

Scribes at work: documenting Theban Tombs 61, 82 and 87

Philological research has been at the heart of Egyptology since the emergence of the discipline as a modern academic subject. In her article, **Lucía Díaz-Iglesias Llanos** lays out what more recent approaches, such as the ‘Material’ or ‘New Philology’, can tell us about a text beyond its manifest content. To do so, the New Kingdom Scribes Project looks at a number of Theban tombs and the processes through which their textual and decorative programmes were produced.

In 2019, the New Kingdom Scribes (NKS) Project was established to accomplish the full documentation and epigraphic analysis as well as the conservation assessment of three burial chambers belonging to members of the ancient Egyptian elite and sub-elite. Cut into the upper terraces of the Sheikh Abd el-Qurna area of the Theban necropolis during the first half of the Eighteenth Dynasty, they rate among the best-preserved underground chambers decorated with extensive textual programmes, of which there are fewer than ten examples. These spaces were linked to the tomb-chapels of three well-known officials from the reigns of Hatshepsut (1507–1458 BCE) and Thutmose III (1479–1425 BCE): the vizier Weseramun (TT 61), his steward Amenemhat (TT 82), and the overseer of the granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt Nakhtmin (TT 87) (image right).

Before describing these chambers, I will explain the aims and the conceptual basis of the NKS Project, before concluding with a summary of the tasks undertaken during the first two seasons of fieldwork in 2019 and 2020. Its main objective is to deepen our knowledge of aspects of Egyptian culture that were not recorded in ancient sources, but which are at the centre of current debates and questions within historical disciplines in general, and Egyptology in particular. Among these open questions are: How were funerary texts and images transmitted? What intellectual and

material procedures underlie the manufacture of inscribed objects or three-dimensional spaces? What were the education and working conditions of the scribes in charge of copying texts in tombs like? How can we distinguish individual scribal hands? What role did those who commissioned private monuments play in the selection of the decorative programmes deployed in their tombs?

To approach these research questions, which lie at the heart of many investigations into cultures that existed before the invention of print, new perspectives and tools are available for philologists and historians. Since the late 1980s, trends that were mainly developed in the field of Mediaeval Studies (the so-called ‘New’ or ‘Material’ Philology) have led to a noticeable change in the ways that texts from manuscript cultures are analysed and interpreted. These trends suggest shifting the focus from the texts themselves towards material artefacts as a whole, and call attention to the processes through which they were produced, used, and received. More importance is also given to the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which these processes took place, and to the human actors that were involved in them.

In the case of the NKS Project, these actors are the patrons of the large early New Kingdom Theban tombs and the scribes who participated in their decoration. The ‘material

turn’ in the study of texts has also been fostered by rapid developments in digital information and communication technologies, and by archaeometrical techniques through which written and decorated surfaces can now be documented and analysed with an unprecedented degree of detail.

Studies of written and scribal culture in Egyptology have traditionally concentrated on

belonging to Djehuty, the owner of TT 11 – share some common geographical, chronological, technological, and social features. They were all built in the Theban necropolis around 1470–1450 BCE, making them roughly contemporary, and their texts were written in cursive hieroglyphs on top of a creamy-white layer of stucco by scribes using rush pens. Moreover, their owners stood at the highest



Photo: NKS Project / Lucía Díaz-Iglesias

View of part of the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, with the location of the shaft belonging to TT 87 highlighted. In the background, the Ramesseum.

papyri and, to a lesser extent, on ostraca, but the NKS Project employs an as-yet underutilised source: the subterranean funerary chambers that belonged to members of the Theban court who lived during the first half of the 15th century BCE. The walls of these spaces were completely covered with formulae belonging to different funerary and cosmographic corpora (Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, the Book of Going Forth by Day / Book of the Dead, the Litany of Re, and the Amduat) that would enable their owners to reach the Beyond and survive there in optimal conditions. These texts were probably copied by those who wrote on papyri and ostraca using the same tools, but on a non-perishable vertical surface.

The three chosen chambers, plus a fourth example integrated in this study of scribes in the New Kingdom and in which the author has been working for the past six years – that

echelons of the administration, had close contact with the king or the vizier, enjoyed access to abundant material and human resources to erect their monuments, and were probably acquainted with different sorts of funerary and religious compositions, which were specially selected to accompany and protect them in their final resting places.

Despite these commonalities, the three case-studies also display distinctive individual features. The burial chamber of the vizier Weseramun in TT 61 is accessible through a shaft lowered into the courtyard close to the tomb's façade. It is decorated with passages from the Litany of Re and the Amduat (image on the following page), being the only monument of a private individual in the New Kingdom that utilised funerary texts from the royal repertoire, specifically those that the reigning king – Thutmose III – used in KV 34.



Photo: NKS Project / Carmen Ruiz

Close-up photograph of the Amduat in the burial chamber of Weseramun (TT 61).

The burial chamber of the steward of Weseramun, Amenemhat, can be accessed through a shaft opened in the tomb's innermost room (TT 82). The decoration comprises spells from the Pyramid Texts, the Book of Going Forth by Day, and various mortuary liturgies. As a member of the second-rank elite, Amenemhat could not secure the means to build his eternal dwelling by himself, but it is possible that he diverted some resources for his own benefit while supervising works in the tomb of the vizier. Finally, the burial chamber of Nakhtmin (TT 87) is situated at the bottom of a shaft and a corridor built within the courtyard of the tomb of his son, Menkheperaseneb (TT 79), which stands at a higher level up the hill. Its walls feature spells from the Coffin Texts and the Pyramid Texts, seemingly copied from an old manuscript that was already decayed – hence the lacunae dubbed in the texts as 'found missing'. The example of Nakhtmin is quite exceptional, since it is one of the few cases in the field of textual transmission in ancient Egypt where the intermediate model (in the form of disposable ostraca) and the final product (the chamber walls) have been preserved, offering us a unique chance to track scribes at work.

The three burial chambers were visited during the late 19th and early 20th centuries by renowned figures of the discipline, such as Karl Richard Lepsius and Sir Robert Mond. During the 1910s, the 1960s–70s, and

1970s–80s, they were excavated (or simply documented), studied, and published by teams of archaeologists and philologists led by Alan Gardiner, Norman de Garis Davies, Erik Hornung, Eberhard Dziobek, and Heike Guksch (née Heike Heye). However, the photographs included in their publications are too general, often only in black and white, and lack precise details, so that they are not valid tools with which to conduct an in-depth analysis of scribal hands, writing habits, idiosyncrasies and instruments. The absence of high-resolution and close-up images of such relevant material for the study of scribal culture during the New Kingdom was one of the reasons that prompted our fieldwork.

The NKS Project is currently composed of two epigraphers and a photographer, but it has benefitted from the advice of restorers and architects. In the immediate future, it aims to incorporate chemists, topographers and geologists in an interdisciplinary effort to understand a textual artefact from as many perspectives as possible. During the first season of fieldwork, conducted in Luxor in 2019, we undertook the initial photographic documentation in the three chambers. In the 2020 season, work concentrated on TT 61 and TT 87 and consisted of new photographic shots that applied different techniques; the start of epigraphic study; reconditioning of the shafts' mouths; and a conservation assessment of the chambers.



Photo: NKS Project / Lucía Díaz-Iglesias

Above: the burial chamber of Nakhtmin (TT 87).



Photos: NKS Project / José Galán

Left: detailed photographs are taken of all the surfaces in the burial chamber of Nakhtmin (TT 87).

New, very high-resolution full-colour images, produced with modern digital cameras were generated during the two seasons. They included both general views of the chambers, walls, and sections thereof, and close-up photographs of individual signs, where the strokes of the rush pens can be seen and which will allow the reconstruction of how the scribes traced each sign and how often they needed to re-ink their pens (images above). Photogrammetry was used to create 3D models and orthographic photographs of the walls, which not only avoid distortions – both existing in the camera and in the burial chamber's architectural surfaces – but also reflect their correct perspective. In 2020, different filters and digital treatments using Adobe Photoshop

and DStretch software were applied, in order to improve the quality of the images and to reveal information that is difficult to see with the naked eye (images on the following page, right). A set of infrared pictures were taken using a specific camera and another one with ultraviolet lighting, to reveal any hidden strokes or underpaintings, or to clarify details in areas of the decorative surface that were darkened by soot or partially blurred.

Epigraphic and palaeographic analysis began in 2020, making use of these digital images and the *in-situ* observation of the writing medium and the signs and non-linguistic marks left on it (image on the following page, left). Through the careful study of the layers of muna and gypsum, the layout of the texts, internal

Application of DStretch filters to a scene in the burial chamber of Weseramun (TT 61).

Magnifying glasses are used for the observation of all material traces left when a sign is traced by the ancient scribe.

characteristics of the signs (size, ductus, morphology, slant, etc), and features of the copying process (brush dippings, mistakes – in the form of added, omitted, changed, or transposed signs – corrections, insertions of hieratic graphemes, etc.), our objective is to understand how many scribes were involved in the decoration, how they worked, and how they were trained.



Photo: NKS Project / Lucía Díaz-Iglesias

Finally, steps were taken towards the preventive conservation of the structures and decorations. Outside the chambers, the mouth of the shaft of TT 87 was reconditioned by removing the largest limestone blocks and loose debris, building low retaining walls of mud bricks and stones, and installing a new metal platform, a diamond-shape grid, and a gate to replace the old fixed metal bars (image on the opposite page). We can thus guarantee the safety of the workers, prevent birds from entering the chamber, and stop debris from falling to the bottom of the shaft. Inside the chambers of TT 61 and TT 87, we undertook an assessment of the state of preservation of the decorated surfaces to determine if any cleaning and consolidation should be carried out, and to prepare a conservation plan to be implemented during upcoming seasons.

In the immediate future, the team intends to grow through the addition of a topographer who will aid in georeferencing the photogrammetries and drawing precise



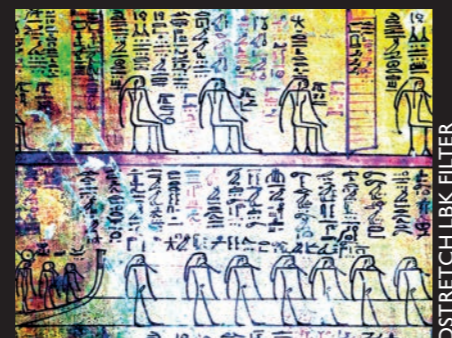
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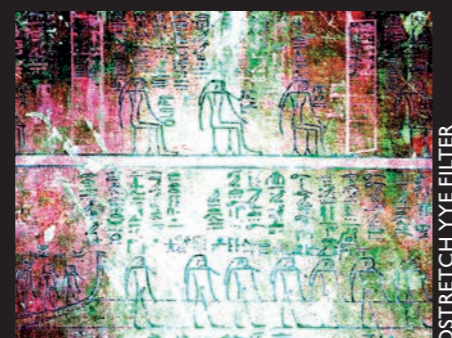
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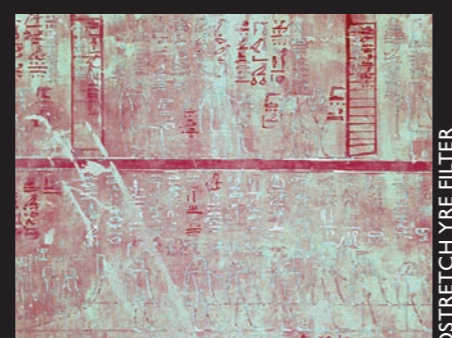
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DSTRETCH YRE FILTER

Photo: NKS Project / Carmen Ruiz

plans, and of geologists who will study the quality of the bedrock and the composition of the preparation and writing layers. Finally, chemists will apply non-destructive analytical techniques (Raman spectroscopy) with the aid of portable equipment to determine how inks were prepared and what pigments and binding agents were used.

The in-depth analysis of the decorative programmes in these Theban burial chambers, plus that of Djehuty in TT II, is a novel avenue from which to approach the identity of the tomb owners, since it can offer plenty of data

on their degree of knowledge of, and access to, various corpora of funerary and cosmographic literature. Moreover, the application of digital and archaeometric analyses to the material traces left during the writing process will shed new light on aspects that are now at the forefront of debates about scribal culture. An anthropological, historical, and social approach to these funerary compositions will transcend a purely philological study and overcome the traditional division between archaeology and philology.

Below: reconditioning process of the entrance to the shaft of the burial chamber of Nakhtmin.



Photo: NKS Project / Carmen Ruiz

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