

Artistic Study of the Wildlife Scene at the Burial Chamber of Rashepses in Saqqara, Egypt

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エジプト・サッカラ遺跡、
ラーシェプセスの埋葬室壁画に描かれた野生動物の美術研究

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[Abstract]

Saqqara is the main necropolis of Memphis which was the capital of ancient Egypt during the old kingdom. The ancient Egyptians tried to keep their place in the after life so they tried to hide their grave away from robbers, especially from the time of the fourth dynasty, they buried their bodies in deep shafts and kept them in stone sarcophaguses, however. From the middle of the fifth dynasty, they began to make big burial chambers, deep underground, accessed by vertical shafts or sloping corridors, they also began to decorate the burial chambers. the burial chamber of Ra-shepses is considered the most ancient of decorated burial chamber that has been discovered till now. Ra-shepses was one of the most important people in the time of the fifth dynasty, he was the first one to have the title of (the responsible for the south), he was a vizier at the time of King Jedkara, the pigments in the burial chamber of Rashepses are unique, the ancient artist used shadows for the first time although it is the most ancient decorated burial chamber. There are more than ten different colors were used in the wildlife scene, that shows how the artist used his skills to create new colors weren't used before, optical digital microscopy, is used to study those pigments and try to identify the technique that was used to create that terrific scene in the burial chamber.

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1 Introduction

Egypt is the land of civilization, the written history of Egypt dates back more than three thousand years BC; Saqqara is one of the oldest historical and archaeological sites all over Egypt as it was the necropolis of Memphis that was the capital of Egypt during most time of the old kingdom. However kings of the fourth dynasty established their capital in Giza, Saqqara was also the religious capital all over the ancient Egyptian history, it has a lot of tombs, temples and pyramids which dated back from the first and second dynasties to late period and Coptic era,

Memphis necropolis extends in the western desert about 80km long from north to south, it includes Aburwaish, Giza, Abusir, Saqqara, Dahshour and Maidum, Saqqara may have been named after the ancient Egyptian god Sukar that was sacred in that region, the name of Saqqara may have also come from the name of an Arabian tribe that lived in the place hundreds of years ago (Hassan Slim 1992). Kings from the old kingdom built their tombs and pyramids at Saqqara and that made officials and nobles build their tombs near the tombs and pyramids of their kings. (Saad 1947) the officials and nobles in the late of the fifth and sixth dynasties built their tombs in two parts, the upper part is a big Mastaba that contains many rooms, the lower part is usually a shaft that leads to a burial chamber (Kanawaty 2000-2004). The burial shafts were cut in the bed rock vertically or sometimes steeply, they were reached from other shafts, that shafts may have been found inside or outside the tomb, most shafts from the fifth dynasty are found outside the tomb, however. The shaft of Mereoka is found inside the tomb. (Kanawaty 2010) Ra-shepses tomb, which is located to the north of Netjerikhet step pyramid complex and to the west of the Oserkaf pyramid is considered the oldest tomb that has a decorated burial chamber, the upper part (Mastaba) was built by using limestone, however, the burial chamber was cut in the bedrock. Although James Burton visited the tomb in 1827 and Lepsius did some excavations in the tomb and made a rough plan to the structure no one has discovered the burial chamber till it was discovered by Hany Altyeb. No one has studied the pigments of that burial chamber before so it is the first time for the pigments to be studied in those papers, for that reason, optical digital microscopy was used.

2 Ra-shepses tomb

James Burton (traveled to Egypt between 1820 to 1839) visited in 1827 the tomb of Ra-shepses which is located to the north of Netjerikhet step pyramid complex and to the west of the Oserkaf pyramid; he copied some scenes and inscriptions, Lepsius was the first one to do scientific-like excavations in the tomb and he copied some scenes and made a rough plan to the structure (Altyeb 2014). In 2016 Quibell pursued some work in the mastaba of Ra-Shepses, he mentioned the northern passage of the tomb, he also found a fragment of a wooden statue that belongs to the owner of the tomb, that fragment is kept now at Imhotep Museum in Saqqara. (Hany Altyeb 2012) Ra-shepses was one of the greatest officials; he was the first one to have the title of overseer of Upper Egypt (the responsible for the all the king's works in the south). (Altyeb 2014)

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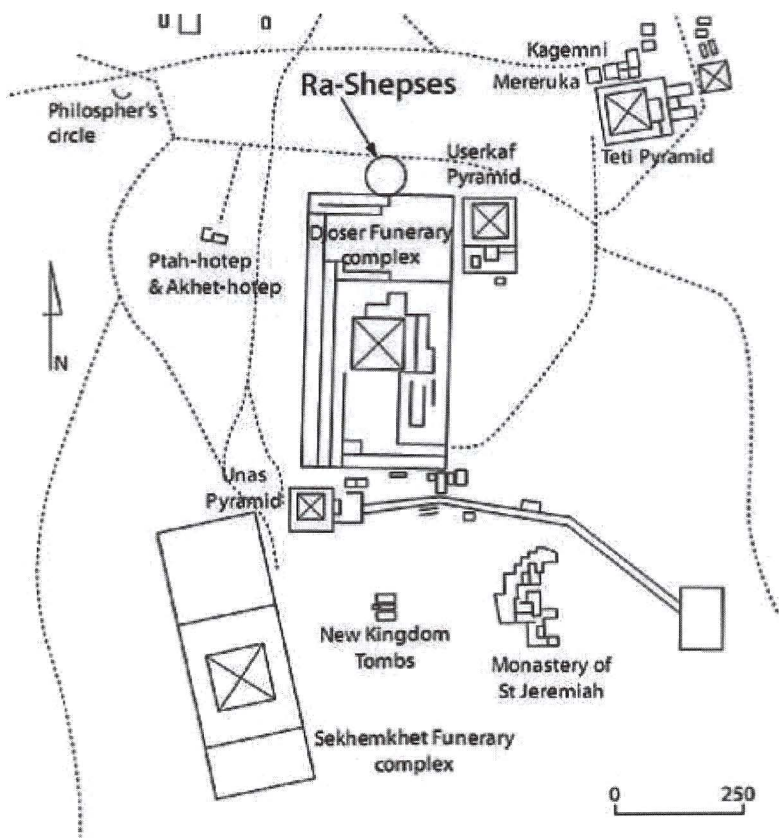


Fig. 1 a plan of Saqqara shows the place of tomb of Ra-shepses after Basta

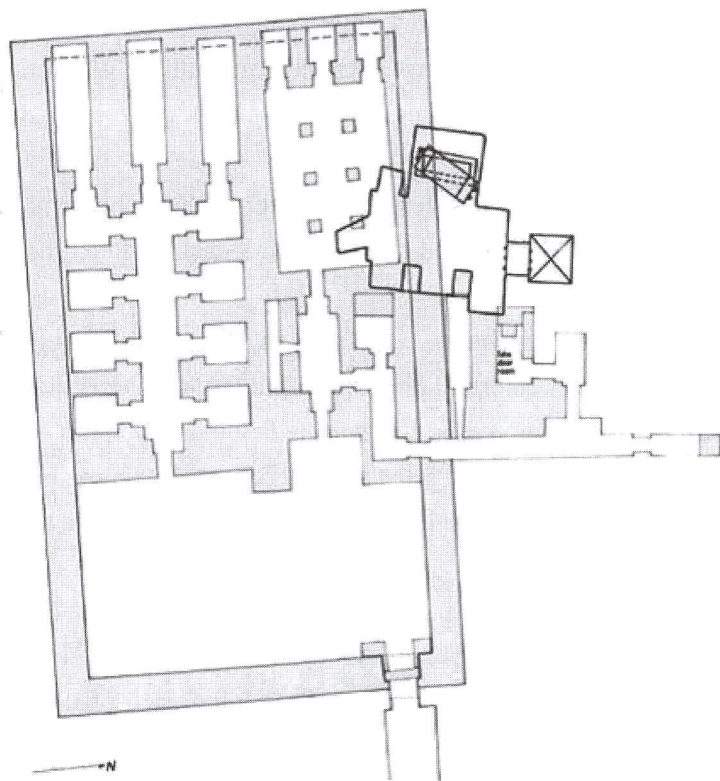


Fig. 2 a plan of the tomb of Ra-shepses after Hany Altyeb

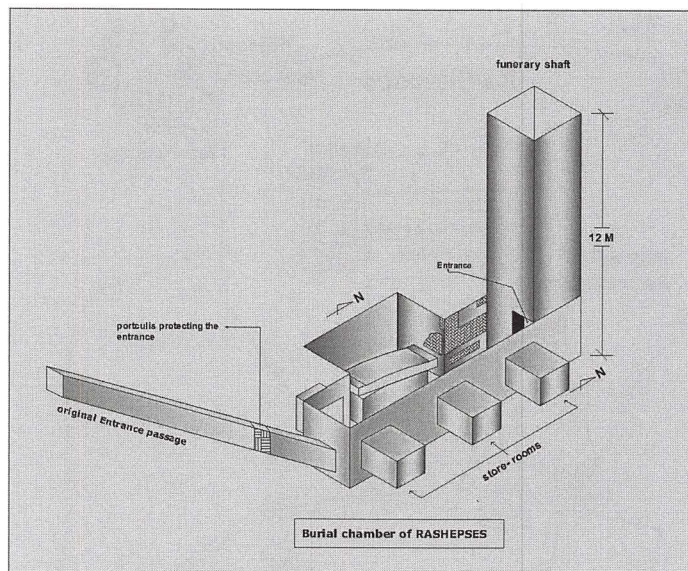


Fig. 3 A 3D Plan of the burial chamber of Rashepses by the author

3 The Wildlife Scene at the Burial Chamber of Rashepses

The burial chamber of Rashepses was found in 2012, it is considered the first decorated burial chamber that has been discovered till now. The burial chamber has a terrific wildlife scene which is very beautiful and unique (Hany Altyeb 2012) . The wildlife scene covered the south end of the west wall; it depicts rows of different animals (all males) as it can be seen in photo No 1. The scene consists of five registers, the last one for butchers, Register No 1 shows four partly damaged Oryxes, which were called ma-hedj in ancient Egyptian language. They have typically long and only slightly curved horns, they are painted white with red-brown throats and bellies with dark brown color around their eyes. Around their necks there are ropes tied to wedges in the ground.

Register 2 contains four screw-horn antelopes (ancient nudju). The front parts of their bodies are painted with bright azure color while their hind-quarters and legs are white. They are also tied with ropes around their necks to wedges.

Register 3 displays five Nubian Ibexes (wild goat, nia in ancient Egyptian language) which are marvelously colored. The first ibex is colored light brown, the second one is hidden and only its head and legs are visible. The other three are painted brown, with individual dark hairs executed by the artists. The figures of the animals provide evidence of the artist's corrections as he painted them larger at first then he had to revise his drawing at a smaller scale. The ibexes are also tied to wedges by ropes around their necks ((Hany Altyeb 2012).

Register 4 is very damaged but still shows parts of four gazelles (gehes in ancient Egyptian language) painted red, with only their bellies and mouths white. Above the first and the second gazelles are the remains of a badly damaged hieroglyphic text describing each of them as a 'young gazelle, the ropes around the necks of the gazelles can be seen but the wedges are lost ((Hany Altyeb 2012). The mural painting which is the subject of the study is found on the west south part of the southern wall of the burial chamber, it consists of five separated registers, the last one of them shows the scene of butchering, photo

No (1) and shape No 4 shows that scene. That wall painting is one of the most wonderful artistic works in ancient Egypt because the artist used unique bright colors and new techniques which were first used perfectly in that early time of the Egyptian history,

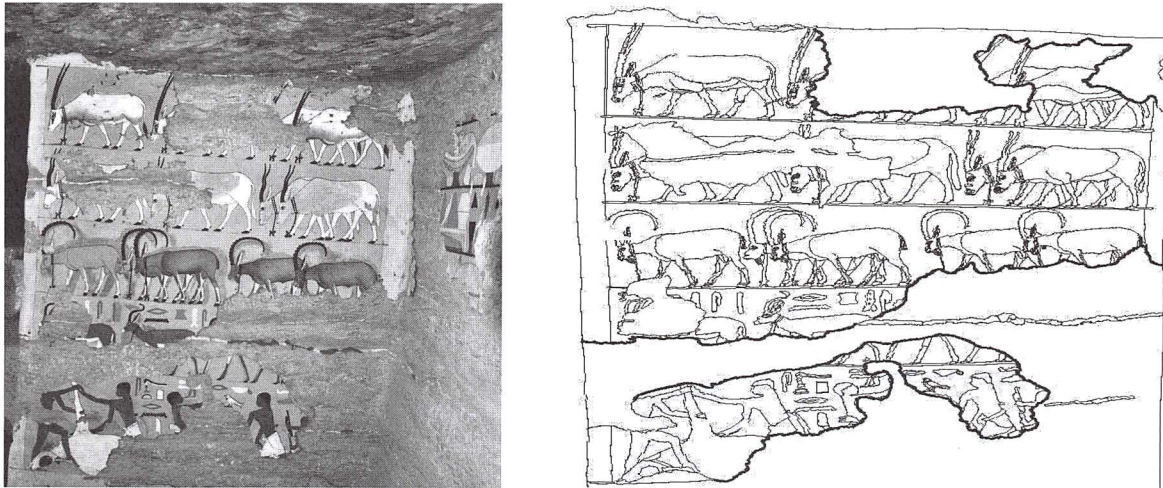


Photo.1 and Fig.3 a 3D plan of the burial chamber of Ra-shepses by the author

3. 1 The First Register

The first register of the wildlife scene shows four ibexes walking quietly and calmly, only the first ibex is nearly complete, they have long black horns and are colored white with brown that gradually turns to light red or orange color in the underlay part to show the shade of this part, the hair of the brush was used to embody the details of the orange and white hair, the artist applied the orange color directly over the painted background, that can be shown from photos (2-3-4) as the blue or grey background can be seen under the missing parts of the orange color, all the legs were colored white except the hooves which were colored in black, the artist painted the part around the eyes with black color. There are black ropes around their necks.

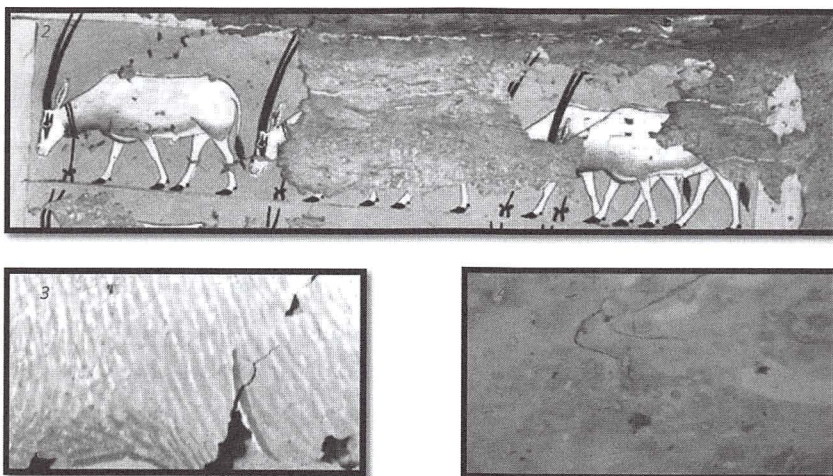


Photo.2-4 (2) shows the first register of four long horn ibexes. It shows the gradually turn from the brown to light red color to achieve the shade in the underlay part, photo (3) shows using the hair of the brush to show the details of the animal hair, photo No (4) by using digital optical microscope shows that the artist applied the orange color directly on the painted background

3.2 The Second Register

The second register shows four male ibexes with jagged horns, the bodies were colored in white and light blue colors, the light blue wasn't widely used to color animals in ancient Egypt, the heads were sometimes colored in light blue and white and sometimes in white only as shown in photo No (5). The artist could have used the fine grains of the blue pigment to get the light blue color or he may have mixed the blue and white color together. Photo No (6) shows also that the blue color was applied directly on the white color, that may have also been a way to get the light blue color. The horns and hooves were colored in black, the artist tried to make embodiment by using a gradual change in the blue color grade, The ibexes were shown walking quietly and calmly without a shepherd. The last two ibexes are nearly complete. However, the first one is nearly missing and the second is nearly half missing.

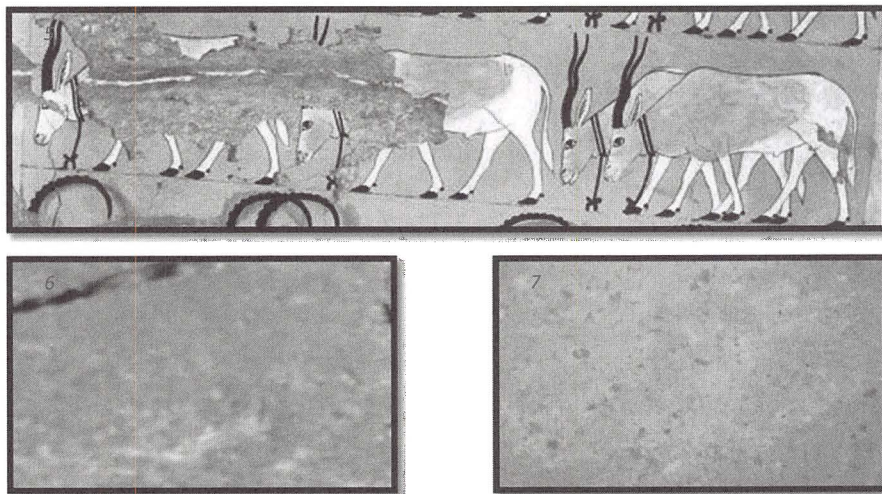


Photo 5-7 (5) shows the register of white and light blue ibexes, photo No (6) shows that fine grains were used to get the light blue color, photo No(7) by using a digital optical microscope shows that the blue pigment was applied directly on the white pigment and that may lead to get the light blue pigment.

3.3 The third register

The third register shows that the artist made a correction, perhaps he started painting the scene in big size first but he found out that it wouldn't be suitable for the scene altogether so he decided to reshape the scene to be smaller and suitable for the size of the scene. (that is clear on the edges of the animals.) The correction by using the brush can be seen, the scene in the third register shows five ibexes, the first one was colored with a plain yellow color without using any shade to show the details of the body, whilst the other four ibexes were different, the head and neck of one of them was colored in the same yellow color without details. The other three are a clear proof on the marvelous skill of the artist, he used the brown color and the yellow color in different grades to show the imperceptible details of the three ibexes. The hair of the brush was used also to show the hair of the ibexes, that ensures the strength and well building of their bodies, white color was used with yellow color to paint the legs of the first ibex whilst the white color and the brown color were also used.

3.4 The fourth register

The fourth register of the wildlife scene shows a group of four gazelles, unfortunately most of the plaster is missing in that register however the remains of the scene shows four red colored mountain gazelles, that kind of animals is called *Gazella gazelle*, it was found in upper Egypt in that time. (Christian Darwish, 1990). Dark red was used to paint the bodies of the animals. However, the underlay parts and the mouths were painted with white color and the legs were painted with white and dark red colors, whilst the hoofs and horns were colored black. There is a register of Hieroglyphic writing painted with different colors such as black, orange and white, photos from 15-21 show the details of register four

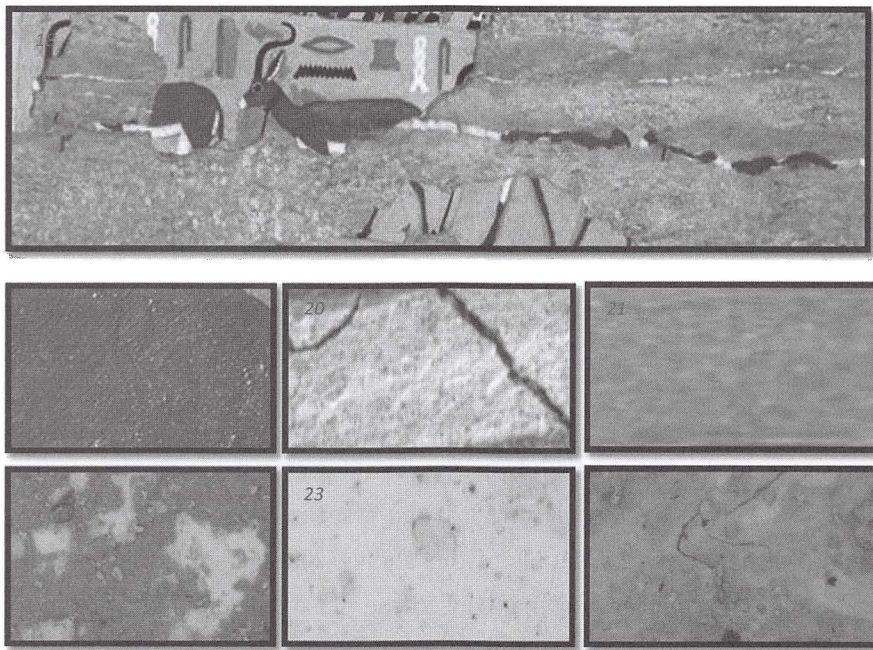


Photo.18-24 (18) shows the remains of four gazelles colored in dark red and white, photos No (19-21) show the dark red, white and orange colors in big size, photos from (22-24) by digital optical microscope show the application of the dark red, white and orange color on the painted background.

3.5 The back ground

The background of the scene was painted in one color (grey), which helps the wildlife scene colors to appear brightly, although the skill and talent of the artist is very clear, the thin plaster layer is one of the fatal disadvantage of the mural paintings at the burial chamber. The artist tried to choose the best layer of the bedrock to carve the burial chamber, then he did his best to prepare the surface before applying the plaster. Due to there not being many faults on the surface, he applied a very thin layer of plaster, of course he wasn't aware about the presence of clay minerals in the bedrock which caused the plaster layer to separate and fall down in the presence of varying humidity and temperature, that can be shown from photos (25- 26). The last thing is that the black color was used to color all the horns and hoofs of the animals, the black color was also applied directly on the painted background, that shows that the artist tried to be realistic.

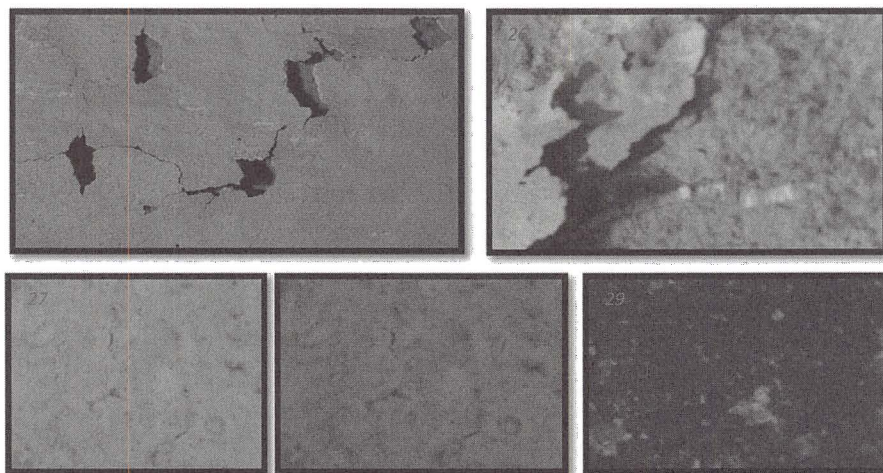


Photo.25-29 (25) shows the grey color of the background, photo No (26) shows the thin thickness of the plaster layer, photos (27-28) by using digital optical microscope show the varieties of the color grades between the background and the places where the corrections were done, photo No (29) by using digital optical microscope shows the black color that used to color the hoofs, ropes and horns of al animals.

4 Conclusion

From the previous study, it can be shown that Ra-shepses burial chamber is the oldest decorated burial chamber that has been discovered till now. It is the first time to see the ancient Egyptian artist using colors to make shadows that show the details of the bodies. The ancient artist paved the surface of the bedrock very well to apply the plaster and that caused the plaster layer to be very thin about one mm in some places, that also caused the plaster to fall down easily. The ancient artist colored the background before applying the colors of the wildlife scene. The ancient artist may have mixed the colors to get new colors such as light blue and light brown before applying them on the plaster.

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Artistic Study of the Wildlife Scene at the Burial Chamber of Rashepses in Saqqara, Egypt

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