

THE 'ABYDOS PILGRIMAGE': A RECONSTRUCTED SEQUENCE OF SCENES IN THEBAN TOMB 179

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The Hungarian Archaeological Mission's South Khokha Project has been carrying out excavations and epigraphic survey in a number of New Kingdom tombs situated on the southern slope of the el-Khokha hillock. One of the tombs included in the research programme is Theban Tomb 179, an early Eighteenth Dynasty mortuary monument constructed for Nebamun, censor scribe of grain. Fieldwork has so far focused on the epigraphic documentation of the murals, including the loose fragments originating from the missing wall surfaces. Besides giving an overview of the layout and decoration of the tomb, the study describes one scene, that of the so-called 'Abydos pilgrimage' to illustrate the extent to which the study of loose mural fragments may contribute to a better understanding of a given decorative programme.

1. THE EXCAVATION OF TT 179

The Hungarian Archaeological Mission's South Khokha Project has been carrying out excavations in Theban Tomb 179 since 2010.¹ The exploration of this early Eighteenth Dynasty tomb and its environs along with the epigraphic documentation of the tomb's cult chapel form part of a complex – archaeological, architectural, epigraphic, and anthropological – research programme conducted since 1983 in the South Khokha necropolis. Theban Tomb (henceforth TT) 179 is situated in the second necropolis-street of this cemetery, whose mortuary monuments remain largely unexcavated (*Fig. 1*). As an exception, TT 179 has long been known to Egyptology due to the accessibility of the entrance and the cult chapels of the tomb. The murals painted on in the cult chapel and being preserved in a relatively good condition already attracted the attention of earlier scholars. In the first half of the 20th century, Norman and Nina de Garis Davies, pioneers of Egyptian epigraphy made watercolour facsimiles of some scenes, whereas in the second half of the century the German Egyptologist Siegfried Schott and the American Keith C. Seele took pictures of the murals in the tomb. Although a few reproductions of miscellaneous details of the tomb decoration have since appeared in works on New Kingdom tomb art, neither the Davies watercolours nor the photos of Schott and Seele were published, and the tomb remained unexcavated.

The clearing work launched in 2011 in the forecourt revealed that the area of the mortuary monument listed as TT 179 in the Theban tomb catalogue is in fact shared by five New Kingdom tombs, three of which have been hitherto unknown. The earliest of these is TT 179 (A) with the decorated cult chapel cut into rock during the reign of Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BC) for a censor scribe of grain called Nebamun. Later in the New Kingdom, two further tombs (179 B = 180 and 179 C) were recessed into the façade on either side of the original entrance, with only a single statue chamber constituting the chapel of either (*Fig. 2*). Finally, we have identified a further tomb entrance (179 D) to the east of the tomb 179 B, and yet another small Ramesside tomb (179 E) cut into the floor of the forecourt. To date, only the statue chambers of TT 179 B and C have been excavated, and given that the inner room(s) and the chapel of the original tomb also await exploration, settling a precise chronology for the Nebamun tomb-complex will be the task of the next seasons.

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Fig. 1. TT 179 and environs (Photo: Gábor Schreiber)



Fig. 2. The statue chambers of TT 179 C and B (on the left and right, resp.) with the axial hall of TT 179 A in the middle (Photo: László Mátyus)

Fieldwork has so far focused on the epigraphic documentation of the murals in the two accessible rooms of TT 179 (A). In the framework of this project, colour-coded facsimile drawings were made of the scenes of the antechamber and the axial hall by means of a digital epigraphic method developed specifically for the documentation of this tomb.² Between 2011 and 2018, the recording of the walls running the length of the two rooms, the inner doorway of the second room and the ceiling was completed, and the loose stone fragments from the missing wall surfaces were documented in drawings as well. This kind of elaborate and time-consuming drawing process was not only necessitated by the high artistic quality of the scenes (cf. Fig. 3), but also by the fact that the murals of TT 179 give an insight into an early period of Eighteenth Dynasty Theban tomb painting.

2. THE DECORATION OF THE TOMB

In the hitherto known rooms of the chapel, the decoration shows different techniques since while the small antechamber was decorated with painted raised reliefs, the murals of the axial hall were executed on a flat surface. In the antechamber, two offering scenes are shown on either side wall. The entrance scenes feature the tomb owner Nebamun presenting the so-called ‘great offering’ to the deity who is not shown on the wall because he was thought to be present in the form of the sunlight when ritual activity took place and the entrance door was open. The next unit depicts another pair of antithetically rendered offering scenes, with one standing and two seated figures each. Due to the destruction of the accompanying label texts, it is uncertain whether the tomb owners are depicted here in the function of making or receiving the offerings.

The walls of the axial hall are decorated with long pictorial compositions, each terminated in a large-scaled offering scene showing Nebamun and his wife receiving offerings. These panels are preceded by a sequence of funerary scenes on the western wall, and banquet scenes on the eastern wall.³

The funerary scenes are divided into six registers (Fig. 5).⁴ The first unit depicts the riverine journey



Fig. 3. Nebamun's saluki. Detail of the western wall of the axial hall. Note the flamboyant realistic painting style which makes this scene an outstanding example of Egyptian dog representations (Photo: László Mátyus)



Fig. 4. Entrance scene, western wall of the antechamber (Photo: László Mátyus)

² Cf. Vértés 2017: 121–138 and Vértés forthcoming.

³ For a summary of funerary and banquet scenes, see Hartwig 2004: 98–103 and 117–120.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of funerary scenes in New Kingdom tombs, see Settgest 1963.

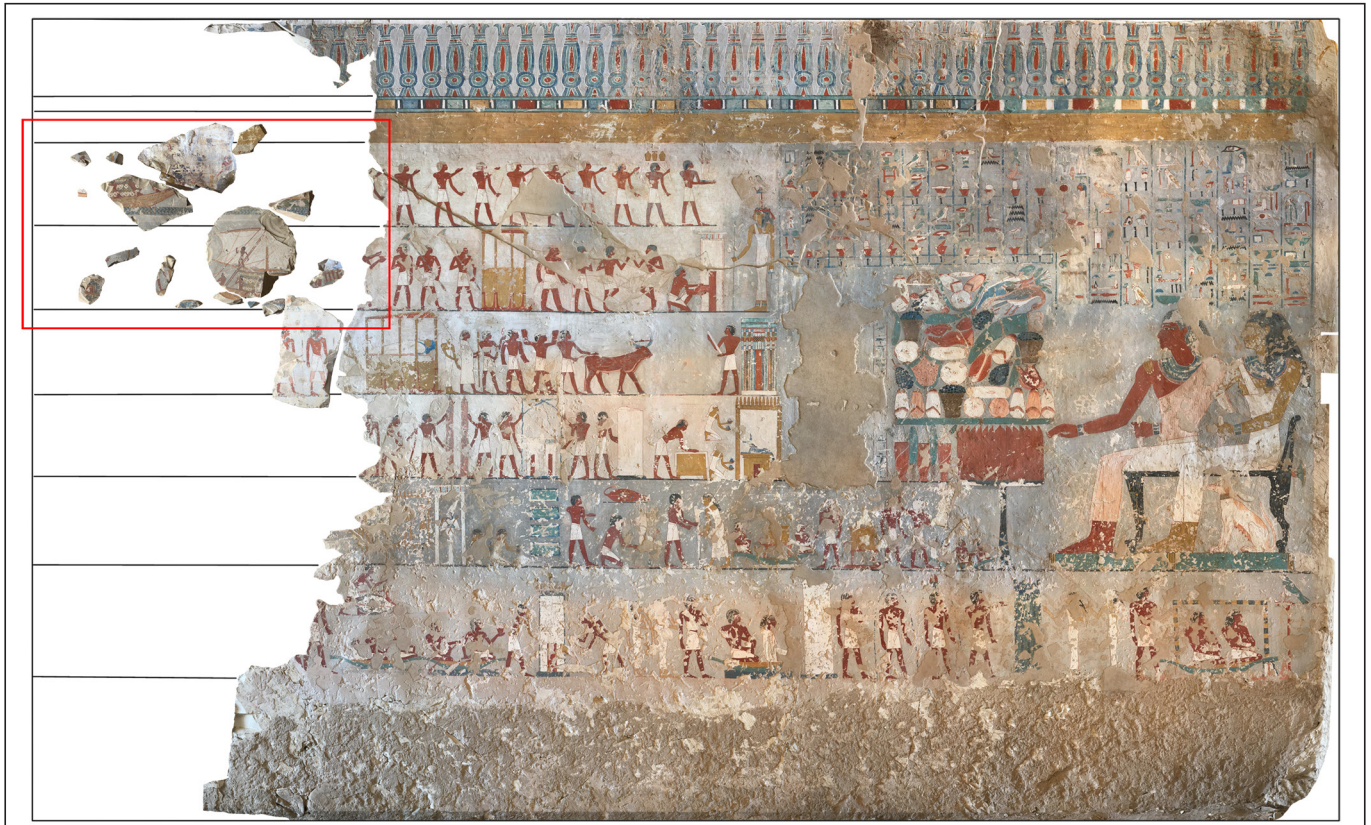


Fig. 5. Western wall of the axial hall with the reconstruction of the loose mural fragments (Photo and reconstruction: Krisztián Vértés)

of the dead from the realm of the living on the east bank to the necropolis on the west bank. Focus then shifts onto the so-called sacred district, with the image of Osiris, the depiction of mortuary rituals, and finally the funeral procession in which the mummy and the burial equipment are towed towards the tomb and the Western goddess. Although the left quarter of the wall is destroyed, the adjoining loose fragments sufficiently prove that the missing surfaces in the top two registers would have featured the so-called ‘Abydos pilgrimage’.

The banquet scenes of the eastern wall are divided into three registers. Picturing that funerary banquets involved both the dead and the living, there is a remarkable dichotomy in the decoration. While the large-scaled offering scene of the top register is static, tranquil and timeless, the scenes of the bottom register are full of dynamism and liveliness: they feature dancing musicians, guests holding lotus flowers and servants working in the storage area and preparing alcoholic beverages, sweet-scented oils and flower bouquets for the banquet.

The inscriptions of the two rooms mainly consist of offering formulae. Furthermore, there are two offering lists and a eulogy praising the deceased in the axial hall.

3. THE HISTORY OF THE WALLS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LOOSE FRAGMENTS

Although the history of the tomb-complex still needs to be drawn up in the light of the forthcoming excavations, some episodes of this history may already be reconstructed based on the study of the murals alone. It is rather apparent for instance that the name of the god Amun was deliberately erased from the inscriptions, undoubtedly during the Amarna Period. This intervention also affected the name of the owner ‘Nebamun’ being a theophoric personal name. What is even more interesting is that shortly after this vandalism had occurred, the tomb was renovated, presumably during the late Eighteenth or early Nineteenth Dynasty, and not only the name of Nebamun but also other short inscriptions were repainted with black ink. The tomb endured in a relatively good structural preservation for the subsequent millennia; however, the inner



Fig. 6. a) Loose mural fragment of the ‘Abydos pilgrimage’ with traces of ancient reworking (Photo: László Mátyus)
b) Lateral view of Fig. 6a (Photo: László Mátyus)

half of the walls of the antechamber, and the outer quarter of the walls of the axial hall perished, with the fragments originating from here being scattered in the surrounding areas. The preserved wall surfaces of the tomb were partially restored by the local archaeological authorities in the 20th century: the edges of the wall-surfaces were reinforced, and the deficiencies filled in. The modern finds retrieved in the statue chamber of neighbouring TT 179 C indicate that this intervention took place in 1967.⁵ It is more difficult to answer the question of when the missing parts of the walls perished. Although it might seem tempting to associate this destruction with the well-known early modern robberies of Theban tombs, that is likely not the case.

During the excavation of TT -400-, a neighbouring tomb situated in the first necropolis street (cf. Fig. 1), a significant collection of loose mural fragments was unearthed, which – without exception – proved to have originated from TT 179. Remarkably, some of these loose fragments were worked with the chipped flint technique – obviously with the aim of making mortars out of the blocks (Figs. 6a-b). Stone mortars of this type often formed a deposit which were placed inside the cult chapel or, as is the case in TT -400-, in front of the tomb stela during the New Kingdom (Fig. 7).⁶ The deposit in front of TT -400- also contained pottery vessels, such as plates and beer jars (Fig. 8). Based on the

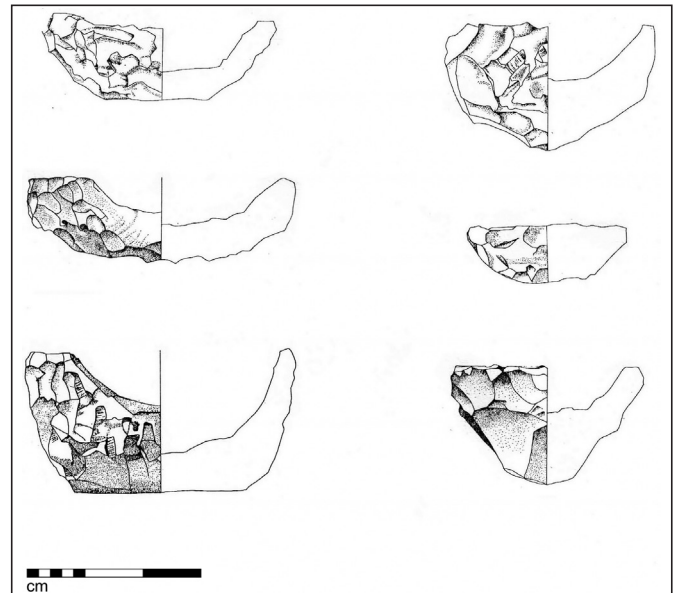


Fig. 7. Stone mortars from the deposit found in front of the stela of TT -400-, Twentieth Dynasty. (Drawing: Imre Szűcs)



Fig. 8. Plates and beer jars from the deposit found in front of the stela of TT -400-, Twentieth Dynasty (Photo: László Mátyus)

⁵ For translating the Arabic newspaper fragments found in this context a debt of gratitude is owed to Inspector Mahmud Hassan el-Azab.

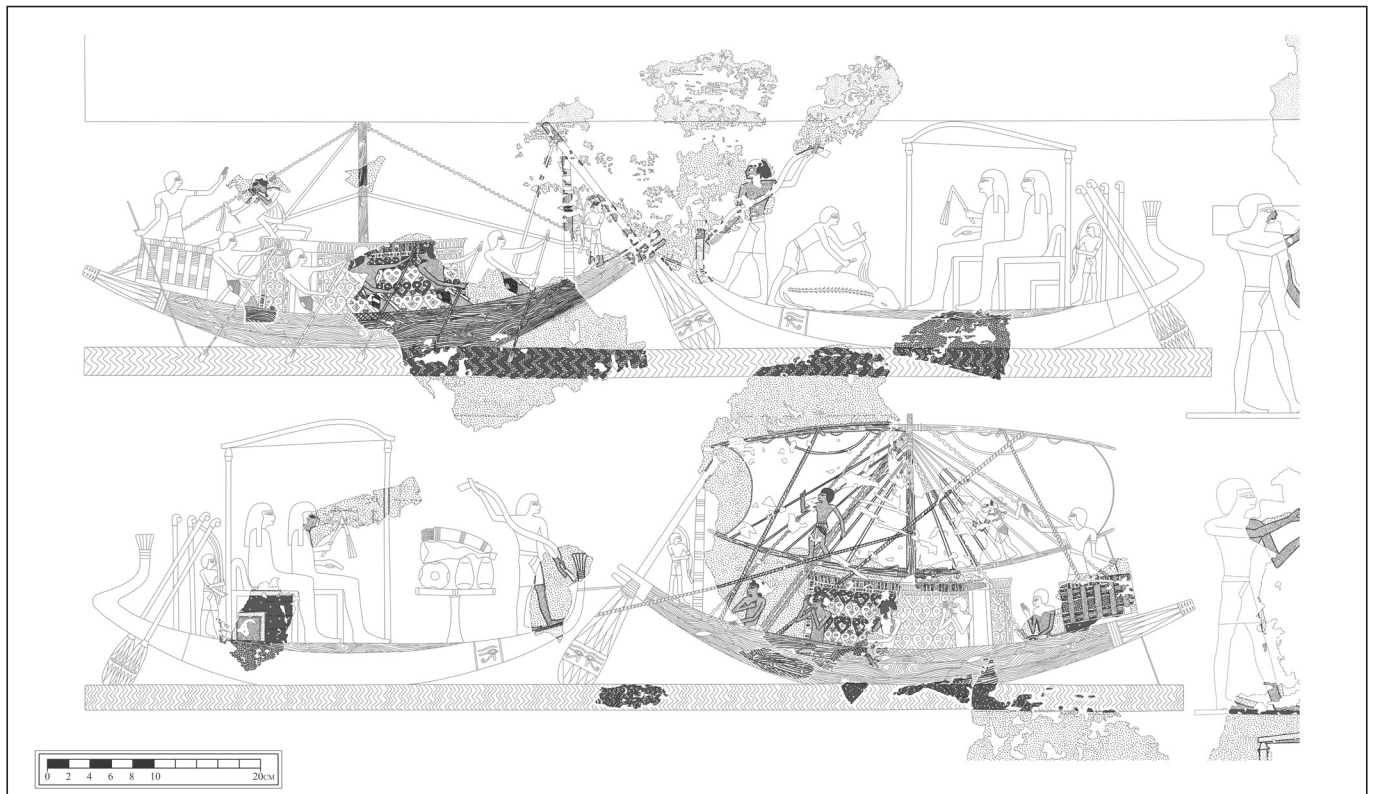
⁶ C.f. Schreiber 2015a: 27, Plate VII.

pottery finds, the deposit may be dated to the Twentieth Dynasty (1186–1069 BC) and associated with a contemporaneous group burial excavated in an intrusive shaft tomb within TT -400-.⁷ It thus seems highly probable that the missing wall surfaces of TT 179 were hacked out deliberately by the late Ramesside owners of this neighbouring tomb in order to quarry raw materials for their own burial assemblage.

The entire concession area has so far yielded 401 diagnostic mural fragments, which allow for the reconstruction of some individual scenes. In closing, one such scene, that of the so-called ‘Abydos pilgrimage’ will be described to illustrate the extent to which the study of loose mural fragments may contribute to a better understanding of a given decorative programme.

4. THE ABYDOS PILGRIMAGE

Based on the extant fragments and parallels from New Kingdom tombs,⁸ the scene of the ‘Abydos pilgrimage’ occupied a two-register field at the southern end of the western wall (*Figs. 5, 9*). All pious Egyptians were expected to make this journey to the holy city of Osiris – if possible, once in a lifetime, if not, at least as a transfigured deceased. Following the god and thereby ensuring an otherworldly life for themselves, the pilgrims’ essential wish was to attend the cultic drama in Abydos centred around the death and resurrection of Osiris.⁹



*Fig. 9. Reconstruction of the ‘Abydos pilgrimage’ from TT 179
(Drawing: Júlia Schmied and Krisztián Vértés, reconstruction: Krisztián Vértés)*

While the upper register features the journey towards Abydos, the lower one shows the way back home. Both scenes display a towboat at the front and a ritual boat behind. As far as the towboat is concerned, the two representations are differentiated, since while the boat sailing downstream is rowed by five oarsmen,

⁷ C.f. Schreiber 2015b: 48–52.

⁸ Similar examples are known e.g. from the tomb of Amenemhet (TT 82), Benia (TT 343), Nebamun (TT 17), Paury (TT 139) and Ineni (TT 81); for a detailed description of a parallel scene in the tomb of Menna (TT 69), see Hartwig 2013: 83.

⁹ For a summary of the Abydos pilgrimage, see Assmann 2001: 184–5; on the mysteries of Osiris at Abydos, see Schreiber 2008: 30 and Smith 2017: 466.

the same oarsmen are shown relaxing upstream, with the boat under full sail. The captain stands in a lookout just behind the prow holding a long pole to prevent the boat from lodging on a sandbank. The helmsman, on the other hand, stands atop the stern, managing the steering oars. On the returning towboat two further sailors are depicted standing on the yardarm and holding halyards, while on the boat sailing downstream only one ordinary sailor remained preserved. This man is shown standing atop the deckhouse and raising his hand to the mouth in the gesture of shouting addressed to the captain who is supervising the manoeuvring.

The reconstruction of the ritual boat is hypothetical. The drawing shown in *Fig. 9* is based on the analogous scene in the tomb of Amenemhat (TT 82), although it cannot be ruled out that the ritual boat of TT 179 followed a much simpler model, such as e.g. the one seen in the tomb of Païry (TT 139). What can be stated with confidence is that the ritual boat has a papyrus-shaped prow and stern and is correspondingly painted green symbolizing rebirth, given that this is the vessel that carried the statue(s) of the deceased (couple). In the scenes of TT 179 only the figure of Nebamun is partially preserved, who is shown seated on a throne under a canopy, dressed in a long white robe and holding a flail in the hand. All these iconographic details are indications of the transfigured state of the deceased. Out of the crew serving the ritual boat, only one figure is preserved, who is shown standing at the prow and holding a rope in the hand.

With the ambitious rendering of the towboat’s crew and the meticulously painted details of e.g. the woodgrain of the hull and the halyards, the scene from TT 179 ranks among the most vibrant representations of the journey to Abydos in New Kingdom Theban tombs. To note the true significance of the scene, however, one also has to look at it in collation with the extant wall surfaces, since both the ‘Abydos pilgrimage’ and the procession towards the goddess of the West depict scenes of arrival. In other words, the juxtaposition of the two scenes alludes to a parallelism between the pilgrim who reaches Abydos, the sacred city of Osiris and returns from there as well, and the deceased who reaches the netherworld (the West), from where moving about freely as a transfigured spirit, he can continue to keep in touch with the earthly sphere of existence by means of the rituals.

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