

Gillian Pyke

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Decoding a Decorative Scheme: the Church in the Tomb of Penehsy at Amarna in Middle Egypt

Gillian Pyke, London

The site of Amarna in Middle Egypt is best known as the capital built by the Eighteenth dynasty king Akhenaten, and occupied between about 1350 and 1330 BC. The city lasted only a generation before it was abandoned and the capital moved elsewhere.

During the lifetime of the city the royal courtiers prepared rock-cut tombs for themselves in the cliffs surrounding the crescent plain of Amarna. One of the most spacious and well appointed of the northern group of tombs is that of a certain Penehsy.¹ His titles indicate that he was a prominent figure of the time and his status is reflected both in the size and decoration of his tomb.

Like many of the tombs, that of Penehsy remains unfinished, abandoned when the court moved northwards upon the death of king Akhenaten. Parts of the Amarna plain were resettled during the Byzantine period,² when the area became the focus of Christian oc-

¹ N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Amarna*, vol. 2. London 1905.

² W. Petrie, *Tell el Amarna*, London 1894, p. 6; K. Lepsius, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopen. Text*, Leipzig 1897–1913, p. 126; Davies, *Rock Tombs II...*, pp. 1–4; H. Frankfort and J. Pendlebury, *The City of Akhenaten. Part II. The North Suburb and the Desert Altars. The Excavations at Tell el-Amarna During the Seasons 1926–1932*, London 1933, pp. 66–71. J. Pendlebury, 'Preliminary Report on Excavations at Tell el-'Amarnah 1930–1', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 17 (1931), p. 239; B. Kemp, 'Preliminary Report on the el-'Amarna Survey, 1978', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 65 (1979), p. 6; M. Jones, 'The earliest Christian sites at Tell el-Amarna and Sheikh Said', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 77 (1991), pp. 129–144; B. Kemp, 'Amarna's Other Period', *Egyptian Archaeology*, 3 (1993), pp. 13–14; B. Kemp and S. Garfi, *A Survey of the Ancient City of el-'Amarna*, London 1993, p. 45; B. Kemp, 'Work at Amarna', in: Anonymous, 'Editorial Foreword', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 80 (1994), pp. vii-x; B. Kemp, P. T. Nicholson and P. Rose, 'Fieldwork, 1999–2000: Sais, Memphis, Tell el-Amarna, Tell el-Amarna glass project, Qasr Ibrim', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 86 (2000), pp. 12–17; B. Kemp, 'Settlement and Landscape in the Amarna Area in the Late Roman Period', in: J. Faiers, *Late Roman Pottery at Amarna and Related Studies*, London 2005, pp. 41, 47–48; J. Faiers, 'Catalogue of Pottery from Other Late Roman Sites within the Study Area', in: J. Faiers, *Late Roman Pottery at Amarna and Related Studies*, London 2005, pp. 18–27; G. Pyke, 'Church Wall Paintings from Kom el-Nana', *Egyptian Archaeology*, 22 (2003), pp. 16–17.

cupation scattered around the margins of the plain, dated by pottery and other finds to the mid fifth to mid seventh centuries.³ The northernmost of these is the settlement in and around the north tombs and associated with the church inside the tomb of Panehsy.⁴

The conversion of the Eighteenth dynasty tomb into a church involved extensive re-modelling of both the architecture and decoration of the original structure.⁵ This paper will focus on the unusual decorative scheme of the church, tracing its development and considering the interpretation and significance of both its individual elements and the scheme as a whole.

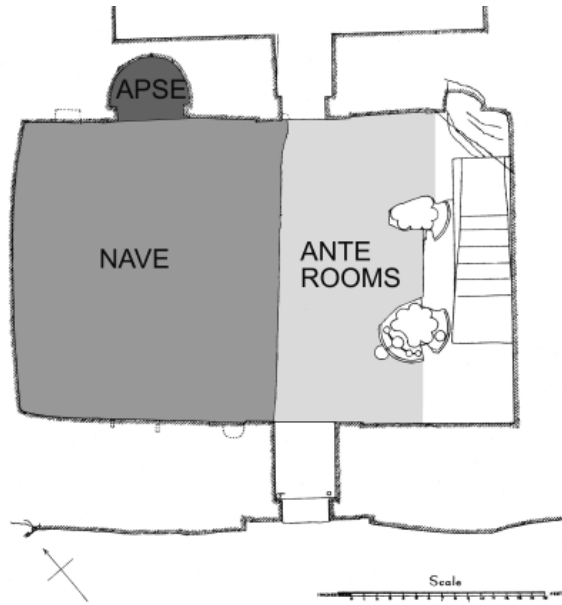


Fig. 1. Plan of church showing layout

The church was confined to the columned hall of the tomb, that is, the first room encountered on entry. A number of significant modifications were made in order to define the church architecturally so that it included the vital elements of an apse and nave, with an antechamber area between the entrance and nave. The area of the nave was enlarged so that the apse was centrally placed in its east wall, and to provide more room for the congreg-

³ J. Faiers and B. Kemp, 'Dating the Sites in the Amarna Area', in: J. Faiers, *Late Roman Pottery at Amarna and Related Studies*, London 2005, p. 267.

⁴ N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Amarna*, vols. 1-5. London, 1903-1908; Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-44.

⁵ Cf. G. Pyke, 'Survey of the Christian Church and Later Remains in the Tomb of Panehsy (No 6)', in: B. Kemp, 'Tell el-Amarna 2006-7', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 93 (2007), pp. 35-50; G. Pyke, 'A Christian Conversion: The Tomb of Panehsy at Amarna', *Egyptian Archaeology*, 32 (2008), pp. 8-10. G. Pyke, 'A wing and a prayer: the decorative schemes of the church in the rock-cut tomb of Panehsy at Amarna', *Eastern Christian Art* (forthcoming).

gation. The size of the church is such that it can be seen as intended for use by a large group rather than for individual worship.

The layout and architectural scheme of the church are relatively simple and represent a single construction event. The history of the decorative schemes is, however, more complex. It is no surprise that the focus of the decoration was the apse and it is here that it was possible to distinguish a sequence of four distinct decorative schemes and preparations for a fifth scheme that was never completed.

The first decorative scheme of the church is associated with its construction. It seems to have been extremely simple and rendered in bi-chrome: red and white. Elements of this scheme were retained throughout the life of the church, including the crosses on either side of the entrance passage, the arches framing the niches, the border at the base of the west wall and north extension of the nave and the cornice above the apse. It is now not clear whether the red paint in the northern extension to the nave was restricted to a red border, or covered the whole wall.

Traces within the apse suggest that it was predominantly white with simple red edging lines. There is no evidence as to whether there was a motif in the semi dome at this time as this plaster layer is not visible. The only complex decorative elements of this scheme that can still be detected are the large red *chi-rho* and possible *alpha-omega*⁶ on either side of the apse. The *chi-rho* monogram, comprising the first two Greek letters of the title 'Christ' is used as a symbol of Christ. The *alpha-omega* monogram, composed of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, is primarily used to symbolise Christ as the beginning and the end of life, as He appears in the Book of Revelations.⁷

The second decorative scheme represents a significant departure from the austerity of the first thanks to the introduction of relatively complex polychrome motifs on a thin plaster skim in the apse. The fact that the original scheme, including the monograms, was retained throughout the rest of the church suggests that it was still held in high regard by its patrons.

Unfortunately, the exact nature of this new scheme is now difficult to detect as it was almost completely obscured by later changes. The innovations included a new wide red band and blue and red *guilloche* band on the exterior of the arch of the apse, and an acanthus and pomegranate frieze on its underside. The lower interior of the apse remained white, but traces of painted decoration within the semi dome suggest that a large-scale motif was added here, possibly an earlier version of that of the third scheme.

The third decorative scheme is by far the most ambitious, and accounts for the majority of the decoration that is visible today within the church. The red-topped niches and the crosses in the entrance passage from the first decorative scheme were again retained,

⁶ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁷ Revelations 1: 8 and 11, 21:6 and 22: 13; L. de Franchia, 'Symbols in Coptic Art', *Coptic Encyclopedia*, New York 1991, pp. 2160–2163.

but the monograms were plastered over and the frieze repainted. The focus of the third scheme expands for the first time to include part of the east wall of the nave surrounding the apse, incorporating a number of new motifs. The majority of these images are relatively common within Coptic and wider Christian art. The overall effect that is achieved by the combination of these motifs, however, is somewhat unusual.

The decorative scheme is dominated by birds, the most frequently occurring image being the dove, two pairs depicted on the surround and within the apse itself. Doves have many meanings in Christian art but are especially known for representing the Holy Spirit (in Coptic art usually only in scenes of the Annunciation or Baptism), hope (especially when, as here, holding a leaf in reference to the story of Noah) and the human soul.⁸

BA dipinto⁹ at the contemporary monastery at Kom el-Nana a few kilometres to the south shows a pair of doves as the letters of the *alpha-omega* symbol either side of a cross. It is interesting to note that in the number-symbolism devised by Mark, disciple of the *gnostic* philosopher Valentinus, the dove is also equated with the *alpha-omega*, which in turn symbolises Christ.¹⁰ According to *gnostic* belief as recorded by Irenaeus, Theodotus and the gospel of Philip, the dove that descended to Jesus at his Baptism was Christ, the two elements becoming joined throughout the rest of his life.¹¹

A prominent and colourful avian image located on the upper part of the surround is the peacock, associated with immortality and the Resurrection. Its position and general

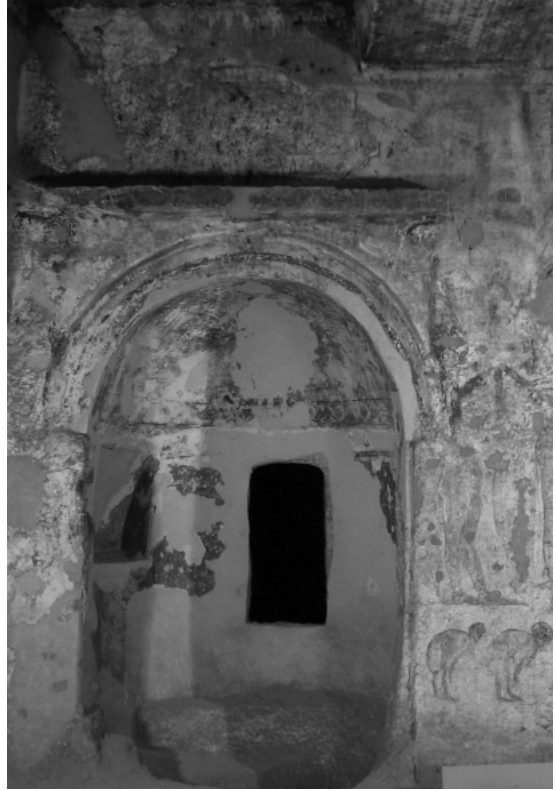


Fig. 2. Extent of the decoration of the apse and east wall in the third decorative scheme

⁸ S. Sauneron and J. Jacquet, *Les ermitages chrétiens du désert d'Esna*, vol 4, Cairo 1972, p. 74.

⁹ G. Pyke, *Painted Wall Plaster from the Church at the Monastic Site of Kom el-Nana (Tell el-Amarna, Middle Egypt)*, in preparation.

¹⁰ Franchia, *op. cit.*, p. 2161.

¹¹ G. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, London 1900, p. 371.

appearance are comparable to that of the pair of peacocks in a scene in the tomb of Theodosia at nearby Antinoopolis.¹² It would appear, however, that only one of these handsome creatures is depicted here, as there is no trace of a partner. The reason for this is unknown. It is possible to attribute the omission to a lack of comparable space on the south side of the apse, but this would pre-suppose a somewhat unlikely lack of planning or spatial awareness.

The lit pair of tall candles depicted immediately behind the upper pair of doves might be a reference to Christ, the illuminator of Man and the 'light of the world' according to the Gospel of John.¹³ A pair of candles can be used to signify the two natures of Christ: divine and human,¹⁴ a belief that was held by both *gnostics* and the Melkite church at the time that the decoration was painted, but not by the Coptic Orthodox church.

One of the strangest elements of the decorative scheme is the lack of human figures, the only example being located on the east wall to the south of the apse. He is at a relatively small scale and only his head, surrounded by a yellow nimbus, and shoulders now remain. Too little remains of the red-painted inscription to be of any help in identifying this figure, but his slightly peripheral location makes it unlikely that he is either Christ, an apostle or an Evangelist. It is perhaps more likely that he is a local saint, possibly the founder of the Christian community living in this area.

The undisputed focus of the decorative scheme is the large-scale figure within the semi dome, probably the same motif as was used in the second scheme. The remains of this figure indicate that it does not conform to images of Resurrection that might be expected in this location within a Coptic church of this date, that is: Christ enthroned or the empty cross. The unusual (and possibly controversial) nature of the motif is confirmed by the deliberate damage that it has suffered, the intention of which seems to have been to make it subject unidentifiable.

What remains of this creature is three pairs of outstretched wings with long flight feathers, the uppermost pair of which were repositioned, and a fanned tail. The two vertical broken areas to the south of the tail are probably the remains of short narrow legs, traces of the feathered upper parts of which are just about distinguishable. All these details add up to the identification of this image as representing some kind of fantastical bird-like creature, the special nature of which is further highlighted by the wreathed disc (also deliberately damaged) above its head.

The prominent splayed flight feathers, fanned tail, upright stance and brown colour of the creature suggest that it is likely to be based on an eagle. The eagle was an important

¹² D. Bénazeth, 'Les coutumes funéraires', in: *L'art copte en Égypte. 2000 ans de christianisme, Institut du monde Arabe*, Paris 2000, pp. 106–7.

¹³ John 8: 12, 9: 5 and 12: 46.

¹⁴ A. Steffler, *Symbols of Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids 2002, p. 8.

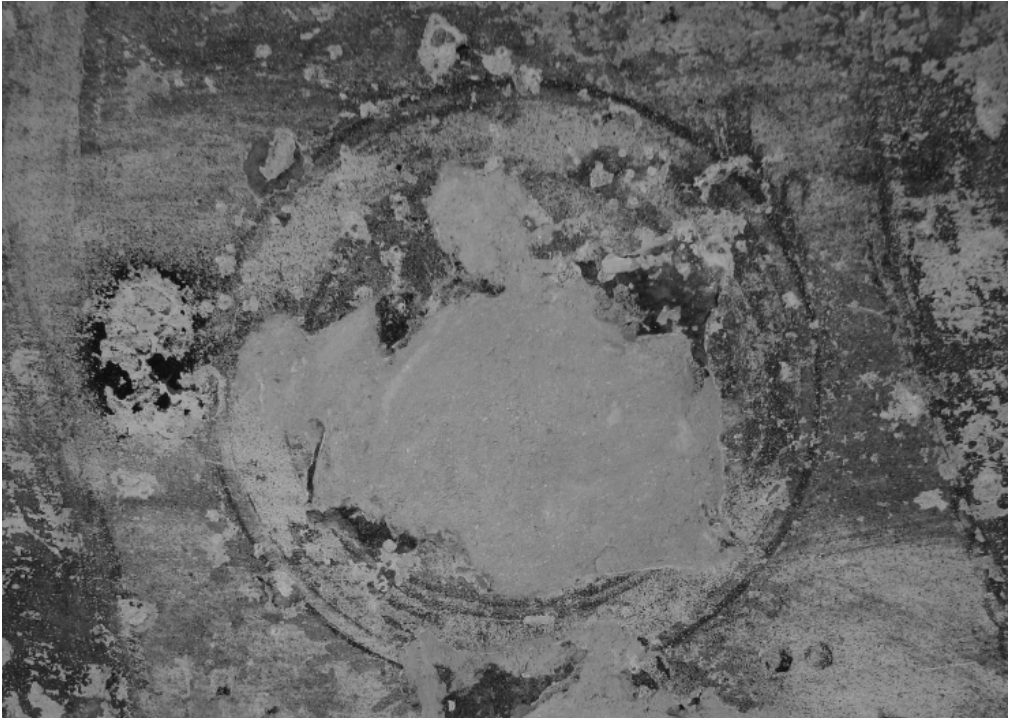


Fig. 3. Laurel wreath above the head of the creature

symbol of triumph (especially imperial triumph) in Roman art,¹⁵ a fine painted example of which was recently revealed by an American Research Center in Egypt conservation team in the Luxor temple, as yet unpublished. This eagle is located in a semi domed niche and is associated with a large triumphal wreath held in its claws.

The Roman eagle motif was later translated into the Christian artistic repertoire to symbolise Christ's triumph over death in the Resurrection.¹⁶ In Coptic art, eagles are usually shown with upright bodies and outspread wings, often in association with a circular wreath containing a cross or rosette, usually at the feet or around then neck of the bird.¹⁷ In the context of church architecture, they appear as a motif on carved friezes and niches, and a painted example is known from a chapel at the monastery of Bawit (chapel 32),¹⁸ they do not seem to have been considered a suitable image for the semi dome of the apse.

¹⁵ G. Gabra and M. Eaton-Krauss, *The Treasures of Coptic Art in the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo*, Cairo 2006, p. 182.

¹⁶ E. Lucchesi-Palli, 'Symbols in Coptic Art: Eagle', *Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, New York 1991, p. 2167.

¹⁷ For example: stela Berlin 4481: *Ägypten, Schätze aus dem Wüstensand, Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil*, ed. M. von Falck and F. Lichtwark, Wiesbaden 1996, p. 126; Relief Inv. No. 4619: Gabra and Eaton-Krauss, *Treasures...*, pp. 182–3.

¹⁸ J. Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, Cairo 1916, pl. ix [lower].

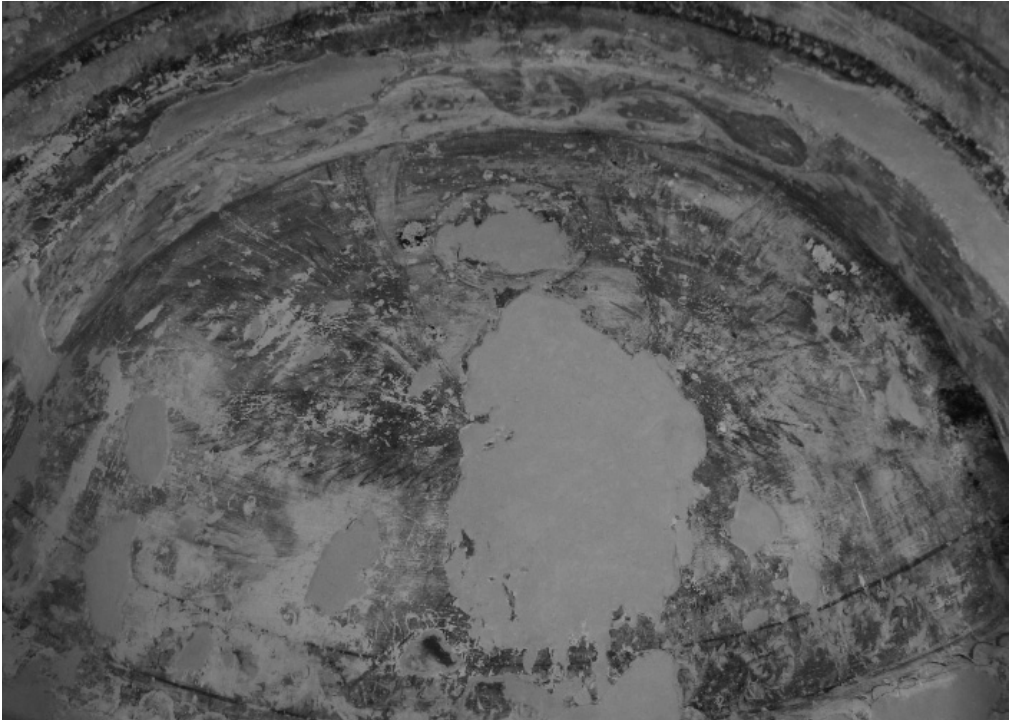


Fig. 4. Six-winged creature in the semi dome of the apse

Clue to the symbolic significance of a fantastic eagle in this context is perhaps to be found in its multiple wings, usually associated with seraphim. Four seraphim, the Tetramorph, are particularly associated with the enthroned Christ, as seen in the visions of Isaiah,¹⁹ Ezekiel²⁰ and John.²¹ These creatures or beasts had six wings that are described by Isaiah (6: 2) thus: “each one had six wings; with twain he covered his feet, and with the twain he did fly”. In describing the wings, John (4: 8) adds: “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within”.

Neither the arrangement, nor the appearance of the wings (or for that matter any other aspect) of the image in the semi dome, match that of seraphim in general (at least as represented in Egyptian Christian art) or those that appeared in visions of the enthroned Christ specifically. The lack of a specific and clear symbolic meaning of the single element of the Tetramorph indicates that it must be rejected as the focus of the decorative scheme.

¹⁹ Ezekiel 1: 4–15.

²⁰ Isaiah 6: 1–3.

²¹ Revelations 4: 1–11.

The idiosyncratically positioned wreath above the head of the eagle bears a striking resemblance to a nimbus. If its destroyed central element was a cross,²² it would indicate that the image should be interpreted as Christ. This proposal invites a wealth of speculation. For example: the six wings might be considered a depiction of their movement at the moment of Resurrection; or as a means of enumerating the process, the number six being of great significance in this context in *gnostic* belief; or simply as a method of making the eagle unique.

The image of the eagle endured through further alterations to the scheme, in which an acanthus and pomegranate frieze and guilloche band were clumsily added below it (and around its feet), above a series of *faux* marble panels. The church was abandoned before the latter element could be plastered over, the keying marks remaining visible.

In conclusion, the development of the decoration of this church can be traced from a simple bi-chrome scheme to one that retained many original elements, but introduced a more complex set of motifs focussing on the apse and its surround. Most of these motifs are well-known in Christian art, but the predominance of birds especially doves, and almost complete absence of human figures is idiosyncratic. The rendering of the various motifs shows both artistic talent and a knowledge of contemporary conventions so any omissions were not due to a lack of ability or understanding. It seems clear that the relatively small number of images, all of which symbolise Christ and the Resurrection, were carefully selected to complement the unique primary motif, which can be seen as articulating their sum.

It can be speculated that the decorative scheme was an attempt to express specific and perhaps not entirely mainstream beliefs, possibly those of the lone human figure in the scheme. This might be the founder of the church and community, who perhaps framed his beliefs in terms of the natural world around him. The theme of Resurrection and special attention to the depiction of this individual could be used to argue for a funerary aspect to the church. While it is possible to find parallels for some elements within the complexities of *gnostic* belief, it is difficult at present to make any conclusions in this direction. It is hoped that further research will illuminate the meaning and significance of the decorative scheme of this church.

²² Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 131.