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# The Painted Tomb, rock art and the recycling of Predynastic Egyptian imagery

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*Using a variety of evidence, both from prehistoric Upper Egyptian rock art and representations on Predynastic archaeological objects, this contribution attempts to explain the apparently incongruous iconography of the famous Painted Tomb (Tomb 100) at Hierakonpolis. It proposes that the decoration of this elite burial may only be properly understood if one accepts a Naqada III modernization of the original Naqada IIC composition. Such a dynamic concept of recycling and updating may have important consequences for understanding other imagery from the same time period.*

*En utilisant différents types de documents, à la fois gravures rupestres préhistoriques de Haute Égypte et représentations figurées sur du matériel archéologique prédynastique, cet article tente d'expliquer l'iconographie apparemment incongrue de la célèbre tombe peinte (Tombe 100) de Hiérakonpolis. L'auteur propose ici de voir dans la décoration de cette sépulture d'élite une modernisation*

*durant la phase Nagada III de la composition Nagada IIC originale. Un tel concept dynamique de recyclage et de mise à jour peut avoir des conséquences importantes pour la compréhension d'autres images de la même période.*

## Introduction

No other tomb from the Egyptian prehistoric period has received more scholarly attention than the famous Painted Tomb (Tomb 100) from the Upper Egyptian site of Hierakonpolis (see, most recently, Trost 2012). This grave, the location of which is currently lost and which is reputed destroyed, was discovered and excavated by the British Egyptologist and archaeologist F.W. Green in 1899 (Quibell & Green 1902: 20-22). To date, it is the only prehistoric Egyptian tomb known that incorporated mural paintings. These paintings, a few fragments

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1. I am indebted to Stan Hendrickx (MAD-Faculty, Hasselt) and Salima Ikram (American University in Cairo) for kindly commenting on an earlier draft of this contribution. Of course, I alone am responsible for any errors of interpretation and debatable standpoints taken.

of which survive in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, have been called 'the most extensive example of early royal iconography' (Wilkinson 1999: 32) and 'an astonishing visual demonstration' of the creation of an ideological system accompanying the establishment of new social and economic structures in mid-Naqada II times (Midant-Reynes 2000: 207). Whereas these are only two out of many different reflections on the significance of this unique tomb, most commentators seem to agree that its decoration is a quite unusual combination of motifs. Indeed, whereas good parallels can be found for the sickle-shaped boats that constitute the main theme in the decoration of the tomb on contemporary funerary ceramics (Naqada IIC-D Decorated pottery), many of the other motifs seem to be somewhat prochronistic within a mid-Naqada II iconographic context (for a detailed listing of these motifs, see Case & Payne 1962; see also Wengrow 2006: 114-115).

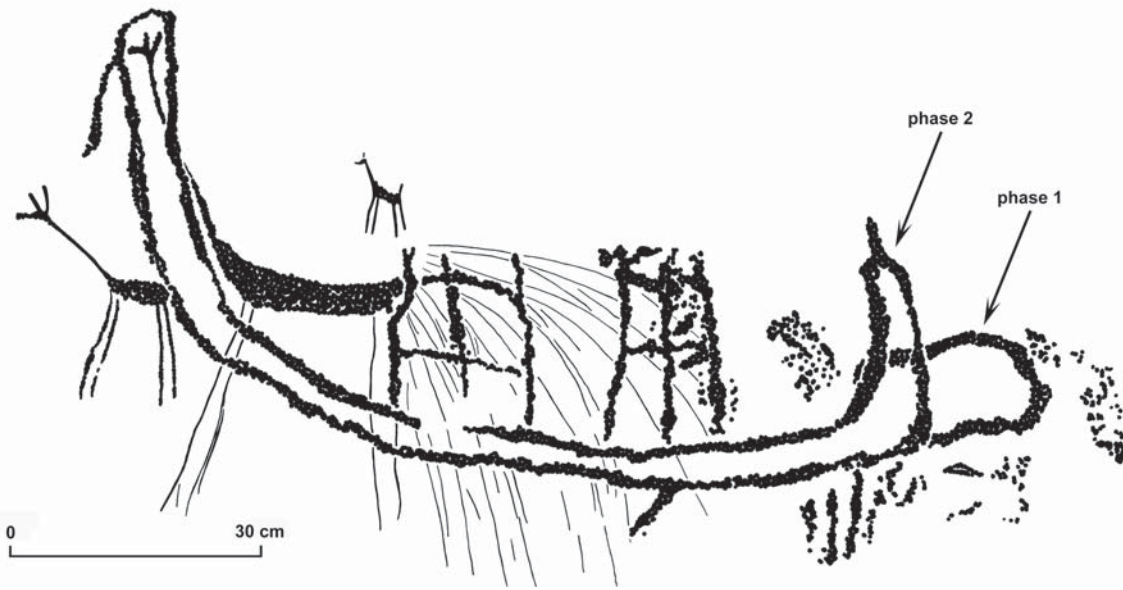
As B. Midant-Reynes (2000: 208) has pertinently said in this respect: 'The troubling aspect of these compositions is the fact that they include not only the world depicted on the Gerzean vessels, with their curved boats, but also the later images portrayed on the decorated ceremonial palettes of Dynasty 0'. That incongruity, as well as a misreading of some of the grave contents, has led some scholars, such as G.A. Reisner (1936: 362) and E.J. Baumgartel (1960: 126), to date the tomb to the very last phase of the Predynastic period or to 'Protodynastic times', in other words to the Naqada III period, which corresponds with dynasties 0-2 and is currently dated to c. 3350-2686 BC (Hendrickx 2006). Nevertheless, on the basis of the objects found within the plundered tomb upon its discovery in 1899 (mainly pottery, two small stone vases, a fragmentary flint knife with V-shaped forked tip, and a few pieces of bone), it seems beyond discussion that it was used for human interment in mid-Naqada II times exclusively, more specifically in the Naqada IIC phase, which is currently dated to c. 3600-3450 BC (Hendrickx 2006; s.d. 48/49-53 suggested by Case & Payne 1962; Payne 1973; *Stufe IIC* suggested by

Kaiser 1957; 1958; Kaiser & Dreyer 1982). How can this 'troubling' incongruity be explained? In order to understand what is possibly going on, we first have to turn our attention to the rock art of Upper Egypt.

## The Elkab rock art

Among the several hundreds of Predynastic petroglyphs at Elkab, just across the Nile from Hierakonpolis, are a substantial number of boat representations (Huyge 2002). One of the most interesting specimens of this series is located at rock art site 56, situated along the northern edge of the Wadi Hilâl, at only a short distance from the Ptolemaic rock-cut sanctuary of Shesmetet (Hendrickx & Huyge 1989: 17, n 56). This hammered sickle-shaped boat (**Fig. 1**), which is superimposed over two stylized giraffe drawings, possibly of Naqada I vintage (see Huyge 2002), shows an asymmetrical hull profile with a high curved stem and a low stern with a thick clubbed end. Amidships are two tall cabins, the front one with a domed roof and the rear one more or less rectangular in shape. The side posts of both these cabins as well as the central pole in each of them extend beyond the roof. Because of the shape of the central cabins and the stern with the clubbed end a date in the mid-Naqada II period (Naqada IIC?) seems likely (compare with boat types I and III in Červíček 1974: 99-107; 116-118).

What is exceptional about this vessel, however, is the fact that the stern has been altered/corrected into an upright position in a later phase. The thus created new outline of the boat is highly reminiscent of late Naqada III/Dynasty 0 (Naqada IIIB-C?) examples, quite similar, for instance, to the vessels represented in the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief (Murnane 1987: fig. 1B) and on the recto side of the Narmer palette (e.g., Asselberghs 1961: pl. 95, *afb.* 169). The corrected upward stern is clearly less patinated than the original clubbed one, and it may well be that both 'versions' of the boat are separated in time by several hundred years. Whatever the precise difference in time



**Fig. 1**  
Rock art panel  
at Elkab site 56  
(tracing I. Regulski;  
© RMAH, Brussels).

between them, however, it is clear that, in this particular case, a Predynastic rock art image was subjected to recycling and updating, maybe to illustrate advances in ship building technology, but supposedly also in a well-considered attempt to comply with the needs of shifting religious, ideological or other concepts.

Another petroglyph panel with boats at Elkab that will be relevant to my argumentation is situated at rock art site 48, on a small rocky promontory along the northern edge of the Wadi Hilâl (Hendrickx & Huyge 1989: 16, n 48). The panel in question already drew

the attention of the discoverer of the Painted Tomb himself, F.W. Green, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who published a photograph of it and commented upon the general resemblance of one of the vessels with the Tomb 100 boats (Green 1903; see also Quibell & Green 1902: 21; for a more recent photo, see Huyge 2002: pl. 107). As many of the small details of the panel cannot be made visible on a photo, however, during the 2000 campaign of the Belgian archaeological mission to Elkab, a direct tracing of the panel was made; it is published here for the first time (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2**  
Rock art panel  
at Elkab site 48  
(tracing I. Regulski;  
© RMAH, Brussels).



The panel at Elkab site 48 shows two sickle-shaped boats with clubbed ends and two cabins amidships, a large one to the left (with a length of 130 cm) and a smaller one to the right. Both are superimposed by two bovids with lyre-shaped horns that are part of a file or frieze of four. Above the second, smaller boat is what is probably the initial tracing of a third boat (a hammered surface defining a stem?) that remained unfinished. Below and above the main boat on the left are several more animal drawings, some of which are difficultly zoologically identifiable. Because of their general shape and their various attributes, the two complete sickle-shaped boat petroglyphs at Elkab site 48 closely resemble the boats shown in the Painted Tomb murals and those on Naqada IIC-D Decorated pottery. What is relevant to the particular topic of this paper, is the fact that, here too, different phases of execution can be distinguished.

This was already noted by J.E. Quibell and F.W. Green (1902: 21), who write with respect to the main boat: ‘... the hull is carefully shown by hammering all over the surface [subsequently carefully polished as a matter of fact], but the oars (propelling oars) are mere hurried scratches, as if put in by another hand...’. The same seems to be true for the series of small human figures that are present in the panel. None of these finely incised figures, at least five of which are actually physically connected to the boat: they seem to be floating in the air above the deck line and the cabins. Stylistically speaking, they are clearly distinct from the human figures usually found associated with boats on Naqada IIC-D painted ceramics (see Graff 2009: 151-155). They have been executed as outline drawings and display a more or less rectangular torso. Some have slightly pro-

**Fig. 3**

Human figures in Naqada III iconography: (a) from Qustul tomb L6 (after Williams 1986: fig. 85c); (b) from Qustul tomb L24 (after Williams 1986: fig. 180b); (c) from Gebel Tjauti (after Darnell 2002: pl. 11).





nounced buttocks. Such a type of human figures is not unknown. They are, in fact, a regular feature in Naqada III iconography. Some examples from this latter corpus, executed either on pottery vessels or in securely dated rock art contexts, are shown in **Fig. 3**. Most of the human figures in the Elkab site 48 rock art panel carry staves or sticks, some of which are forked at the base. What is more significant, is that two of them bear a long, curved feature on the head provided at the end with hatching. To the best of my knowledge, such attributes in connection to human figures are unparalleled in Predynastic iconography, but they find a likely counterpart in similar features (palm fronds or feathers?) that adorn engraved bucrania at Gebel el-Waz near Elkab (Regulski 2002), one of the Horus falcons in the Gebel Tjauti tableau (Darnell 2002: 12, pl. 11 and see also fig. 3, c) and painted bovid heads on ceramics from tomb U-j at Abydos (e.g., Dreyer 1998: *Abb.* 46, j2/1-j2/2; *Tafel* 18, a-b), all of early Naqada III age.

In conclusion, like is the case for the rock art panel at Elkab site 56, the creation of the one at site 48 does not seem to be a single event. For one reason or another, the original Naqada IIC-D tableau was modified and completed in a later phase, most probably during the subsequent Naqada III period.

## Discussion

The undoubtedly high-status person once buried in the Painted Tomb at Hierakonpolis has received various qualifications: he has been called 'one of the legendary Kings of Upper Egypt' (Case & Payne 1962), a 'person that socially stands out' (Kaiser & Dreyer 1982), a 'proto-king' (Baines 1995), a 'prince enseveli' (Ciałowicz 2001: 157), a 'late Predynastic king' (Kemp 2006: 81) and a 'local ruler of the Naqada IIC period' (Wilkinson 2007). B. Williams and T.J. Logan (1987) went as far as to say that 'it would be perverse to deny that this [tomb] is a royal monument in the strictest sense'.

As has already been said, the Painted Tomb is unique. Other tombs like it may well

have existed, but they have disappeared or they have not been discovered yet. In any case, there can hardly be a doubt that graves like this must have been exceedingly rare. Whereas the roofing of the Painted Tomb was probably of wood (see Quibell & Green 1902: 20), unfortunately, nothing is known about the superstructure or any other above-ground associated architecture. However, in view of what is the case in the earlier, Naqada IC-IIB elite cemetery HK6 at Hierakonpolis, where several tombs are provided with, among other features, impressive multi-columned halls (Friedman 2011; Friedman, Van Neer & Linseele 2011), it is very likely that Tomb 100 must also have been clearly marked at the surface. The occupant and even the grave itself must quickly have acquired 'legendary' status and they may have been the object of visit and the focus of veneration during many generations and probably even several centuries (as has also been suggested for cemetery HK6; see Friedman 2008). In the light of this, is it conceivable that a Naqada III/Dynasty 0 chieftain or an early 'king', desiring to pay reverence to a 'legendary' ancestor and, in doing so, possibly wishing to secure legitimization of his own worldly power 'by reference to antiquity' (Baines 1995), decided to renovate the Painted Tomb and adapt it to modern standards and a more 'pharaonic-like' ideology? Is it imaginable – what is even more speculative, of course – that the Naqada IIC tomb was appropriated and being prepared for a Naqada III interment (like what happened at cemetery HK6 with respect to Naqada IC-IIA Tomb 16; see Hendrickx 2008; Friedman, Van Neer & Linseele 2011), which ultimately, for one reason or another, did not take place? What arguments can be put forward to support such ideas?

Unfortunately, as far as known, F.W. Green is the only scholar to have examined the tomb in situ. As said above, its location is currently lost and the few fragments of the decoration preserved in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo have so badly deteriorated and blackened that no additional information can be gained from them. We therefore have to rely

Fig. 4

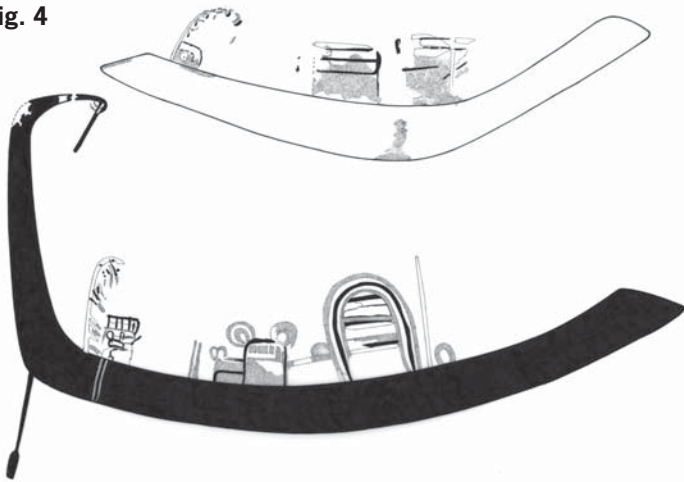


Fig. 5



Fig. 4

A detail of the central part of the Tomb 100 mural painting showing the Black Boat and an associated vessel (redrawn by F. Roloux from a photo of F.W. Green's original facsimile in the archive of the Egyptological Association Queen Elisabeth, Brussels).

Fig. 5

Proposed reconstruction of the original state of the Black Boat (drawing by F. Roloux).

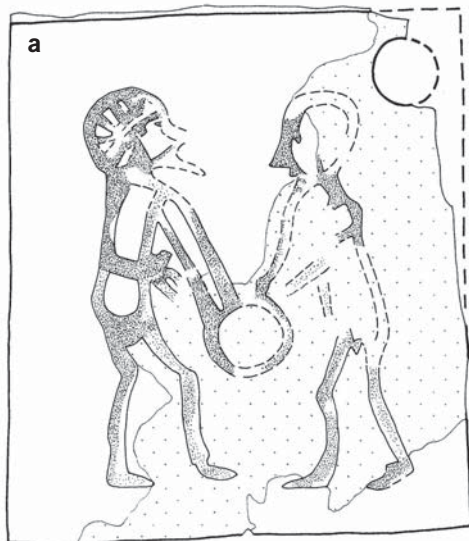
on Green's 1902 account, which says: '... the scenes seem to have been put where there was room for them, after the larger designs, such as the boats, had been drawn' (Quibell & Green 1902: 21). Also recent 'art-historical' investigations ('figurative space analysis') of the decoration of Tomb 100 (Gautier 1993) have confirmed that the imagery was done in more than one phase and that the boats were painted first. This is undoubtedly the case, but I would argue that there may have been several centuries before the flotilla of sickle-shaped boats was completed with (most of?) the other figures. Elsewhere, Green (same reference as above) states: 'In many places also the artist had rubbed out his red outline, thus reddening the yellow surface before re-drawing his design...'. Here too, one may wonder whether these 'corrections', or probably rather 'additions', were not done with a considerable interval of time. D. Wengrow's (2006: 115) intuitive assumption that different hands may have contributed to the decoration of the tomb may also be relevant in this respect. However, the best arguments for the Naqada III modernization of a Naqada IIC tomb

decoration can directly be derived from the representations themselves. A key element in this is the central boat, the so-called Black Boat (Fig. 4). There has been some disagreement on the course of this boat (see Case & Payne 1962; Ciałowicz 2001: 161), but as all the sickle-shaped boats seem to be heading towards the left (among other arguments, because of the presence of what seems to be a killick hanging from the prow; also present in the Black Boat for that matter), I tentatively accept that the high part is the stem. Like the other boats in the mural painting, the Black Boat also features a curved 'palm branch' at the prow. The purpose of this feature is unsure: it has been considered to be a proto-sail or a shade for the lookout. While it is always present in the sickle-shaped boats represented on Decorated pottery (Graff 2009: 174) and exceptionally also in the rock art (see Fig. 2), it has, to the best of my knowledge, never been identified before on a boat with one or two upright extremities.

The low stern of the Black Boat perfectly matches the sterns of all the other boats in the panel. In fact, the only feature that distinguishes this boat from the other vessels is its stem (not considering its colour and the particular shape of one of the cabins amidships). Like the boat at Elkab site 56 discussed above, I believe it to be very likely that the Black Boat originally was also a 'classical' Naqada IIC-D sickle-shaped vessel and that it was transformed at a later date, most probably in Naqada III times, into a high-prowed ship (see Fig. 5). The reason why only this boat was altered and modernized seems evident. Because of its prominent position in the panel and because of the fact that it is different from the other boats as regards the shape of one of the cabins amidships (see also Ciałowicz 2001: 161, fig. 18,6), it is definitely the most important vessel of the flotilla. Either it 'identifies' the owner of the tomb and may well have been his personal ship of state or his own funerary bark or it is not a 'private' vessel at all, but a divine bark. The particular shape of the right cabin, resembling an early tent-shrine with a curved canopy, may be indicative of the latter (see Kemp 2006: 144-147).

Another eye-catching oddity in the Tomb 100 painting is the simple construction with a human figure inside standing on top of one of the cabins of the largest of the sickle-shaped boats, the one in the upper left part of the panel. This detail (see Ciałowicz 2001: 158, fig. 18,2) has been interpreted by several commentators as a representation of a 'ruler' standing beneath an awning (Case & Payne 1962; Kemp 2006: 81), a feature that is considered reminiscent of later scenes of the king seated during the jubilee or *sed* festival. To the best of my knowledge, the only Naqada IIC parallel for this construction is on an unprovenanced Decorated pottery vessel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, but here the

two human figures inside, probably a (large) woman and a (little) man, are of typical Naqada IIC vintage (Graff *et al.* 2011: 445-446, fig. 8; Craig Patch 2011: 70, cat. 71). Taken as a whole [awning, running(?) figure inside and worshipping(?) figure in front of the kiosk], the best parallels for this scene in the Painted Tomb are the ceremonial appearances of the king on a stepped and canopied throne dais on the ceremonial mace head of king Narmer from Hierakonpolis (Quibell 1900: pl. XXVIB) and on a wooden label of King Den from Abydos (Petrie 1900: pl. XI,14), both of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty. I consider it not very likely that this construction and its occupant form part of the original Naqada IIC decoration of the boat and the tomb. If it was intended to be so, such a highly important feature would have been positioned directly on the deck of the boat and not, in a rather awkwardly way, on top of a cabin. Again, the logical conclusion is that the boat originally was a 'classical' Naqada IIC sickle-shaped vessel, with two equally 'classical' cabins amidships, and that the awning was added to it in a later period. The three human figures with outstretched arms (definitely not a typical Naqada IIC-D posture) above the boat, which Kemp (2006: 93) identifies as female guardian figures, and the steers(?) man on the stern have probably



**Fig. 6**  
Human figures in Naqada III iconography:  
(a) from Cemetery U at Abydos (after Dreyer 1998: Abb. 82, X183);  
(b) from tomb 1579 at Tarkhan (after Petrie 1914: pl. VI);  
(c) from Elkab site 64 (Rock of the Vultures).  
Note that the upper human figure carries a forked stave in an horizontal position, possibly a was sceptre  
(© RMAH, Brussels).

also been put in, in very much the same way as human figures have been added to the sickle-shaped boat in the rock art at Elkab site 48.

As regards the remainder of the decoration, it may well be that some of the animal figures belong to the original Naqada IIC composition. Most human figures, however, which are characterized by their rectangular torsoes with concave sides and their slightly pronounced buttocks, are of types not commonly represented on Naqada IIC-D Decorated pottery (compare with Graff 2009: 151-155). They may have been added later to the tableau. In fact, the best stylistic parallels for many of these human figures can in particular be found in Naqada III iconography. It falls outside the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed comparative study of all the decorative elements present, but even a cursory visual comparison of the human figures in the Tomb 100 painting with some indisputable Naqada III examples, on various types of support, makes this perfectly clear (see **Fig. 6**).

## Conclusion

Accepting a Naqada III repainting and modernization of the original Naqada IIC composition is, I think, the only way to account for the several stylistic anomalies in the decoration of the Painted Tomb. It also explains the seemingly prochronistic presence

in the mural paintings of themes that are unparalleled in Naqada IIC-D iconography and that fit much better in the ideological repertoire of the Naqada III period, such as the 'smiting of the captives' and the 'master of the animals' scenes.

The above considerations and conclusions, of course, do not make it clear whether the Tomb 100 murals contain elements of narrative and could be referential to particular historical events or whether they should be regarded as purely religious or ideological constructs (in this respect, see, e.g., Williams & Logan 1987; Ciałowicz 2001: 157-163; Midant-Reynes 2003: 331-336; Kemp 2006: 93-96). They do suggest, however, that the tomb and its decoration can only be properly understood within a broader diachronic perspective and not just within the mid-Naqada II time frame within which the interment of its occupant took place. In other words, it is probably a misconception to state that 'these representations should be regarded as existing within their own specific set of spatial and temporal conventions' (Midant-Reynes 2000: 208). In fact, different such sets of conventions may be in operation here. As the rock art makes it undeniably clear, the creation of Predynastic visual evidence should be considered a 'dynamic event' rather than a 'static condition': recycling and updating may indeed be integrant part of the genesis of this imagery. Such a notion opens new and promising strategies to look at 'old' documents.

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