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*Guilloche Drawings on a Potsherd
A Contribution to the Designing
of the Theban Hermitage Wall Decoration*

Excavations of a hermitage site in Sheikh Abd el-Gurna in December 2008 yielded a find that had direct bearing on a subject the author had already prepared for publication, that is, sources documenting successive phases of a design for wall painting decoration inside the hermitage.¹ The discovery in question was a sherd from the body of a storage container (amphora)² bearing drawings of three different guilloches differing in size, degree of complexity and pattern of weave (**Figs. 1, 2**). The same rather firm hand had executed them all at one time, using black ink that stands out well against the creamy slip of the pottery. In the light of previous remarks on the subject, there is every reason to think that the new find verifies previously propounded ideas.³

The similarity observed and established between the painted and drawn guilloche images found on plaster fragments, a limestone flake and the sherd provided the necessary inspiration for the present contribution. The resemblance between the drawings is not the sole proof of a relation between the different categories of finds. Of equal significance is the topographic and stratigraphic proximity of the finds, largely implying a relation of chronological contemporaneity between them. The previous contribution had ended with the statement: *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 finds from the hermitage, this part of a hypothetical reconstruction of the decoration process must remain conjectural.*⁴

‘Precise’ is hardly a qualifier for the sherd drawings, even so they can be considered as verification of the author’s hypothesis and can facilitate a better reconstruction of the process of designing elements of the wall-painting decoration and an identification of the successive phases in this process. The question whether there were any more detailed versions of this design will surely remain open.

The drawings **A–D** discussed in the earlier contribution were painted on either side of a limestone flake found lying in the tomb passage, apparently reused as a floor tile filling a gap in the stone pavement. The flake surface had not been damaged or worn in any way because the flake lay next to the wall, away from the center of the passage frequented by the monks.⁵ It had found practical use as a floor tile and so had not shared the fate of the sherd with the guilloche designs, which was simply thrown away once the project had been finished, one of many other useless items landing on a rubbish heap.⁶ The contem-

¹ T. GÓRECKI, Limestone Flake with a Drawing of a Guilloche. A Contribution to the Designing of Theban Hermitage Wall Decoration, *EtTrav* XXII, 2008 [= Contribution I], pp.61–68.

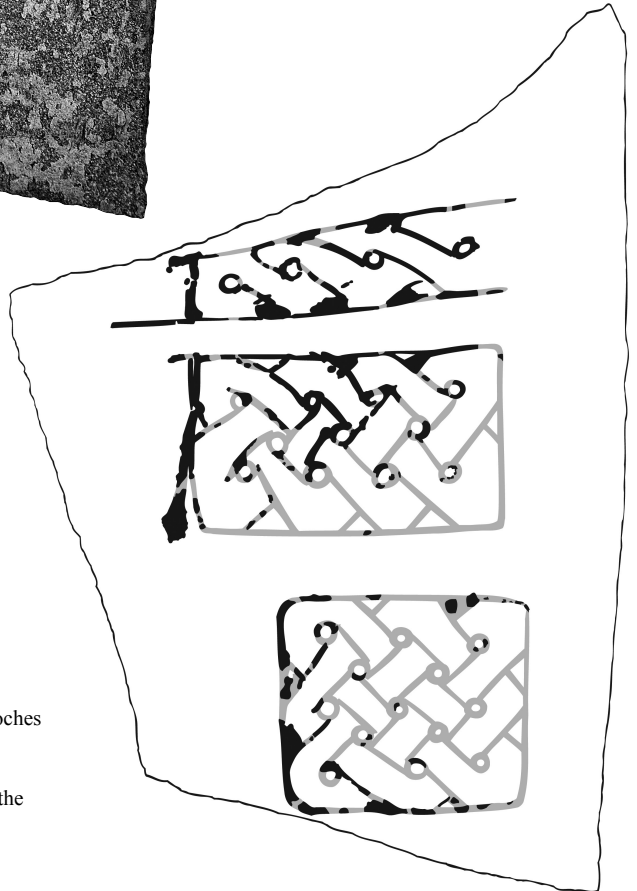
² Body sherd (dimensions 11.7 x 8.2 cm) from a Late Roman amphora produced most likely in Tunisia perhaps in the second half of the seventh century. For amphorae of the type from the hermitage in Tomb 1152, see: Id., Coptic Hermitage. First Interim Report, *PAM* XIV, 2004, Fig. 6.

³ Cf. Id., Contribution I, pp. 65f.

⁴ *Vide supra*, note 3.

⁵ Other limestone flakes used as floor tiles, especially those in the center of the passage, are smooth and polished from the feet of the monks. This is particularly apparent in the case of stelae and relief blocks reused as floor tiles, the carved images and hieroglyphs on these stones being worn away in part.

⁶ The extensive rubbish heap has yielded ostraca (about 90% of the record), mostly utilitarian wares, yarn, scraps of cloth, baskets, tanned leather and many other items of significance for reconstructing the everyday life of the monks in this hermitage.

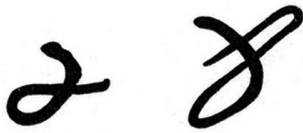


1. Amphora body sherd with drawings of guilloches (Phot. Z. Doliński).

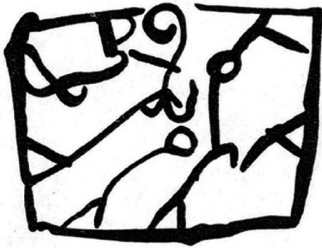
2. Amphora body sherd with reconstruction of the patterns. (Drawing by T. Górecki).



A



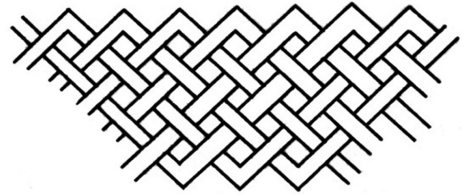
B



C



D



3. Reconstruction of successive stages in creating the design (or designs) for the wall decoration based on the guilloche motif (drawings not to scale).

On the left side (A–D) – tracings of original drawings from the limestone flake with a reconstruction of the first sketch to the right.

Next page. Left column (E–G) – tracings of drawings from the sherd, the reconstructed parts in gray.

Middle column – reconstructions based on a module; thickened lines indicate the grounds for the reconstruction. Lowermost drawing in this column – possible variant of guilloche G2 extended by one “segment.”

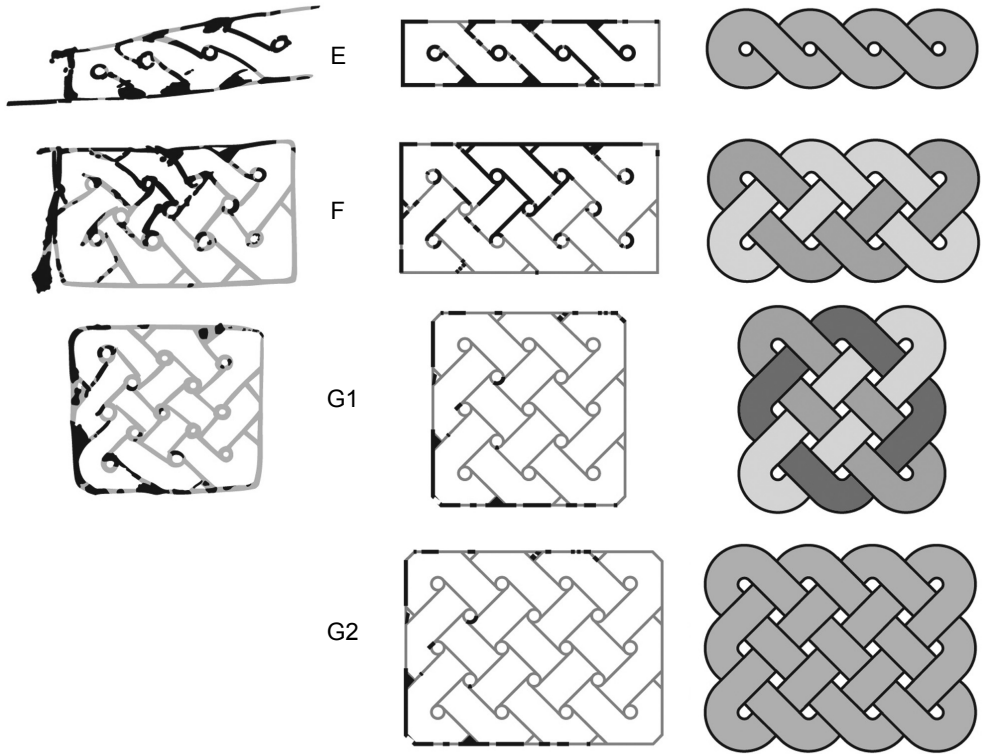
Right column – model reconstructions of guilloche patterns; color differentiation introduced to facilitate recognition of particular elements: E is one braid, F is composed of two braids, G1 of three braids, and G2, the most elaborate, is a single repeatedly interplaited braid (Drawing: E. Brykowska-Liniecka, T. Górecki).

poraneity of flake and sherd is further confirmed by the stratigraphy of the rubbish dump. The sherd was found in the upper layers corresponding with the chronology of the archaeological context for the flake.

1. Upper guilloche E (Figs. 1, 2, 3E)

Small circles were drawn in one row at roughly the same intervals in the middle of a band set off by two parallel lines.⁷ Lines starting upward and downward from these circles at

⁷ See also another interesting example of a horizontal guilloche (the practice drawings or the working studies on a sherd) from Abusir, H. BENESOVSKA, P. VLCKOVA (eds), Abusir. Secrets of the Desert and the Pyramids, Praha 2006, p. 188, Fig. 4.

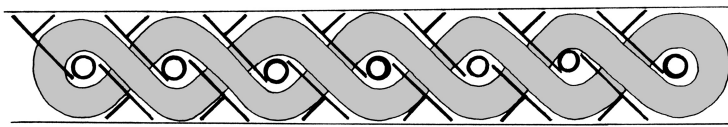


an angle of 45 degrees merge with triangular figures at top and bottom, filled in sketchily with black paint or ink. The empty spaces between these elements (referred to below as “lambdoid”) trace the pattern of this simple single-braided guilloche. The overly schematic and geometrized arrangement of elements in this sketch indicates that it was merely a preliminary outline serving as a model for a later painting of a plaited band consisting of smoothly flowing “sinusoid” curves.⁸ This kind of guilloche is defined as having no beginning or end.

2. Center guilloche F (Figs. 1, 2, 3F)

The preliminary design of this more complex guilloche was executed in similar manner. The lines and circles of the plaiting pattern were drawn in much the same way as in the first example. The guilloche appears to have been enclosed in a rectangular frame, of which two sides of different length and perpendicular to one another have been preserved

⁸ The “lambdoid” sequences of the sketches (the author uses the term “lambdoid” as these elements remind of the greek letter λ) take on the form of two intersecting sinusoids in the ultimate executions of the simplest kind of guilloche (*vide infra*, Fig. 4); in rare cases (PH. BRIDEL, D. SIERRO [eds.], *Explorations aux Qouçoûr Hégeila et ‘Éreima* lors des campagnes 1987, 1988 et 1989, Louvain 2003 [= Kellia IV], Pl. 39.4 on p. 589, drawing on the floor), the guilloche remained in the “geometric” stage, giving the impression of decoration that never went beyond the sketching stage.



4. Guilloche ‘inscribed’ into a set of modules created by rhythmically repeated ‘lambdoid’ shapes joined by small circles (Drawing: T. Górecki).

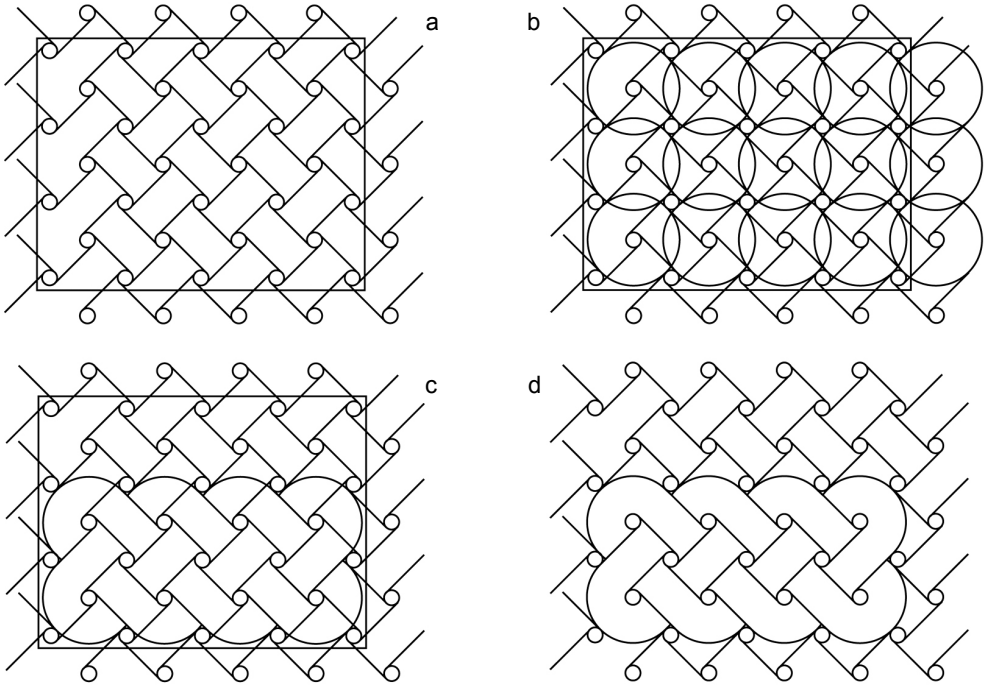
in reasonably good condition. The ‘lambdoid’ motifs spring from the longer, upper side of the frame (three elements) and the shorter lateral side (one element). The resultant fairly schematic design could be executed only as version **F** and points to a guilloche composed of two separate interplaited bands, each of which represents a separate and complete whole.

3. Lower guilloche **G** (Figs. 1, 2, 3G1–2)

The least visible of the three drawings nonetheless preserves characteristic features permitting a reconstruction of the artist’s design. Small sections of the frame around the guilloche can be traced on all but the right side. Two “lambdoid” elements spring from the left vertical side of the frame. The frame size, as well as the pattern and extent of black ink traces suggest that two (possibly three) such elements started from the upper and lower sides of the frame. In the first case (**G1**), the frame would have formed a square field, in the second (**G2**) a rectangle. Version **G1** is nearer to the sketches on the limestone flake (**C** and **D**), while version **G2** is suggested by the fact that the last of the guilloche patterns in this sequence should be the most developed and elaborate of the three. Version **G1** may be defined as a set of three plaited braids, while version **G2** is a single braid without beginning or end that interweaves repeatedly with itself to fill the entire rectangular space.

The similarity of the elements forming the guilloche and their arrangement on the flake (**C** and **D**) and sherd (**F** and **G**) are self-evident. Nonetheless, the missing end of drawing **D** and the unclear and perhaps incomplete (because of the damages to the surface of the sherd on the right side) drawing **G** do not permit an unequivocal determination of whether the idea represented in drawing **D** was developed into either drawing **G1** or drawing **G2**. It is somewhat more likely that the guilloche was drawn as the **G1** version as manifested by the resemblance to **D**. Moreover, the slight downward turn of the upper side of the frame on the right (beginning of a vertical line?) suggests a framed space that is nearer to a square in shape. The only guilloche that could be inscribed within a square is the one shown in **Fig. 3G1**.

Taking into consideration the differences in quality between drawings on the flake and sherd, it may be assumed that two individuals with widely different drawing skills participated in the execution of the wall-painting design. The drawings on the flake, inept and clumsy, and full of mistakes (especially **C**) as it is, could have been made by the monk commissioning the work, a resident of the hermitage, whereas the sherd drawings, while

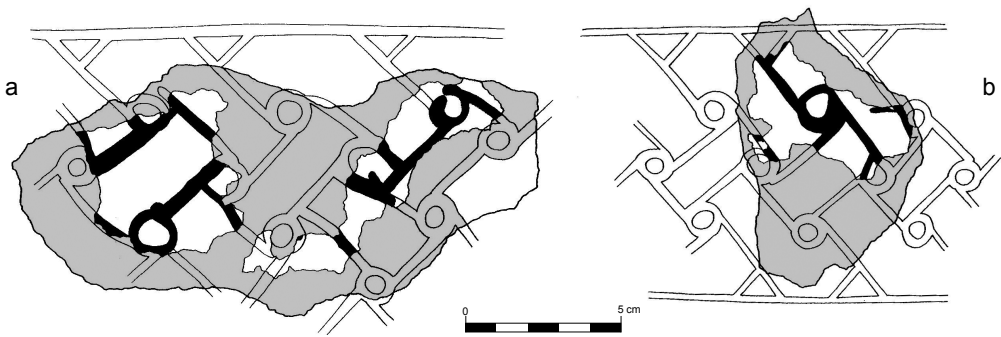


5. Illustration of stages of the reconstruction work (on the basis of example F): inscribing modules into a grid (a), followed by introduction of circles (b) and elimination of superfluous elements (c). In the end effect, only the motifs forming the final drawing of a guilloche remain (d) (Drawing: E. Brykowska-Liniecka).

not exactly finished off, but evidently skillful and logical in their design, were the work of a craftsman-painter hired for the job.

The reconstructed course of events (from idea through sketch to design) could have been as follows:

1. Sketch of an elaborate geometric guilloche **A** (**Fig. 3A**, not executed?; see also: GÓRECKI, Contribution I, Fig. 4);
2. Knot or loop **B** (**Fig. 3B**; see also: *ibid.*, *loc.cit.*) possibly representing a counter-proposal of another kind of guilloche with rounded plaiting pattern;
3. Design of a multi-braid guilloche **C** with evident mistakes (**Fig. 3C**; see also: *ibid.*, *loc.cit.*);
4. Design of a partly corrected guilloche pattern **D** (**Fig. 3D**; see also: *ibid.*, Fig. 5), demonstrating still the same problems with the rendering of the plaiting pattern in the central part as in **C**;
5. Sketch design of narrow guilloche **E** (one braid) made presumably by a professional painter as exercise or planned decoration element (**Fig. 3E**);
6. Sketch design of elaborate guilloche **F** composed of two interplaited braids (**Fig. 3F**), either a variation on version **D** or a development of the idea represented in drawing **E**.



6. One possible reconstruction of guilloches painted on fragments of wall plaster from the hermitage, cf. GÓRECKI, Contribution I, Fig. 2b and 2c (Drawing: T. Górecki).

The surviving part of the drawing reveals the artist's proficiency in rendering the contour lines of the guilloche pattern, showing the pattern of plaiting and correcting evident mistakes in the center parts of drawings C and D.⁹

7. Last in the sequence and most probably the final version of a guilloche, the preliminary idea for which was sketched in drawing D. Drawing G1 (possibly G2, Fig. 3G1–2) was the result of either a transformation of drawing F or an entirely independent, professional execution of the pattern sketched in drawing D.¹⁰

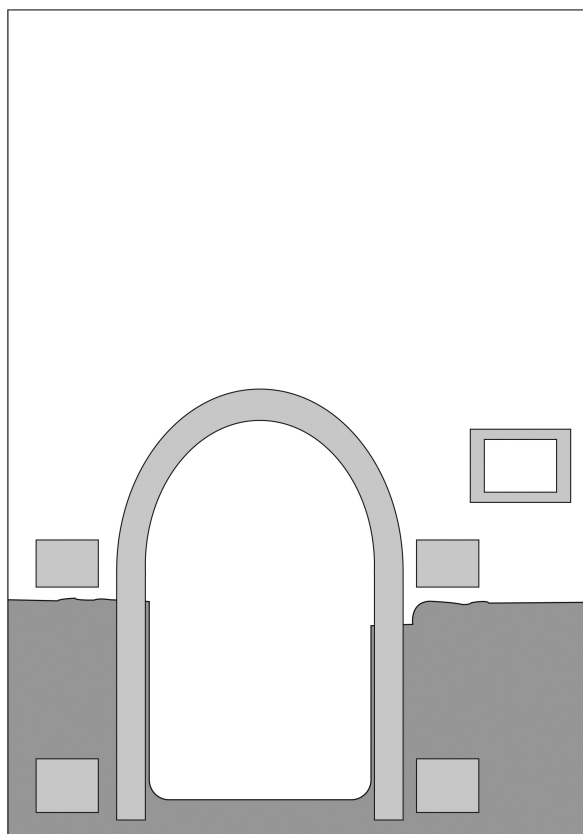
The finding of the sherd emboldens a reconstruction of the designing process for this kind of decoration painted on wall plaster. A satisfactory answer to the question as to where and on which parts of the walls this decoration could have been painted inside the hermitage escapes us due to the poor preservation of the weak mud plaster used as wall finishing in the complex.

The guilloche patterns known from Coptic wall painting, either autonomous or surrounding figural compositions, from Bawit, Saqqara and mainly Kellia, surviving in various states of preservation, are of limited use for reconstructing, even hypothetically, the decoration inside the hermitage in Sheikh Abd el-Gurna (Fig. 7). A long guilloche of the E type could have run around a doorway or niche in this wall;¹¹ it could have also consti-

⁹ Drawing F is the sole one with enough characteristic elements to support a full reconstruction, which in turn permits a reconstruction of the two versions of drawing G. The surviving small circles and linear ('lambdoid') elements drawn at an angle of 45 degrees at regular intervals form a module that facilitates a reconstruction of these drawings (Fig. 5). Multiplying the module horizontally gives an idea of what guilloches F and G could have looked like in the form of a long frieze. This helps to reconstruct to some extent the guilloches that were painted on the plastered walls (cf. GÓRECKI, Contribution I, Fig. 2b–c, and here, Fig. 6).

¹⁰ For the same kind of guilloches as in G1 on ostraca, see among others: W. BELTZ, *Die koptischen Zauberostraka der Papyrus-Sammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 2, 1980, Abb. 11; W. GODLEWSKI, *Deir el-Bahari V. Le monastère de St. Phoibammon*, Varsovie 1986 [= St. Phoibammon], Fig. 57; H.R. HALL, *Coptic and Greek Texts of the Christian Period from Ostraka, Stelae, etc.* in the British Museum, London 1905, Pl. 24 (No. 15971, rev.).

¹¹ For guilloches around a doorway, see: e.g. S. SAUNERON, J. JACQUET, *Les ermitages chrétiens du désert d'Esna I. Archéologie et inscriptions*, Le Caire 1972 [= Ermitages I], p. 63 and Fig. 26. PH. BRIDEL, N. BOSSON,



7. Hypothetical positioning of guilloches on the transversal wall across the hermitage corridor (Reconstruction proposal by T. Górecki).

tuted the filling of the arms of a cross.¹² Guilloche **F** (possibly also **G**) developed into a frieze could have also run around a doorway or niche opening, but it could have also been an autonomous element decorating the lower parts of a wall.¹³ Guilloches **F** or **G**, if

D. SIERRO (eds.), *Explorations aux Qouçoûr el-Izeila lors des campagnes 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1989 et 1990*, Louvain 1999 [= Kellia III], Pl. 92.2 (s. 760); above a niche: J. MASPERO, *Fouilles exécutées à Baouît, Le Caire 1931*, *MIFAO* LIX,2, Pl. XL, A–B; BRIDEL, BOSSON, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia III*, Pls. 26.2 and 26.4 (p. 694), 27.3 (p. 695), 96.2 (p. 764); BRIDEL, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia IV*, Pl. 39.3 (p. 589); around a niche: e.g. PH. BRIDEL, N. BOSSON (eds.), *Explorations aux Qouçoûr er-Roubâ'iyât. Rapport des campagnes 1982 et 1983*, Louvain 1994 [= Kellia II], Pl. 30.6 (p. 554).

¹² For guilloches inside a cross, see: BRIDEL, BOSSON, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia III*, Pls. 27.2 (p. 695), 46.4–5 (s. 714), 51.3 (p. 719); SAUNERON, JACQUET, *Ermitages*, Fig. 38–40 and Pl. XXV E–F; a cross image on a limestone flake from Deir el-Bahari could well be a designing sketch as well as an autonomous representation, cf. GODLEWSKI, *St. Phoibammon*, Fig. 54.

¹³ For guilloches on wall dadoes, cf. BRIDEL, BOSSON (eds.), *Kellia II*, Fig. 214 (s. 341); BRIDEL, BOSSON, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia III*, Pls. 28.2 (p. 696), 48.3 (p. 716), 79.4 (p. 747); under a niche, cf. BRIDEL, BOSSON (eds.), *Kellia II*, Figs. 206 (s. 337), 209 (s. 339); BRIDEL, BOSSON, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia III*, Pl. 96.1 (s. 764).

framed, could have decorated a pilaster front,¹⁴ the lower part of a wall on either side of a doorway¹⁵ or the surface next to the capitals of pilasters bordering a niche (**Fig. 7**).¹⁶ The function of element **G** in this position would have been the same regardless of the version, whether **G1** or **G2**.

Discussing a typical ornamental motif like a guilloche (very fragmentarily preserved at that) would seem an exercise of marginal significance and little creative potential in the light of major studies on Coptic figural painting. Yet it should be kept in mind that the point of the exercise is not so much a reconstruction of the wall decoration of this particular hermitage and the position of the guilloche in it (or a determination of its type and form), but an in-depth consideration of man's actions, his way of thinking and acting, and the process of creating any decoration. The fragments of wall plaster and the limestone flake were found in excavations, meticulous documentation of the drawings of guilloches on the sherd, quite faint at first glance, led to their successfully reconstruction. In effect, a comparison of the drawing reconstructions with the flake and the fragments of painting on wall plaster, permitted to put the successive stages of creation in their right sequence: the idea for the decoration expressed in a preliminary sketch (flake), transformation of the sketch into three versions of the design (sherd), which was finally reproduced as part of the decoration, gracing the walls of the hermitage (plaster).

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¹⁴ E.g. BRIDEL, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia IV*, Pl. 83.4 (p. 633).

¹⁵ E.g. BRIDEL, BOSSON, SIERRO (eds.), *Kellia III*, Pl. 49.2–3 (p. 717).

¹⁶ E.g. E. CHASSINAT, *Fouilles à Baouît, Le Caire 1911, MIFAO XIII*, Pl. LXI–LXIII.