



**Archaeological research in the hermitage in Tomb 1152 in Sheikh Abd el-Gurna (West Thebes)**

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Source: *PAM 20 (Research 2008)*, 225-236

ISSN 1234-5415 (Print), ISSN 2083-537X (Online)  
ISBN 978-83-235-0821-2

Published: Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW),  
Warsaw University Press (WUP)

[www.pcma.uw.edu.pl](http://www.pcma.uw.edu.pl) – [www.wuw.pl](http://www.wuw.pl)

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# ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE HERMITAGE IN TOMB 1152 IN SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA (WEST THEBES)

Tomasz Górecki

National Museum in Warsaw

**Abstract:** The chief objectives of work at the site include the chronology of its occupation by Coptic monks, the nature of the monastic foundation, and reconstruction of everyday life. Even small features, like masonry benches and the fill of hollows in the rock floor are explored in minute detail in view of the shallow stratigraphy. Feature 4/S was examined this season to establish the southernmost extent of the complex. Finds from both the Christian and pre-Christian periods are studied systematically — this season human and faunal skeletal remains were examined, as well as textiles.

**Keywords:** West Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-Gurna, Coptic hermitage, monasticism

Archaeological excavations were limited in scope during the two seasons which took place in 2008 in favor of specialist studies, which covered the entire assemblage of

archaeozoological and anthropological remains, as well as textile finds collected since the beginning of explorations on the site in 2003.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

The southern part of the courtyard of the hermitage<sup>1</sup> [*Fig. 1*] was explored archaeologically with the express purpose of studying the stratigraphy of the rock detritus slope in front of the entrance to the small tomb from the Late Period(?), associated with Tomb 1152 and inhabited or at least used by the monks. Previous work (in 2003 and 2006) had demonstrated that the slope was not the effect of

natural accumulation of weathered rock, but intentional action on the part of the monks availing themselves of rock material brought from the nearest neighborhood. The purpose apparently was to facilitate entrance into the tomb, which was situated approximately 2 m above the level of the courtyard. In 2006, explorations of the eastern slope had uncovered a large round pottery container (pithos) filled with rock

<sup>1</sup> See plan of the whole hermitage in Górecki 2007: Fig. 1, also Wipszycka 2009: Fig. 48 (place of exploration marked with the letter F).

detritus and empty amphorae (Górecki, Szpakowska 2008: 308 and Fig. 4). The question asked then was whether the pithos had been a solitary installation or was part of a small domestic complex.

Exploration of the surface layers of the slope uncovered remains of thin walls with a low mastaba attached to it, constructed of mud brick and coated with mud plaster. Complete ostraka were found on top of the bench [Fig. 2], two in one group and three in the other, both wrapped in cloth and tied with rope. The ostraka had been either “archivized” or prepared to be sent. In any case, they had been treated differently than other ostraka found in the hermitage, which were dumped in the rubbish in front of the complex after being read.

The slope was explored completely in the western part (approximately 9 m by 2.50 m; total height explored 1.50–2.00 m), down to the uneven surface of the rock. A stone wall with brick bench

was documented, separating the utilitarian part of the slope with flat surface from the non-utilitarian sloping eastern part. A path ran alongside the east side of this wall, leading to the slope next to the rock face bounding the hermitage on the south. In this spot under the slope there had been on a lower level a kind of structure serving as steps. In the southern part of the slope, a few dozen centimeters below the slope surface, excavations uncovered two steps of different width, made primitively of loosely laid mud bricks and stones. These steps led into the tomb from the east [Fig. 3]. They were laid on a fairly soft unstable slope of rock debris, so to harden the ground the monks used not only stones, but also the relatively hard spikes of Egyptian LRA 7 amphorae — altogether 103 such endings were discovered, used to level the ground under the steps and to reinforce the loose rock substructure. The western face of the baulk, aligned with the N–S dividing

### Team

*Dates of work:* First season, 1 December 2007–15 February 2008; second season, 3 November–14 December 2008

*Directors:* Tomasz Górecki, archaeologist, pottery specialist (Eastern Christian Art Collection, National Museum in Warsaw) (both seasons)

*SCA representatives:* Abu el-Abbas Selim Mohamed Kedr (first season), Amir Abd el-Atef Ahmed al-Azab (second season)

*Archaeologists:* Szymon Maślak (Polish Ministry of National Education scholarship holder), Zbigniew Polak (Institute of Archeology, University of Warsaw), Eliza Szpakowska, egyptologist (PCMA)

*Anthropologist:* Robert Mahler (PCMA)

*Archaeozoologist:* Urszula Iwaszczuk (PhD candidate, Faculty of History, University of Warsaw) (second season)

*Textile conservator:* Barbara Czaja-Szewczak (Wilanów Palace Museum, Warsaw)

*Photographer:* Zbigniew Doliński (National Museum in Warsaw) (second season)

*Student-trainees:* Łukasz Jarmużek (undergraduate student), Joanna Michalska (graduate student, PCMA scholarship holder) (both Institute of Archeology, University of Warsaw)

*Volunteer:* Zuzanna Górecka (second season)

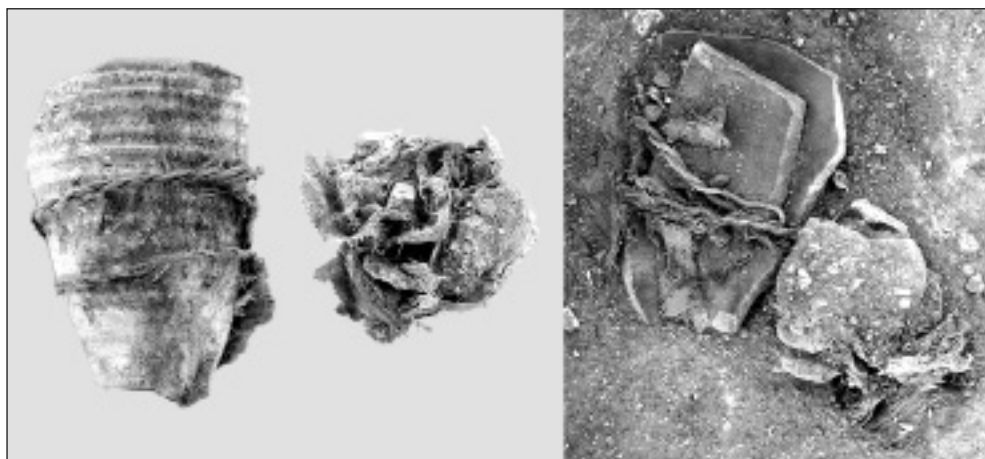
wall, showed the stratigraphy better than the eastern one, permitting a more precise phasing of the accumulation [Fig. 4]. The rock material forming the slope was deposited from the south, all the way to the rise in the ground in front of the tomb. The color of the layers and structural differences indicate different sources of the rock material. The used part of the slope was encased by a low wall made of loose stones (unbonded); the top at the southern

end was smoothed and leveled with loose debris and roughly covered with a clay floor.

The assemblage from the rock fill was fairly poor and included chiefly sherds of Egyptian amphorae and a few coarse ware vessels. Bits of small bread loaves constituted an absolutely unique find. Their overall shape, whether oval or round, could not be ascertained, but it was possible on occasion to estimate the size, especially the



Fig. 1. Plan of the southern part of the hermitage: 1 – pitbos; 2 – ostraka; 3 – steps; 4 – basket; 5 – cone; 6 – frying pan; 7 – textile (orbiculus); 8 – sherds with sketches; 9 – “bench”; A–B – section through the fill on the slope (see Fig. 4) (M. Czapińska, Z. Polak, M. Trzeciecki)



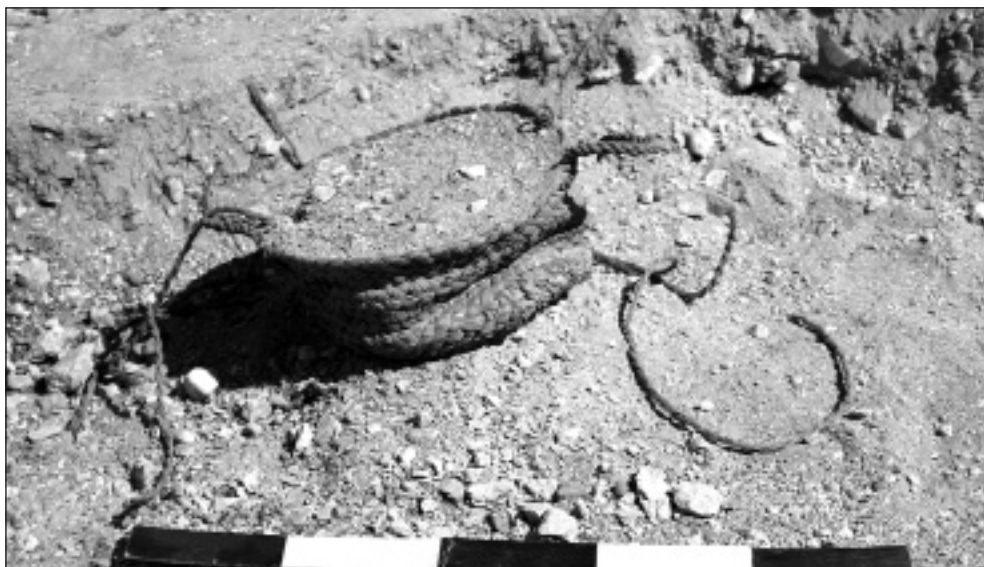
*Fig. 2. Ostraka discovered on the bench (right); two groups of ostraka (C.O. 268, 269, 270 and C.O. 266, 267) wrapped in cloth and tied with palm rope (Photos T. Górecki)*



*Fig. 3. Steps into the tomb from before the making of the slope (Photo T. Górecki)*



*Fig. 4. Section through the slope in front of the tomb, looking southeast (marked A–B on plan in Fig. 1)*  
(Photo T. Górecki)



*Fig. 5. Damaged palm-leaf basket containing rock detritus*  
(Photo T. Górecki)

height of individual breads (approx. 4 cm with a diameter of approx. 6 cm).

A damaged basket woven of palm leaves was found in place at the bottom of the slope. It was filled with the same kind of rock detritus as that used in the forming of the slope [Fig. 5]. The handle of the basket had been torn rendering it useless for further work; therefore, it must have been abandoned by the monks and covered in the course of their “building project”.

Exploration of loose fill on top of bedrock just a few meters to the east of the excavation area this season produced a small (Diam. 9.3 cm, L. 12.8 cm) clay funerary cone with distinctly impressed text mentioning the name of Ramose [Fig. 6]. The cone was surely salvaged from the nearby tomb of Ramose (No. 132) by one of the monks and used subsequently as an amphora stopper.<sup>2</sup> This secondary usage of the cone is confirmed by its location among broken remains of an amphora of LRA7 type.

A survey with a metal detector carried out in the hermitage brought to light a few minor iron artifacts, two of which could have been tools (awls for threading rope or thongs) used in basketmaking or sewing leather sandals. It also located a large object inside what proved upon exploration to be a hollow in the rock just a few centimeters under the occupational level of the courtyard, right by the stone wall separating the slope (F) from the courtyard. The hollow was filled with organic remains, stones and rock detritus. The object turned

out to be a large iron pan (C.I.15),<sup>3</sup> made up of a round and fairly shallow part for frying with a beak bent out in the rim (for decanting oil?) and a handle attached to it with two rivets [Fig. 7]. It was repaired and appears to have seen long use, the layer of burning on the bottom being up to 2 mm thick in places. Preliminary conservation measures revealed under a thin layer of rust on the handle a relatively rich ornament cut into the iron with a tool approximately 1 cm wide. The sharp edge of the tool was held parallel to the handle surface to obtain longer strokes or at various angles to get shorter incisions of various lengths. The decoration consisted of four motifs, looking from the end of the handle: two parallel palm leaves; two fish parallel to one



Fig. 6. Funerary cone with the name of Ramose (Ph.C.01) brought to the hermitage from Tomb 132 (Photo E. Szpakowska)

<sup>2</sup> Another funerary cone from Tomb 132 (Ramose) published without identifying the provenience: Lepsius 1849: 284; Zenihiro 2009: Appendix 1, 48 (type no. 631/B.04). I am indebted to the late Eliza Szpakowska for her suggestion that the cone came from the tomb of Ramose.

<sup>3</sup> Length of pan 43.3 cm; of riveted handle 24.4 cm; rim diameter 18.8 cm to 19.0–19.1 cm; base diameter 16.6–17.0 cm; depth 1.8 cm, width of handle 2.6 cm at base, 2.1 cm before the rounded ending; diameter of rounded ending 3.6 cm. Thickness of metal in the pan for cooking 0.05–0.1 cm.

another, swimming in opposite directions; a bird (peacock? dove?) with a leaf or stem above its back; two motifs of a geometric nature [see *Fig. 7*].<sup>4</sup>

Digging in the extensive rubbish dump deposited on the rock slope below the hermitage tower and courtyard yielded a few hundred fragments of pottery, organic



*Fig. 7. Iron pan (C.I.15) and close-ups of four contiguous sections of the decoration on the handle (Photo D. Dąbkowski)*

<sup>4</sup> Issues meriting attention apart from the rich decoration on the handle include technological aspects, production technique, execution of the decoration, traces and way of use, purpose. For similar pans, see Farid 1973: Pl. IXA, Mills 1982: 12, Pl. VIII (192.2.29 and 192.2.30). Pans of a different kind (with folding handles) were discovered in Thebes (see Harcum 1921: 44ff.); some of the ornamental motifs on the handles of these pans resemble the decoration on the Gurna find. A more detailed description of these ornamental panels can be found in Hayes 1984: 160–163, nos 252–254.

remains, animal bones, fragments of wood and textiles (including an *orbiculus* with unidentifiable ornament [Fig. 8], 30 Coptic ostraka and two sherds with sketches of a few variants of the guilloche motif (Górecki 2010: 29–38) [Fig. 9]. Texts appear mainly on Egyptian amphorae, but there is also a sizable group of inscriptions on sherds from imported containers characterized by a cream-beige slip. Big pieces of baskets and thick ropes were also found in the rubbish dump, accompanied by numerous fragments of irregular limestone tiles with attached clay. These could be evidence of renovation works inside the hermitage, replacing old tiles with new ones. The baskets and ropes must have been connected with bringing building materials to the site, that is, camel or donkey transport.

Finds from this part of the site came from a layer of relatively insignificant thickness and were poorly preserved.

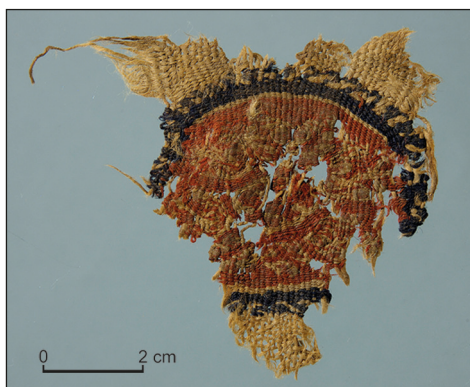


Fig. 8. Woolen textile with orbiculus decoration (C.T.063) (Photo Z. Doliński)



Fig. 9. Amphora sherds with sketches of variants of the guilloche motif (Photo Z. Doliński)

Inside the tomb, investigations concentrated on a bench with clay sides reinforced in a few places by fragments of vessels [Fig. 10]. The coating was removed and the fill explored. The fill turned out to consist of mainly small fraction rock detritus mixed with all kinds of rubbish and objects: organic remains, scraps of textiles, a Hellenistic lamp and sherds from the upper part of a Roman amphora, also human bones. In the lowest part of the accumulation there was an evident thin layer of burned, black, fine rock detritus and ashes mixed with severely fragmented human bones. The partly incinerated human remains may have come from a Hellenistic-period burial, disturbed by the monks adapting the tomb for their purposes.

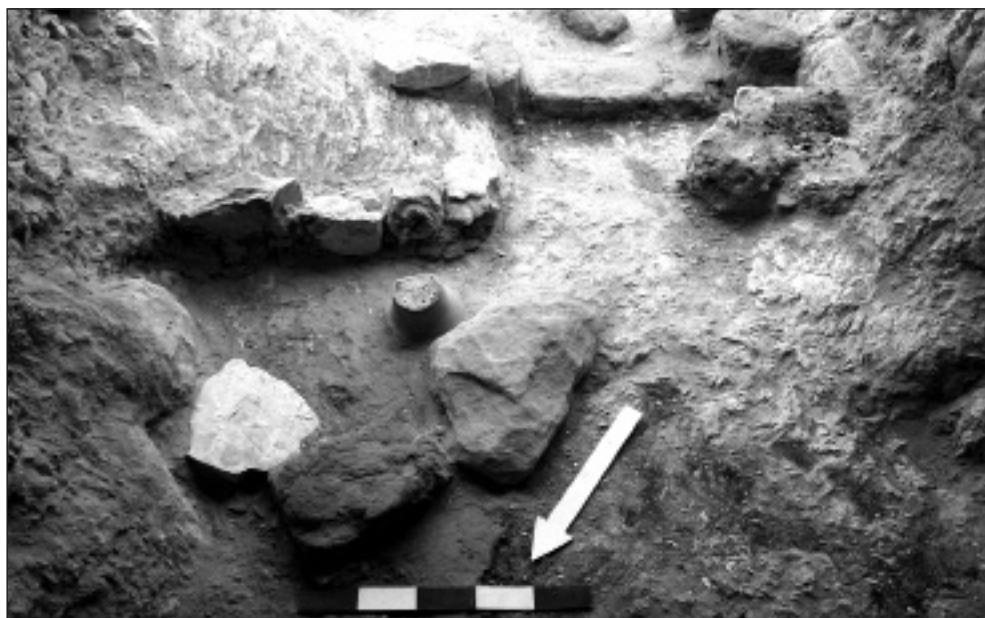
The inside of a small, fairly regular chamber (4/S: H. 1.71 m, W. 1.70 m, D. approximately 3.75 m) cut in the rock in the southern part of the monastic complex, about 30 m from the southern edge of the courtyard, was also cleared of rubbish, debris and large stone blocks [Fig. 11]. The chamber demonstrates evidence of adaptation and human occupation in the form of a wall one-brick thick in front with a narrow passage (0.51 m wide) in it and an open fire used barely a few times, a pot-stand made from the upper part of a broken amphora and evidence of ashes on the rock floor [Fig. 12]. The space outside the chamber (a kind of yard?) was enclosed with a high stone wall from the south and a low wall of large stone blocks on the east. On the north, the rock



Fig. 10. The inside of a mastaba following exploration of the fill (top view)  
(Photo T. Górecki)



*Fig. 11. Courtyard and entrance to chamber 4/S  
(Photo T. Górecki)*



*Fig. 12. Inside of chamber 4/S with threshold of dried brick, open fire, Hellenistic amphora neck used as a pot-stand(?) with stones around it (Photo T. Górecki)*

face constituted a natural boundary. The briefness of occupation in this chamber is suggested also by the insignificant amount of pottery. The chamber may have been executed in the Pharaonic age, possibly as the beginning of a new tomb, or much

later to serve as a burial place in Hellenistic or Roman times. The empty chamber may have been used by the monks occasionally (as a *refugium*?) and quite probably also by much later penetrators of the Theban necropolis.

## SPECIALIST STUDIES

Osteological material collected during the excavations conducted on site since 2003 was subjected to preliminary anthropological examination. Human remains were separated from those of animal origin. According to anthropologist Robert Mahler, the proportion of human to animal remains was roughly determined as 2:1. The remains collected from different locations, including six incomplete, mummified bodies, proved to be one big commingled set. The minimum number of individuals identified in the set is 24. At least six were not adults, while most of the others appeared to be under 35 at the time of death. Further anthropological analysis of the material is planned for the next season.

The archaeozoological remains consisting of 3575 bones were found to be in good condition. More than 90% of the set was identified in terms of anatomical attribution and species. According to archaeozoologist Urszula Iwaszczuk, mammals prevailed among the identified remains, the predominant species being carnivores (fox, dog, hyena). Ruminants

were also identified (cattle, goat/sheep, gazelle, antelope), as were other mammals, both wild and domestic (horse, donkey, camel, cat, pig, micro-mammals). The assemblage included a few bird and fish bones, and two pieces of shell.

Textiles collected in earlier seasons were examined and categorized. According to textile conservator Barbara Czaja-Szewczak, all of the items were incomplete and damaged, constituting study material at best. Two groups of textiles were distinguished: textiles from Pharaonic-age burials (fragments of shrouds, wrappings, bands) and textiles from the Coptic period (small pieces of robes, a fragment made in the carpet technique). Fragments of wicks used in oil lamps made from twisted linen cloth were also identified, as was linen and woolen yarn and fibers. The assemblage suggests production on a small scale of simple textiles and bands. The yarn for weaving was spun and most probably also dyed on the spot, in the hermitage. Linen prevailed among the weaving products, wool being represented only minimally.

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---

## CONTENTS

---

## CONTENTS

<i>PAM RESEARCH</i> — NEW FORMULA: NOTE FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD...	11
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	13
OBITUARIES	
<i>Stanisław Medeksza</i> .....	15
<i>Eliza Szpakowska</i> .....	17
<i>Hanna Szymańska</i> .....	19
ABBREVIATIONS AND STANDARD REFERENCES .....	21

## PAM REPORTS

PCMA FIELD MISSIONS AND PROJECTS IN 2008 (WITH MAP) .....	25
---	----

## EGYPT

### ALEXANDRIA

ALEXANDRIA: KOM EL-DIKKA EXCAVATIONS AND PRESERVATION WORK. PRELIMINARY REPORT 2007/2008	
<i>Grzegorz Majcherek</i> .....	35
THE ISLAMIC GRAVEYARD ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA. EXCAVATION SEASON 2007/2008	
<i>Emanuela Kulicka</i> .....	52
GLASS FROM AREA F ON KOM EL-DIKKA (ALEXANDRIA). EXCAVATIONS 2008	
<i>Renata Kucharczyk</i> .....	56
NUMISMATIC FINDS FROM KOM EL-DIKKA (ALEXANDRIA), 2008	
<i>Adam Jegliński</i> .....	70

### MAREA

MAREA: EXCAVATIONS 2008	
<i>Hanna Szymańska</i> , <i>Krzysztof Babraj</i> .....	81
MAREA 2008: POTTERY FROM EXCAVATIONS	
<i>Anna Drzymuchowska</i> .....	97

## CONTENTS

---

### MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

MARINA EL-ALAMEIN. POLISH–EGYPTIAN RESTORATION MISSION:  
CONSERVATION WORK IN 2008

*Stanisław Medeksza, Rafał Czerner* ..... 103

### TELL EL-RETABA

TELL EL-RETABA 2008: EXCAVATIONS AND GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

*Sławomir Rzepka, Jozef Hudec, Tomasz Herbich* ..... 129

TELL EL-RETABA 2008: THE POTTERY

*Anna Wodzińska* ..... 146

### TELL EL-FARKHA

TELL EL-FARKHA (GHAZALA), 2008

*Marek Chłotnicki, Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz* ..... 153

GOLD FROM TELL EL-FARKHA. CONSERVATION PROJECT AT THE EGYPTIAN  
MUSEUM IN CAIRO

*Anna Longa, Władysław Weker* ..... 171

### TELL EL-MURRA

TELL EL-MURRA (NORTHEASTERN NILE DELTA SURVEY), SEASON 2008

*Mariusz A. Jucha, Artur Buszek* ..... 177

### SAQQARA

SAQQARA 2008: INSCRIBED MATERIAL

*Kamil O. Kuraszkiewicz* ..... 183

### DEIR EL-BAHARI

TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT AT DEIR EL-BAHARI, SEASON 2007/2008

*Zbigniew E. Szafrński* ..... 193

BUILDING *DIPINTI* IN THE TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT. DOCUMENTATION WORK,  
SEASON 2007/2008

*Dawid F. Wiczorek* ..... 203

TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT: POTTERY FROM EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROYAL  
MORTUARY CULT COMPLEX, SEASONS 2004–2008

*Ewa Czyżewska* ..... 212

### SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA (WEST THEBES)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE HERMITAGE IN TOMB 1152  
IN SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA (WEST THEBES)

*Tomasz Górecki* ..... 225

### DAKHLEH OASIS

DAKHLEH OASIS PROJECT. PETROGLYPH UNIT, ROCK ART RESEARCH, 2008

*Ewa Kuciewicz, Michał Kobusiewicz* ..... 237

---

## CONTENTS

---

### SUDAN

#### OLD DONGOLA

THE 12 NUMMLA COIN FROM OLD DONGOLA

*Barbara Lichocka* ..... 245

#### BANGANARTI

BANGANARTI AND SELIB: TWO FIELD SEASONS IN 2008

*Bogdan T. Żurawski* ..... 251

APPENDIX 1: REVITALIZATION PROJECT AT BANGANARTI

*Bogdan T. Żurawski* ..... 261

APPENDIX 2: BANGANARTI CONSERVATION REPORT  
(JANUARY–FEBRUARY AND NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 2008)

*Dorota Moryto-Naumiuk, Bogdan T. Żurawski* ..... 262

APPENDIX 3: OVERVIEW OF CERAMIC STUDIES AT BANGANARTI IN 2008

*Dobiesława Bagińska* ..... 264

INSCRIPTION WITH LITURGICAL HYMN FROM THE LOWER CHURCH  
IN BANGANARTI

*Agata Deptuła* ..... 267

BANGANARTI FORTIFICATIONS IN THE 2008 SEASON

*Mariusz Drzewiecki* ..... 273

### CYPRUS

#### NEA PAPHOS

NEA PAPHOS: SEASON 2008

*Henryk Meyza* ..... 283

### LEBANON

#### ESHMOUN

ESHMOUN VALLEY: PRELIMINARY REPORT AFTER THE THIRD SEASON  
OF THE POLISH-LEBANESE SURVEY

*Krzysztof Jakubiak* ..... 295

### SYRIA

#### TELL ARBID

TELL ARBID: ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY EXCAVATIONS IN SECTOR P,  
SPRING SEASON OF 2008

*Rafał Koliński* ..... 303

---

## CONTENTS

---

### TELL QARAMEL

TELL QARAMEL: EXCAVATIONS 2008

*Ryszard F. Mazurowski* ..... 321

## PAM STUDIES

INTRODUCTION ..... 345

ENTRE LA II<sup>E</sup> ET III<sup>E</sup> CATARACTE: SEDEINGA, UNE ÉTAPE SUR LA RIVE  
OCCIDENTALE DU NIL

*Catherine Berger-el Naggar* ..... 349

FOOD AND FUNERALS. SUSTAINING THE DEAD FOR ETERNITY

*Salima Ikram* ..... 361

SYMBOLIC FAUNAL REMAINS FROM GRAVES IN TELL EL-FARKHA (EGYPT)

*Renata Abłamowicz* ..... 373

THE NECROPOLIS AT TELL EDFU: AN OVERVIEW

*Joanna Aksamit* ..... 379

THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD CEMETERY IN THE HATSHEPSUT TEMPLE  
AT DEIR EL-BAHARI. RECENT RESEARCH

*Miroslaw Barwik* ..... 387

ENIGMATIC BUILDING FROM TELL EL-FARKHA. PRELIMINARY STUDY

*Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz* ..... 399

FUNERARY TEXTILES FROM THE MEDIEVAL CEMETERY OF NAQLUN

*Barbara Czaja-Szewczak* ..... 413

GRAECO-ROMAN TOWN AND NECROPOLIS IN MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

*Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski* ..... 421

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AS REFLECTED BY BURIAL  
RITES OBSERVED IN THE PROTODYNASTIC PART OF THE CEMETERY  
IN TELL EL-FARKHA

*Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin* ..... 457

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

*Włodzimierz Godlewski* ..... 467

REMARKS ON THE TYPOLOGY OF ISLAMIC GRAVES FROM THE CEMETERIES  
ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

*Emanuela Kulicka* ..... 483

BEADS AND WARRIORS. THE CEMETERY AT HAGAR EL-BEIDA 2 (SUDAN)

*Anna Longa* ..... 499

## CONTENTS

---

MATS AND BASKETS FROM CEMETERY A AT NAQLUN IN FAYUM OASIS <i>Anetta Łyżwa-Piber</i> .....	509
TOMB BUILDING TRADITION IN LOWER NUBIA FROM THE MEROITIC AGE TO AFTER CHRISTIANIZATION <i>Artur Obłuski</i> .....	525
ANIMAL REMAINS IN POST-MEROITIC BURIALS IN SUDAN <i>Marta Osypińska</i> .....	541
CEMETERY A IN NAQLUN: ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE BURIALS <i>Karol Piasecki</i> .....	549
ORNAMENTS ON FUNERARY STELAE OF THE 9TH–12TH CENTURIES FROM EGYPT — JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI’S PUBLICATION ANEW <i>Małgorzata Redlak</i> .....	561
NON OMNIS MORIAR. REFLECTION ON “RITE DE PASSAGE” IN THE OLD KINGDOM <i>Teodozja I. Rzeuska</i> .....	575
BURIALS IN THE COMPLEX OF THE GREAT AMIR QURQUMAS (No. 162) IN CAIRO’S “NORTHERN NECROPOLIS” <i>Maciej G. Witkowski</i> .....	587
BURIAL CUSTOMS AT TELL ARBID (SYRIA) IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE. CULTURAL INTERRELATIONS WITH THE NILE DELTA AND THE LEVANT <i>Zuzanna Wygnańska</i> .....	605
GIFTS FOR THE AFTERLIFE: EVIDENCE OF MORTUARY PRACTICES FROM THE NECROPOLIS IN MARINA EL-ALAMEIN <i>Iwona Zych</i> .....	619
INDEX OF SITES .....	633