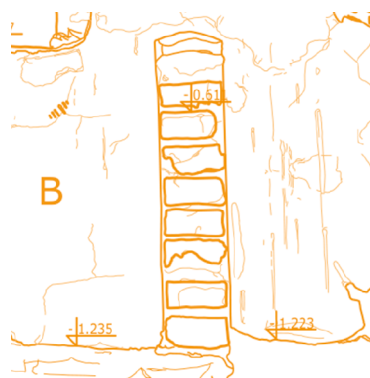


Tombs of Coptic anchorites at the site of the Temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari



Abstract: Early Coptic tombs, two at least, were discovered on the Upper Terrace of the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. The orientation of the tombs is north–south, which is the typical orientation of early Christian tombs. Christian activity at Deir el-Bahari is attested in contexts starting from the 4th century, predating the establishment of the Monastery of St Phoibammon in the 6th century.

Keywords: Theban Necropolis, Deir el-Bahari, Temple of Hatshepsut, rock-cut tomb, Coptic

The mortuary character of the temple site at Deir el-Bahari and in its immediate neighborhood remained even after the sanctuary built for the New Kingdom pharaoh-queen Hatshepsut ceased in its religious role. A burial ground from the Third Intermediate Period was installed in the Upper Courtyard (Szafrński 2015), while many tombs of Ptolemaic and Roman date were installed in both Deir el-Bahari and Asasif (Strudwick 2003). Burials from a phase when the ruined temple buildings were adapted to house a Coptic monastery were noted already by Édouard Naville, who saw in the Complex of the Royal Cult, specifically in the vestibule in front of the Chapel of Hatshepsut: “... bricks, which at first sight looked like beds or seats. They were graves;

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Coptic papyri found in the Chapel of Hatshepsut. I am also grateful to Prof. Tamás A. Bács for information and the photograph of the anchorite burial uncovered by the Hungarian Mission at Thebes. I appreciate information given by Prof. Jacques van der Vliet and Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski. I am also grateful to Mr. Marek Puskarski, Mr. Paul M. Barford, Dr. Aleksandra Brzozowska-Jawornicka and Dr. Teresa Dziedzic for their professional preparation of the drawings. Finally, I thank Iwona Zych for revising the English of this article.

each of them contained several Coptic mummies” (Naville 1901: 6). Reporting on their visit to the temple Herbert E. Winlock and Walter E. Crum wrote about a “rectangular bench-like structure” in the Vestibule of the Complex of the Royal Cult. According to them, these were tombs of monks and each tomb contained several mummies (Winlock and Crum 1926: 13–14). Some of the mummies could be dated to the 4th–5th centuries CE (Parlasca 1966: 208–209; Grimm

1974: 95). At least two tombs, apparently from the Coptic period, were discovered several decades later, during recent excavations by the Polish–Egyptian Expedition to the Temple of Hatshepsut, working inside the Complex of the Royal Cult.

TOMB INSIDE THE CHAPEL (A)

An installation made of a mixed set of red and mud bricks was unearthed in the southeastern corner of the Chapel of Hatshepsut (trench S.1/07; Szafrński 2010: 256–257, 259, Figs 4, 5) [Fig. 1]. Judging by the lower part hewn in the rock below the level of the chapel pavement, the dimensions overall were approximately 2 m (N–S) by 1.60 m (E–W) [Fig. 2]. The general orientation of the tomb is north–south. The structure was composed of two compartments, A and B, divided by a partition wall approximately 0.15 m thick. The two compart-

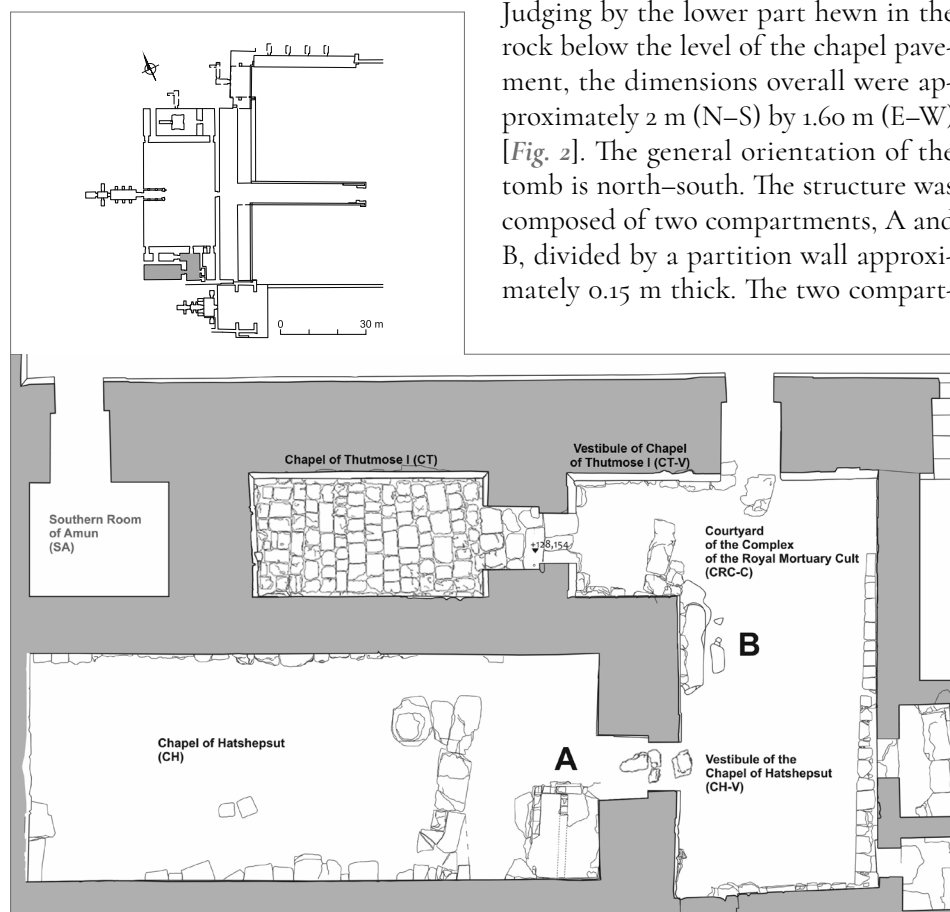


Fig. 1. Coptic tombs in the Complex of the Royal Cult of the Temple of Hatshepsut (PCMA UW | drawing T. Dziedzic, contribution A. Brzozowska-Jawornicka and P.M. Barford)

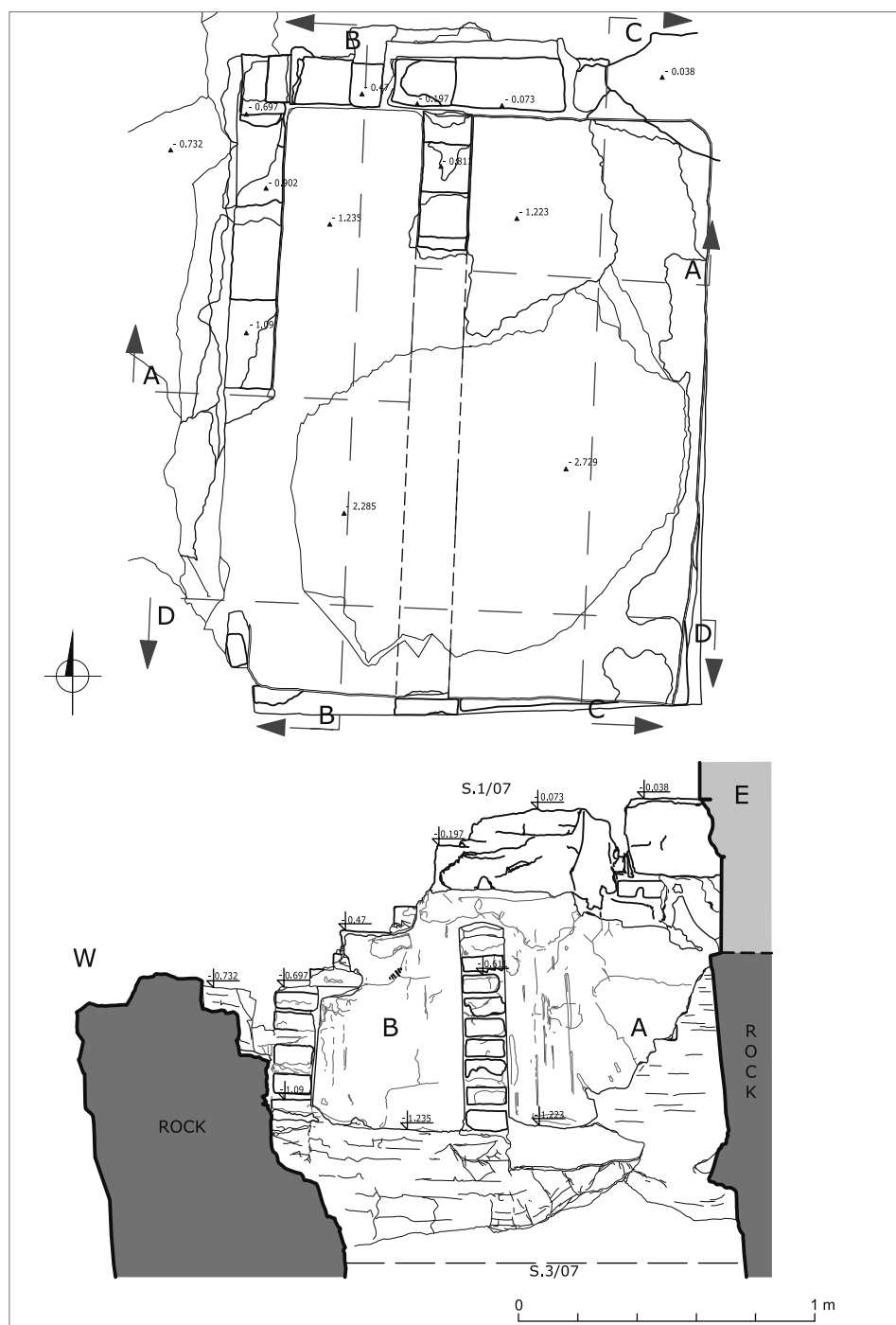


Fig. 2. Tomb inside the chapel (A). Plan and E-W section (A-A') (PCMA UW | drawing A. Brzozowska-Jawornicka, contribution G. Karpińska and Z.E. Szafranski)

ments were both approximately 1.95 m long (N–S), the width (E–W) being 0.80 m for Unit A and 0.46 m for unit B. The respective preserved height of the remnants of the two units was at least 1.15 m and 0.70 m. Some remnants of a vault can be seen in the southwestern corner of unit A, approximately 0.90 m above the floor, and there are two courses of bricks apparently from a wall facing the said vault in the northern part of unit A [see *Fig. 2*]. The original height of the installation, estimated on the grounds of the preserved remains, would not have been less than 1.80 m [see *Fig. 2*].

The ancient builders actually reused the mouth of an earlier shaft tomb from the Third Intermediate Period (Tomb Tomb XIII in trench S.3/07; Szafrński 2015: 196, *Fig. 3*), placing the brick structure directly on top of it. The inside walls of the two compartments and the pavement were given a coat of plaster and whitewashed. Hence the 3-cm-thick layer of plaster under the purported north wall of compartment A.

The archaeological material from the structure was fragmentary and chronologically mixed, but with no modern finds. Most of the artifacts from the fill—fragments of mud brick, bits of rope and textiles, linen tapes (*keria*) roughly 2 cm wide, organic material—can be attributed to the Coptic period (Szafrński 2010: 256–257). A few pottery sherds found in the fill were of mixed chronological provenance. The evidence is naturally insufficient, but the execution and quality of the two com-

partments suggest a burial place for two individuals.

Remains of a few mud bricks were recorded in a test trench S.1/04 dug in the northeastern corner of the Chapel. They were found directly on top of the shaft of another Third Intermediate Period tomb (Tomb XI; Szafrński 2010: *Fig. 4*), but there is nothing to indicate that they had been part of a separate structure. Therefore, the structure described above would have been the only Christian tomb in this space, constructed just outside the front wall of the Church of St Phoibammon that was installed inside the Chapel of Hatshepsut at the end of the 6th century (Godlewski 1986: 60) [see *Fig. 1*].¹

TOMB IN THE VESTIBULE (B)

Excavation outside the entrance to the Chapel of Hatshepsut uncovered an elongated oval feature extending parallel approximately 9 cm from the face of the east (front) wall of the chapel. Feature 18, as it was designated at the time of discovery, was aligned north–south (Barford 2010: 34–35; Szafrński 2013: 142–143, *Figs 4, 6*) [see *Fig. 1*]. The pit was hewn 1.23 m into the rocky ground, and was 2.30 m long and 0.51 m wide. The northern end was slightly narrower than the southern one. The bottom was flat and the walls, roughly vertical, were unplastered and relatively rough [*Fig. 3 top*]. Bounding the western edge of the tomb were the surviving flooring slabs of the Chapel.

Burial intent in the case of this feature is suggested by the mortar “pillow”, 40

1 The foundation blocks of the east (front) wall of the church were uncovered (Dziedzic 2020: Pl. 8). A more precise plan of the remains based on the archaeological evidence is included in an unpublished report from work in 2006–2008, written by Andrzej Ćwiek and Marta Ćwiek, now in the PCMA UW Documentation Centre archives.

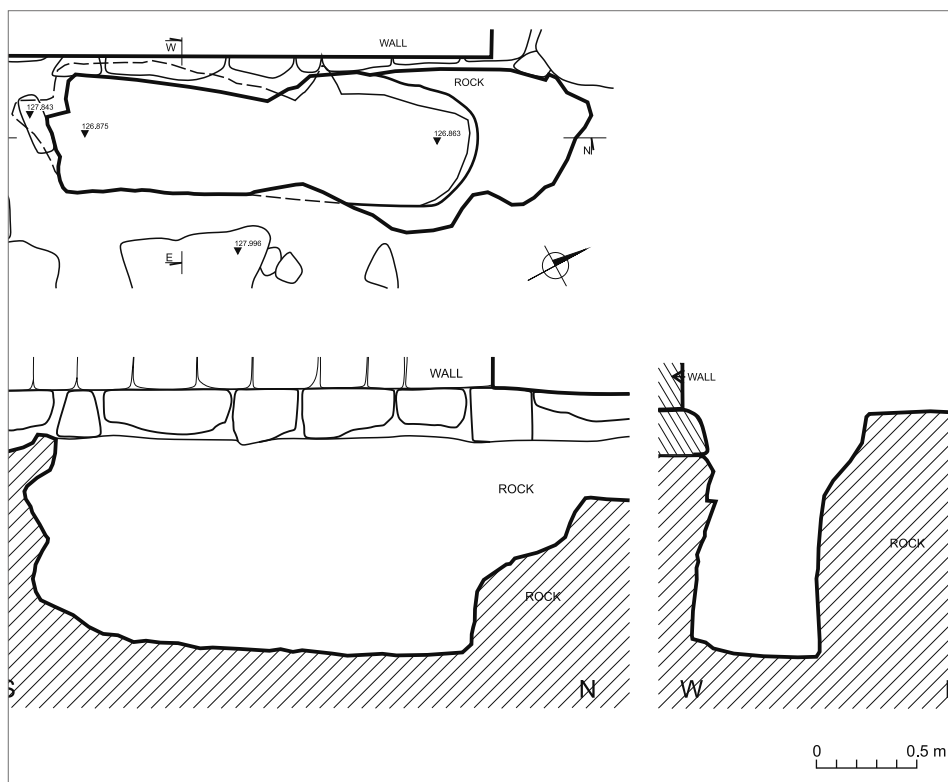


Fig. 3. Tomb outside the Chapel (B): top view after excavation, plan and sections (PCMA UW | photo W. Wojciechowski; drawing M. Puskarski, after P.M. Barford)

cm by 28 cm, observed in the southern part of the tomb. The hollow in it looks like the impression of the back of a head [Fig. 4]. The mortar preserved some dark brown, red, white and orange staining, as well as the impression of a coarse textile. Patches of mortar were observed also along the west edge of the pit. There was no body, as a matter of fact no human-related remains in the grave. The hollow in the mortar “pillow” must have been produced by the weight of a body in a shroud or wrapping of some kind (Barford 2010: 34–35, Drawing 19) [Fig. 4 inset]. The fill yielded one fragment of a limestone block with relief decoration, many fragments of mud brick and red bricks, as well as a shabti fragment, bits of rope and textile, organic material. There were a few fragments of Coptic pottery (several different vessels). This fill seemed to be modern

backfill, although there were no finds of modern date in the assemblage.

The fragments of red brick in the fill could have been redeposited and, therefore, could have derived from the tomb superstructure. Scant but telling evidence of a superstructure mortared to the bedrock here came in the form of a patch of very hard, sandy, yellow-brown mortar adhering to the bedrock on the lip of the grave, at the southern end. It was 0.28 m by 0.12 m in size, upstanding some 6 cm, as if it was what remained of a mortar joint between two bricks. Thus, this patch could have formed the seating of some kind of brick structure. Brown stains, apparently made by the same kind of mortar, were noted on the stones of the foundations of the east wall of the Chapel of Hatshepsut adjacent to the grave, and on the top eastern edge

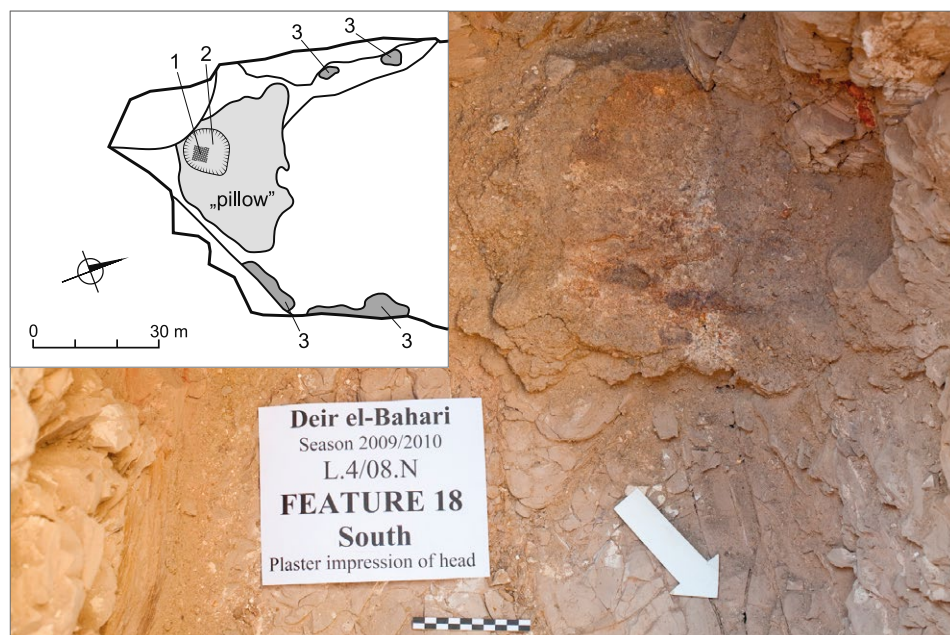


Fig. 4. Tomb outside the Chapel (B): 1 – textile impression; 2 – impression of the back of a head; 3 – sandy mortar (PCMA UW | drawing M. Puzkarski, after P.M. Barford; photo W. Wojciechowski)

of the grave. This staining does not occur on other stones around the site. The mortared brick construction apparently associated with this pit could have been either the vault of the grave pit or else the base of a superstructure marking the location of this tomb.

DISCUSSION

The two tombs need not be tombs of monks. They could represent a privileged form of burial for a saint or important personage, whose life was regarded as a model for others in the community. The dead could have also been hermits. Traces of inscriptions, painted in red, were found on the eastern and southern walls of the Chapel of Hatshepsut. A single letter painted in red, “/// H(?) ///”, was preserved in the middle of an allegedly one-line inscription on the south wall of

the Chapel, above compartment B of the double-chambered tomb and below the dado decoration on the south wall of the Chapel (Szafranski 2010: 259).

The West Theban area seems to have been populated quite densely in the Coptic period (starting from the 4th–5th century CE). Several modern toponyms from the area suggest at least seven monasteries: Deir el-Shelwit, Deir el-Moharedb, Deir el-Rumi, Deir el-Medina – Church of St Isidore (Lecuyot 2009: 18), Deir el-Bahari – Monastery of St Phoibammon (Godlewski 1986), Deir el-Bakhit – Monastery of St Paul (Burkard and Eichner 2007), Sheikh Abd el-Gurna – so-called Monastery of Cyriacus (Winlock and Crum 1926; Bács 2000).

Christian vaulted burial chambers could have been built up into a squared structure with flat roof (see Grossmann



Fig. 5. Double anchorite burial uncovered in the so-called Monastery of Cyriacus (Courtesy T.A. Bács | photo T.A. Bács)

2002: 322–325; Welsby 2004: 229, Figs 169 and 171; Godlewski 2008: 468–469, Fig. 5). The north–south orientation of the tombs is also significant. A similar orientation, precisely SW–NE, characterized a double anchorite burial (Bács 2000; 2009: 148–149; Stark and Bács 2021: 85) uncovered within the precinct of a Coptic monastery associated with Cyriacus the Anchorite (Winlock and Crum 1926), the so-called Monastery of Cyriacus, on the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Gurna [Fig. 5]. The grave had originally contained two burials separated by a low mud-brick wall. The western burial had been robbed. The eastern one contained a body, lying on its back, the head to the south. The body was wrapped in a coarse linen shroud and strapped with linen tapes forming a netting around it. A leather apron was wrapped around the upper body and fastened with a decorated leather belt (Bács 2000: 35–36; 2009: 149). It was established that the body was of a male, aged probably 35–40 at death.² The badly damaged remains of another burial were found in an Eighteenth Dynasty shaft in the forecourt of the monastery (Bács 2000: 36).

Coptic tombs found in the Ramesseum were also oriented north–south, the heads to the south (Lecuyot 2000). Tombs in Qurnet Murrai (Sauneron 1972: 206–207) and in Djemé-Medinet Habu (Winlock 1924: Pl. 38; Godlewski 1986: 49)

had the same orientation; the cemetery at Djemé is dated to the 4th–5th century (Godlewski 1986: 49).

The tomb of Saint Epimachus from the 6th century was located in front of the apse of the first church at Tell el-Makhzan, close to Pelusium, in Sinai. The first church is dated to the end of the 4th and the 5th century. A catacomb of ten funerary vaults, all oriented north–south, accessed by an underground passage, were found in the basement of the nave (Bonnet et al. 2004: 58, Fig. 1; 2005: 282, Figs 2 and 3).³ In the main church on the same site, the martyrium had a crypt with six tombs aligned north–south (C. Bonnet, personal communication).

At Deir el-Bahari, there is evidence of hermits inhabiting the ruins of the temple in the 4th–5th century, notably before the construction of the church of St Phoibammon at the end of the 6th century (Godlewski 1986: 63). Coins from the 4th century were discovered during the excavation of the Upper Terrace of the temple (Lichocka 2016). Some scraps of Coptic literary texts, identified as passages from the Bible, were also excavated there. One of them, a fragment on parchment from Jeremiah (Inv. 822), is dated to the 5th century⁴ (“une date assez haute: 5^e siècle?”; Boud’hors and Garel 2016: 48). Graffiti and Greek inscriptions from the 5th century were recorded among the finds from the Upper Terrace (Bataille 1951: XXV,

2 Based on an X-ray examination of the body by Salima Ikram (T.A. Bács, personal communication, 2021).

3 The north–south orientation of a primitive tomb is at the origin of the holy places in Geneva, in several churches, in the cathedral and a second episcopal church (C. Bonnet, personal communication).

4 However, there is no proof that the text was in the possession of hermits living in the temple before the church was constructed, that is, before the 6th century.

63–64; Godlewski 1986: 19). Two Coptic papyri of the 5th/6th century, one of them a letter (A. Boud'hors, personal communication) were found specifically between the blocks of a wall of the Chapel of Hatshepsut [Fig. 6]. The papyri were placed in the wall before the Chapel was turned into a church in the 6th century, covering the earlier pharaonic decoration with gesso and rendering new wall painting.

Last but not least, evidence of occupation of the area in the 4th and 5th centuries includes glass vessels and objects from the excavations of late strata in the Complex of the Royal Cult: vessels from the 4th century (see Kucharczyk 2021, in this volume) and other artifacts of glass dated to the 5th century (Kucharczyk 2010; Szafrński 2013: 136).

CONCLUSION

The presence of Coptic anchorites, still not monks, in the area of the Upper Terrace of the Temple of Hatshepsut is attested before the construction of the Monastery of St Phoibammon at the end of the 6th century. At least two tombs among those discovered by the expedition can be identified as Christian tombs from the 4th–5th century. The north–south orientation of these tombs is typical of early Christian tombs in Egypt, predating the shift in the 6th century to an east–west alignment. Therefore, these two tombs could be interpreted as burials of anchorites made in the still standing ruins of the Pharaonic temple. This supports the idea that the Christian occupation of Deir el-Bahari started already in the 4th century CE.

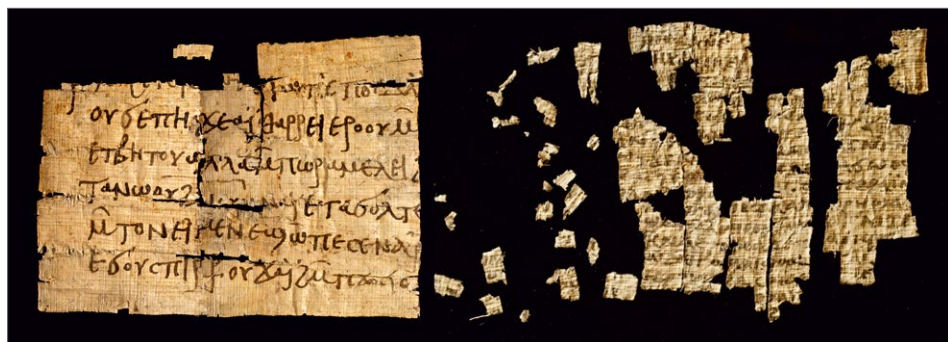


Fig. 6. Coptic papyri from between the wall blocks in the Chapel of Hatshepsut: left, letter, *recto* (Inv. 2562); right, papyrus, *verso* (Inv. 2568) (photo M. Jawornicki)

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