

Naqlun 2016 Hermitage EE.50: preliminary report

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Abstract: During the 2016 season in Naqlun, dedicated to an array of specialist studies of material in the storeroom, the team documented one of the hermitages located in the hills west of the monastic compound. The work was necessitated by evident illicit digging which had partly destroyed the compound. The hermitage, which occupied a small valley, appears to have comprised at least three living units, furnished with rock-cut storage pits in the floor and niches in the walls. The doorways and niches bore traces of architectural rendering. The complex may be interpreted tentatively as a residential and religious complex, and it is a good example of a mid-5th century hermitage, the dating confirmed by a study of the pottery assemblage coming from it.

Keywords: Naqlun, hermitage, 5th century

The hills above the monastery in Naqlun are full of rock-cut hermitages that were surveyed and provisionally recorded by a team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw in the first seasons of exploration, from 1986 through 1988. These 5th and 6th century complexes are scattered over an extensive area that has been divided for the purposes of a forthcoming volume on the topography of the Naqlun hermitages into nine relatively easily distinguishable sectors. These are situated in the gebel as well as on the plateau that extends all the way west to the Bahr el-Gharaq canal on the outskirts of the village of Kalamshach Esba (Dobrowolski 1992).

Sector 5 lies in the northeastern part of the hills and contains nine hermitages [*Fig. 1* bottom left]. The sector, which is located between valleys accessible to motor

cars these days, had not been explored before by the Polish team. Some of the hermitages in this sector were reoccupied by monks from the monastery in the early years of the 21st century, but the others were left undisturbed.

In the autumn of 2016, deep trenches were observed by the team within the grounds of hermitage EE.50 [*Fig. 1* bottom right; *Fig. 2*]. The complex had apparently been destroyed in part, but it was also obvious from the depth of the trenches that the illicit diggers were searching for a burial chamber, believing that the hermitage had been located in the upper part of a pharaonic tomb. Indeed, it seemed from the collection of tools found on site: baskets, hoes, spades and a long rope ladder, that the robbers had been there in September of 2016. The digging was done hastily, probably by a few people

to go by the empty bottles of beverages, feta cheese packaging and cigarette packs.

The site was cleared of the debris and the deep trenches backfilled. The broken and scattered pottery, mainly LR.7 amphorae, was picked up and sorted, and part of this large hermitage was excavated in order to prevent future illicit digging. The team has never found any evidence of pharaonic tomb-cutting activities in the Naqlun hills and it is obvious that the 5th and 6th century hermitages were situated in otherwise uninhabited rocky hills.

The hermitage EE.50 occupied a small valley and comprised at least three living units cut into its slopes. These units were partly ruined and filled with sand and in 2007 there had been no signs of illicit digging [Fig. 1 top].

UNIT EE.50.1

The unit in the northeastern part of the valley was entered from a courtyard on the southern side; it consisted of a large room (EE.50.1.1) and a small room (EE.50.1.2) furnished with a large sleeping cubicle (EE.50.1.3).

Room 50.1.1 was rectangular, 4.90 m by 2.80 m, with an entrance 0.47 m wide

in the southwestern corner of the south wall [Fig. 3 above]. An engaged pillar, 0.45 m wide and 0.60 m long, formed the eastern side of this entrance. A niche was noted in the west wall by the doorway. It was 0.76 m wide and 0.18 m deep; a hollow in its floor, measuring 26 cm in diameter, had held a cooking pot, which was found broken. The niche apparently housed the door when it was open and the vessel may have been used as a door-block, but it may have served other purposes as well.

A long bench lined the west wall of the room. It was a mere 0.12 m high, but ran for 3.50 m and was 0.30 m wide. A storage pit cut into the floor occupied the southeastern corner of the unit [Fig. 3 left]. It was 0.62 m wide, 1.50 m long and no deeper than 1.70 m. A gravelly fill with rock debris contained fragments of the floor that had collapsed into the pit under the weight of the falling roof. The pit was not fully excavated, but the fill that was removed contained absolutely no finds, not even broken potsherds.

Two small niches were cut into the wall above the pit. The northern one of the two was well preserved; it was 0.40 m wide, 0.22 m high and 0.26 m

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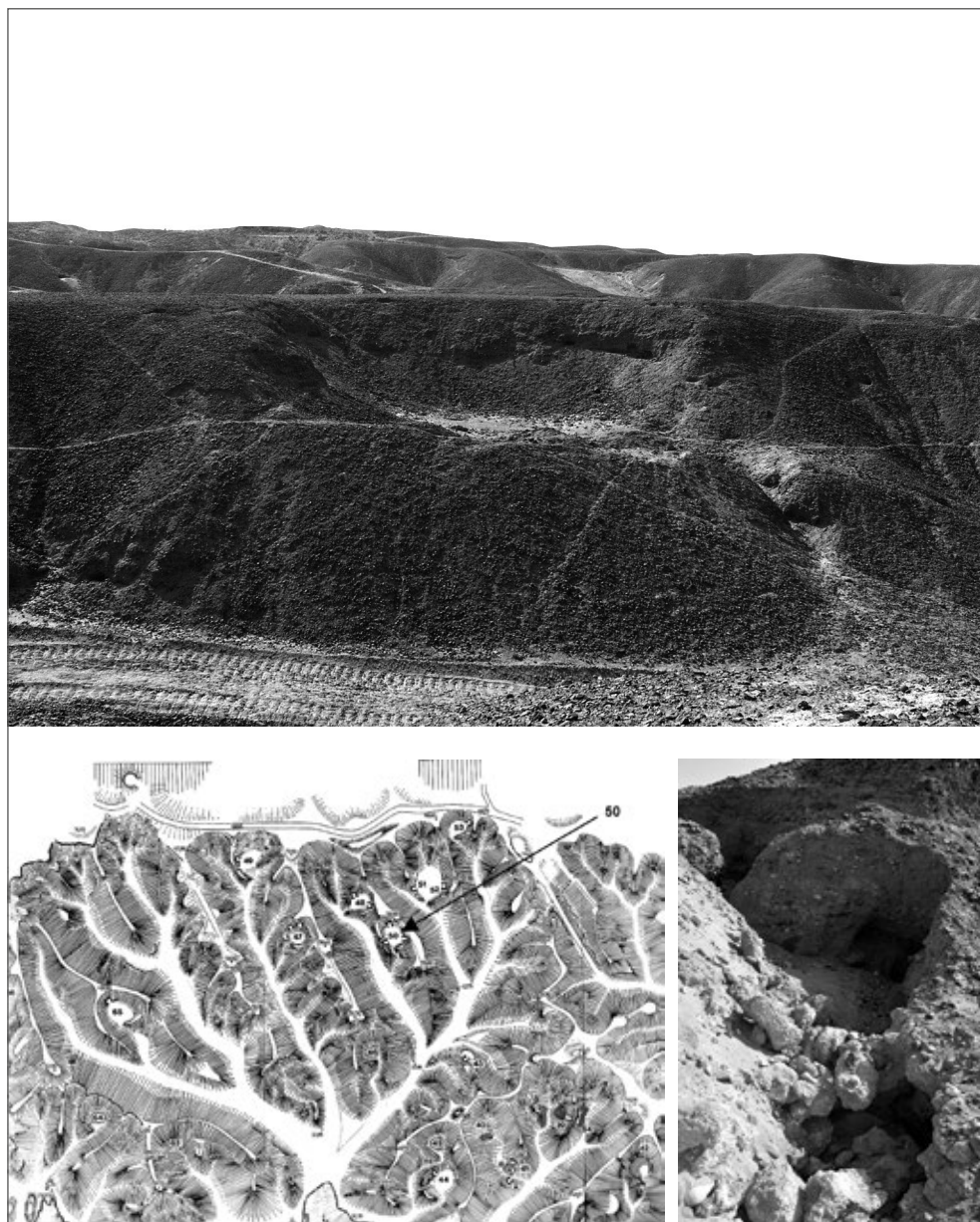


Fig. 1. Hermitage EE.50 in the Naqlun hills east of the site: top, view in 2007; bottom left, location within the segment of the Naqlun hills; bottom right, destroyed part of the complex in September 2016 (PCMA Naqlun Project/plan J. Dobrowolski; photo in 2007 W. Malkowski, in 2016 W. Godlewski)

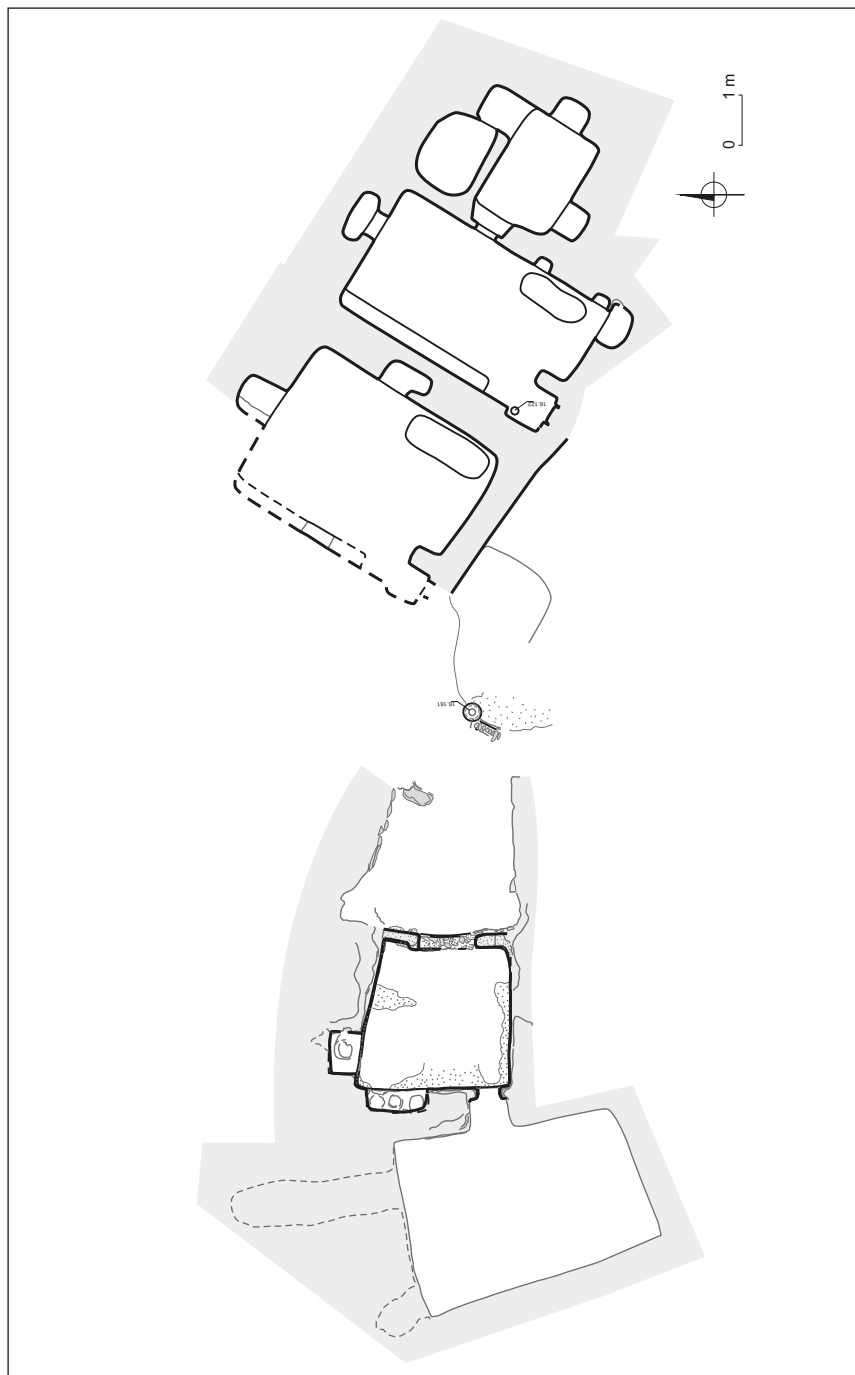


Fig. 2. Plan of the uncovered part of hermitage EE.50: northeastern unit 1 and unit 2 (PCMA Naqlun Project/S. Maslak, W. Godlewski)



Fig. 3. Unit EE.50.1.1: above, view during the cleaning of the interior; seen from the north; left, detail with storage pit in the southeastern corner and large niche above it; right, two niches in the unit walls, above, niche in the south wall, below, niche in the north wall (PCMA Naqlun Project/photos W. Godlewski)

deep. The southern one was preserved fragmentarily; only its width could be determined and it measured 0.32 m. A third and much larger niche appeared on the south wall, in the southeastern corner and above the pit [Fig. 3 right above]. It was 0.80 m wide and 0.45 m high; its

depth was 0.46 m and it may have had a smaller hollow in the eastern part, but the evidence is not conclusive. Opposite it in the north wall, some 0.70 m from the northeastern corner, was another large niche with two lateral niches. In each there was a small shelf. The opening of this niche



Fig. 4. Unit EE.50.1: right, sleeping cubicle EE.50.1.3 in the foreground, seen from the north, on the left doorway to room 50.1.2 which is in the background with the niche in the south wall and, to the left, of it in the photo, a cut made by recent pillagers; top left, niches cut in the east wall; bottom left, doorway between rooms 50.1.2 and 50.1.1, seen from inside (PCMA Naqlun Project/photos W. Godlewski)

was 0.55 m, whereas the width with the lateral hollows was 1.04 m. The full depth was 0.76 m, while the lateral hollows were 0.36 m wide. The preserved height was 0.60 m, but it was higher once.

The walls were covered with a mud plaster, which was also used to render walls inside the niches. A mud floor filled the room, sealing also part of the storage bin, and large sections were found in the fill of the bin.

An entrance in the central part of the east wall led to the second room. It was just 0.44 m wide and it was placed 2.80 m from the southeastern corner. It broadened on the inside, forming jambs 0.15 m wide and 0.12–0.14 m thick. These were rendered with a mud plaster [Fig. 4 bottom left], unlike the rest of the walls of the room.

Room EE.50.1.2 was small: 1.90 m by 2.60 m, actually 2.20 m with two niches, one by the entrance, measuring 0.75–0.95 m, and the other in the northeastern corner, measuring 0.84 m by 0.84 m. The entrance to the latter was framed with vertical bands of white lime plaster, of which very meager evidence remained [see Fig. 4 top left]. The niche in the east wall had the bottom 0.76 m wide, cut 0.60 m deep into the rock and was 0.50 m high, starting at a level 0.90 m above the floor. The one in the south wall started at 0.95 m above the floor and had similar dimensions (just 2 cm less on the height). The walking level inside the room was lower than in 50.1.1 and there was no preserved mud floor here.

A sleeping cubicle EE.50.1.3 was entered through an opening cut 0.90 m above the walking level in the north wall of room 50.1.2. The room was practically square, 1.40 m by 1.45 m, the entrance to

it just 0.60 m wide. The interior, both walls and floor, was mud-plastered.

UNIT EE.50.2

The unit consists of just one surviving room and was entered quite likely from the south through a doorway, no longer existing, in the southwestern corner [see Fig. 2]. A tentative hypothesis links this room to the third unit described below (EE.50.3), interpreting the whole as a residential and religious complex in which room EE.50.3.2 would have served as an oratory (see below).

Room EE.50.2.1 was a large hall, 4.35 m by 3.60 m, measuring by the remains of the floor and a fragment of a bench by the east wall. Otherwise, the east wall and the northeastern corner of the room have been destroyed. The evidence for the entrance is also poor, merely a jamb in the south wall measuring 0.47 m by 0.46 m. The niche in which the entrance was situated was 0.60 m wide. The bench by the east wall presumably extended the whole length of this wall; the surviving fragment is 0.30 m wide and 0.15 m high. The walls were preserved quite low, but enough to show the remains of a niche in the northwestern corner, 0.87 m deep and at least 0.60 m wide. The bottom of another niche could be observed in the east wall, some 1.40 m from the northeastern corner. It had a lateral hollow that made the interior of the niche at least 1 m wide (with the opening being 0.63 m); the niche was 0.70 m deep [Fig. 5].

A storage bin was cut in the southeastern corner of the mud-plastered floor. It was 2.10 m long by 0.70 m wide, and it reached a depth of at least 1.50 m (the bottom was not explored at this time). The gravelly fill yielded no finds.

The mud floor was thick and burnished on the surface. The walls were rendered in mud plaster, whereas the eastern niche, while plastered with a mud coat, had lime plaster on the floor.

UNIT EE.50.3

The unit consisted of three or four rooms in a row, opening one from the other, tentatively connected with room EE.50.2.1 described above [Fig. 5]. It is now entered

through a small trapezoidal room measuring 3.50 m by 5.05–4.45 m, preserving stubs of walls up to the ceiling only in the southern part [Fig. 7]. The walls were not rendered with plaster and there were no niches (the robbers had attempted to cut a hole in the west wall). The walking level here was not reached at this time.

A passage 0.50 m wide between mud-plastered jambs broadened out to 0.78–0.90 m. The room it gave on was small,



Fig. 5. Unit EE.50.2: top, view from the west; bottom left, jamb and entrance to EE.50.2.1; bottom right, remains of a niche in the east wall (PCMA Naqlun Project/photos W. Godlewski)



*Fig. 6. Cooking pot sunk into the floor of room EE.50.3.4
(PCMA Naqlun Project/photo W. Godlewski)*



*Fig. 7. Unit EE.50.3: Rooms 50.3.1–2, view from the north
(PCMA Naqlun Project/photo W. Godlewski)*



Fig. 8. EE.50.3.2: top, view of the room toward the entrance in the south wall, note patch of lime plaster preserved just above the floor next to the entrance and niche with three circular hollows in its floor; bottom, remains of lime plaster with a painted inscription on the east wall (PCMA Naqlun Project/photos W. Godlewski)

3.00 m by 3.10 m. The walls were also badly destroyed, the highest point being in the southwestern corner [see *Fig. 7*]. Two niches were cut in the walls, close together in the southwestern corner; the tops of these niches have not survived. The niche in the south wall had the bottom 1.20 m wide by 0.40 m deep; three circular hollows were cut in a row inside these two niches (although whether they were part of the original design is not clear). The niche in the west wall measured 0.86 m by 0.66 m on the level of the bottom. It was at least 0.98 m high and may have been topped with a conch.

A wide entrance gave from the north; it was 1.15 m wide and had rounded pillars finishing off the sides. The western one was 0.20 m wide and 0.15 m long. The entrance wall was 0.20–0.25 m thick, the one on the west 0.47 m to the pilaster, the one on the east 0.55 m. Mud bricks were used in the construction. The floor had a much worn surface of white lime mortar. A coat of white lime plaster covered the mud-and-sand rendering of the walls of the room and the inside of the niches. There were red bands painted just above the floor, presumably on all the walls and framing the door in the south wall, which led to the next room. An inscription painted in red, in large letters and with much interlinear space, can be seen on the east wall; its state of preservation and salt efflorescence on the surface make it difficult to decipher.

Room EE.50.3.3 was severely damaged, missing most of the height of the walls; the north wall was entirely lost. The room was originally rectangular, 2.60 m by 4.00 m, and had no regular floor plastering. The next room, EE.50.3.4, survives only in its eastern part with the walls gone. It was 1.90 m by at least 3.00 m and extended

next to room EE.50.2.1. A mud floor survives with a large thick-walled cooking pot sunk into it in its reserved western end [*Fig. 6*]. The raised edges of this floor on the eastern and southern edge are the sole survivors of the lost walls of this room.

SUMMARY

Hermitage EE.50 is a good example of a mid-5th century complex (for the dating, see Danys 2017, in this volume), which must have been abandoned very early on, most probably not later than in AD 641 (Godlewski forthcoming), and was never reopened. The storage bins contained no archaeological material; they seem to have been filled in naturally after the place had been deserted and the interiors destroyed. A complete assessment of the architecture has to wait for the full excavation of the complex; however, it seems to share many features with another early hermitage, EE.44, which is also located in a small valley in the northwestern part of the Naqlun group (Godlewski 2000).

ADDENDUM

The study season concerned other hermitages as well as other finds categories in storage at the site. Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski studied in detail some of the hermitages provisionally documented in 1986–1988 in the Naqlun hills and the medieval monastic complex. Prof. Tomasz Derda studied Greek documents uncovered previously in hermitage EW.87 and the medieval monastic complex. Szymon Maślak continued investigations of different construction methods applied in the monastic buildings on kom A for his doctoral thesis and Katarzyna Danys studied the pottery collected in storage in preparation for her PhD dissertation.

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