

Kamil Kuraskiewicz

West Saqqara: Funerary Chapel of Meref-Nebef : Preliminary Report on the Recordings of the Decoration

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 10, 100-106

1999

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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FUNERARY CHAPEL OF MEREF-NEBEF

Preliminary report on the recording of the decoration

Kamil Kuraszkiwicz

The present report is a presentation of the documentation principles and the most important problems that have been encountered in the recording of the funerary chapel of the vizier Meref-nebef, which the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission at Saqqara discovered in 1997 during excavations west of the funerary complex of Netjerykhet.¹⁾

The chapel had been cut in a ledge of yellowish limestone, which is very soft and crumbling. The monumental facade consists of three walls: the oblong eastern one, which has an extremely narrow entrance (60 cm wide) to the chapel in the middle, and the narrow, northern and southern lateral walls. The decoration of the eastern wall of the facade is composed of three registers. The topmost one (referred to as inner "lintel") bears the inscription and a representation of the deceased in sunken relief (c. 1 cm deep) with traces of blue paint, having in its present state a greenish shade. The middle register consists of a long inscription, and the lower one bears eight representations of the tomb owner, both executed in raised relief (up to 1 cm

high) and polychromed. The surface of the rock ledge on either side and above the chapel facade, referred to as the outer "jambs" and "lintel", is covered with texts and representations in sunken relief (up to 5 cm deep), but with no surviving traces of polychromy.

The chapel itself is a rectangular room, 6.45 x 2.43 m (*Fig. 1*), cut in the rock and decorated inside with inscriptions and representations, for the most part in raised relief (the exceptions being false doors, offering lists and a few inscriptions), the polychromy largely preserved. The false doors inside the chapel were painted in imitation of red granite and decorated with inscriptions and representations in sunken relief, featuring blue paint.²⁾ Considerable changes with respect to the original version may be noted in the present state of the decoration.

The nature and structure of the rock forced the ancient artists to use different techniques. Some parts of the decoration were cut straight in the rock face, covered with a thin lime ground and painted (e.g. most of the decoration inside the chapel).

¹⁾ K. Myśliwiec, *PAM X, Reports 1998*, (1999), n. 2 for earlier bibliography; id., "Five Wives and a Girlfriend", *Discovering Archaeology* (July-August 1999), 54-67; id., "Nowe odkrycia przy najstarszej piramidzie świata", *Świat Nauki* 8 (1999), 28-37; id., "Vizir de Saqqara", *L'Archéologue. Archéologie Nouvelle*, 42 (juin-juillet 1999), 47-49; id., "Meref-nebef: Berater des Pharaos", *Spektrum der Wissenschaft* (Dezember 1999), 54-60; id., "The New Discovered Tomb Hidden by the World's Oldest Pyramid" (in Japanese), *Nikkei Science*, vol. 30, no. 8 (2000), 48-58; id., "Saqqara: una tomba piena di misteri", *Le Scienze*, 377 (2000), 76-85; id., "O Tafos tou Archiereia ton Farao", *Scientific American* (Greek edition) (January 2000), 51-60; id., "La découverte d'un vizir", *Pour la science* (avril 2000), 34-41; id. (with K. Kuraszkiwicz), *Recent Polish-Egyptian Excavations in West Saqqara, Saqqara-Abusir 2000*, Prague (in print).

²⁾ K. Myśliwiec, *New Faces of Saqqara* (Tuchów 1999), figs. 39-41.

Other parts were made in a thick layer of reddish, coarse-grained mortar that was laid to even out the rock surface (southern end of eastern wall of the facade). In the facade, where the quality of rock is particularly poor, a missing part of the rock of considerable size was filled in with a slab of a much better quality stone bearing a relief (in the northern outer jamb, the inserted slab being the only fragment of this jamb where the relief decoration is still preserved).

Perhaps the same case occurred inside the chapel where a part of the relief was

carved in blocks inserted in a rectangular niche in the wall (southern upper corner of the eastern wall).³⁾ Here, the scenes are different from the rest of the decoration, both in their style and color range. It is possible that this fragment was made at a later date.⁴⁾

The damages to the relief decoration and the polychromy of the chapel are obviously a consequence in part of the natural weakness of the rock and its salinity.⁵⁾ This kind of damage concerns mainly the plaster and paint layer (then the outlines of the relief are visible) as well as the mortar layer

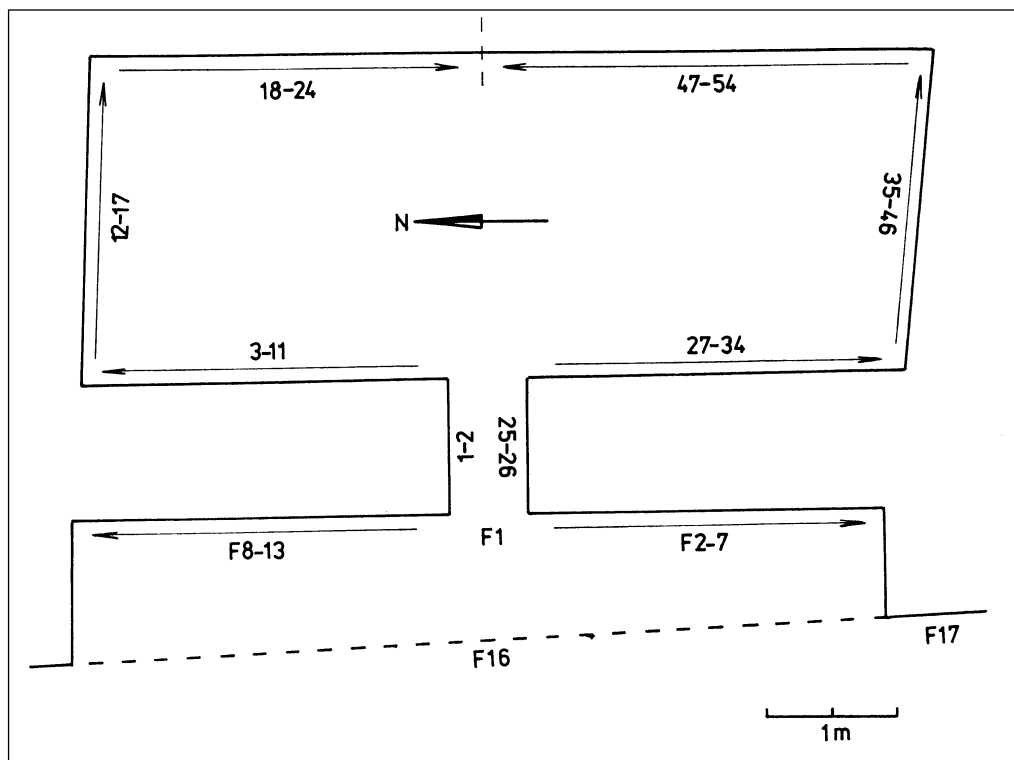


Fig. 1. Funerary chapel of Meref-nebef. Plan
(Drawing K. Kuraskiewicz)

³⁾ Ibid., fig. 51.

⁴⁾ Mysliwiec, Kuraskiewicz, Saqqara-Abusir 2000, op. cit.

⁵⁾ Z. Godziejewski, "Conservation work in the funerary chapel of Meref-nebef", *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 97-100.



Fig. 2. A damaged and overpainted inscription in the hunting scene on the eastern wall of the chapel, mentioning the pyramid and the *mrrt* temple of king Teti (Photo Z. Kosić)

covering the rock. In the latter case negatives in plaster are sometimes preserved or outlines of the relief in the rock. However, the relief modeling was often made only in the plaster.⁶⁾ In some places (e.g. the inscription strip in the upper part of the eastern wall of the chapel), there is no relief under the layer of plaster, but sketches made in red and black paint can be observed instead.⁷⁾

Certain parts of the damaged decoration were painted over (e.g. scenes in the bottom parts of the lateral walls in the entrance or some parts of the hunting scene on the eastern wall of the chapel – *Fig. 2*). Since there is no evidence of intentional destruction (no traces of chiselling) in damages of this kind, it may be assumed that they resulted from natural surface friability and the overpainting was designed to mask the problem.

However, certain elements (the word *nswt* in the formula *imꜣhw hr nswt* (cf. *Fig. 4*), the figures, names and titles of two or three sons of Meref-nebef) were intentionally chiseled out in ancient times (there are clear traces of a chisel with a cutting edge of c. 9 mm). While the previously described damages show definite care in their masking, no effort was made to conceal parts that had been chiseled out; they were neither painted nor covered with plaster. Solely in the scene on the southern wall of the entrance the word *smit* was painted in black in a place where the original *nswt* had been chiselled out. Nonetheless, the surface had not been evened out, the damage was not concealed and the painted hieroglyphs themselves are quite careless (*Figs. 3-4*).

All of the decoration of the funerary chapel has been recorded in drawing, photography and description.

In 1997 the decoration of the southern outer "jamb" and outer "lintel", the inner "lintel" and a few scenes from inside the chapel were recorded. A system for numbering the scenes was also introduced, starting from the top and from the entrance, going down and toward the axis of the eastern wall of the chapel, first in the northern, then in the southern part (cf. *Fig. 1*). In 1998, all the scenes inside the tomb were recorded in drawing. The relief decoration on the northern and southern walls of the facade was not drawn, because this would have required the dismantling of a provisional wall that had been erected against the facade at the end of the 1997 season to protect the decoration until a shelter had been built above the tomb in 1999. Once this wall was removed in 1999, the drawing documentation was completed. The ready drawings were collated and the descriptions finished.

In 1997, the drawings were made initially by placing transparent film directly on the decorated surface. This material proved, however, too heavy, soft and extensible, forcing us to use cut sheets 50 x 50 cm in order to minimize distortions. The method would have also been potentially destructive, as it was impossible to avoid some loading of the decorated surface. Consequently, the remaining drawings were made on graph paper, based on observation and measurements, in 1:1 scale.⁸⁾ After the campaign, copies of the drawings on film were reduced to 1:4 scale, which has been adopted for all the documentation

⁶⁾ Myśliwiec, *New Faces of Saqqara*, op. cit., figs. 30 and 31.

⁷⁾ Myśliwiec, "Nowe odkrycia", op. cit., photo on p. 37, top.

⁸⁾ This part of the work was repeated in 1998 using the improved drawing-on-film method.

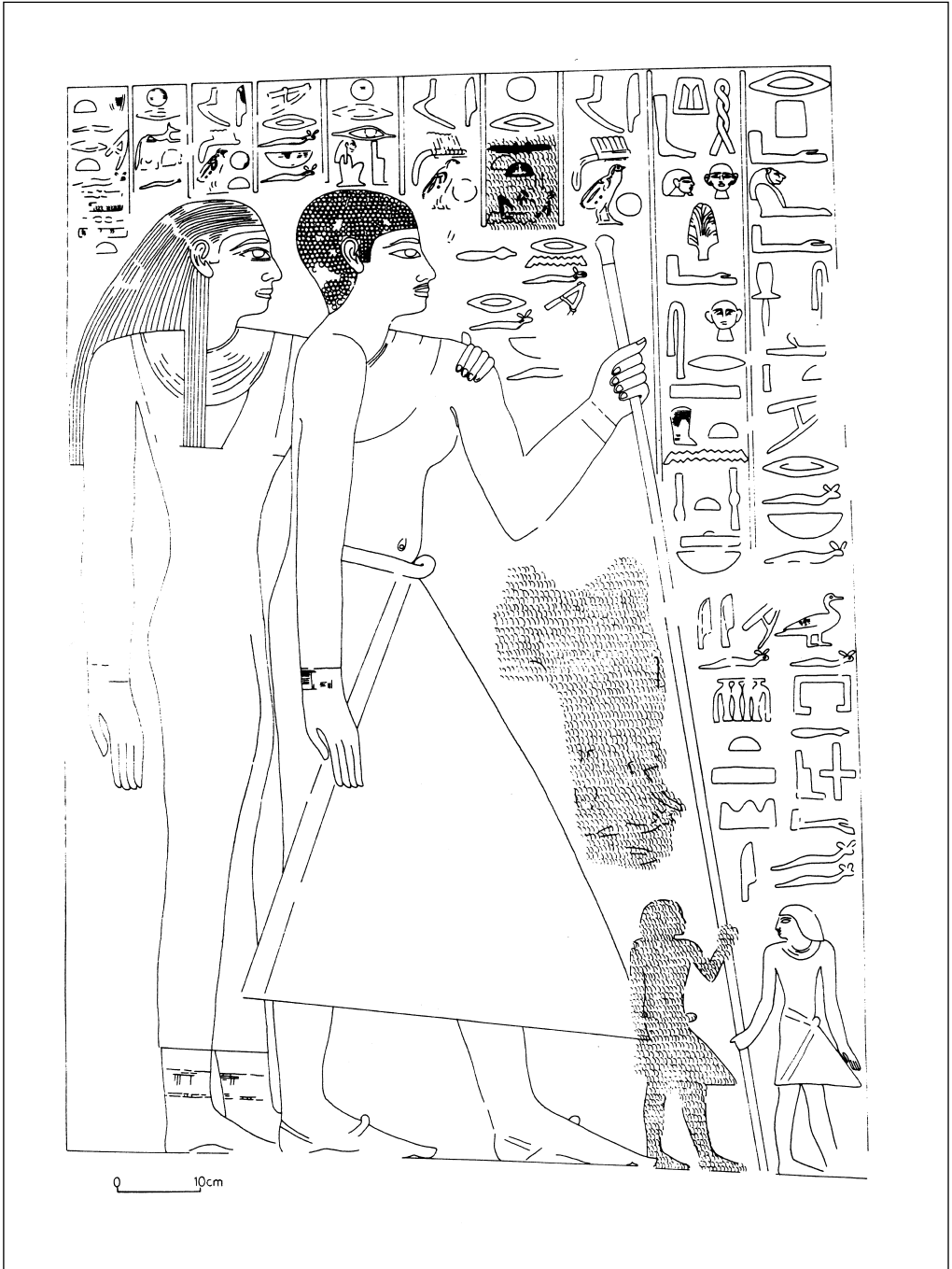


Fig. 3. Copy in drawing of scene 25 on the southern wall of the entrance to the chapel
(Drawing K. Kuraszkievicz)



Fig. 4. Fragment of the inscription in scene 25: the chiseled out word *nswt* in the formula *im3hw hr...* and the word *smit* painted in its place (Photo Z. Kości)

of the chapel and inscribed objects of larger size, and subsequently copied onto tracing paper.

In 1998, a lighter, thinner and stiffer transparent film was used. A special portable frame was designed to hold the film at a regulated height, in order to provide a perfectly flat surface at an even distance from the decorated surface. This method permitted the decoration to be copied without actually touching the stone and large sheets of film to be used without danger of distortion resulting from the material's extensible properties.

The adopted method of reducing the drawings to 1:4 scale allows film sheets up to 90 cm wide to be used. Thus, the partly superimposed drawings of fragments of the decoration have to be merged after reduction and transferred to tracing paper. The scale that has been adopted for all the chapel documentation has retained the clarity of the drawings, while permitting whole walls to be drawn without division into smaller fragments.⁹⁾ The resultant drawings constitute the final documentation to be used in the forthcoming publication (*cf. Fig. 3*).¹⁰⁾

In the case of the chiseled out fragments of the reliefs, the nature of chiseling

– the chisel marks filling exactly the surface within the outlines of the relief – permitted a theoretical reconstruction of the destroyed fragments and inscriptions. The parts that were destroyed naturally constitute a much more difficult problem – most of the time reconstruction of the missing parts is possible only by analogy to other sources.

The condition of the polychromy on the inscriptions in the chapel of Merefnebef is such that the coloring of particular signs can easily be determined and a study of the paleography made. Data of this kind is helpful, for instance, in reconstructing texts based on preserved fragments of sign polychromy. It proved particularly helpful with respect to the inscriptions on the facade. The description of colors using AGFA color codes was carried out in 1999 in preparation for a full study of the tomb.

A complete, professional photographic documentation of all the reliefs decorating the tomb was also made, both in color and black-and-white.

The documentation of the chapel of Merefnebef was completed in 1999. Currently, a study of the material is in progress.

⁹⁾ The sole exception being the longest, eastern wall of the chapel, which has been divided into two parts, and the eastern wall of the facade, which is recorded in three drawings, following the structural divisions into the inner lintel and the two lateral walls of the entrance.

¹⁰⁾ Cf. also Mysliwiec, *PAM X, Reports 1998*, op. cit., fig. 1.