



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

March 2021 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

“The Life Cycle of Theban Tomb 16”

Dr Suzanne Onstine

At the beginning of March Suzanne Onstine

(<https://www.memphis.edu/history/faculty/faculty/suzanne-onstine.php>) came to talk to us (via Zoom) at the Essex Egyptology Group about her team’s work at Theban Tomb 16 (<https://www.instagram.com/thebantomb16/>), where they have been working since 2008. She told us that she chose the title of her talk to emphasise how they are looking at all of the phases of use of this tomb. There’s a tendency in Egyptology to only consider the initial occupant of a tomb – so for this tomb that would imply that only the original Ramesside occupier was important. But she feels that even though that is one thing that needs investigation it’s also important to study the other phases of the life cycle of the tomb – later re-use, and even the looting. All of the phases are interesting and important, not just the initial burial.

Theban Tomb 16 is in Dra Abu el-Naga near the road that runs to the Valley of the Kings, and the road to Deir el Bahri – so as Onstine pointed out most of us who have visited Egypt have probably gone past it or possibly even stopped next to it without realising (as it’s situated between two alabaster factories). She showed us a photo of it taken from above sometime before 2007 where it is right in the middle of a whole collection of modern buildings. In 2007 the houses in this area were cleared away (but not the alabaster factories) as part of an Egyptian government programme to protect the monuments in the area.



View towards TT16
through the gap in the
modern buildings
©Dick Sellicks 2003

There is an enclosure wall around the tomb which had trapped debris in the area immediately over the tomb, and the destruction of the houses created even more debris. This meant that when they started work there their first job was clearing off the hillside to get to the entrance to the tomb. Now that it's clear of debris within the enclosure wall the entrance and the courtyard in front of it is clearly visible. Onstine told us that there is still some ancient mudbrick in the wall, which is built into the wall of the modern alabaster workshop! She did say that there's no problem with those alabaster factories still being there – the tomb is behind them, and all the activity of both the craftspeople and the tourists takes place at the front.

There were several phases of use of Theban Tomb 16 – it began in the New Kingdom, in the reign of Ramesses II, as a tomb built for a couple called Panehsy and Tarenu. In the Third Intermediate Period it was re-used for secondary burials, and there is also some evidence for later period (such as the Ptolemaic or Roman times) re-use. And then we fast-forward to modern times, when during the late 1800s or early 1900s the tomb was looted. It was then looted again, probably in the 1970s. The second phase of looting is the one where some of the scenes from the walls were removed – and Onstine said it's thought to be in the early 70s because it was in 1972 that it became illegal under international law to remove artefacts from Egypt. So the removal of these scenes was part of a last mad dash to get stuff out of Egypt before it became a crime to do so. That was made easier than you'd expect as there wasn't a door on the tomb until the 1980s.

As well as having been looted twice in modern times the tomb has also been excavated to at least some extent several times. The IFAO worked a single season in 1928, and the next work was in the 1950s or 60s. This was probably done by the Egyptian government of the time, although the documentation of it is slender it is the sort of conservation work that was being done by the government in that period. The work that they did was to clear out the second room inside the tomb and put a cement floor down plus some steps to get into the tomb. After that a plan was drawn up by an archaeologist called Frederica Kampp. It wasn't entirely accurate because there were human remains covering the floors of the corridor so it was hard to move about and study the tomb – but it was representative of the layout and formed a good starting point.

Onstine said her team began their work there in 2008, having picked this tomb when she was looking to find a tomb that needed epigraphic documentation as well as conservation. They began their work by making a new plan – Peter Robinson who drew up this plan was in our audience for the talk! Onstine showed us a picture of it – the tomb has two main chambers joined by a short corridor that turns at a right angle between them, and then there is a longer corridor which is not straight and smooth-sided and leads from the second chamber down to the burial chamber. This second corridor is where the looters left all the detritus of their looting – coffin bits, human remains etc, to a depth of 80cm or more on the floor. The original burial wasn't intact and so Onstine said that they can't say much about that but they have discovered a lot of interesting information from the later phases and the original decoration.

Having introduced the tomb to us and given us a broad overview of how it was used and re-used, Onstine now moved on to talk about the different phases in more detail. The earliest phase was the burial of Panehsy and Tarenu for whom the tomb was built – though as she'd just said, there is nothing to say about the original burial. However, the decoration does survive to a large extent and tells us quite a bit about the people it was made for. Tarenu is shown holding a sistrum, as she was a Chantress – probably of Amun at Karnak. And Onstine said the couple may have met “at work,” because Panehsy was definitely connected to Karnak by one of his titles – he was an Overseer of Chanters. In the Q&A Onstine came back to his name – it means “the Nubian,” and is quite common. Onstine said she had given a talk

called “No, Not That Panehsy” because there are at least two more famous Panehsy’s that people tend to assume this one is! Panehsy and Tarenu were particularly interesting to Onstine because she did her thesis on Chantresses – and while doing that research she became aware that sometimes (although rarely) men, like Panehsy, were Chanters. Panehsy in particular must have been important because he’s an overseer.

The first scene she showed us was of a long procession of priests leading towards a temple and carrying a representation of Amun. At the head of the procession were Panehsy and his brother Pawah. It’s very unusual to see the tomb owner and his brother depicted in a scene like this. The temple they are going towards is depicted in the scene, and Onstine said it seems to be Karnak – the temple facade looks like we know Karnak looked in Ramesside times.

Panehsy was also a Priest of Amenhotep of the Forecourt (n p³ wb³). The forecourt that is referred to is probably a space where there was an oracle figure of Amenhotep I that would be encountered by worshippers. Amenhotep I was deified and worshipped long after his death as a sort of patron saint who could intercede on behalf of the more normal people of Egyptian society (as was his mother Ahmose-Nefertari). This cult is often associated with Deir el-Medina, but it’s a wider phenomenon than this and many people are buried with titles to do with this cult who are not connected to Deir el-Medina. The oracle figure itself is a little seated statue of Amenhotep I, and it’s found depicted in scenes and on ostraca related to the cult.

As well as the scene with Karnak temple there is another temple depicted in the tomb artwork – Onstine thinks this may be the mortuary temple of Amenhotep I. Next to it is a scene of Panehsy with an offering table containing 3 loaves of bread and a duck – this is an image of the daily offering a cult temple, and so Panehsy was probably a priest working within this larger cult apparatus of Amenhotep I.

These depictions of his work in his tomb where they would be present with him for eternity suggests that Panehsy’s piety and job were deeply important to him. The place that he chose to build his tomb reinforces this sense of the man – it is within visual distance of the mortuary temple of Amenhotep I. There’s nothing visible of the temple above ground today, but it was only 5 minutes walk from TT16. There are two other structures dedicated to Amenhotep I in this region – one where the Deir el-Bahri causeway runs, and one under the Thutmose III temple. And while the tomb of Amenhotep I isn’t known for sure all three possibilities are close by – these are KV39 (which is not actually in the Valley of the Kings), AN-B and K.93.11. So this region of Dra Abu el-Naga is clearly associated with Amenhotep I during the Ramesside period. It’s another nexus for the worship of Amenhotep I, particularly in an oracular manifestation and separate from Deir el-Medina. Onstine thinks that choosing this particular hill for his tomb was a sign that Panehsy wanted to be close to his work and still a part of this cult.

Yet another scene within the tomb backs up this idea that Panehsy’s work was key to his identity. The second room of the tomb has very severe smoke damage but they have been able to use digital epigraphy techniques to trace the outlines of the scenes. One of these shows Panehsy making an offering to Ahmose-Nefertari (mother of Amenhotep I and a part of that cult). The real emphasis in the tomb is Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari – no mention of the king under whom Panehsy lived (Ramesses II), instead the focus is on the king he served.

The decoration is not solely focused on Panehsy’s role as priest, however. There are also a selection of funerary scenes and daily life motifs as well. These include two scenes of Hathor, Mistress of the West, coming out of the mountain – a standard scene but having two is unusual and Onstine said they don’t have an explanation for this. Both scenes are sadly damaged – in the first room parts of the plaster fell

off the wall prior to the 1920s, and the wall was restored in the 1950s conservation work. But they have managed to find some more pieces of this scene which they plan to replace into the wall. In fact this was one of the first things they found. They started excavation proper during the Revolution in 2011 – they were already in Luxor when things started in Cairo so just had to wait it out there before they could start work. And once they did get into the tomb to begin one of the first things they found was a bit of plaster with Hathor from this scene!

The second scene is in the second room, which as she said earlier was very damaged by smoke (and also by removal of parts of the scenes). So it's harder to tell for sure that it is this Hathor emerging from the mountain scene, but there are elements which are very like the parts of the scene. For instance there are papyrus clumps which were usually to Hathor in her role as protecting the king in the marshes. And in this area of Thebes this is a very common motif.

Another standard scene is also duplicated – this is the scene of the goddess Nut in a tree pouring water. Nut is a protective goddess associated with rebirth because the sun god passes through her and is born every morning. In chapter 59 of the Book of the Dead she is said to pour cool water for the deceased, which became associated with the sycamore tree in Egyptian thought. Sycamores can only grow with human assistance in the Egyptian environment – they need watering a lot and need human intervention to fertilise their flowers. They are commonly found in gardens associated with pools of water. As well as the particular features of the sycamore that associate it with this scene of Nut, trees in general are also a blessing in a country like Egypt because they provide shade.

Again Onstine said they have no theory yet for why there are two representations of this scene in the tomb. In the first room Panehsy and his ba are shown holding out cups to the tree to receive the water from the goddess. In the second scene Panehsy and Tarenu are both depicted sitting in front of the tree on chairs with their feet on footstools. They drink the water the goddess is pouring from golden goblets. In this scene in front of the tree is a white rectangular object – Onstine said that this represents a little enclosure wall to keep a pool of water close to the roots of the tree. So in this scene the goddess is receiving care from human beings, and in turn she cares for them by pouring water for them.

There are also some humorous details to some scenes that give some light relief in amongst the more serious funerary scenes. These evolved from the daily life scenes of 18th Dynasty tombs, and the humour revolves around animals. In one scene there's a donkey lying down refusing to move with grain heaped up on his back. The donkey is braying and the man next to it is futilely trying to beat the donkey and make it get up to transport the grain – bringing some humour to a scene of harvesting (and presumably a reaction of wry recognition for the average Egyptian). Another scene is of ploughing where two plough teams have met head to head. One of the animals on one plough team has lain down on the job, and the ploughman is struggling to get it to get up and get moving. And the animals on the other team are epically rolling their eyes – Onstine joked that this was the “world's first side-eye!”

Onstine now moved on to phase 2 of the life cycle of TT16. This was the secondary burials, which had been extensively looted in the past and Onstine's team worked on clearing them from the corridor between 2011 and 2018. She started by showing us a photo of the state the corridor floor was in when they first entered the corridor. The whole thing was covered with linen wrappings, broken pieces of bone, pieces of cartonnage and some other artefacts. Everything was broken up and scattered all over the corridor in a very poor state.

The most common artefacts were pieces of the burial assemblages – bits of coffin, bits of cartonnage. The most common form of cartonnage that they found was not

“real” cartonnage – normally it is linen papier mâché which has been moulded over a mud form and then removed to use for the burial. The stuff they found here was mostly mud with no linen and a layer of plaster covering it which was then painted. She said that there was so much of it that it was clearly a construction style rather than something aberrant like some dirty pieces of cartonnage. She showed us a slide with several fragments of them – almost all are only a few cm long, and they are generally colourfully decorated. Despite being small pieces they are big enough for the decoration styles to be dated – there are multiple periods represented but the majority of it dates to the Third Intermediate Period. Coffins from this period generally have very busy decoration with lots of motifs and colours. Despite being mud and plaster these fragments also have the slightly raised relief that you often see on these coffins (where the pigment is built up on a figure to make it stick out). As well as the cartonnage they’ve also found some fragments of wooden coffins – again in a typical Third Intermediate Period style. There is a lot of this material, from the human remains (that she discussed later) she said they’ve estimated 100-200 individuals were buried here and this is backed up by the amount of linen, cartonnage, and coffin fragments that they’ve found.

Onstine said that they’ve also found a lot of shabtis. It was common in the Third Intermediate Period and later to be buried with lots of shabtis each – a complete set might number 401, or one for every day of the year plus overseers to organise them. So in any tomb of the period there are lots to find even after looters have been through the tombs. Again most in this tomb date to the Third Intermediate Period. Most are fragmentary, but she showed us some examples of well preserved ones. The higher status ones were made of faience but less good quality ones were made of pottery – one of her examples was a pottery one which was part of a set (for one person) where they’ve found quite a few of the set. Another example dated to the 25th Dynasty and it had seedbag on the back of the shabti indicating what job he could do. She also showed us 25 tiny shabtis belonging to someone called Ankh-en-Khonsu which dated to the Third Intermediate Period. She said that on her first visit to the UK when she went to the Petrie Museum she saw more of this set of shabtis – Petrie had bought 5 of them which are now in the museum. This helps date the looting of the tomb – because Petrie bought these on the art market they must’ve been removed from the tomb before then (but not too long before).

There have been other small finds, discovered while sifting the debris. Onstine said they have several Egyptian workers with very good eyesight working for them who’ve found these. Two of them are small scarabs with the name of Thutmose III on them – she said not to worry about this with regards to dating the tomb, there is a lot of material from the Third Intermediate Period which has his name on it. As with Amenhotep I he was looked back to by later people as a legendary king (this is something that also came in up in Stephanie Boonstra’s talk about scarabs, see my writeup:

<https://writeups.talesfromthetwolands.org/2019/12/01/reconstructing-the-mid-second-millennium-bce-using-scarab-amulets-stephanie-boonstra/>).

Another small find is a glass pendant, which Onstine is still looking for parallels to so that she can date it. Given it is made of glass it must be fairly late, but so far it seems to be unique.

The last of the artefacts she showed us was the single piece of decorated linen that they have found. Again it’s fragmentary, and the part of the design that’s on this is of a crocodile standing upright on his tail with a man standing in front of it. She showed us an example of the whole scene from another site – the whole design shows a man flanked by two upright crocodiles. It’s not known what the purpose of these cloths was, but one has been found wrapped round a Book of the Dead which suggests some function relating to that funerary text.

Another part of the funerary assemblages that she told us about were little fragments of leaves, that Amr Shahat (now at UCL but once was a student of Onstine's) has been able to do archaeobotanical research on. There were enough of these leaf fragments that it was clear that these weren't just random leaves which had blown into tomb. Some of them were also found wrapped around stick, so they were clearly part of made objects. She showed us an example of the sort of thing she thinks they once were which is now in the Cairo Museum – this is a whole layer of wrappings round a coffin made from garlands of leaves stitched together into a protective coating. The leaves are mostly *Persea* leaves, but also possibly some olive leaves.

Onstine said that the human remains were one of the biggest surprises when they were clearing the tomb. She knew there were a lot there before they began work, but hadn't fully appreciated quite how many people had been buried in this tomb until they cleared it out. As she'd said earlier in the talk there were 100-200 individuals (and as they are all fragmentary there could be more). Many patterns have emerged as they've examined them and she told us about a few of them. One oddity is that there are lots of bones of children, which isn't usual (because they disintegrate more quickly than adult bones and so don't show up as much in the archaeological record as they "should" given infant mortality). Here they have found quite a lot of bones from young children from neo-natal to toddler years. All ages are represented however, and the gender split is 60% women to 40% men.

They were able to use a portable veterinary x-ray machine to further investigate these remains – looking at the mummification techniques and the pathologies that were present. Onstine said they had a good team of experts who worked on this area. Arthritis was prevalent in the skeletons, as well as the usual sorts of traumatic injuries (like stress fractures in the lower legs from a lot of walking). There were also several cases of anaemia, which was surprising – in the questions someone asked if this could be a sign of the parasitic disease schistosomiasis but she said they can't tell as they haven't been able to do the sort of analysis that would be necessary to find out. There were also two examples of women who had died in childbirth – she came back to these a bit later in the talk as it's very rare to find examples where you are sure that this is what had happened.

They could also investigate different aspects of funerary practices. One of these was the use of prostheses for the afterlife. There are several examples of this – for instance one was a mummified bundle of sticks. The x-ray found no bones in there, and it has been wrapped to look like a limb which has been replaced for the afterlife. There are also a number of torsos with sticks running down the spines – these were inserted during the mummification process. Most of those torsos belonged to adults (although there was one child), and one of them had severe arthritis of the spine so this person was probably quite stooped in life. Onstine said there are still a lot of questions as to precisely what the purpose of these practices were, but the general idea seems to be to repair, replace or stabilise parts of the body for the afterlife. She said that this shows the level of care the embalmers were putting into each mummification. They didn't just use "factory settings" for the mummification, they tailored it to each individual to address the problems they'd had in life. Which shows us something of what mummification meant to the Egyptians and humanises it as well. This was a caring and human way to treat your deceased family members.

Another thing they have found is signs of differences in mummification techniques. For instance normally the brain is removed through the nose, but in 12 skulls they have found an identical rectangular hole in the soft palette which has been used instead. This isn't seen anywhere else, and Onstine speculated about what it might mean – perhaps the preferred technique of one workshop? Perhaps a more broad regional variation? She thinks that perhaps it suggests that the person in charge of

arrangements in this part of the necropolis sent people off to his preferred embalming workshop who had this different technique.

There are more signs that help with the dating of these burials, as well. The organs were replaced back into the cavity, so there are no canopic jars. This was the usual practice in the Third Intermediate Period, as was adding little wax figurines of Osiris which have also been found amongst the remains.

Onstine now returned to the two examples of women dying in childbirth. The first example was just a pelvis, which had been tied together with string during the mummification process. The ligament which would normally hold it together was broken, which is not something that would've happened during mummification so presumably happened while the woman was giving birth. They sent an x-ray of the pelvis to some gynaecological experts, who confirmed it was the pelvis of a young woman and that it had been restored to close to normality with this binding. This is another example of the embalmers taking care to correct problems with an individual's body during mummification so that they'd have a good afterlife.

The other example was a torso where a lot of the mummified flesh was still present, including the genitalia (she didn't show us a photo of this as she said it's pretty graphic). This clearly shows that the woman died with a distended vagina, at a level which suggests that she died within 24 hours of giving birth (as it would've shrunk back further towards normal after this). There's no sign of a fetus inside the body, instead the whole of her abdominal cavity is packed with mud and sand. Onstine speculated that this perhaps had something to do with the fertility symbolism of Nile mud. And pointed out that this is again an example of care being taken to restore this individual to wholeness in some sense in the afterlife. These two finds are also a very rare indication of this aspect of women's lives and deaths in archaeological record – despite it being something we all know happens, there are few pieces of direct evidence of women dying in childbirth.

Onstine finished up her talk with a discussion of what they are doing next at the tomb, which is to work on conservation and repair of the damage caused by the looters. They've worked on some small test spots but hope to start this work properly in the coming year (pandemic and funding permitting). They will be focusing on treating the looter damage, much of which was done since the conservation work that took place in the 50s and 60s (which they know as there are photos showing these scenes intact at this time). The pattern of the looting is clearly driven by what would be suitable for the art market – the bits that have been taken are things like heads and torsos, while many of the bits left behind (or in pieces on the floor) are the “boring bits.” The inscriptions and any unique scenes have also been left behind – they might be identifiable and so it removes any plausible deniability as to where the art came from. The plan for the conservation work is to replace the bits of plaster they've found when clearing the tomb and to stabilise the tomb so that more plaster doesn't fall out.

In the Q&A she was also asked if they were going to try and clean up the smoke damage – they'd like to and have done some tests, but they fear it might be impossible at the moment. The work done in the 1950s possibly used chemicals that have stuck to the surface and so now it might not be possible to clean that off to get at the soot which is underneath. She did say that if they had more money available then they'd be able to get in the laser cleaning people, who might be able to deal with that. The smoke damage itself is likely the result of multiple years of people going into the tomb with torches – both in the early looting and millennia before during the internment of the secondary burials. There are also possibly signs of a fire before those secondary burials were put in (the secondary burials weren't burnt so it must've been after that).

This was a really interesting talk – I enjoyed hearing about the whole of the use of this one tomb rather than just the oldest stuff with the rest being dismissed. I also liked the way she drew out what she has been learning about the real people who were buried there from all this fragmentary evidence – like Panehsy’s strong attachment to his job, and the attempt to correct disabilities for a better afterlife for the people buried during the secondary burial phase.