UPDATE FROM ARCE
CURRENT RESEARCH, EXCAVATION AND CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN EGYPT

TT 223: THE TOMB OF KARAKHAMUN

Conservation and Reconstruction of the Offering Scenes in the Entrance Area to the First Pillared Hall

Dr. Elena Pischikova, Director, South Asasif Conservation Project

It’s easy to see why the South Asasif Conservation Project (SACP) adopted this dog as their symbol. A masterpiece of 25th-Dynasty art, Karakhamun’s hunting dog, with its marvelously-curled tail, sits beneath his master’s chair in a scene in the tomb’s First Pillared Hall (see plan on page 37). The dog was discovered in the early days of the SACP’s excavation of the tomb in the summer of 2006, and gave the team hope that artistic treasures had indeed survived. A more ruined mirror image of the dog retains a vestige of colour, and reveals that the dog’s collar, stylishly wrapped three times around the neck and knotted at the back, was once painted red.

TT 223: THE TOMB OF KARAKHAMUN

Conservation and Reconstruction of the Offering Scenes in the Entrance Area to the First Pillared Hall

Dr. Elena Pischikova, Director, South Asasif Conservation Project

EGYPT’S 25th DYNASTY

The “Victory Stela” of the Nubian pharaoh Piye proudly documents his total conquest of Egypt, after the surrender of his last northern rival, the Libyan king Tefnakht at Sais. But for Piye, this wasn’t just a military victory; acting by the will of Amun, the king was set on restoring order to a politically divided Egypt which had also lost its way spiritually. In doing so, Piye founded Egypt’s 25th Dynasty.

The stela was discovered in 1862 in the ruins of the Temple of Amun at Napata, the Nubian capital from where Piye reigned.

While it seems that the Nubian pharaohs swept into Thebes with a massive sense of entitlement, considering themselves as the true successors of Egypt’s great imperial rulers, the 25th-Dynasty kings may well have had part Egyptian ancestry. Almost 400 years earlier, during the 20th Dynasty, Egyptian forces stationed in northern Nubia to manage valuable trade routes were recalled north to defend the country against a confederation of “Sea Peoples”.

It seems, however, that some of the Egyptian troops and colonists had married into the local community, and their Egyptian-Nubian descendants continued to flourish, following a fusion of cultural practices. In time, the society that had been forged by these blended families grew to become one of the most enduring kingdoms in African history, with their rulers embracing the local manifestation of Amun as their divine father. Around 743 B.C., the reigning king, Piye, sailed into the heart of Thebes and claimed the throne of Egypt.
The South Asasif Conservation Project (SACP) is an Egyptian-American mission working under the auspices of the Ministry of Antiquities and directed by the author. It was founded in 2006 with the goal of clearing, restoring and reconstructing three tombs of the Theban South Asasif necropolis. Two of these tombs date to the 25th Dynasty: that of the Mayor of Thebes and Fourth Priest of Amun, Karabasken (TT 391), and the First aq-priest of Amun, Karakhamun (TT 223). The third tomb is from the 26th Dynasty: that of the female scribe and "Chief Attendant to the God’s Wife Nitocris”, Irtieru (TT 390).

The state of the tombs at the start of the Project was heartbreaking. They had been critically damaged by floods and later occupants, and buried under the houses of a modern village. The tomb of Karakhamun had collapsed entirely and the tombs of Karabasken and Irtieru were half-buried beneath layers of debris. As several still-visible features appeared severely damaged, the tombs were widely considered to be irreparably destroyed. However, tens of thousands of carved and painted fragments of the original decoration found during the excavation of the tombs have made it possible to plan and start executing their reconstruction.

Our work was supported by three ARCE grants from the Antiquities Endowment Fund (AEF), for the conservation of Karakhamun's painted burial chamber, the vestibule of the tomb and offering scenes in the entrance area. The work is executed by members of the Ministry’s conservation team.

Although the results of the very first season in 2006 proved that—surprisingly—sizable areas of Karakhamun's tomb still remained intact, it took the SACP 11 years to clear all the spaces of the tomb. Excavation of TT 223 was finally completed in 2016.

The tomb is large. The uncovered features include the entrance area, vestibule, large open court, two pillared halls with side rooms, a multi-roomed burial compartment with a painted main burial chamber, and remains of the mud brick enclosure wall and pylons of the superstructure.

Despite severe damage to the architectural features, the amount of decorated fragments found during excavation allowed us to plan its reconstruction from the very first season of work. Close to 20,000 fragments of the limestone relief decoration, 8,000 fragments of the painted ceiling and 6,000 fragments of painted plaster in Karakhamun's burial chamber have been recovered from the debris of the shattered tomb.

Incredibly, based on the found fragments, all of the tomb’s architectural features have been identified, as well as most of the texts and images of the original decoration. Every found fragment went through the patient process of conservation and consolidation.

The next step taken by the Project team was the physical reconstruction of the tomb. Recreation and preservation of the monument in situ presents every found fragment as part of a scene or text in its original context, in the original space and on its original height. The recreation of a tomb restores the meaning and function of even the smallest fragments—including undecorated ones—by finding their original locations.

Matching the shape of broken bedrock in situ with the back of carved fragments is incredibly difficult, but plays an important part in the process of reconstruction in the original space—especially in cases when the remains of carving on a fragment are unclear or damaged (see image South Asasif is relatively unknown and rarely visited (for now). The cluster of Late Period tombs is around 300 m south of the impressive mud-brick pylon of the 25th/26th-Dynasty Tomb of Mentuemhat (TT 34) at Asasif, near Deir el-Bahari.

For years the tombs were obscured by a modern village, which was built around, and often directly on top of, the tombs. When the Tomb of Karakhamun was rediscovered in 2001, it had virtually disappeared after having collapsed in the 1990s from floods and quarrying. Information from villagers revealed that parts of the tomb had previously been used as a stable, and as a cool place for a local family to live during the heat of the Egyptian summer.

The tomb was also used during the Coptic era. Not only had soot from Coptic cooking fires obscured the tomb’s colourful paintings, but the heat from the flames had made the limestone of the walls extremely brittle.

However, even after centuries of misuse, the South Asasif Conservation Project is revealing the stunning reliefs and elegant architecture in Karakhamun’s tomb.
The Tomb of Karakhamun (TT 223) is significant in that it is the earliest known Nubian tomb in Thebes, built during the reign of Shabaqo (the brother of the dynasty’s founder, King Piye) and his son, Shebitqo.

The tomb is also the largest in the South Asasif necropolis, with a large court, two pillared halls and multiple burial chambers. Being so large, it is part of a category of tombs known as temple-tombs.

Karakhamun also ensured that his tomb was richly decorated with brightly painted, sunk relief carving. In its day, the tomb would have been dazzling. For such a large tomb, however, Karakhamun didn’t hold any distinguished positions within the Theban administration, and his priestly title wasn’t particularly important. How did he afford such a tomb? It is thought that Karakhamun may have enjoyed close connections to the new Nubian royal court.

Unfortunately, without strong family ties in Egypt, Karakhamun’s tomb was relatively unprotected and began being reused and plundered soon after his burial.

The Tomb of Karakhamun (TT 223) is significant in that it is the earliest known Nubian tomb in Thebes, built during the reign of Shabaqo (the brother of the dynasty’s founder, King Piye) and his son, Shebitqo.

The tomb is also the largest in the South Asasif necropolis, with a large court, two pillared halls and multiple burial chambers. Being so large, it is part of a category of tombs known as temple-tombs.

Karakhamun also ensured that his tomb was richly decorated with brightly painted, sunk relief carving. In its day, the tomb would have been dazzling. For such a large tomb, however, Karakhamun didn’t hold any distinguished positions within the Theban administration, and his priestly title wasn’t particularly important. How did he afford such a tomb? It is thought that Karakhamun may have enjoyed close connections to the new Nubian royal court.

Unfortunately, without strong family ties in Egypt, Karakhamun’s tomb was relatively unprotected and began being reused and plundered soon after his burial.

The Tomb of Karakhamun (TT 223) is significant in that it is the earliest known Nubian tomb in Thebes, built during the reign of Shabaqo (the brother of the dynasty’s founder, King Piye) and his son, Shebitqo.

The tomb is also the largest in the South Asasif necropolis, with a large court, two pillared halls and multiple burial chambers. Being so large, it is part of a category of tombs known as temple-tombs.

Karakhamun also ensured that his tomb was richly decorated with brightly painted, sunk relief carving. In its day, the tomb would have been dazzling. For such a large tomb, however, Karakhamun didn’t hold any distinguished positions within the Theban administration, and his priestly title wasn’t particularly important. How did he afford such a tomb? It is thought that Karakhamun may have enjoyed close connections to the new Nubian royal court.

Unfortunately, without strong family ties in Egypt, Karakhamun’s tomb was relatively unprotected and began being reused and plundered soon after his burial.

The Tomb of Karakhamun (TT 223) is significant in that it is the earliest known Nubian tomb in Thebes, built during the reign of Shabaqo (the brother of the dynasty’s founder, King Piye) and his son, Shebitqo.

The tomb is also the largest in the South Asasif necropolis, with a large court, two pillared halls and multiple burial chambers. Being so large, it is part of a category of tombs known as temple-tombs.

Karakhamun also ensured that his tomb was richly decorated with brightly painted, sunk relief carving. In its day, the tomb would have been dazzling. For such a large tomb, however, Karakhamun didn’t hold any distinguished positions within the Theban administration, and his priestly title wasn’t particularly important. How did he afford such a tomb? It is thought that Karakhamun may have enjoyed close connections to the new Nubian royal court.

Unfortunately, without strong family ties in Egypt, Karakhamun’s tomb was relatively unprotected and began being reused and plundered soon after his burial.

The Tomb of Karakhamun (TT 223) is significant in that it is the earliest known Nubian tomb in Thebes, built during the reign of Shabaqo (the brother of the dynasty’s founder, King Piye) and his son, Shebitqo.

The tomb is also the largest in the South Asasif necropolis, with a large court, two pillared halls and multiple burial chambers. Being so large, it is part of a category of tombs known as temple-tombs.

Karakhamun also ensured that his tomb was richly decorated with brightly painted, sunk relief carving. In its day, the tomb would have been dazzling. For such a large tomb, however, Karakhamun didn’t hold any distinguished positions within the Theban administration, and his priestly title wasn’t particularly important. How did he afford such a tomb? It is thought that Karakhamun may have enjoyed close connections to the new Nubian royal court.

Unfortunately, without strong family ties in Egypt, Karakhamun’s tomb was relatively unprotected and began being reused and plundered soon after his burial.
The reign of Psamtik II. The original inscriptions are still traceable in some areas.

The Tornische was one of the worst preserved areas in the tomb of Karakhamun. The door frame and adjacent walls and pilasters had collapsed due to numerous floods and fires from later occupation of the tomb. Most of the original casing of the south wall of the Tornische had fallen off, exposing the bedrock underneath, except for the bottom of the wall and a small area of carving in the first register (see the “before” photo on page 39).

Thousands of fragments of the architectural elements and decoration found in the debris demonstrated varying kinds of damage, and the remains found in situ were less than a meter high. In order to reconstruct the offering scenes in the entrance area we had to rebuild the architectural elements of which they were part.

The Tornische was traditionally the most lavishly decorated area of Kushite and Saite tombs and considered the main entrance to the tomb. Scenes and inscriptions were usually carved in raised relief with the rest of the tomb decorated in sunk relief. The Tornische of Karakhamun is the largest and earliest fully decorated Kushite entrance to the subterranean area of a tomb. Its reconstruction is a significant contribution to the history of art and architecture of Kushite temple-tombs.

The Project rebuilt the door frame with cavetto cornice...
and lunette and two pilasters (above). This meant that new structures and casing had to be made from new limestone to support ancient fragments inserted into “pockets” carved into the new stone.

The quality of carving in this area is the highest in the whole tomb. The reconstructed scenes include three large-scale offering scenes on the Tornische south wall and the east wall of the First Pillared hall (see facing page), two small offering scenes on the front and back lintels of the entrance door frame, processions of offering bearers on the pilasters, offering texts of the door frame and chapters from the Book of the Dead on the pilasters and the thickness of the entrance.

The figure of Karakhamun at the offering table on the north part of the east wall (page 38) is his best preserved and most skillfully carved “portrait”, executed in shallow sunk relief with sharp edges and delicate modeling on the face featuring pronounced Kushite features.

The pillars in the First Pillared Hall were badly damaged by the collapse of the rock ceiling, but what remains shows that they were carved with carefully-executed hieroglyphic text. Thankfully, thousands of fragments have been retrieved from the debris and carefully conserved. The pillars are currently enclosed in wooden boxes for protection, and reconstruction will be performed during the 2019 season.

Moving west, the Second Pillared Hall has now been covered with a wooden roof for temporary protection for the hall’s decoration for the period of reconstruction.

Until recently, the tombs of the South Asasif have never been properly cleaned, surveyed or recorded. The South Asasif Conservation Project is planning to finish conservation and reconstruction of the Kushite and early Saite tombs of the South Asasif necropolis within the next five years and open them to the public.

You can discover more about the ongoing work of the South Asasif Conservation Project at https://southasasif.wordpress.com.
This photo from May 2018 shows Abdelrazk Mohamed Ali, Said Ali Hassan and Katherine Blakeney reconstructing fragments of an offering bearer into a new limestone pocket. This is one of eight male offering bearers that originally formed a procession on the south wall of the Tornische. This procession, carved in delicate low raised relief, demonstrates the intricacy of the details and subtle modelling on the human figures in Karakhamun’s tomb.

ELENA PISCHIKOVA is the director of the Egyptian-American South Asasif Conservation Project, and Research Scholar at the American University in Cairo. She has directed the Project since 2006 conducting clearing, conservation and reconstruction of the tombs of the South Asasif necropolis. Dr. Pischikova also teaches at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

70 Years of Egyptian Heritage Preservation

As an ARCE member, you’re a critical partner in conserving Egypt’s history for generations to come.

JOIN TODAY AT arce.org/membership