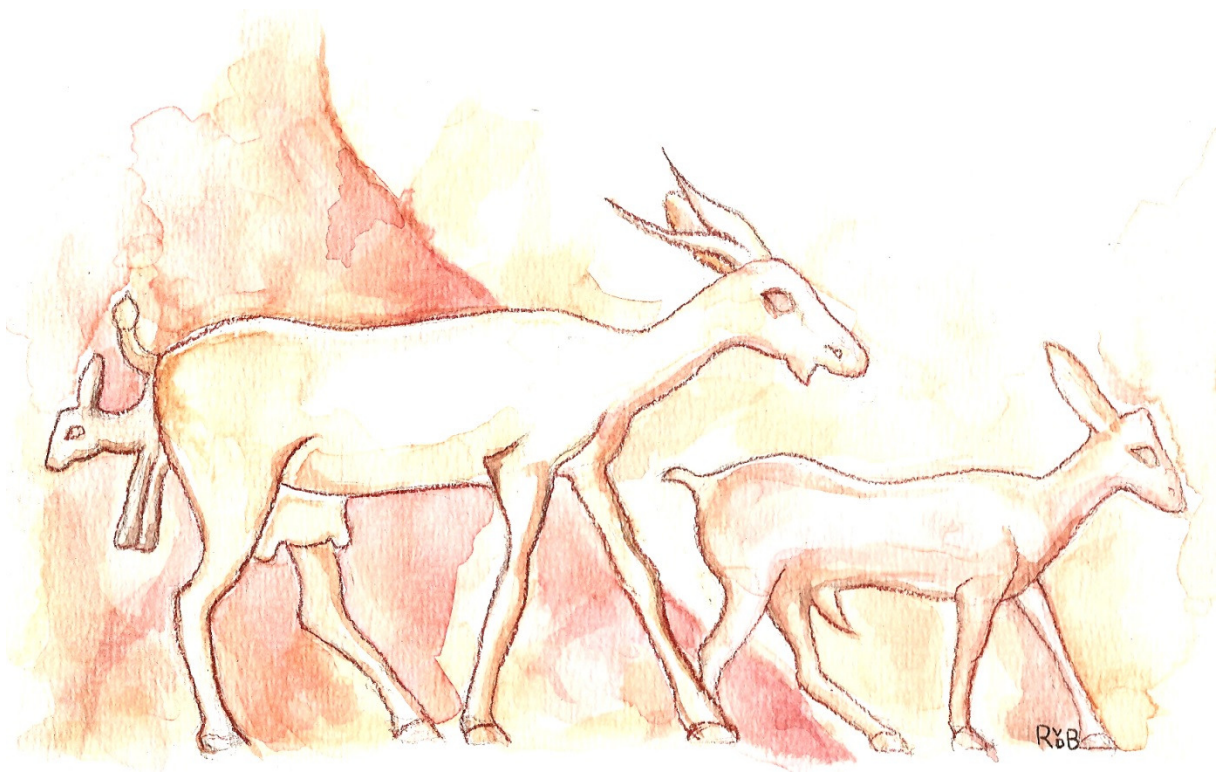


Two scenes in the Old Kingdom elite tomb chapel of Hetepherakhet:
Catching songbirds and goat herding

Part I: Text



Nicky van de Beek

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In honour of Herta Therese Mohr (1914-1945), for her courage and perseverance.

In memory of Harold M. Hays (1965-2013), who introduced me to Saqqara.

For Anja,
the strongest woman I know.

To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again, from the gross earth or what it brings forth, from sound and shape and colour which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand – that is art.

James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

*One Moment in Annihilation's Waste,
One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste –
The Stars are setting and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing – Oh, make haste!*

*How long, how long, in infinite Pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful Grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter Fruit.*

The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám (translation by Edward FitzGerald), quatrains 38 and 39

“There is no rushing the little grey cells.”

- Hercule Poirot

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.”

- Lao Tzu

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Introduction

The tomb chapel of Hetepherakhet is a monument that has intrigued me ever since I set foot in it for the first time. Once part of the necropolis of Memphis¹, it is now one of the highlights of the Egyptian collection in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden (inventory no. F 1904/3.1). The chapel itself formed part of a much larger *mastaba*² originally built at Saqqara. It was first excavated by Auguste Mariette in the 1860's.³ In 1902, the tomb chapel was purchased from the Egyptian government by the Dutch amateur archaeologist Adriaan Goekoop. It was shipped to the Netherlands in 70 crates, and first opened to the public in 1904 (see appendix 1).



Fig. 1: The tomb chapel in its original museum setting.⁴

¹ Geographically running from Abu Rawash to Dahshur, encompassing Giza, Abusir and Saqqara. Maidum could also be considered part of it for stylistic reasons. See fig. 2 for a map.

² Term coined by Mariette because of the bench-shaped (Arab. *mastaba*) superstructure of this tomb type, derived from the so called Mastabat-el-Farâoun at Saqqara (Mariette, *Mastabas* (1885), 22-23). A more neutral term is 'elite tomb', which also includes rock-cut tombs (Van Walsem, *Iconography* (2005), 10-11).

³ Mariette, *Mastabas* (1885), 340-348.

⁴ Boeser, *Beschrijving* (1905), pl. V.



Fig. 2: Map of Old Kingdom burial sites.⁵

⁵ http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oea_ahrc_2006/queryMap.cfm

Hetepherakhet⁶ was elder of the court⁷ and priest of Ma'at⁸, according to his titles on the façade of his tomb chapel. On the false door at the back of the chapel it is furthermore mentioned that he was *wꜥb*-priest of the pyramid of king Neferirkare⁹, and priest of the sun temple of king Niuserre.¹⁰ This likely dates his career in the fifth dynasty (c. 2494-2345 BCE), set against the social background of an expanding bureaucracy that provided room for an increasing number of officials, their elite tombs and the highly skilled artisans that decorated these tombs.¹¹

The fine reliefs adorning the small offering chapel of Hetepherakhet (measuring only about 5.5 m²) are often presented as a 'classical example of Old Kingdom art', containing a 'concise selection of the typical scenes of the time'.¹² In part owing to it being one of the earliest examples of Old Kingdom elite tomb decoration in a European museum, the reliefs of Hetepherakhet are often mentioned along with those of Ti, Hesire and the Meidum Geese of Nefermaat.¹³

The so called 'scenes of daily life'¹⁴ depicting the tomb owner in his various roles as official and head of estate are potentially highly informative of several aspects of ancient Egyptian life. Although the only elements that are truly indispensable in the decoration of an elite tomb are the false door in the west wall and an image of the tomb owner seated behind an offering table,¹⁵ the scenes can cover such diverse themes as agriculture, fishing, fowling, food production, crafts, funeral preparations and entertainment.¹⁶

The iconography of these secular scenes must first be understood within the very specific functioning of the Old Kingdom elite tomb as an artefact charged with presenting and perpetuating the tomb owner's status after his/her death.¹⁷ The selection of scenes, their layout within the tomb chapel, and the way in which the themes are represented can then be studied in order to discover the conscious and unconscious choices made both by the tomb owner who commissioned the work and the artisans who executed it.

⁶ *ḥtp-ḥr-ḏḥ.ty*: 'das Antlitz des (Gottes) *ḏḥ.ty* sei gnädig'. Ranke, *Personennamen I* (1935), 258 [24].

⁷ Jones, *Titles OK* (2000), no. 3313.

⁸ Ibidem, no. 1930.

⁹ Ibidem, no. 1371.

¹⁰ Ibidem, no. 2006.

¹¹ Bard, *Introduction* (2008), 157.

¹² Mohr, *Hetep-her-akhti* (1943), ix.

¹³ E.g. in Curtius, *Antike Kunst I* (1923), fig. 88-90.

¹⁴ An Egyptological designation for the 'secular scenes' in the Old Kingdom elite tombs. The king and/or gods are never depicted. Instead, certain aspects of the 'daily life' of the tomb owner are shown.

¹⁵ Van Walsem, Meaningful places, in: *Site-Seeing* (2006), 126.

¹⁶ See the different classifications employed in the databases of Harpur (2006) and Van Walsem (2008).

¹⁷ Van Walsem, *Iconography* (2005), 19.

For a thorough iconographical study of a decoration scheme in an Old Kingdom elite tomb, it is vital to have access to a good publication of the tomb. After massive initial work by Auguste Mariette mainly in the Saqqara and Giza necropolis, most of the known Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs were excavated and published during the twentieth century. There is considerable variation in the quality of photographs, drawings and descriptions in these publications. Also, the graphic record is not always complete, as sometimes a scene is not represented in both facsimile drawing and photo.¹⁸ Provincial tombs have generally been discovered (and published) somewhat later than the centrally located Memphite tombs, and recently, tombs are also being republished.¹⁹

The tomb chapel of Hetepherakhet has been the subject of a study by Mohr (1943). She provides a catalogue of drawings and description of the scenes and translations of the inscriptions, as well as a discussion of general features of the tomb chapel and notes on the principles of Egyptian two-dimensional art. Unfortunately, due to the unforgiving circumstances of the time, Mohr was unable to finish her work.²⁰ The photographs she had planned could not be taken, and she based her drawings on Boeser's printed photographs of 1905, supplemented by photos she had made herself using a small camera.²¹ In September 1939, the tomb chapel vanished into the basement of the museum and was inaccessible for further study by her.²² Despite the impossible conditions Mohr was faced with, her work led to a valuable publication that is still an inspiration today.

The current set-up of the tomb chapel renders it technically impossible to make a good photographic record of the decoration. The blocks are encased in a construction resembling the outer face of a mastaba, with a roof blocking out daylight and even part of the inscription above the false door. Glass panels are fixed in place to protect the inscriptions, with seams at inconvenient places.²³ The lighting is uneven, overexposing some of the decoration and leaving other parts in the dark. The entranceway is too narrow to move around in with a camera.

¹⁸ E.g. no photo is available for the baking/brewing/tax scene in the tomb of Khentika (James & Apter, *Khentika* (1953), pl. IX), while no drawing is available for the baking/brewing/roasting scene in the tomb of Mehu (Altenmüller, *Mehu* (1998), pl. 16). The baking/brewing scene in the tomb of the Two Brothers (Moussa & Altenmüller, *Nianchchnum* (1977), pl. 23) is only partly covered in drawings in Faltings, *Keramik* (1998).

¹⁹ E.g. to provide a more detailed photographic record (Harpur, *Scene details* (2006, 2008, 2010)), correct drawings (Kanawati, *Pepyankh* (2012)), or reconstruct the archaeological context (Ziegler, *Akhethetep* (2007)).

²⁰ Herta Theresa Mohr, who was Jewish, wrote the preface to her publication in the summer of 1942. On 10 September of that year the police posted a search warrant, on account of her having gone into hiding. On 15 April 1945, aged 30, she perished in camp Bergen-Belsen. Both of her parents died in Auschwitz.
<http://www.joodsmonument.nl/person/462047/en>

²¹ Mohr, *Hetep-her-akhti* (1943), x. An additional volume of photographs was planned in collaboration with a certain M. Coppens (Martien Coppens?) from Eindhoven, but this was never realised for reasons that are clear.

²² Mohr, *Hetep-her-akhti* (1943), 79.

²³ Removal of the glass panels for a proper study of the inscriptions is highly expensive and not possible in the present set-up.

For the time being, high-resolution scans of Boeser's black and white negatives still offer the best photographic record of the monument. They are of a quality that is hard to match even today using digital photography. Wreszinski's publication proves helpful in some cases.²⁴ Supplemented by several photographs of scene details and overviews made when the glass wasn't in place or temporarily removed for maintenance, this is a reasonable corpus on which to base new and improved facsimile drawings. The available images in digital format have been kindly shared with me by the museum photographers Peter Jan Bomhof and Anneke de Kemp. Hans van den Berg has furthermore provided me with a high resolution composite photo of the catching songbirds and goat herding scene made in 2003, for which I thank him sincerely.

The goal of this thesis is to restart the research on the tomb chapel of Hetepherakhet, with a case study focusing on two specific scenes in its decoration program: the catching songbirds and goat herding scenes depicted on the lintel above the doorway in the east wall of the chapel. I will present new drawings of these scenes and compare them with parallels in other Old Kingdom elite tombs from the Memphite area and provincial cemeteries. Ultimately, a renewed study and facsimile rendering of Hetepherakhet's tomb could be the subject of a PhD project.

The main question of this thesis is:

What is the value of a renewed study of the Old Kingdom elite tomb of Hetepherakhet?

In the next three chapters, I will try to answer the following research questions:

What is the state of research on the elite tomb of Hetepherakhet?

What theories and methods can be used in examining its decoration program?

What is the significance of the catching songbirds and goat herding themes in Old Kingdom elite tomb iconography?

²⁴ E.g. Wreszinski, *Atlas* (1914), pl. 108 gives a clearer image of the catching songbirds/goat herding scene than Boeser, *Beschrijving* (1905), pl. XII.



Fig. 3: Google Streetview image of the current situation.²⁵



Fig. 4: Uneven lighting and seams in the glass panels (photo by author).

²⁵ <http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/rijksmuseum-van-oudheden>