



The painted tomb-chapel of Nebamun

In December 2008 the famous wall paintings of Nebamun will go back on display at the British Museum, as **Richard Parkinson** describes.



Looking northwards to the hills of Dra Abu el-Naga. Photograph: Richard Parkinson

In 1820 Giovanni d'Athanasio discovered an intact tomb-chapel from the late Eighteenth Dynasty somewhere near Luxor, and quickly removed various scenes from the mud-plaster walls. Eleven of these were acquired by the British Museum, and have become some of the most familiar works of Egyptian art. Despite their fragmentary condition they were quickly recognised as outstanding paintings, and were continually on display until the late 1990s. Since then a major conservation project in the Museum (see cover photograph) has consolidated the surfaces and remounted many of the paintings, so that they can be re-displayed, not as isolated fragments but as parts of the decorated walls of an Egyptian tomb-chapel.

Recent archival work has confirmed Lise Manniche's earlier suggestion that the tomb-chapel was in the northern part of the Theban necropolis, but the precise location remains unknown. Various strands of evidence suggest that it was probably in the area of the current Spanish–Egyptian excavations (see 'Digging Diary' p.26) at Dra Abu el-Naga. The tomb commemorated Nebamun, a grain accountant of the Temple of Amun, who probably worked late in the reign of Amenhotep III, and the damage and restoration to some scenes shows that the tomb must have remained open until after the Amarna Period.

Over the past seven years, scientific analysis in the Museum's laboratories has revealed that the painters used a very standard palette of pigments, and the exuberant aesthetic effects of the paintings were created by an assured draughtsmanship and almost unparalleled technical skills. The freedom of the compositions and the lively details make the scenes hugely appealing, and the handling

of the textures – especially on the various animals – is remarkable in any age.

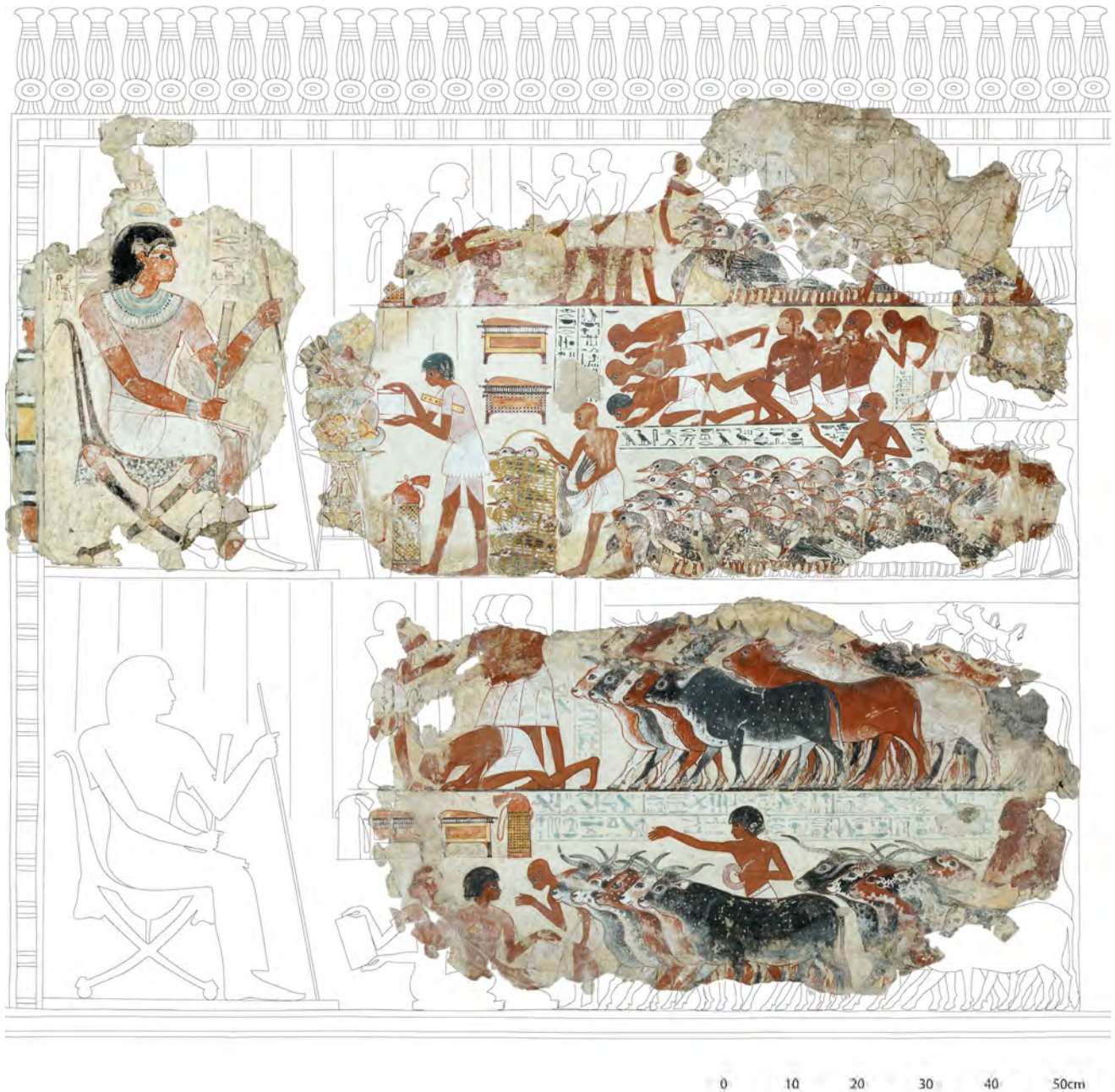
One of our aims has been to recreate the sense of the paintings' position in a small, intimate and highly decorated space, and the evocative but simple gallery design will be complemented by an animated 'walk-through' reconstruction of the tomb-chapel and its location. This will be viewed in the gallery and will also be available in an interactive version on the Museum's website. By such means we hope to give back to the paintings their architectural setting and their position in the Egyptian landscape. Next to the paintings, a display



Karen Birkhölzer and Richard Parkinson inspecting one of the paintings during the conservation process



The scene of Nebamun inspecting the produce of the estates, reconstructed from three fragments, together with two details of the lively geese and cattle he is inspecting. Reconstruction drawing by Claire Thorne and Richard Parkinson





The famous scene of Nebamun hunting in the marshes, with two details of the wildlife surrounding him: a Plain Tiger butterfly and a flying bird





Detail of the scene showing Nebamun's 'garden of the west': a pool full of fowl and Tilapia fish



A detail of an agricultural scene, showing two hinnies (offspring of a male horse and a female donkey) eating under a sycamore tree

of some 150 contemporaneous artefacts will suggest to the visitor the intense realism of these paintings, but the artefacts will also remind visitors that these scenes present an idealised world-view of a small elite, and that most people's experience of life was not necessarily the celebration of leisure and prestige that the eternally young Nebamun enjoys.

The main aim, however, is to make these paintings fully accessible as masterpieces of Egyptian art. The gallery will have a Braille guide for visually impaired visitors, podcasts will be available on the Museum website, and the Department of Art History at the Open University (www.open.ac.uk/Arts/arthistory/index.html) will run a certificate course about the paintings. The gallery itself is due to open in early December 2008.

□ Richard Parkinson is a Curator in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum. Related publications on the Nebamun paintings include: Richard Parkinson, *The Painted Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun* (British Museum Press and American University in Cairo Press 2008); for children: Meredith Hooper, *The Tomb of Nebamun: Explore an Ancient Egyptian Tomb* (British Museum Press 2008); A Middleton and K Uprichard (eds), *The Nebamun Wall Paintings: Conservation, Scientific Analysis and Redisplay* (British Museum Press and Archetype Press, in press). Illustrations, unless otherwise indicated, © The British Museum. Photographs of the conserved paintings are available at: www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database