

## Essex Egyptology Group Meeting Report – Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2025

### Lucia Gahlin - The Colourful Tombs of Beni Hassan

At the beginning of July we welcomed a familiar face when Lucia Gahlin came to Witham to speak about the Middle Kingdom tombs at Beni Hassan. Lucia started with the intriguing fact that these tombs are on the eastern bank of the Nile rather than the more traditional western bank where death and burial are associated with the setting of the sun. At Beni Hassan the only good limestone was on the eastern bank so that's where the tombs went but their creators came up with a clever way round the problem, as Lucia revealed later.

The tombs date from the early Middle Kingdom (c2000 BCE) at the time of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> dynasties and were built for the governors (often described as the 'great overlord of the nome') and officials of the Oryx nome who lived in the nearby vanished settlement of Hebenou. The governors' tombs are high in the cliffs and are reached by 300 steps. There are less luxurious tombs lower down the cliff and some Old Kingdom burials in the valley floor.



The start of a long walk to the cliffs

There are 39 tombs on the upper level of which four are open to visitors. In chronological order they are: No2 – Amenemhat (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty); No3 – Khnumhotep II (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty); No 15 – Beget III and No 17 – Kheti (11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> dynasties). The families of these men would also have been buried in these tombs. Visitors can walk into the decorated tomb chapels where, in ancient times, people would also have visited to say the names of the dead and give offerings of food. The burial shafts were cut down into the rock and are not decorated. Some of these shafts are very deep. For example, that of Kheti goes down 28 meters. These shafts were left open in the recent past but now they are covered, much to the relief of modern visitors.

The original epigraphy of the tombs was carried out by Percy Newberry in the 1890s. This has now been repeated by a team from Macquarie University which gives a much clearer view of the artwork. A reconstruction of the tomb of Khnumhotep II is in the Grand Egyptian Museum at Giza. John Garstang excavated the lower cemetery. Though the shaft tombs there were not decorated he found intact funerary equipment including many models, such as this one in the British Museum.



Brewing and butchering

The walls of the nomarch's tombs list their many titles such as overseer of the great army, overseer of the priests of Khnum, overseer of the entire Oryx nome and true acquaintance of the king. In the First Intermediate Period nomarchs were given a variety of titles to reflect the real power which they exercised in the absence of a unifying pharaoh and these titles continued to be used by the nomarchs of the Middle Kingdom, despite the fact that their power was reduced. It is only in the later tombs that these titles are 'reduced'. Khnumhotep II is now the mayor of Menat-Khufu rather than a great overlord.

Lucia now mentioned the ingenious method the tombs' creators used to get round the 'problem' of these tombs being on the east rather than the west bank of the Nile: the false door, through which the living and the spirit of the dead could make contact, was placed on the western wall of the chapels.

The tombs are decorated in a provincial style close to the style of the First Intermediate period rather than the more formal style of the Old Kingdom. Decoration of the chapels includes the khekher frieze at the top of the walls which is a reminder of the vegetation which would grow out of the top of wattle and daub walls in the houses of the living. The vegetation has been stylised as tied bunches.



Khekher frieze in the tomb of Seti I

There are features, however, which are specific to these tombs such as the pairs of wrestlers. The tomb of Beqet III boasts 220 pairs while other tombs have smaller numbers. They suggest the armies of which the tomb owners were overseers. There are also archers and soldiers who attack fortified structures. Nubians, Asiatics and Lybians are represented as being part of the army. These tombs were built at a time of peace but there must have been memories of recent conflict.



Wrestlers in tomb of Khnumhotep

Other images in the tombs show the traditional activities of fowling and fishing, huge quantities of food being offered and splendid clothing. However, Khnumhotep's dress shows innovation: he is shown wearing a see-through linen over kilt for the first time. The hunting scenes in his tomb also show innovation as he is shown hunting and using a clap-net to catch birds. In previous representations it is the hunters rather than the tomb owner who are doing the hunting. Perhaps the deceased will trap the bad spirits on his journey through the underworld in the same way that he traps fish.

The families of these tomb owners are shown in the tombs with family trees. The women wear Old Kingdom style light sheath dresses while the sons are shown carrying out priestly duties. In the tomb of Beqet III there are women gymnasts juggling, leapfrogging and spinning. Agriculture and manufacture also feature: vegetables are grown, cattle counted, fabric woven and wine produced creating an impression of prosperity and comfort – though the baboons get to the sycamore trees first to enjoy the figs.