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*Limestone Flake with a Drawing of a Guilloche  
A Contribution to the Designing  
of Theban Hermitage Wall Decoration*

Whole and fragmentary limestone flakes bearing monochrome drawings have been found in abundance at many sites in Egypt, originating from Coptic as well as earlier, mainly Pharaonic times. To the same category belong sherds and papyri decorated with drawings executed in different colours.<sup>1</sup> Most of the drawings would be described as awkward or hardly more than mediocre by modern artistic standards, rather naive, perhaps even kitschy as far as art is concerned. This concerns particularly figural representations of Coptic origin.<sup>2</sup> Non-figurative drawings, depicting geometric and floral motifs, constitute a group which is much more varied 'artistically'. The most popular motif, the guilloche, can be simplified to such a degree that it loses its typical gentle curves, fluidity, and impression of continuous plaiting. Many drawings are characterized by little compositional consequence, others are of high quality, demonstrating a precision of execution which reveals the hand of an experienced craftsman or artist.<sup>3</sup>

Coptic drawings on limestone flakes and potsherds are rarely found (or seldom published?) and they are treated more as 'curiosities', as autonomous objects with no bearing on any other activity, definitely not draft designs or parts of some artistic programme or decorative scheme. Many are quickly drawn, spontaneous illustrations of some observation, or an element of a story or report, discarded when no longer of use. Others testify to considerable time and effort, not to mention inventiveness, put in their execution, so much so that one has the indelible impression of a diligently prepared design (or sketch for a design)

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<sup>1</sup> Drawings from pre-Christian Egypt, among others, in: W.H. PECK, J.G. ROSS, *Dessins égyptiens*, Paris 1980 [= *Dessins*]; E. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches. Figured Ostraka from the Gayer-Anderson Collection in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Istanbul 1979*; also: *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder (Bilddostraka) der deutschen Museen und Sammlungen*, Wiesbaden 1956; drawings of an architectural nature collected by J.P. HEISEL, *Antike Bauzeichnungen*, Darmstadt 1993 [= *Bauzeichnungen*] (concerning Egypt on pp. 76–153); Coptic drawings: B. KRAUSE-BECKER, *Figürliche und ornamentale Zeichnungen auf koptischen Ostraka um 600* [= *Zeichnungen*], in: *Festschrift Johannes Jahn zum XXII. November MCMLVII*, Leipzig 1958, pp. 33–39, Figs. 11–22; W. GODLEWSKI, *Deir el-Bahari V. Le monastère de St. Phoibammon*, Varsovie 1986 [= *St. Phoibammon*], Figs. 45–68; U. HORAK, *Illuminierte Papyri, Pergamente und Papiere I*, Wien 1992 [= *Illuminierte Papyri*], with a discussion of two groups of drawings on papyrus: 1) designs of textile decoration on loose cards, mostly from the fourth–sixth century: pp. 28–41 (especially pp. 35–41), Pls. 1–4, 15–19; 2) sketches: pp. 59–61, Pls. 24–36, 48, also on pp. 253–258 – a list of then known limestone ostraca with drawings.

Textile decoration designs on papyrus also in: R.W. SCHELLER, *A Survey of Medieval Model Books*, Haarlem 1963, p. 46 and Figs. 2–3, and color version (Fig. 2), reproduced and discussed more extensively in: M. VON FALCK, F. LICHTWARK (eds.), *Ägypten. Schätze aus dem Wüstensand. Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil. Katalog zur Ausstellung herausgeben vom Gustav-Lübcke-Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Wiesbaden 1996, pp. 268f (Cat. No. 309).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. KRAUSE-BECKER, *Zeichnungen*, Figs. 14, 16; GODLEWSKI, *St. Phoibammon*, Figs. 45, 47, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Less skilled drawings of guilloches undoubtedly: KRAUSE-BECKER, *Zeichnungen*, Figs. 18 and 19 (on papyrus); GODLEWSKI, *St. Phoibammon*, Figs. 61, 65; execution of guilloche evidently by a good practiced hand, in: *ibid.*, Figs. 62, 63. Some of the guilloches sketched on stone flakes are typical of the well-painted examples from Bawit and Saqqara, among others: J. CLÉDAT, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouït*, Vol. I, fasc. 2, Le Caire 1906, *MIFAO* XII [= Baouït I], Pls. LXXXVI, XCIV, XCVI; *Id.*, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouït*, Vol. II, fasc. 1, *MIFAO* XXXIX, Le Caire 1916, Pl. XII; *Fouilles exécutées à Baouït par Jean Maspero. Notes mises en ordre et éditées par Étienne Drioton*, fasc. 2, *MIFAO* LIX, Le Caire 1943, Pl. XL; J.E. QUIBELL, *Excavations at Saqqara (1907–1908)*, Vol. III, Cairo 1909, Pl. IX; *Id.*, *Excavations at Saqqara (1908–1909, 1909–1910)*, Vol. IV: *The Monastery of Apa Jeremias*, Cairo 1912, Pl. XII.

to be used in further work, or else a way of presenting an artistic idea, a decoration proposal of some kind.<sup>4</sup>

Of greatest interest are drawings of which it can be said with a great deal of probability that they were designs for bigger undertakings. Very few examples of such works have been preserved, but those that have illustrate particular stages of the creative process, from the inception of an idea (loose sketch or precise design) to the end effect (painting, statue or building). This creative process can be traced and commented on only if such a drawing (design) is matched with a work created on its basis and evaluated as being either roughly implemented or executed with full consequence.<sup>5</sup>

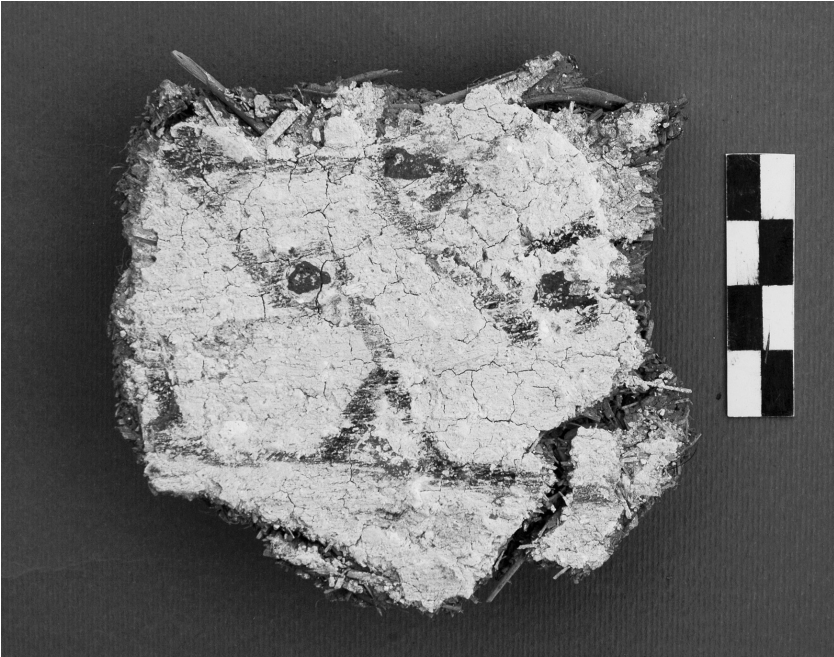
The excavation of the hermitage at Sheikh Abd el-Gurna has yielded numerous fragments of painted mud plaster,<sup>6</sup> found lying at the base of a partition wall inside the hermitage. The plaster came off the wall presumably when the hermitage was already abandoned in the eighth or ninth century. Elements of the composition observed on these fragments characterize the decoration as a kind of simple guilloche painted in black on a whitewashed mud plaster (**Figs. 1** and **2 a–d**). Fields between the lines forming particular elements of this decoration were alternately red and dark yellow-brown. While there is no way to position the decoration on the wall, there is reason to believe that the guilloche ran around the doorway and perhaps also around a window opening lighting up the interior behind the wall.

Further exploration of floor levels in the southern part of the hermitage, closer to the entrance, uncovered a rather big limestone flake (17.2 x 13.1 cm) bearing very clear pictures rendered in black paint on both sides. On the flatter side with smoother surface, a big drawing (**D**) filled the entire available space (**Figs. 5** and **6**). On the other side of the flake, three drawings (**A**, **B**, **C**) were executed on two more or less even surfaces, slightly angled with regard to one another (**Figs 3** and **4**).

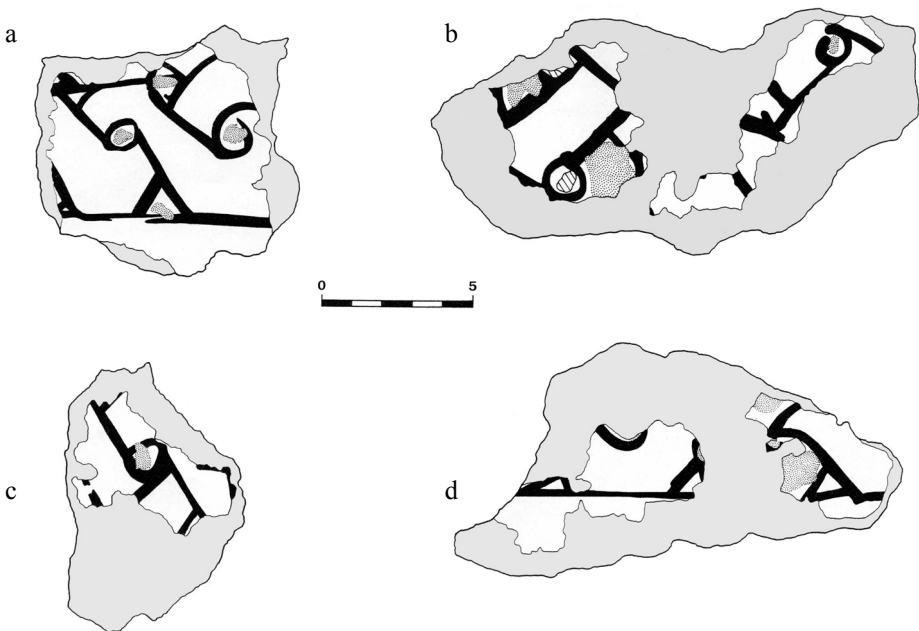
<sup>4</sup> Textile designs and sketches on papyrus are a good illustration of this kind of process, cf. HORAK, *Illuminierte Papyri*, esp. Pls. 1–4, 15–19, 24–26, 48. Of interest are two guilloches from Faras Cathedral, painted next to one another, the one on the right being a fairly awkward preparatory sketch for the more precise guilloche pattern on the left which was painted as a design for some decorative element, cf. K. MICHALOWSKI, *Faras. Wall Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw*, Warsaw 1974, illustration on p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this kind are known only from the Pharaonic period, e.g. PECK, ROSS, *Dessins*, two illustrations on p. 35, showing three hieroglyphic characters: one is a drawing (pattern) on a limestone flake, the other shows a relief from the temple of Hatshepsut carved on the basis of this or very similar design; illustrated on pp. 196–197 are the plans of the tombs of Ramesses IV on papyrus (Pl. 129) and of Ramesses IX on a limestone flake (Pl. 130). Despite minor differences, there can be no doubt that the plans refer to these particular tombs, cf. tomb plans in: PM<sup>2</sup> I, 2, p. 498: tomb KV. 2 (Ramesses IV) and tomb KV. 6 (Ramesses IX). A more detailed discussion of the two, see: HEISEL, *Bauzeichnungen*, pp. 96–102 (papyrus with inventory plan of the tomb of Ramesses IV); pp. 102–105, Pl. 12 (limestone flake with tomb plan – design). It is noteworthy that the limestone flake was discovered near the tomb.

<sup>6</sup> T. GÓRECKI, *Sheikh Abd el-Gurna. Coptic Hermitage. First Interim Report*, *PAM XV*, 2003, pp. 173–179; *Id.*, *Hermitage in Tomb 1152. Second Season of Excavations, 2004*, *PAM XVI*, 2004, pp. 239–243; *Id.*, *Sheikh Abd el-Gurna (Hermitage in Tomb 1152). Preliminary Report, 2005*, *PAM XVII*, 2007, pp. 263–272; the plan (Fig. 1) in the last cited report records the wall in the western part of the passage (Fig. 2), next to which the wall plaster fragments were found; limestone flake with guilloche drawing was discovered by the south wall, between the second bench and a narrow wall (brick step?) running across the chamber.



1. Fragment of mud plaster with a drawing of a guilloche (see also drawing 2a below). Colours: black and red (Phot. T. Górecki).



2 a–d. Tracings of selected fragments of mud plaster with drawings of a guilloche. Colours: black, red (dotted areas), yellowish-brown (oblique dashes) (Drawing: T. Górecki).

Drawing **D** is easily recognized as virtually identical with drawing **C**; it is obviously a bigger version of the latter, somewhat developed and revised.<sup>7</sup> The execution is fairly awkward and the lines of the guilloche are broken, something hardly possible had the motif been painted by a professional. A contour around the two drawings (**D** and **C**) suggests that the guilloche was supposed to run around some opening or niche. The sketches on the limestone flake do not seem to be a mere artist's exercise or a copy of some drawing or painting executed in a different material and scale. The triangular fields in the lower and upper part of the composition and the small round fields formed by two successive S-shaped lines running at an angle, point to a close relation between this drawing and the guilloche painted on the mud plaster, the composition of which is fairly clear despite its fragmentariness. The relation here is presumed to be along the lines 'design – execution'. The design here is a simple and awkward drawing, while the guilloche painted on the wall is the execution.

The term 'design' is used here conventionally with the reservation that it means a precise drawing prepared with all the details and in proportions ready for transferring in a required scale to another material, and not an inaccurate drawing or outline of a design picturing someone's idea. This design is actually a working sketch, the first phase of a certain idea which could be modified or changed at a later stage. Drawing **C** is a preparatory sketch developed in drawing **D**, which was in turn only a preliminary design for the final work (wall painting), the composition of which cannot be fully reconstructed now.

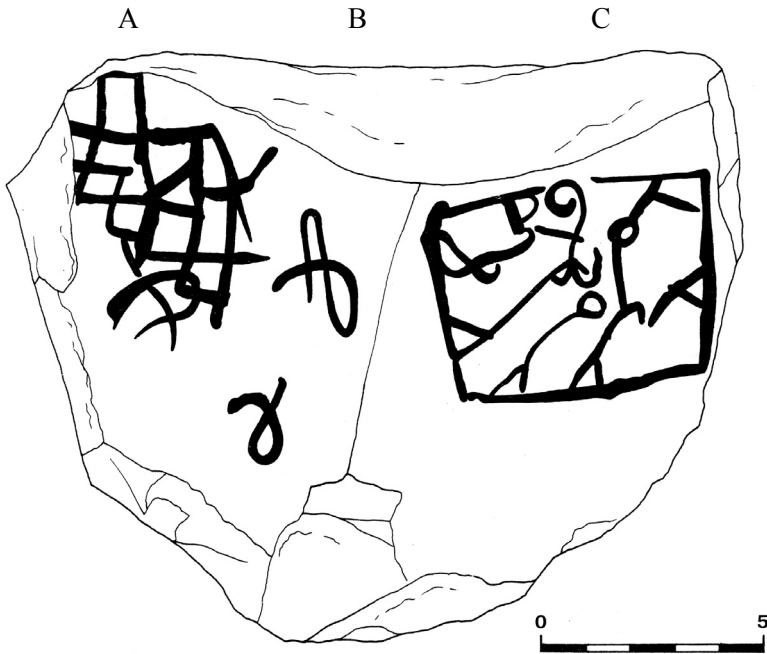
A comparative analysis of the drawings on the limestone flake from the Gurna hermitage and those preserved on the fragments of wall plaster permits a tentative reconstruction of successive stages in the designing of the painted decoration of the hermitage during a renovation of its interior. Once the building decision was made and a wall built across the end of the corridor, and once this wall was plastered and whitewashed, the monks decided to decorate the door(?), window(?) or niche(?) in it with a guilloche frieze. A debate presumably ensued as to what kind of guilloche would be most suitable for the purpose. An untrained hand, most likely one of the monks, made drawing **A**, proposing a geometrized version of the guilloche with sharply turning lines.<sup>8</sup> This idea seems not to have gained approval and someone else drew drawing **B** (loop, knot?) instead, suggesting a different kind of guilloche. This gave rise to drawing **C**, which shows a guilloche with softer, curved lines, S-shaped elements, perhaps composed of more than one plaited strand. This sketch must have been accepted, since it was enlarged with just a few corrections on the other side of the stone (**D**). Despite certain inconsistencies in this not entirely precise composition, the last drawing (**D**) was understood by the professional painter who transferred the awkward design to the wall, eliminating errors, inconsistencies and applying the correct proportions. It is naturally possible that drawing **D** (= idea, concept) served to prepare a very detailed preparatory design (= project), which was then transferred to the wall in appropriate scale (= execution). But since no such drawing was discovered among the

<sup>7</sup> On the corrected drawing **D**, the 'lambdaoid' elements 'run' in the same direction, while in drawing **C** they are directed toward one another.

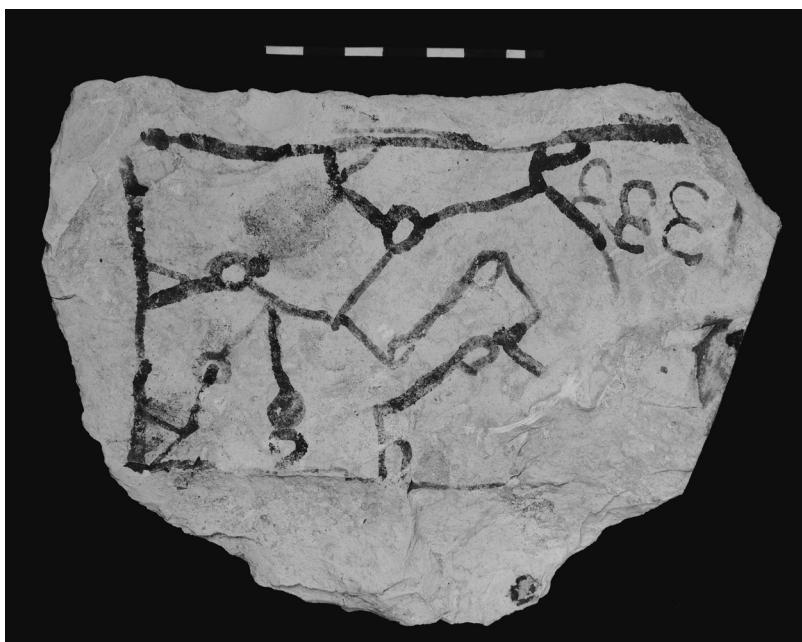
<sup>8</sup> Perhaps similar to the one uncovered in Bawit, cf. CLÉDAT, Baouït I, Pl. LXXXIV (top).



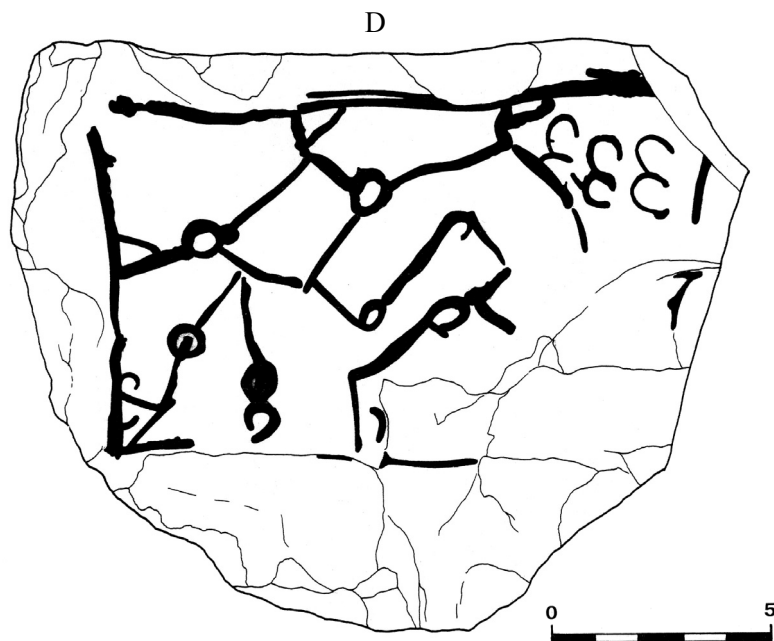
3. Limestone chip with different kind guilloches painted in black (Phot. J. Śliwa).



4. Tracing of limestone chip with different kind guilloches painted in black (A, B, C) (Drawing: T. Górecki).



5. Limestone chip with a painted sketch of a guilloche and three examples of the letter omega (Phot. J. Śliwa).



6. Tracing of limestone chip with a painted sketch of a guilloche and three examples of the letter omega (Drawing: T. Górecki).

finds from the hermitage, this part of a hypothetical reconstruction of the decoration process must remain conjectural.

The mud-plastered walls of the hermitage preserved traces of a compass being used to trace the circles, as well as the tondo with a bust of Christ, painted on the wall. Other drawings were also found, including an important limestone flake,<sup>9</sup> bearing an alphabet and showing how to use four chords passing through the center of a circle to divide it in such a way, so as to inscribe in it two squares intersecting at an angle of 45 degrees. There is more proof in this hermitage of the artists' knowledge of geometry and its application, but that is material for a separate study. Knowledge of geometry, as well as the discovery at various sites in Egypt of drawing sketches of different designs favor the belief that in Christian times (similarly to the Pharaonic times) every artistic and building enterprise was, most likely, preceded by the preparation of a more or less accurate drawing sketch – if not a fully professional design.

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<sup>9</sup> T. GÓRECKI, Sheikh Abd el-Gurna, in: A. MAJEWSKA, E. LASKOWSKA-KUSZTAL (eds.), *Seventy Years of Polish Archaeology in Egypt*, Warsaw 2007, bottom illustration on p. 190.