

# Coptic Literature in Context (4th-13th cent.)

## Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology

edited by  
Paola Buzi



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# Coptic Literature in Context (4th-13th cent.): Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology

Proceedings of the Third Conference of the ERC Project  
“Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature.  
Literary Texts in their Geographical Context (‘PATHs’)”.

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Paola Buzi

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# Archaeological and Epigraphical Survey of the Coptic Monastery at Qubbet el-Hawa (Aswan)\*

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## *Abstract*

Excavation carried out at Qubbet el-Hawa demonstrates that the site offers an archaeological sequence spanning from the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the Middle Ages, including the existence of a large necropolis that almost completely occupies the hill across different Egyptian periods and phases. This article presents the most recent archaeological achievements and offers the edition of two Coptic ostraca and one inscription.

## *Keywords*

Qubbet el-Hawa, ostraca, monastery, cell.

## 1. *The archaeological context of Qubbet-el Hawa*

The hill of Qubbet el-Hawa rises on the west bank of the Nile in front of the modern city of Aswan, a short stretch from the island of Elephantine (Fig. 1). Excavation performed at this site demonstrates that the archaeological sequence at Qubbet el Hawa spans from the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the Middle Ages, including the existence of a large necropolis that completely occupies the hill across different Egyptian periods and phases.

Since the 1880s, the different hypogea of the site have been intermittently excavated in pursuit of epigraphic and archaeological material.<sup>1</sup> It was not until 1957 that Elman Edel, an Egyptologist with a clear philological inclination, initiated uninterrupted excavations that lasted until 1984.<sup>2</sup>

In 2008, the University of Jaén in Spain, in collaboration with the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, had their first season of excavations in the necropolis, under leadership of Alejandro Jiménez Serrano. As of present day, the University of Jaén has carried out ten archaeological campaigns in which more than a hundred researchers have collaborated.<sup>3</sup> The results that we present here are the product of research conducted during the four most recent archaeological campaigns, in which we have had the opportunity to investigate part of a huge rubbish dumpster dating from the Byzantine period that had buried several tombs (QH33-aa, QH33-bb and partially QH34-cc), and contained materials from the Coptic monastery that sits atop the hill of Qubbet el-Hawa. Abundant ceramics were also documented from a pottery workshop belonging to the same monastery, which we had the opportunity to partially excavate.<sup>4</sup>

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1 BURCKHARDT 1819; SCHIAPARELLI 1892; WILLIAM CECIL 1903; BUDGE 1920; HELCK 1975; HABACHI 1985.

2 EDEL 1966; EDEL 2008.

3 Proyecto I+D+I HAR2016-75533-P de Excelencia "Excavación, Estudio Histórico y Conservación de las Tumbas del Reino Medio de la Necrópolis de Qubbet el-Hawa (Asuán, Egipto)", <http://www.ujaen.es/investiga/qubbetelhawa/index.php>.

4 BARBA *et al.* 2017.

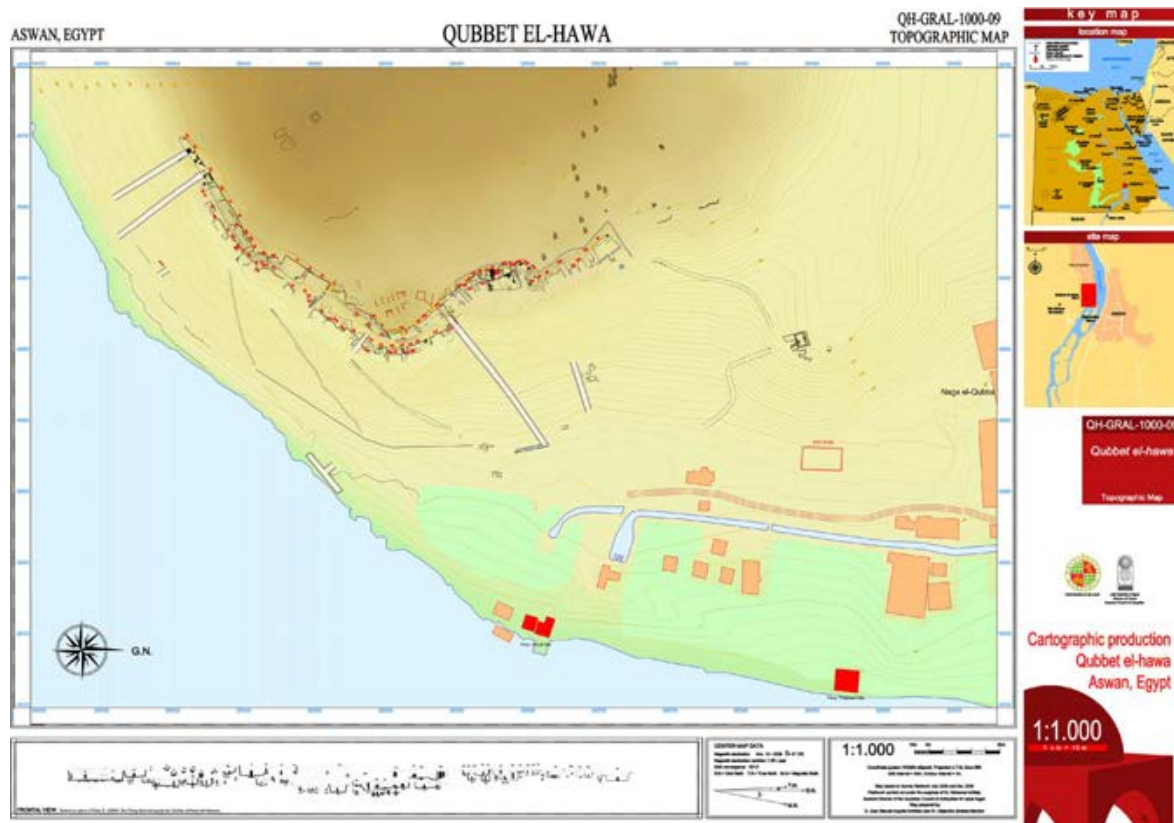


Fig. 1. Archaeological site of Qubbet el-Hawa in Aswan. ©Proyecto Qubbet el-Hawa, Universidad de Jaén.

## 2. *The Coptic monastery of Qubbet el-Hawa*

We do not have a complete picture of how this spectacular monastery was structured. According to some authors, it depended on another close monastery called Dayr Anba Hadra.<sup>5</sup> In 1998, the Supreme Council of Antiquities decided to remove sand from the northern area of tomb QH34h where a church would eventually be unearthed.<sup>6</sup> The church had been built by excavating into the mountain and using part of the old tombs as foundation. The most outstanding discovery was that of an apse featuring mural paintings and graffiti with Coptic, Arabic, and Greek texts. Following this discovery, the remaining sand was then removed from the church by the Department of Islamic Archaeology of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in 2010. Today we have a complete view of the entire religious building. Some interpretations of the building's architecture have been published,<sup>7</sup> although analyses of the structures have focused mainly on the study of the aforementioned parietal decorations and graffiti.<sup>8</sup> Some of the Coptic and Arabic graffiti were studied by Renate Dekker,<sup>9</sup> and later on surveyed by Amalia Zomeño and Sofía Torallas Tovar.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of the inscriptions date from after the eleventh century, mostly votive in content, inscribed both in Coptic and Arabic with a single Greek text, likely written by visitors requesting prayers and protection. In some cases, the inscriptions are painted on the wall, with reddish ink or paint and have begun fading away due to sun exposure. Most frequently the inscriptions were incised, sometimes in an elaborate manner, though also in other cases much faster and more carelessly. Some of the inscriptions are bilingual (Coptic-Arabic) like the one edited by Dekker.<sup>11</sup> This particular inscription, important for

5 MONNERET DE VILLARD 1927, 108-114. MEURICE 2006; GABRA 2002, 105-107; DIJKSTRA 2008; DEKKER 2013a.

6 ABDIN 2013.

7 DEKKER, 2008; DEKKER 2013b.

8 COQUIN - MARTIN 1991; GROSSMANN 1991; MIDDLETON-JONES 2013.

9 DEKKER 2008; DEKKER 2013a.

10 TORALLAS TOVAR - ZOMEÑO RODRÍGUEZ 2013.

11 DEKKER 2008, 32-34, for the Coptic part.



Fig. 2. Church of Qubbet el-Hawa.

giving a historical context to the church, was made immediately prior to the destruction mentioned in the inscription on the north wall of QH34e. The inscription in Sahidic reads: “Today, 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month of Tubi, the first day of the new moon, Era of the Martyrs, year 889, it happened during the domination of the ‘Turks’ in all the land of Egypt, during the archbishopric of our father Abba Mark in the city of Alexandria and also in the days of the Bishopric of Theodore in the city of Aswan, then the Turks made ... they came towards Prim and they “opened” it on the seventh day of Tubi, they took it all ... what was in it, they came and sold...”.<sup>12</sup> This inscription must be one of the earliest carved in Arabic in the church, though once the church was destroyed, it continued to receive visitors and dwellers who were mainly Arabized Christians. The walls of the church continued to receive inscriptions from visitors, but at some point, it is not entirely obvious that they knew that the building in ruins in which they were was in fact a church. For example, in the vault of the right nave of the church, an Arabic inscription reads: “He was in this place (*makan*) Isma’il b. al-Hayy Sulaymi in the year 1108” (1745 CE). This inscription is obviously very late, and it differs from those that appear in other layers for the fact that a ‘place’ (*makan*) is mentioned, and not a ‘monastery’ (*dayr*), using the formula: “So-and-so was in this monastery...”.

### 3. A Coptic chapel in the ancient tomb QH34-aa

The hypogeum with the number QH34-aa was discovered in 2014, located between the tombs QH34 and QH34a, and was named following the correlative numbering established by Elmar Edel. QH34-aa is a complex area, and until the excavation of the entire area was completed in 2017, we did not have a general view or understanding of the origin of several small tombs located in this sector. These small tombs have followed the same numbering (34aa, 34bb, 34cc and 34dd). Although originally they were probably all part of a single funerary complex, nowadays they stand separate from each other. At some point, this particular area of the hill must have suffered a great detachment from bedrock, likely at the end of the Pharaonic period, most probably caused by a great earthquake that triggered the sinking of much of the larger structures and exposed further rooms and chambers. It is for this reason that we currently see small, incomplete tombs and shafts with burials in what is an outdoor area. Once all the large blocks of rock had been removed, the whole area, during the Byzantine period, was used for the establishment of some structures, and subsequently as a rubbish dump for the monastery that was located on the upper terrace.

The number QH34-aa corresponds to a tomb formed by a shaft and an underground burial chamber of the Middle Kingdom, inside which approximately ten intact burials have been found, some of which in excellent states of conservation, with even the names of the deceased being preserved.<sup>13</sup> As the shaft with time became filled with sand, the upper part was used by the first hermits as a primitive chapel.

<sup>12</sup> One of the best-known inscriptions of this site, on the fall of Qasr Ibrim in 1173, already published by BOURIANT 1886, 218, then taken up by DE MORGAN 1894 and finally by GRIFFITH - CROWFOOT 1934, 5-8. See for the latest edition S. RICHTER, in EDEL 2008, 514-515.

<sup>13</sup> JIMÉNEZ-SERRANO *et al.* 2016.

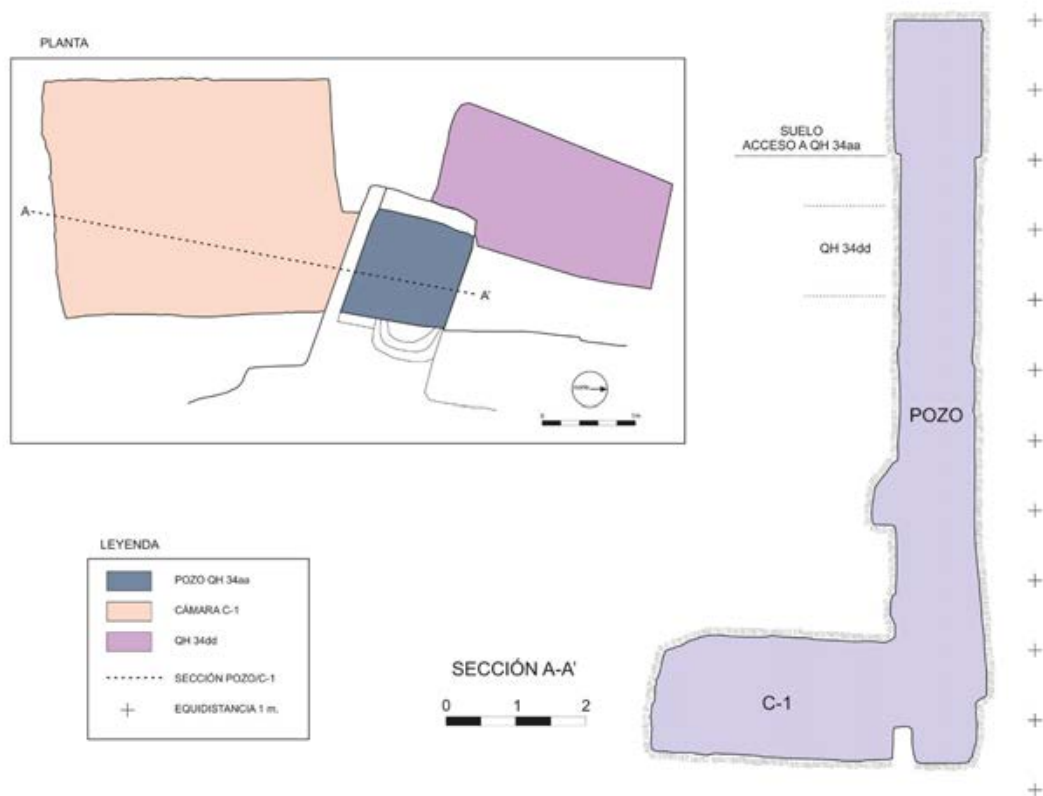


Fig. 3. Ground plan and section of tomb QH34aa.

Inside this supposed small “chapel,” there is no stratigraphy associated with its use as such. Its entire interior was completely filled with different strata from the Coptic dumpster, providing us with a very interesting chronology of its abandonment. All the ceramics that we have studied from the dumpster belong to a late-antique chronology, from the beginning of the sixth century up to the beginning of the eighth century, and therefore the chapel must have been constructed and been in use at some point between the fifth and sixth century, and abandoned shortly after.

The chapel consists of a small quadrangular room measuring 1.30 meters wide by 1.20 meters deep and 2.10 meters high. All four walls were white-washed, with two inscriptions along the top of the side-walls written in red ink by the same hand, one in Coptic and the other in Greek. On the back wall we found a niche, possibly intended to hold a sacred image or icon, and two holes on the wall, perhaps for hanging lamps. This cavity is not large enough to have been used as a cell, so we thought it may have been used as some sort of oratory. This possibility would explain the presence of the inscriptions on the upper part of the walls.

The painted inscription (*dipinto*), in Coptic uncial, presents a couple of verses of the Lord’s prayer (Mt 6:9-13) both in Coptic and Greek.<sup>14</sup> Paul Dilley<sup>15</sup> has already drawn attention to the lack of studies and even less developed systematisation of the *dipinti* (painted inscriptions) of late antiquity. Generally, these *dipinti* serve as labels for the images represented in the frescoes, so they usually do not appear alone as in the case of our inscription.

On the north wall there is the text in Sahidic Coptic. The two lines are encased inside a red line that surrounds each line separately in some kind of frame. The surface covered by the inscription measures ca 0.80 m wide and 0.10 m high.

14 For an overview of the inscriptions and *dipinti* in Egypt and Nubia, see DELATTRE - DIJKSTRA - VAN DER VLIET 2014-2018.

15 DILLEY 2008.

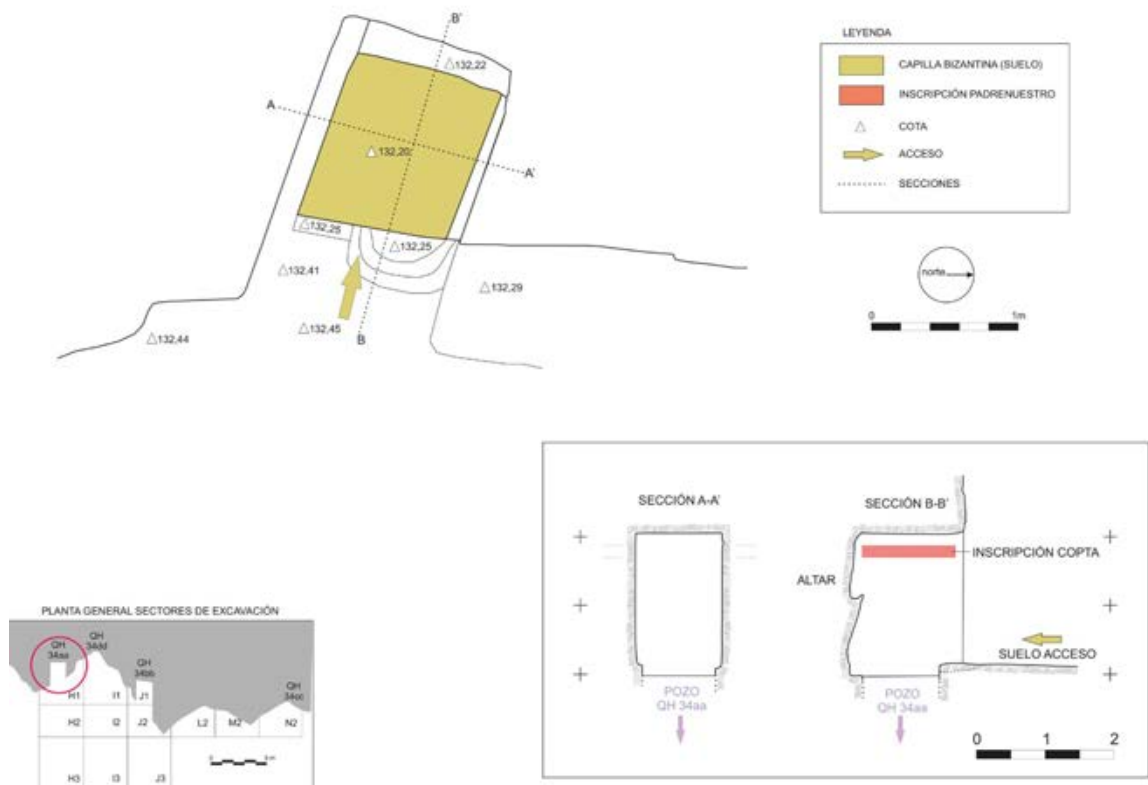


Fig. 4. Ground plan and section of the Coptic chapel.



Fig. 5. Inscriptions in the chapel.



with representations of saints framed between various floral and geometric decorations that have been dated to the sixth-seventh centuries.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we think that the settlement of Qubbet el-Hawa too must have originated in the movement of a small community of hermits who settled in the various caves and graves next to them, deciding to reuse an old well and then build a chapel around the fifth or sixth centuries.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. *The Coptic dumpster*

As we have mentioned above, the area where the mountain collapsed, thus exposing wells and internal rooms of ancient tombs, had been buried by a large dumpster in late Roman times. Within this landfill up to 18 different strata have been documented, some of them still maintaining a distinct spatial relationship with one another. As we can see in this archaeological sequence, the rubbish dumpster has small horizontal strata of rapid formation, including horizons of irregular connection between its lower or upper strata. Abundant ash, burnt bricks, and large burnt ceramics are commingled within stronger layers of more compact earth whose origin resulted from slow formation, with smooth connection lines that evidence post-depositional accumulation. In some cases, we can observe small archaeological layers or micro-layers that have left their mark, having been deposited as fine lines on the ground (sands surely related to storms and ashes).

Analysing the stratigraphy of the dumpster, we could verify that its origin had to be associated with the diverse activities developed on the platform just above, where the still visible structures of the monastery are located. In 2015 we were able to carry out both a superficial archaeological cleaning and also an excavation of several archaeological soundings from this site.

The structures located on the upper platform cover an area of about 500 m<sup>2</sup>. Several enclosures delimited by masonry walls have been defined and in some cases the walls of rammed earth and adobe are preserved. This entire structural ensemble is associated with the monastery walls that are still standing on the spur of the plateau, a place that has to this day never been excavated. We have identified what could have been an area of workshops, where a survey located a series of ovens of various sizes. The whole structural group was defined by an enclosure delimited by the cut of the rock. Under these structures, in the cut of the rock, we found the rubbish dumpster that we have described previously, seven meters below the platform. It seems both logical and practical that on the lower platform there is an accumulation of sediments and waste materials both from the periodic cleaning of the structures above, and from the production area where several ovens and a possible kitchen area have been documented.<sup>24</sup>

The ceramics found there were most likely from a manufacturing workshop. There were at one point up to eight furnaces, some of great size, which may have been dedicated to the baking of ceramics, as well as others of a smaller domestic type that could have belonged to the kitchens of the Coptic monastery. Among the materials found, a large number of ceramics stand out. Our analysis of the complete repertoire of the table service has identified storage crockery, an abundance of transport containers such as amphorae, the Egyptian Sigillata, and certain luxury decorative materials or intended for ritual use.

Among the materials found in the dumpster, we would like to highlight the approximately 40 ostraca that have been documented during the archaeological excavation process. Most of them are very fragmentary and feature only a few words, sometimes even just a few letters, and there are only three of them that have a more or less intelligible text. We will include below just two pieces featuring a more or less complete text. From these pieces, one of them is especially interesting, since it attests to the connection of the Christian settlement in Qubbet-el-Hawa with the monastery of Anba Hadra and the existence of workshops and probably commercial exchange. According to the date provided by the archaeological context, we have dated them roughly to the mid sixth to mid seventh centuries. The first one is later than the second one, since it was found in the superior levels.

<sup>22</sup> MONNERET DE VILLARD 1927; DEKKER 2013a. VAN LOON (forthcoming) dates the earliest paintings to the seventh-eighth centuries.

<sup>23</sup> See above the inscription for Bishop Joseph III edited by DEKKER 2015.

<sup>24</sup> BARBA *et al.* 2017.

4.1. *O.QHJaen 1* (TM 844393)

This ostracon is composed by different fragments: inv. no. 1085 (QH33/10 F3-UE104), found in 2010, which fits perfectly with others found in 2009 in sector F3, inv. no. 344 (QH33/09 F3-UE32), sector F1, inv. no. 331 (QH33/09 F1-UE32), and inv. no. 300 (QH33/09 F1-UE30). These pieces match together (ca H 14 x W 13.5 cm) to form an almost complete letter written with brown ink, with a well-trained hand on a piece of wavy pottery (dark brown slip, colour of the paste 10R 7/4), c. seventh cent.

1 [                    ]ΝΤΕΚ  
 [ΜΝΤΗΔΑΙΝ]ΟΥΤΕ  
 [ΝΣΟΝ Ε]ΤΒΕ ΝΖΩΒ  
 [ΜΠΕ]ΚΕΡΚΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ  
 5 ΕΤΕΚΕΡΖΩΒ ΝΖΗΤΥ Π ...  
 ΤΥ ΕΙΣΦΕΡΙΝ ΠΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΤΟΥΑ-  
 ΔΒ ΝΑΠΑ ΖΑΤΡΕ ΝΝΕΡΩΜΕ ΖΩΛΟΣ  
 ΩΙΝΕ ΖΙΤΟΟΤΚ ΝΣ[Δ.]ΩΚΟΡ ΖΝ[  
 ΝΓΑΥΟΥΕΙΝΕ ΧΙΠ[    ] ΜΠ[  
 10 ΤΡΙΣΜΑΚΑΡΙΩΣ [    ] Π[    Η]  
 ΤΟΝ ΝΝΟΟΥ[  
 ΝΟΥΚ + Ν[  
       ]ΕΥΧ[

3 ...to your God-loving brother, about the work at | 4 your workshop | 5 where you work ... | 6 bring/deliver to the *topos* of the holy | 7 Apa Hatre. | No one at all | 8 shall require the rent from you. In... | 9 they have passed ... | 10 three times holy ...

1. Probably a form of *εχα* in the lacuna.
4. *εργαστήριον* (Gk *ἐργαστήριον*) also in P.KRU 106, 152; 25, 12; 24, 3 and 68, 51/68,60 SBKopt 50, 19 302, 6.
- 5-6. There are few traces of a word probably between lines 5 and 6, insufficient to provide any sure reading.
6. *εισφέρειν* is a hapax as Greek loan in Coptic.
8. For *ωσορ*, 'rent'.
10. The term *τρισμακαριος* appears in very few Greek texts on papyrus, P.Cair.Masp. III 67295, 1, 15, applied to a 'Father', P.Cair.Masp. III 67312, r 109, to a 'Mother', and P.Lond.V 1927, 2, 46, to the apostle, citing *Eph.* 5:16.
13. *ευχ* : Perhaps the Greek expression *ἔρωσθαι σε εὐχομαι*, typical of the farewell formula of letters.

4.2. *O.QHJaen 2* (TM 844394)

This ostracon was found in recent years (QH33-UE338-9) and contains an order for transportation. Seven lines of text are written with black ink on a sherd of an amphora with a wavy surface. The four margins are preserved, and thus we have a complete document (H ca 12.5 x W 16 cm). ca seventh cent., probably earlier than *O.Qubbet-el-Hawa 1*.

1 + ΩΙΝΕ ΝΣΑ ΩΜΗΤ  
 ΝΚΟΥΣΤΗΡ ΝΕΛΟΟΛΕ  
 ΝΝ ΣΝΔΥ ΝΣΑΡΑΚΩΤ Η  
 ΝΥΤΕ ΜΝΟΥΣΑΛΑΚΩΤ  
 5 ΝΤΛΑΚ ΤΝΝΟΥ ΣΝΔΥ  
 ΝΝΑΔΕ ΝΠΑΡΑΤΟΥΝΕ  
 ΝΝΤΒΝΟΥΕ

1 Fetch three | 2 *couster* of grapes | 3 and two *sarakot* | 4 and four (?) and one *salakot* | 5 of gourd (?). Send two | 6 *matia* of fodder (?) | 7 for the animals.

- 1 The expression *ΩΙΝΕ ΝΣΑ* is used for orders of delivery or transportation and has been connected to the monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit. It is used exclusively in ostraca with very few examples on papyrus. See ALBARRÁN - BOUD'HORS 2016, 104; TAIT 1994 and *O.Bawit*, p. 247. Though the formulary from Bawit differs from this instance, it is interesting that the formula lacking sender and addressee are strikingly similar.
- 2 *ΚΟΥΣΤΗΡ*: if understood as a measure it can be connected to *χους*, Gk. *χούς* (FÖRSTER 2002, 877), but this is a liquid measure; *σοστ* (CRUM 1939, 832b; ALCOCK 1996, 6) is a measure of length. Better perhaps connected to Gk *χίκτη*, 'basket' (though only attested in second century Greek papyri). Alternatively it can be connected to Lat. *culter*, 'tonsorius, sickle'. For grapes, cf. *P.Mich.inv.* 6865, sixth cent. *λιλωζε νελοολε* "a *lilohe* of grapes".



Fig. 6. O.QHJaen 1.



Fig. 7: O.QHJaen 2

- 3  $\sigma\alpha\rho\alpha\kappa\omega\tau$ : can be connected to  $\sigma\alpha\rho\alpha\gamma\alpha\eta\eta$  'basket' (FÖRSTER 2002, 717 'Korb, Flechtkorb'). Otherwise it means 'wanderer' (CRUM 1939, 54b).  $\sigma\omega\rho\omega\gamma\tau\omega\eta$  (VORDERSTRASSE 2014, 220) is a measure of liquid, generally wine or vinegar.
4. The reading of  $\psi\tau\epsilon$  is not guaranteed.
- 5  $\eta\tau\lambda\alpha\kappa$ : I have not been able to find an explanation for this term. The verb  $\tau\omega\lambda\kappa$  'to pluck' might be related?, unless it is a pot ( $\lambda\omicron\kappa$ , CRUM 1939, 138a; ALCOCK 1996, 3; VORDERSTRASSE 2014, 219). Perhaps related to  $\tau\lambda\omicron\sigma$  and  $\omicron\lambda\omicron\sigma$  meaning 'gourd' (CRUM 1939, 815a).
- 6  $\rho\alpha\rho\alpha\tau\omicron\gamma\eta\epsilon$ : it must be some product that can be delivered in *matia* ( $\eta\delta\alpha\lambda\chi\epsilon$ , CRUM 1939, 213a; ALCOCK 1996, 3; a dry measure for wheat, lentils etc.) and is connected to animals. I am inclined to think this is fodder for the animals. A similar sounding term is attested in the Gk. papyri,  $\rho\alpha\rho\alpha\tau\omicron\upsilon\rho\alpha$ , from Lat. *paratura* (TRAPP 1993 'Ausrüstung'), but connected to clothing vel sim., see *P.Louvre* I 67; SB XVI 12254. No other like sounding Latin term seems to mean 'fodder'. Alternatively,  $\rho\alpha\rho\alpha$  can be the Greek preposition  $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ , but I do not find any way of explaining it here.

The remaining 40 Coptic ostraca fragments do not really deserve "papyrological publication", due to their extremely fragmentary state.<sup>25</sup> However, they are not completely useless, since the stratigraphy of this dumpster allows us to place them in a relative chronological sequence, and thus helps provide dates to their palaeography.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

From the archaeological materials we have analysed, we know that the monastery was occupied during a very specific chronology. The beginning of the inhabitation on this hill must be fixed around the fifth-sixth century, with the occupation of the ancient Pharaonic tombs. It would most likely have been a Christian troglodyte habitat, occupying the spaces of the old funerary chapels in which we observed various inscriptions and drawings. Next to these, a small room (QH34-aa) had been chosen as the location for a small chapel in which an image or icon of the saint to whom this place was consecrated, possibly Saint George,<sup>27</sup> must have been placed. All around the room, red *dipinti* provided the Lord's prayer in Coptic and Greek.

In the middle of the sixth century the chapel was abandoned, and the icon probably moved to one of the new rooms that were built at the top of the hill. The monastery began construction in the early sixth century, eventually reaching its peak usage during the second half of the seventh century and the first third of the seventh century. At the end of the seventh century, the structures of the upper platform ceased to house any activity, and by the eighth century, the structures of the workshop seem to have been completely abandoned, as we do not find archaeological materials dating after that period. This abandonment

25 For a preliminary description, see JIMÉNEZ-SERRANO *et al.* 2010-2011, 79-80. See also TORALLAS TOVAR 2010. For a complete list with images and transcriptions, see BARBA COLMENERO-TORALLAS TOVAR forthcoming.

26 Other eight ostraca from the necropolis have been published by Sebastian Richter in EDEL 2008, 451 (QH34c/25), 1548-1549 (QH104/1), 1572-1573 (QH105/37), 1765-1767 (QH110/47), 1774-1775 (QH110/33), 1776 and 1780 (QH110/51 and QH110/55), 1777 and 1781 (QH 110/60) (page numbers in EDEL 2008 are followed by tomb and item numbers. We suggest they be named O.QH Edel).

27 See *dipinti* in QH34f, Richter in EDEL 2008, 518-522.

of the workshop area seems to have coincided with a key moment in the restructuring of the monastery. From that moment on, the structures related to the church on the other side of the hill became more important, although it is not clear to what cause we should attribute this change. This will be the aim of our future inquiries.

The study of the archaeological materials from the Byzantine period of the Qubbet el-Hawa monastery has elucidated important evidence regarding the history of this place. The study of the materials has only just begun, and we still have much work to do in terms of classification, study, and quantification, especially of the ceramic material. Even so, from this relatively small contribution, Qubbet el-Hawa will be positioned on the map as a key place from which to gather important details about the daily life of the primitive Christian monks of southern Egypt.

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