

To kill a songbird: Scenes of catching songbirds in Old Kingdom elite tombs*

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The tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden contains an interesting composition above its entrance door viewed from the interior (see Fig. 1). On the left, a leafless tree is depicted with a net strung over its top that is anchored to the ground on one side. A total of 43 birds in various stages of flight, rest and captivity are depicted in and around the net. Two figures are actively engaged in rousing the birds by shouting and waving with a piece of cloth.

Three more figures are plucking the unlucky birds from the net and putting them in a crate at the foot of the tree. On the right side, a tree of similar height and appearance is depicted, this time with leaves. On four registers, goats can be seen eating from tufts of foliage. One kid goat is suckling with its mother, and another goat is seen giving birth. A figure in shepherd's attire is shown on the right, water flask, stick and mat in hand. A boy is helping an older shepherd to drink. No captions are present.

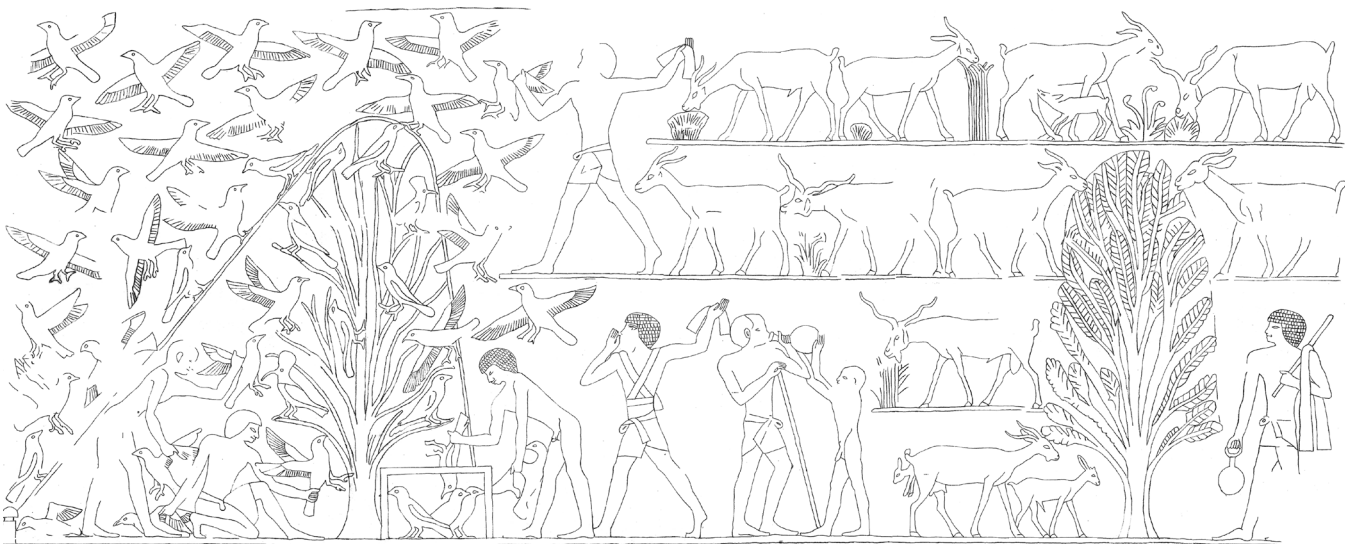


Fig. 1 Pencil drawing of the scene in the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhty (author).

* This article is based on a part of my MA thesis: N. van de Beek, *Two scenes in the Old Kingdom elite tomb chapel of Hetepherakhet: Catching songbirds and goat herding* (Leiden 2014).

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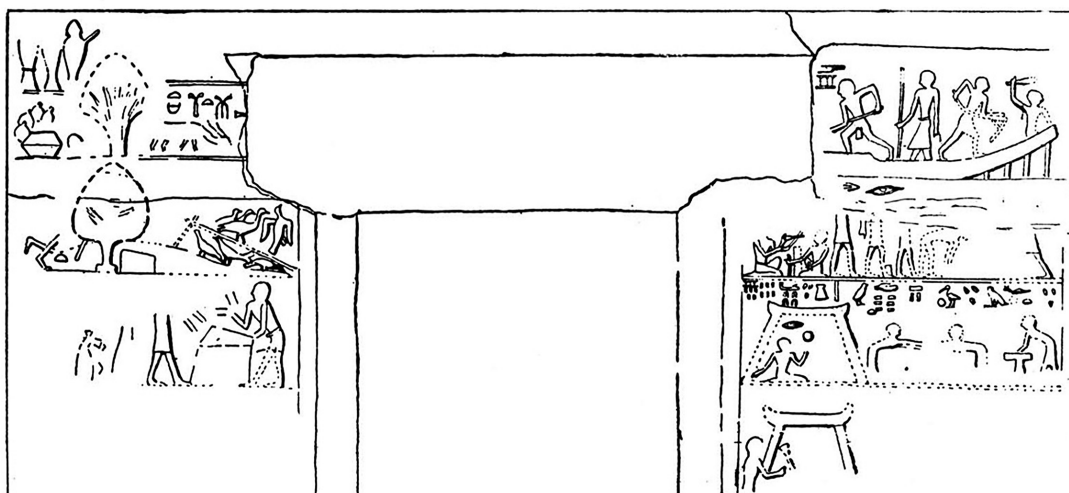


Fig. 2a and b (top next page) Catching songbirds, tree felling and boat building in Sekhemkare.¹

Scenes of catching songbirds appear in a limited number of elite tombs in the Old Kingdom necropolis of Memphis. Only fifteen tomb chapels contain such a scene, three from Giza, one from Abusir and the majority from Saqqara.² All date from the fifth to early sixth dynasty. No known provincial tombs contain this scene type. The scenes are categorized in *MastaBase*³ under the main theme of 'Fowling' with the subtheme 'Tree-net' (sometimes supplemented with 'Caging birds'), once 'Scaring birds' and twice 'Spring trap'. In Harpur's database,⁴ the scenes are classified under 'Netting song-birds in an orchard'. Generally, the scenes can be found

in the vicinity of a doorway. There appears to be no pattern in the orientation (N, S, E, W) of the scenes. The WPI (wall position index) proposed by *MastaBase* does show a pattern: the scene is usually located in the upper registers of the decorated part of the wall, although it appears twice in the middle to lower sections.⁵

The earliest attestation of the songbird catching scene can be found in the tomb of Sekhemkare at Giza, which shows the basic elements of birds, a tree and a net (see Fig. 2a and b). A register below, the birds are being put in crates. The context here is that of trees: a goat is browsing

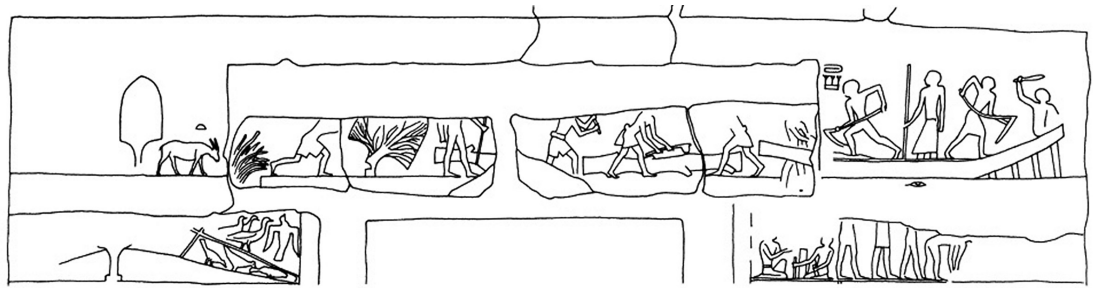
¹ S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza IV. 1932-1933* (Cairo, 1943), 110-111, fig. 57 and Y. Harpur, 'The identity and positions of relief fragments in museums and private collections: Miscellaneous reliefs from Saqqara and Giza', *JEA* 71 (1985), 41, fig. 10.

² Sekhemkare, Rawer and Iymery from Giza; Ptahshepses from Abusir; Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep, Akhethetep, Hetepherakhty, Ti, Rashepses, Neferherentah, Neferirteneb, Mereruka: Meri, Niankhnesut, Ankhmahor: Sesi and Hesi from Saqqara.

³ R. van Walsem, *MastaBase: A research tool for the study of the secular or "daily life" scenes and their accompanying texts in the elite tombs of the Memphite area in the Old Kingdom* (2008).

⁴ Y. Harpur, *Oxford Expedition to Egypt: Scene-details Database* (2006). <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006/>

⁵ In the case of Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep and Akhethetep.



underneath a tree, while other trees are being felled and trimmed for wooden boat construction.

Not much can be said about a fragmentary piece from the tomb of Rawer,⁶ but it was included in the analysis for the sake of completeness. Harpur classifies it as a songbird catching scene.

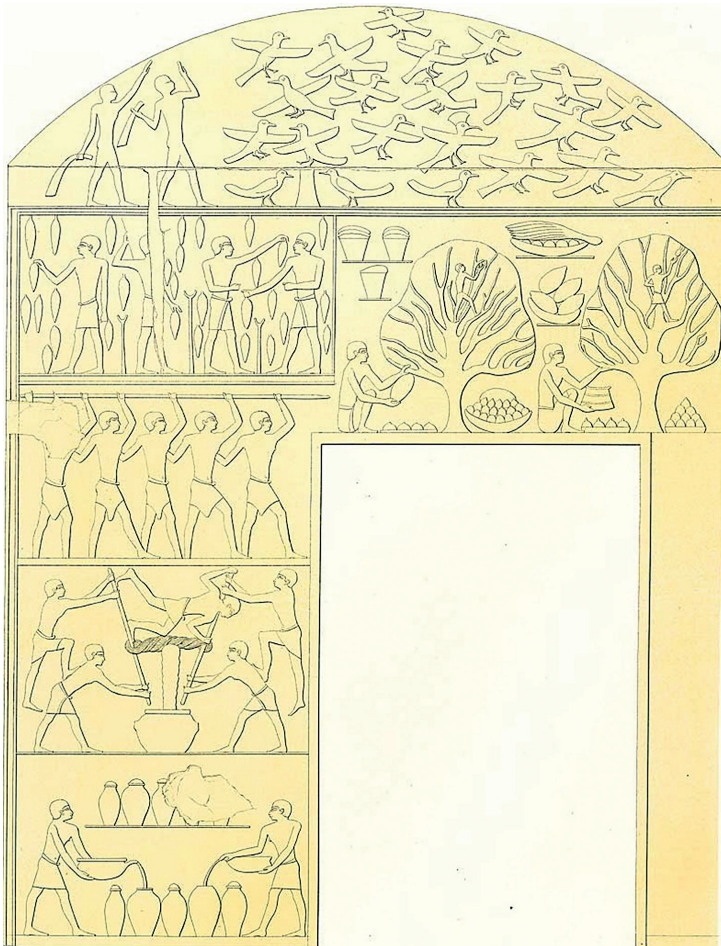


Fig. 3 Scaring birds in the tomb of Iymery.⁸

lymery shows only the shoing of birds, by two figures waving with lengths of cloth (see Fig. 3). Here the context is clearly that of the fig and grape harvest (from which the birds need to be kept away) and the process of wine-making. One hoopoe is present among the flock of birds. The stem of what could be a tree is visible in Lepsius' drawing. Unfortunately, the scene is now lost.

A fragment from the mastaba of Ptahshepses shows either a poultry-yard scene or the netting of pigeons or doves in the upper register, and contains a caption likely referring to the use of the hexagonal clap-net in the lower register.⁷

The tomb chapel of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep contains the first complete songbird catching scene (see Fig. 4). A leafless tree is visible with a net strung over it, forming a triangle with the ground. Two naked figures rouse the birds, shouting and waving a cloth, to cause them

⁶ S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza I. 1929-1930* (Cairo, 1932), 33 [6], pl. XXXIV [3].

⁷ B. Vachala, *Die Relieffragmente aus der Mastaba des Ptahshepses in Abusir* (Abusir 8; Prague, 2004), 165 [C201 (1192)].

⁸ C.R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (Genève, 1972-1973), section II, pl. 53 [b].

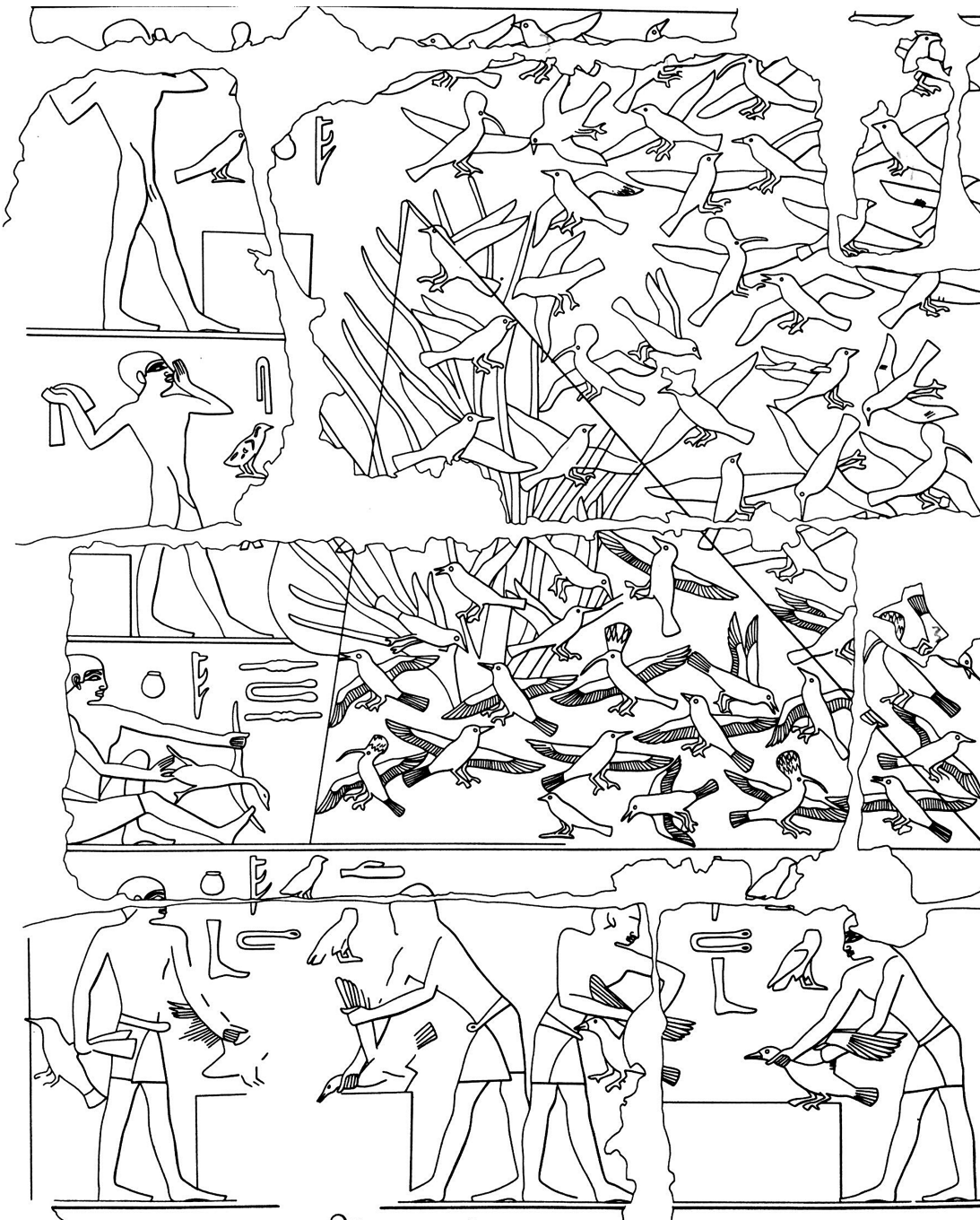


Fig. 4 Catching songbirds in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep.⁹

to fly into the mesh of the net. At least seven hoopoes are present among the birds. The other birds can be recognized as golden orioles by their black wing-tips (and according to the excavators,

yellow plumage). Another figure is sitting on the ground, plucking the tail feathers of a bird to prevent it from flying off. A register below, men are engaged in crating the birds.

⁹ A.M. Moussa, and H. Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Niankhchnum und Chnumhotep* (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 21; Mainz am Rhein, 1977), fig. 9.

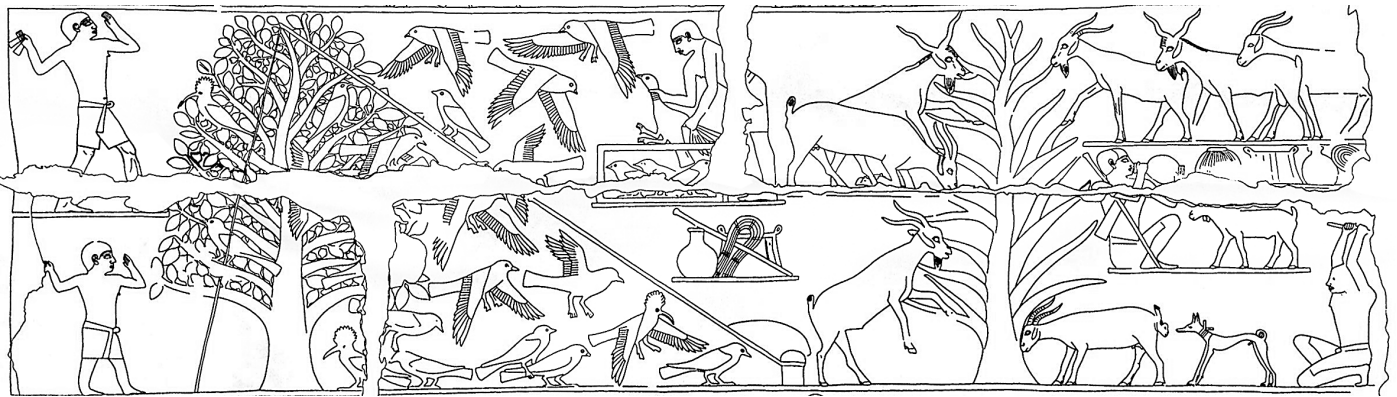


Fig. 5 Catching songbirds and goat herding in Akhethetep.¹⁰

The scene in the chapel of Akhethetep clearly shows how the net is fixed to a pole in the ground (see Fig. 5). It is attached on one side only, forming a triangular trap for the birds to fly into. The tree itself is provided with green leaves (colour not visible in the drawing). A rare detail is that one of the bird rousers on the left is a dwarf. Again, at

least two hoopoes can be found among the songbirds, recognizable by their crest. Unfortunately, no colour is preserved on the birds themselves. On a sub register next to the tree, a man is seen putting birds in a crate. Underneath him are depicted shepherd's implements. The parallels with our scene in the tomb of Hetepherakhty are apparent: a second

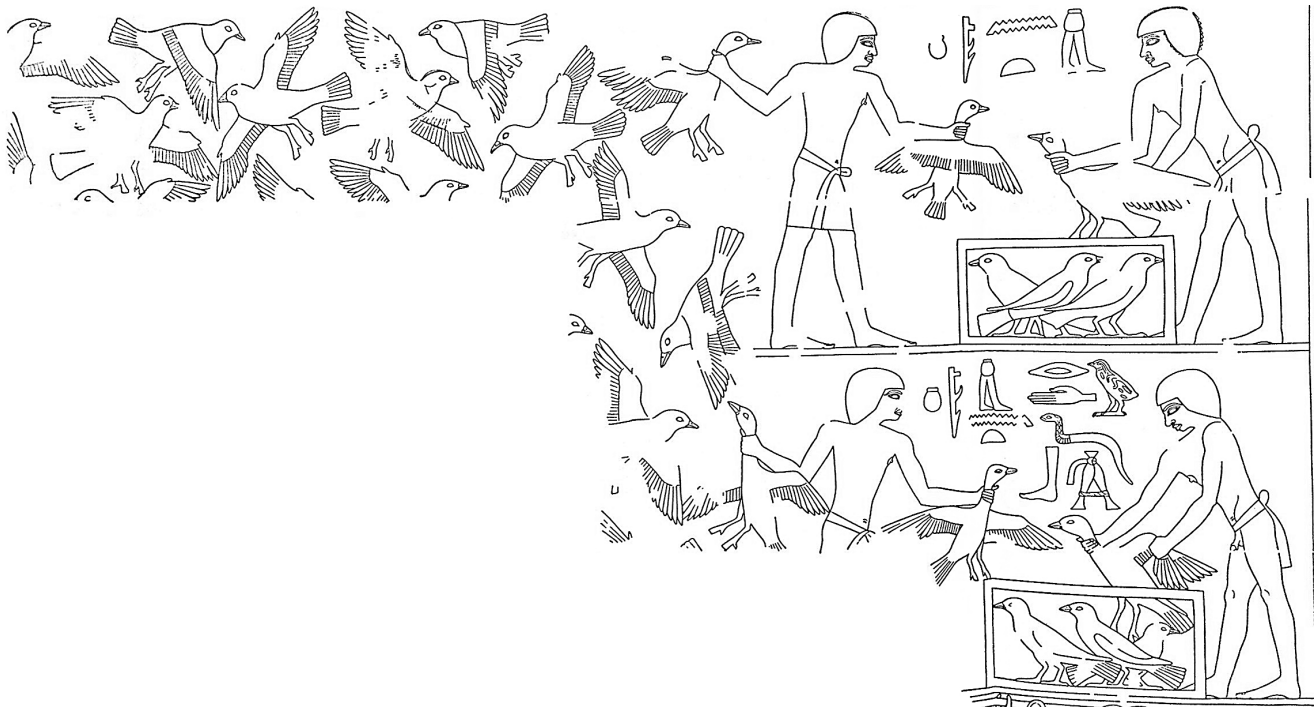


Fig. 6 Putting songbirds in crates in the tomb of Ti.¹¹

¹⁰ C. Ziegler, *Le mastaba d'Akhethetep: une chapelle funéraire de l'ancien empire* (Paris, 2007), fig. 37.

¹¹ L. Épron, F.F.E. Dumas, G. Goyon, and H. Wild, *Le Tombeau de Ti III* (Cairo, 1966), pl. CLXX.



Fig. 7 Detail of bird catching scene in the tomb of Neferherenptah.¹²

(leafless) tree is present with goats climbing up (and down) into it, a shepherd drinking from a flask and a shepherd about to hit his dog who is a little too eager to welcome a new-born kid goat.

Unfortunately, the scene in the tomb of Ti is only partly preserved (see Fig. 6). No tree is visible, but a large flock of (presumably) orioles is present. Two figures appear to simply pluck the birds out of the air, handing them over to two colleagues who are busy putting them in crates. The scene is placed above scenes of grape harvest and wine-making, so the context

seems to be that the birds are caught to be kept away from the valuable fruit harvest.

The scene in the tomb of Rashepses is again not fully intact, but what can be perceived from Lepsius' drawing¹³ is part of a flock of birds, the stem of a tree and the pole to which a net could be attached. Two figures are bending and crouching to capture the birds from underneath the net.

An exceptional sequence in the chapel of Neferherenptah shows the catching of doves or pigeons as well as songbirds in association with the harvest of grapes,

¹² W.S. Smith, *The art and architecture of ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1998), fig. 123.

¹³ C.R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (Genève, 1972-1973), supplement, XXXIX [a].



Fig. 8 Catching songbirds and fig harvest in the tomb of Neferirtenef.¹⁴

figs and perhaps another type of tree-fruit (see Fig. 7). Unfortunately, the scene has not been published in its entirety.¹⁵ Two trees are depicted, one with and one without fruit. Orioles are flying around in a frenzy, with a single Pied Kingfisher and some butterflies among their ranks. Altenmüller describes a net,¹⁶ but this is not clearly visible on the available photos. A kneeling figure captures birds and hands them to his colleague, who is standing next to a tree ripe with fruit. He in

turn hands the birds over to two figures, one sitting, one kneeling, who place the birds in crates (notice the black wingtips).

Next, between two reed bushes, the catching of doves or pigeons is depicted using a hexagonal clap-net being pulled by three figures. Interestingly, this part of the scene is only painted, not sculpted, and the colours are much better preserved. On the far left, the harvest of tree-fruit is depicted.

¹⁴ B.M.J.G. van de Walle, *La chapelle funéraire de Neferirtenef* (Brussels, 1978), pl. 9.

¹⁵ But see the photos on <http://www.osirisnet.net>.

¹⁶ H. Altenmüller, 'Arbeiten am Grab des Neferherenptah in Saqqara (1970-1975)', *MDAIK* 38 (1982), 10-12.



Fig. 9 Catching songbirds with hand-set traps in the tomb of Mereruka: Meri.¹⁷

In the mastaba of Neferirteneft, the catching of songbirds is once again associated with the grape and fig harvest (see Fig. 8). A fruit tree is shown with a net strung over it, a flock of orioles (with at least one hoopoe among them), two rousing men, two men putting birds in cages, and the fig harvest on a register below.

In Mereruka: Meri, only three tree stems can be discerned, with two hand-set traps (one open, one closed with a bird inside), a figure sitting beside a basket of figs, and naked boys walking away with birds in hand, among which is at least one hoopoe (see Fig. 9). In the registers below, children's games are depicted. Harpur furthermore believes that a separate fragment found near the Teti Pyramid fits the scene, but this might be problematic taking into account the original height of the trees on the lower

register. Interestingly, this scene associates songbirds with children, who may have helped with either the harvest or the catching of birds.

A fragment from Museum August Kestner in Hannover (inv. no. 1957.78)¹⁸ which Harpur attributes to the tomb of Niankhnesut could contain traces of a songbird catching scene, but this is not entirely clear. The feet of two men who appear to lean backwards (pulling a rope?) could likewise make it a hexagonal clap-net scene. Another fragment more certainly belonging to Niankhnesut shows the now familiar scene of a tree, triangular net, rousing men and songbirds, at least two of which are hoopoes.¹⁹

A fragment from Ankhmahor: Sesi shows two trees, a flock of birds, two crates filled with birds, two shouting bird

¹⁷ Y. Harpur, 'The identity and positions of relief fragments in museums and private collections: Miscellaneous reliefs from Saqqara and Giza', *JEA* 71 (1985), 35-36, fig. 5.

¹⁸ R. Drenkhahn, *Ägyptische Reliefs im Kestner-Museum* (Hannover, 1989), 46-49 [14], fig. 3.

¹⁹ A. Leahy and I. Mathieson, 'The tomb of Nyankhnesut (re) discovered', *JEA* 87 (2001), 39, pl. V [2].



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Looking at the general elements of the theme, the catching of songbirds is usually recognizable by the representation of (a flock of) birds, a tree and a net. Often the placing of caught birds in wooden crates is shown, as well as figures that shoo the birds by calling and waving with lengths of cloth. Rarely, the plucking of tail feathers is depicted, as is the trapping of songbirds using hand-set traps. The figures involved in the catching of songbirds are always male.

²¹ N. Kanawati, and A. Hassan, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara II: The Tomb of Ankhmahor* (The Australian Centre for Egyptology: Reports 9; Warminster, 1997), 71, pl. 30 [b]; 72 [TNE95:FI47].



In five instances, the activity is described by a caption:



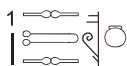
shwi gn.w Rounding up golden orioles.

In one instance (Neferirtenef):



wh' gn.w Catching golden orioles.

In the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, two further activities are mentioned:



ztz gn.w Plucking golden orioles.



wdi gn.w m tb Putting golden orioles in a crate.

The iconographic context of the bird catching theme is sometimes that of goat herding (see Figs. 1, 2 and 5). The common factor in these cases is the foliage from which both birds and goats fed, while other trees were being chopped down and used for wooden boat-building (Fig. 2). Another recurring associated theme is the fig and grape harvest (see Figs. 3 and 8), from which the birds needed to be chased. An interesting case are the children (Fig. 9), as children are often depicted clutching an unhappy looking hoopoe.

The species of songbirds most often depicted is the golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*),

whose bright yellow plumage and black wingtips are unfortunately rarely preserved on the Old Kingdom reliefs. This bird, known to winter in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, is a migrant in Egypt in autumn and spring, when it can be found throughout the country, but preferring such fertile areas as the Nile Valley and Delta, the Fayum and oases of the Western Desert.²²

The oriole is an arboreal bird (it prefers to perch in trees) and partly frugivorous (fruit-eating). As tree-fruit (such as figs and grapes) was of economic importance to the Egyptians, it is likely that they were either chased away or caught during the harvest season, when the fruit was ripe. Besides figs (*Ficus carica* and *Ficus sycomorus*) the birds are also known to enjoy dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and mulberries (*Morus*). This sweet diet would contribute to their own flavour, and it is possible that the birds themselves were consumed, although this is never depicted.

Although the majority of the represented birds are orioles, the hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) is also often present. This bird is easily recognizable by its crest. Within the flock of orioles, usually one or two hoopoes can be discerned. Like the oriole, it breeds in the Nile Valley and Delta, the Fayum and Western Desert oases between mid-February and June. It is also a passing visitor in spring and autumn.²³

Interestingly, the hoopoe is usually depicted in the papyrus thicket, while it prefers grassland and wooded areas, like farm-

²² P.F. Houlihan, and S.M. Goodman, *The birds of Ancient Egypt* (Warminster, 1986), 129-131 [69]; S.M. Goodman, *The birds of Egypt* (Oxford, 1989), 441.

²³ Houlihan, *Birds* (1986), 118-120 [62]; Goodman, *Birds* (1989), 347-349.



Fig. 11a and b The golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) and hoopoe (*Upupa epops*).

lands and orchards. Hoopoes are not frugivorous, and would not have done such damage to the tree-fruit crop as orioles. It is unclear whether they were caught on purpose or as bycatch. The catching of hoopoes is not mentioned in the accompanying inscriptions. Since their taste is considered to be poor, it is possible that they were caught as pets for children, as these are often depicted with a hoopoe in hand (see also Fig. 9).²⁴

In the tomb of Neferherenptah, what appear to be turtle doves (*Streptopelia turtur*) are caught using a hexagonal clap-net. In the accompanying captions, the birds are called *ḥb3*. The birds can be recognized by their short neck, rounded head,

narrow black bill, long tail and mottled upper wing coverts, although the diagnostic parallel lines on the side of the neck are missing.²⁵

The turtle dove is a migrant breeder in the Western Desert oases, Nile Valley and Delta.²⁶ They are often depicted as provisions, alongside ducks and geese. Turtle doves are easily domesticated and breed well in captivity. In aviaries, they can be fattened for the table. Houlihan in his *Birds of ancient Egypt* regards the species without prominent neck markings as possible laughing doves (*Spilopelia senegalensis*) rather than pigeons (*Columba livia*). The fact that the Egyptian word *mnw.t* is used both for the turtle

²⁴ But more symbolic reasons for depicting a child with a hoopoe have been suggested.

²⁵ Houlihan, *Birds* (1986), 103-107 [54].

²⁶ Goodman, *Birds* (1989), 313-315.



Fig. 12 Pied Kingfisher and butterflies in the tomb of Neferherenptah.²⁷

dove and dove without neck markings, but is translated like *ḥ3* as 'pigeon', makes determination even more problematic.

In the same scene, a pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) can be recognized in attack mode, as well as some butterflies (see fig 12).

The trees in which the birds are perched are imagined in a stylized way, sometimes leafless to make room for the depicted birds (see Figs. 1 and 4). The trees are generally quite tall and conical, covering multiple registers. In the tomb of Akhethetep, its green leaves are shown (Fig. 5). Some trees are bearing fruit (Figs. 7 and 8). The most likely species being the sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomoros*, *nht* in Egyptian) or common fig (*Ficus carica*, *nht n d3b*).²⁸

In trying to analyse what appears to be a simple scene of bird catching, the researcher comes upon many peculiarities in trying to classify, describe and determine what is being depicted and why. The excavators of the tomb of Hesi are of opinion that the songbird catching scene is rare because the orchard was not a favoured theme by tomb owners.²⁹ Nevertheless, the theme is represented in a creative way in those tombs in which it did occur. It would be interesting to find out what was the link between tombs containing a relatively rare scene such as the catching of songbirds, or distinct details such as a goat giving birth (which only occurs four times in the Memphite necropolis, including in the mastaba of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep). Was this directly derived

²⁷ After a photo from <http://www.osirisnet.net>.

²⁸ N. Baum, *Arbres et arbustes de l'Égypte ancienne : la liste de la tombe thébaine d'Ineni (n° 81)* (Leuven, 1988), 18ff; 120-128.

²⁹ N. Kanawati, and M. Abd El-Raziq, *The Teti cemetery at Saqqara V: The tomb of Hesi* (The Australian Centre for Egyptology; Warminster, 1999), 34.



from the repertoire of the artists who decorated the tombs? Did tomb owners visit other tomb chapels to come up with ideas for their own decoration scheme? And to take it even further, did certain 'showroom' chapels exist (the tomb chapel of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep with its highly varied content being a possible contender) that inspired similar scenes in later tombs? This would make the decorating of a funerary structure a much more 'social' affair than hitherto thought.

After the initial excavation, publication, classification and storing in a database

of (information about) a great number of mastaba tombs, we can now start using methods derived from the field of Digital Humanities to delve deeper into the (social) world of the Old Kingdom elite tomb owners, and visualize the connections between them through analysis of the information-bearing monuments they left behind. For the coming years, this is what I intend to do in the form of a PhD project. Furthermore, a plan is being drawn up to update and put online the *MastaBase* core data for everyone to use. Studying Old Kingdom elite tombs, we are blessed with a wealth of information that hopefully has many more insights to yield.

