THE TOMB OF NIAY (TT 286) AT LUXOR

Theban Tomb 286, the tomb of Niay at Dra Abu el-Naga in Luxor, presented one heck of a challenge for ARCE. Large chunks of beautiful funerary scenes were missing, painted plaster was peeling away at the edges, and cracks in the ceiling threatened to pull down the overhead patterned decoration. For Khadija Adam, ARCE Conservation Manager at Luxor, it was perfect.

Khadija helps train Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities conservators in Luxor through ARCE’s Conservation Field Schools.

The town owner, Niay, was a Scribe of

When you explore the wonderfully-decorated “Tombs of the Nobles” on the West Bank at Luxor, this is what you rarely see—dedicated teams of Egyptian professionals conserving and preparing the tombs for your visit—and posterity.

This is the small Ramesside tomb of Niay (TT 286) at Dra Abu el-Naga. Since the above photo was taken, the Conservation Field School run by the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) has put in new flooring with skirting boards to protect the base of the walls (right). Lights can attract insects, so the tomb has also been fitted with solar powered, motion-sensor lighting, which activates only when someone enters the tomb.
The eastern wall of Niay's tomb chapel displays a large bare patch where thieves had broken through from outside. The bottom register shows Niay and his father adoring the sacred barque of Sokar (out of frame). These paintings were threatened by previous interventions and required some ingenuity on the part of Khadija Adam and her trainee conservators.

The eastern wall breach had been sealed with cement and stone by previous missions (above left). This was problematic as cement absorbs moisture differently from the surrounding mud and plaster, and so can cause cracking as it expands and contracts. The solution: take a plaster cast of a section of exposed bedrock outside the tomb and attach it to the stone blocking with a layer of mortar. This was then coloured to match the other bare bedrock in the tomb (above right).

The cement patches connecting with the tomb's fragile paintings were carefully chipped away, and the surrounding paintings stabilised to the wall with a thin layer of mortar that was applied along the edges of the plaster. The team's efforts not only met the tomb's conservation needs but made it more attractive for tourists as well.

the Table (sesh udjhu ḫḥ) and likely shared his tomb with his wife Tabes ḫḥ, who held the title, “Singer (shemayet ḫḥ) of Amun. The tomb dates from the 19th or 20th Dynasties (see picture caption on page 29).

Niay's title, Scribe of the Table, is sufficiently broad that it could mean a number of roles and responsibilities. It could be that, on behalf of the king, Niay was responsible for the account-keeping of royal produce that went to the offering tables in one or more of Luxor's temples. It may be that Niay was in charge of the allocation of food from the table of the king to his high officials. In any case, it seems to have been an important role. Susanne Binder of Sydney's Macquarie University states that “an idea of the social significance of the bearer of the position may be gleaned from the observation that numerous titleholders also held highly demanding and prestigious positions among the highest ranks of the elite…” Niay's high status certainly entitled he and his wife to a fine tomb with enviable views across the Nile and the great temples on the other side.

PROGRESS REPORT
The decorated walls and ceiling in Niay's tomb chapel consist of the base (bedrock), a preparatory layer (a mud mixture to even out the plane), a pictorial layer (plaster) and the painted layer. At-risk areas of each layer have received conservation and stabilisation attention by the Field School and information panels for visitors are in place. New
The north wall of Niay’s tomb chapel includes a niche that initially held a double statue of the tomb owner and his wife. Thieves have tunnelled into the back and side walls of the niche, looking for shiny grave goods. The “after” photo shows dark patches that used to be bare bedrock. These areas are now covered with a preparatory mud layer, similar to what the ancient tomb-builders would have applied, to create a smooth surface on which to apply a plaster base for painting.

The ARCE Luxor Conservation Field School were able to determine what the original mud mixture was and copied the formula for the patching. This mud application helps to stabilise the exposed mud and plaster edges and prevent any further fragments from flaking off.
This scene from the south wall of Niay's tomb chapel features the sycamore tree goddess pouring life-giving water into the cupped hands of a kneeling Niay and his ba, perched on a standard.

The scene is inspired by Chapter 59 of the Book of the Dead, which is titled “Spell for breathing air and having power over water”. It deals with providing the deceased with eternal life by breathing air and drinking water in the netherworld.

Scenes like this help date Niay's tomb to the Ramesside period, as the image of the ba bird drinking water poured by the sycamore tree goddess appears only from the 19th Dynasty onward.

The black-and-white photo on the left was taken by a Penn Museum (University of Pennsylvania) mission to record and conserve tomb scenes at Dra Abu el-Naga in the late 1960s. Since then, vandals have brutally damaged the scene (right).

Thanks to the kind permission from the Penn Museum, ARCE hopes to use their high-quality black-and-white images, combined with the original colouring to restore the missing sections of the painting.

Because modern conservation practice means that original tomb decoration can't be “fixed” or “touched-up”, this coloured recreation can be made digitally and printed onto a photographic panel placed in the tomb. Hopefully, modern visitors to Niay's tomb will be able to see how the completed scene once looked.

stairways have also been built leading up to the tomb. The stone for these was recycled from excavated debris that had been dumped by other expeditions at Luxor.

While TT 286 was robbed of large areas of its wall paintings, many beautiful painted scenes remain, which have been painstakingly conserved. Next comes a grand opening—and the news that Luxor has a new tourist attraction. John Shearman, ARCE's Associate Director at Luxor, is coordinating the timing with the Ministry of Antiquities—hopefully before the end of the year.

FILLING IN THE GAPS
As evidenced by the damage to the decorations, TT 286 has long attracted the wrong sort of attention. French explorer and mineralogist, Frédéric Cailliaud, gives us just one example; he carted off a painted piece for the Louvre (E 13108) in the early 19th century. It's highly likely other portions of Niay's funerary paintings are cared for in other museums and private collections, unprovenanced and waiting to be re-connected with their origins—even if that reunion is facilitated digitally (see above). We can only hope that, in time, more pieces will turn up and perhaps tells us more about Niay and the pharaoh he served.

While TT 286 has been completed (on time and under budget!), the focus for Khadija Adam and the Luxor Conservation Field School moves on to another project. You can learn more about ARCE's activities in Luxor (and throughout Egypt) at www.arce.org.

Decorated fragments like this one were dislodged when thieves hacked out larger scenes. Hundreds were found scattered in the floor debris of Niay's tomb. Where possible, pieces are reattached in their original positions on the walls using mortar.

PHOTO: KHADIJA ADAM

PHOTO: KHADIJA ADAM

PHOTO: KHADIJA ADAM

PHOTO: KHADIJA ADAM

PHOTO: KHADIJA ADAM