. What little has survived has led scholars to the conclusion that practically every Pharaonic temple had been adapted in some part as a church, many rock tombs were occupied by hermits, and monasteries were established in a handful of the temples (Deir el-Medina, Deir el-Bahari) and funerary complexes (Monastery of St Epiphanyos). Monasteries were also built

from scratch (e.g. Deir el-Bakhit, Deir el-Rumi) and new hermitages were cut mainly in the southern slopes of the rocks confining Thebes on the west.

The Polish team selected for exploration a complex of Middle Kingdom pharaonic tombs cut in a small hill located north of Deir el-Medina. Monks had adapted tomb no. 1152 as a hermitage most likely in the second half of the 6th century; they occupied it until the 8th century. They put in benches for sitting and a 'bed' to sleep on, and they plastered and decorated the rock walls with crosses, inscribed one in a circle and another inside an arch, two images of equestrian saints, Christ in a tondo and inscriptions, these images all painted in red and yellow. At a later stage in the existence

of the hermitage, chambers for domestic use were constructed in the courtyard in front of the adapted tomb. The largest of the three units was an almost 6-m high defensive keep built of mud brick with an upper-floor chamber entered via a ladder from the outside. This tower also served storage purposes.

The hermitage appears to have been occupied by two monks, a master and his disciple, engaged in the manufacture of textiles, basketry and leatherworking (including bookbinding). Proof of their handiwork has been forthcoming from the extensive rubbish dump which had accreted on the rocky slope in front of the hermitage: yarn, reeds and half-products like pieces of cut skin of various sizes. The dump has also yielded evidence of another kind: more than 200 ceramic and limestone-chip ostraca, and most excitingly, three complete Coptic manuscripts discovered in 2005 (see below). A few fragmentarily preserved Coptic letters written on papyrus, as well as some of the ostraca came from the part of the hermitage arranged inside the tomb interior.

The other Middle Kingdom tomb-turned-hermitage (no. 1151), which the team has started to explore, is located 40 m to the north of the first. The monks plastered the rock walls and laid a fine floor of irregular stone tiles imitating gray-white marble in the entrance, decorated with a large cross, the outlines of which were marked with regular pieces of red-brick tiles. Further inside, the floor of this hermitage or possibly chapel was made of smooth and hard lime mortar. The mud plaster coating of the walls was decorated with painted circles inscribed with intricate geometric elements, a cross and Cop-

tic inscription. Earlier excavations in the 1930s had cleared the tomb of any Coptic finds, but there can be no doubt that the two hermitages formed a complex. Further work should help in determining the mutual relationship between the two.

The discovery of the three manuscripts in the rubbish dump was electrifying news in a situation where such finds have been rare anyway in recent times and none has ever come specifically from Gurna, which is known for the fine production of its several *scriptoria*. The numerous manuscripts that now grace museum collections around the world have practically all been purchased on the antiquaries market or from *fellahin*, and few can boast a fairly certain archaeological context.

Two of these manuscripts were books written on papyrus and bound in leather, the covers blind-tooled and decorated. One contained the *Canons of Pseudo-Basil*, a collection of rules regulating various aspects of church life, written on 148 pages. This manuscript, provisionally dated to the 7th/8th century is the only full text of these canons in the Coptic language (Sahidic dialect), known previously only from a late medieval version in Arabic. The other codex, decorated on the cover with a red-painted simplified *Chi-Ro* sign inside a circle and a guilloche, turned out to be a 144-page long *Enkomion of St Pisenthios*, bishop of Keft (Koptos), who lived in AD 568–632 and was active in Thebes for a time. More surprising identifications will surely be forthcoming once the thick covers of these two books, made of papyrus waste from old books, letters and documents, are taken apart and carefully preserved.

The third book was a set of 51 loose parchment cards inserted between two

wooden boards pasted with thin leather. One card bears a Greek text dated to the 8th century. Another two, presumed to be palimpsests, contained excerpts from chapters 35 and 36 of the apocryphal *Acts of St Peter* describing the saint's martyrdom. The remaining 48 cards featured a few of the last chapters of the Old Testament Book of Isaiah.

The concerted effort of conservators who were rushed out into the field immediately after the discovery, preserved the books and made it possible to photograph several pages and to identify their content. Prof. Wincenty Myszor of Silesian University in Katowice translated two of the pages from Coptic, and Prof. Ewa Wipszycka from the University of Warsaw identified these as part of the *Canons of Pseudo-Basil*. The other manuscript had opened fortunately on the title page and this allowed Wincenty Myszor to identify it as the life of St Pisenhios. The parchment codex remained a mystery, its poor condition excluding any preliminary examination at the time. This changed once the books were transferred to the National Museum in Alexandria where conservators undertook comprehensive measures to protect and preserve all of the finds. Their first effort was to separate all the parchment cards and this they accomplished in

2006, allowing Prof. Tito Orlandi of the University of Rome (La Sapienza) to identify the text as part of the Book of Isaiah. It also turned out that the parchment codex included pages written by another hand, describing the martyrdom of St Peter. Editing work has already begun on the Book of Isaiah, even while the pages are being cleaned. The major task of the conservators at the time of writing is to clean and straighten all the sheets of the two papyrus books, as well as to separate the bits and pieces of papyrus waste used to stiffen the leather-bound covers.

Investigations of the Theban hermitages complement earlier and current work mainly in the monasteries and inside pharaonic temples where church remains are being documented. Important research on Egyptian monasticism has been carried out foremost on sites like Esna, Kellia, Abu Fano and Naqlun. Much is known also about Theban Christianity and monasticism, but mainly from written sources. Therefore, the results of new archaeological investigations are providing complementary information on the life of the Theban hermits and specifically the least studied aspects of life in the hermitages and the mutual relationships of different units.

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*View of the Nile Valley from the
courtyard of Hermitage 1152
(Photo E. Szpakowska)*

*Courtyard of Hermitage 1152
The entrance to the hermitage on the right,
on the left, a two-floor building (keep)
(Photo T. Górecki)*





*The manuscripts at the moment of discovery
(Photo T. Górecki)*

*The Coptic alphabet written on a chip of limestone
(Photo M. Jawornicki)*

