

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COLLOQUIUM ON
THEBAN ARCHAEOLOGY
AT THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF ANTIQUITIES
//////////////// November 5, 2009

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CAIRO, 2011

“... like heaven in its interior”: Late Ramesside Painters in Theban Tomb 65

/ Tamás A. Bács //////////////////////////////////////

¹Year 9, second month of winter, day 14 (?) under the majesty of King **Ramesses IX**.

²This day, the scribe *Amenhotep* with his son, the scribe,

³deputy of the draughtsmen *Amennakhte* of the Necropolis,

⁴came to see the temples of truth [... ...]

⁵[after (?)] they executed the decoration in the tomb [... ...]

⁶[of the overseer of the scribes of the] temple *Imiseba*, of the Estate of Amun.

⁷[... ...] They came and they looked at the mountains. [...]

The quote – a graffito – represents one of those rare instances in the history of Egyptian art, in which an artist is directly associated with a work he has produced (*Fig. 1*).¹ Beyond the obvious allure of its rarity, however, its more pronounced significance lies in the fact that the work in question is available for direct study in the form of the wall paintings of *Imiseba*'s mortuary complex, that is Theban

Tomb 65 (*Fig. 2*).² Although there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the graffito inscribed in the tomb of *Ramesses VI*, which can also be understood as a kind of artist's signature³, its true implications can only be appreciated if indeed the artistic presence of the painter/draughtsman or the extent of this presence can be exposed in said tomb's decoration. My primary, if not exclusive aim here then is an attempt at identifying (and outlining) his stylistic repertoire as reflected by the wall paintings. In a broader sense, it is intended as a tentative first step towards an improved understanding of an artistic production that has been heavily undervalued and of which the decoration of TT 65 represents one of its last surviving examples.⁴

Setting aside here the various issues and problems concerning the stylistic analysis of Egyptian painting, it should be noted at the outset that as an art historical method, the identification of individual painterly hands is not entirely unknown, but its utilisation is significantly more restricted in comparison to the study of other artistic traditions. Why this is so gains one form of explanation from the often cited argument that large-scale representations were the result of a process involving groups of artisans rather than a single artist. Inherent to such a process is of course the aim of creating stylistic unity that necessarily

1 See CHAMPOLLION 1889, 635; SPIEGELBERG 1921, 92–93; KRI VI, 658–659. Unfortunately enough, neither the frequently cited black ink graffito itself nor its position on the ceiling of the burial chamber in KV 9 has been relocated since its original recording by CHAMPOLLION. Equally problematic is the reason underlying its being inscribed here. Most would see in it the record of an inspection following theft from the royal tomb, see originally ALDRED 1979, 92; BOGOSLOVSKY 1980, 95; REEVES 1990, 125 n. 40, 233; DAVIES 1999, 112–113; PEDEN 2001, 205; earlier hinted in THOMAS 1966, 130. KELLER, on the other hand, rightly questions the validity of this explanation and although she cannot suggest a precise reason nevertheless advocates a more informal context for it, see KELLER 2003, 96; also similarly understood earlier in MCDOWELL 1999, 242.

2 For the tomb-chapel and its decoration, see BÁCŠ 1998, BÁCŠ 2001; BÁCŠ 2002.

3 An early compendium of artists' signatures is in WARE 1927; for *Merira*'s inscription in the tomb-chapel of *Setau* at Elkab, SPIEGELBERG 1902, briefly now also in LIMME 2008, 26–27; for the artist *Sedjemnetjeru* at Hierakonpolis, see DAVIES 2001, 119–121.

4 See briefly HOFMANN 1991; a more detailed study is in HOFMANN 2004, 49–90.

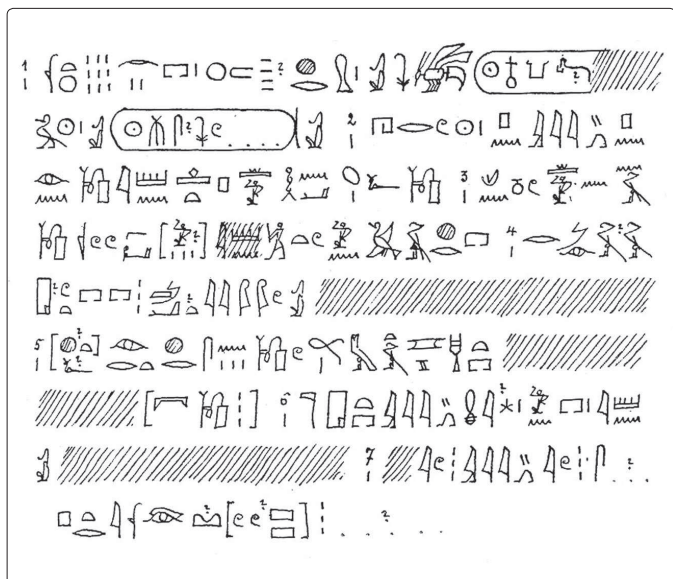


Fig. 1 Graffito of Amenhotep in KV 9
(after SPIEGELBERG 1921, 92–93)

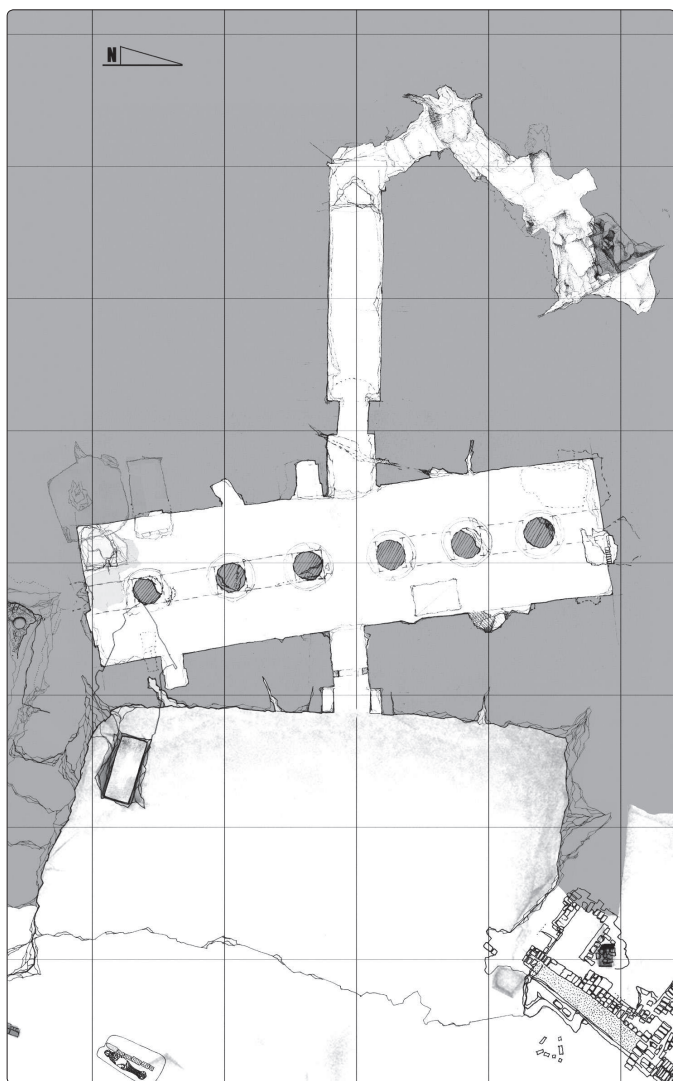


Fig. 2 Ground plan of TT 65 (drawing by Marcell Nagy)

suppressed individual idiosyncrasies. That this process, likened recently to performing art⁵, was not entirely successful in concealing individual stylistic traits, however, has been fruitfully exploited by a number of studies specifically on tomb paintings by Kozloff, Shedid, Bryan or Keller.⁶

On the other hand, to believe that it may be applicable in all cases or even desirable would be entirely misleading.⁷ Much in the same sense, as it would be unwarranted to speak of recovering or capturing artist personalities or attempting to write so-called pseudo-biographies of artists as yet. Such cannot be done at present even in the case of Amenhotep, the draughtsman/artist of the quoted graffito, even though he is one of the better documented artists in respect of his body of work.⁸

Based on textual evidence, the career of the chief draughtsman of Deir el-Medina, Amenhotep, son of the famous scribe Amennakhte, started sometime during the end of Ramesses III's reign (Year 28) and lasted till nearly the end of Ramesses IX's (Year 17), probably attaining the post of chief draughtsman under Ramesses IV (Year 2).⁹ Although his career within the Deir el-Medina community cannot be regarded as out of the ordinary, the fact that it was during his tenure that the post of chief draughtsman rose in prestige to the level of the traditional leaders of the community, that is the two chief workmen and the scribe of the tomb.¹⁰ An equally discernable tendency that probably cannot be divorced from the personality of Amenhotep either is the visible segregation of the painters within the community and their growing self-perception as forming its elite.

During his at least forty-seven year career Amenhotep oversaw the work and himself worked on five royal, two queenly and at least one princely tomb in the Valley of the Kings (to which may be added in all probability the

5 ARNOLD 2008.

6 KOZLOFF 1979; KOZLOFF 1992; SHEDID 1988; BRYAN 2001; KELLER 1981; KELLER 1993; KELLER 2001. For a more sceptical view of the so-called Morellian method, see now HARTWIG 2004, 30–35.

7 A promising avenue of analysis based on the study of painterly techniques is set out in LABOURY and TAVIER 2010.

8 Nevertheless, further studies will eventually allow for the observing and documenting of changes in his personal style through time. For preliminary observations to this effect, see KELLER 2003, 94–95.

9 Set out with earlier literature in KELLER 1984, 122–128; and more briefly in KELLER 2003, 85. The possibility of his having been still alive in Y1 of Ramesses X is suggested in DAVIES 1999, 113 with n. 399.

10 ČERNÝ 1973, 231–239; KELLER 1984, 123 with n. 47.

last decorative phase of KV 13 as well).¹¹ Outside of his royal commissions, yet again based on inscriptional data, Amenhotep had been associated with the decoration of at least two private tomb-chapels, namely the aforementioned one of Imiseba, and one – TT 113 – he worked on approximately fifteen years earlier during the reign of Ramesses VIII that belonged to a certain Kynebu, a *wꜥb*-priest and *hry-sšt* of the estate of Amun, and *hm-ntr* of “the mansion of *ʿ3-hpr.w-rꜥ* (Amenhotep II)”.¹² The latter tomb has been mostly destroyed together with its decoration and has only been preserved in copies made by Wilkinson and the HAY expedition respectively and a small number of actual fragments (Fig. 3). Before turning to these once featuring Amenhotep himself as lector-priest in a scene of the “Opening of the Mouth” as well¹³, it is necessary to summarise studies that have facilitated the recognition of his personal style.¹⁴

Despite being self-professedly incomplete and far from comprehensive, the credit of identifying the artistic repertoire of Amenhotep undoubtedly belongs to Kathleen Keller.¹⁵ Her research was based on a synchronic approach involving the close study of figured ostraca retrieved from the royal wadis and Deir el-Medina on the one hand, and the finished works of the royal tombs themselves on the other. Of primary interest were signed sketch- or votive pieces that not only enabled draw-



Fig. 3 The tomb-chapel of Kynebu, TT 113

ing styles to be linked to names, but as a further step, allowed the attribution of unsigned ostraca to artists also.¹⁶ Furthermore, as most also carried texts of various lengths, and considering the degree to which texts in general were integral to visual compositions, it became possible to distinguish the writing style of several painters, among them that of Amenhotep.¹⁷ Although thematically figural ostraca and royal tomb decorations clearly differ, an analysis of the former allowed Keller to establish stylistic correspondences between the two, especially in the case of painted scenes, where the work of the relief carvers could not obscure these. One of her most celebrated examples is the famous astronomical ceiling of Ramesses VI's burial chamber, where of the two figures of the goddess Nut, the one representing the night sky displays the same triangular navel and triple belly fold that is found on the Cairo ostrakon with the self-portrait of Amenhotep.¹⁸

Amenhotep's artistic style as reflected in the, at present twenty figural ostraca attributable to him¹⁹ allows for then a meaningful comparison with the three fragments

11 These are KV 2 (Ramesses IV), KV 9 (Ramesses V and Ramesses VI), KV 1 (Ramesses VII), KV 6 (Ramesses IX). For the Twentieth Dynasty queenly decoration of KV 10 (Queens Baketwerel and Takhat), see now SCHADEN – ERTMAN 1998, 137–151. KV 19 (Prince Montuirkhopshef (II)); for Ramesses VIII as KV 19's originally intended owner, see BROCK 1995, 65 n. 13; also referred to in REEVES – WILKINSON 1996, 170; For KV 13, see ALTENMÜLLER 1994, and more recently ALTENMÜLLER 2009.

12 PM² I:1, 230–231; KAMPP 1996, 394–395; and KRI VI, 440–446. Following PM² I:1, 230 most references state that Kynebu was a *hm-ntr* in the mansion of Thutmose IV, but as noted by KITCHEN the cartouche holds the prenomen of Amenhotep II and not that of Thutmose IV, see KRI VI, 442 n. 5a. The reading of *ʿ3-hpr.w-rꜥ* has also been confirmed more recently by Richard PARKINSON (personal communication).

13 WILKINSON 1841, pl. 86.

14 Neither Kynebu's nor Imiseba's contacts with the crew were restricted to the issue of their tomb's decoration as perhaps illustrated by surviving fragments of their correspondence, thus e.g. Kynebu's letter addressed to a Qenymin (O. DM 115) or a letter sent to Imiseba by a certain carpenter, Hay. In the latter (pDM 3) among other things Hay states that he is working on the bed for Imiseba (addressed simply as scribe) and is waiting for Imiseba to send the necessary ebony and webbing material, see ČERNÝ 1978, 13–15, pl. 18–18a; with a translation in WENTE 1990, 140; more recently discussed also in COONEY 2007, 168. For the „twin letter” of Kynebu, see KRI VI, 448; translation in WENTE 1990, 163 no. 260.

15 See KELLER 1984; and KELLER 2003.

16 To date some eleven ostraca are known to bear the “signature” (expressed by the formula *ir(.t).n*) of Amenhotep, see KELLER 2003, 86.

17 The palaeographic peculiarities of Amenhotep's handwriting are outlined in KELLER 2003, 87–90.

18 Of the two figures of Nut originally only the nocturnal one was attributed definitely by Keller to Amenhotep, see KELLER 1981, 10–11. More recently she had revised and refined her analysis of the painting and assigned both figures to him with the nocturnal Nut figure being representative of his informal, while the diurnal figure of his formal style, KELLER 2003, 98–99.

19 As listed in KELLER 2003, the so-called signed ones are: CG 25029, 25037, 25051, 25052, 25066, 25095, 25114, 25115, 25117, 25129, and O. MMA 14.6.213+CG 25017; unsigned ones include O. MMA 14.6.213, O. BM 50710, CG 25007, 25006, 25019 rt, O. BM 60001, O. Bruxelles Inv. 7424, CG 25019 vs, 25074.

from the tomb-chapel of Kynebu housed today in the British Museum.²⁰ Deriving from two offering scenes once adorning the eastern end wall of the tomb-chapel's transverse hall, two of these show the figures of the deified Amenhotep I and his mother Queen Ahmose-Nefertari from one scene, while the third that of Osiris from another.²¹ A comparison of Amenhotep I's rendering with that of Amun preserved on a Cairo ostrakon (CG 25117)²² leaves little doubt as to the author of the former. Thus, stylistic elements common to both include: the facial profile with a pinched nose, the elongated and undulating front body profile, the knobby elbow, the line of the thumb, and the detached nipple. On the figure of Ahmose-Nefertari a further stylistic feature appears despite being partly obscured by her face being painted black as befitted her status, namely the rendering of the ear that presented a constant challenge to artists and which as a consequence created several solutions.²³

The tomb-chapel of Kynebu is important here in the way that it provides a further point of interest, though its full significance necessarily remains obscure. Thus, according to an inscription in the tomb it took exactly three months and nineteen days (between Y1 of Ramesses VIII, 1 Akhet 13 and 1 Peret 2 or 3) to complete its decoration.²⁴ Lacking comparable data, however, as well as being left uninformed about the number of draughtsmen/painters working on it, or the timetable they were keeping to, renders the inscription, regrettably enough, an isolated curio.²⁵

Turning now to Theban Tomb 65, it should be observed at the outset that despite their relatively fine state of preservation, the wall paintings of the tomb-chapel of Imiseba do not lend themselves easily to stylistic analysis. On the one hand, when in the Late Antique Period the tomb-chapel was incorporated into a monastery, the faces of all of the large figures were defaced with the consequence of denying access to one of the most important

features necessary for such analyses.²⁶ The other difficulty arises from the chapel's decorative programme itself. Functionally dividing the architectural spaces into two major units, this decorative programme was designed to evoke a royal-style memorial temple within the monumental transverse hall, while the newly cut axial corridor was reinterpreted as an equivalent of the royal tombs in the King's Valley.²⁷ In the case of the transverse hall, this was achieved by the striking use of royal Ramesside temple iconography, the models of which moreover can be identified with fair accuracy on existing Theban monuments. Employing the visual idiom of royal monuments and the level of execution this required, however, undoubtedly set greater restrictions on the artist/artists engaged in their execution.²⁸

Of the major scenes occupying the front walls of the transverse hall that depict the *Opet*-and Valley-festivals respectively, it is readily apparent that they cannot be attributed to a single hand. They are visibly the products of a workshop practice familiar to an extent from temples and royal tombs. A comparison of the two royal figures also underlines, moreover, that the responsibility of painting the main figures was not necessarily reserved for the master painter, other examples of which exist in both royal and private contexts. Despite its more formal rendering when compared with the ostraca drawings, the royal figure on the northern front wall, especially when set alongside his image of Prince Montuhirkhopshef from KV 19, appears as the work of Amenhotep (Fig. 4). As my focus here is solely on Amenhotep's artistic presence and not on the identification of other painterly hands, it will suffice to note that the southern wall's main figure, on the other hand, was probably painted by Hormin, a painter otherwise closely associated with Amenhotep and his family, and whose individual style has also been treated by Keller in detail.²⁹

Turning to the hall's two rear walls reveals an equally close collaboration between the two painters. On closer scrutiny it can be determined that initially only those parts of the scenes were done that included the main figures. When work was resumed on the scene and further figures were added on the southern one that portray the immediate ancestors of Imiseba, the two painters had to be

20 JAMES 1979, pl. 11 (Ahmose-Nefertari, BM EA 37994); JAMES 1985, 36 fig. 36 (Amenhotep I, BM EA 37993), 36 fig. 37 (Osiris).

21 The figures of Amenhotep I and Queen Ahmose-Nefertari are from scene (2), while that of Osiris is from scene (1) in P M² I:1, 231.

22 DARESSY 1902, 22 and fig. XXII.

23 It should also be noted that a preliminary study of the drawings of the now lost scenes preserved among the Hay manuscripts has also confirmed the presence of stylistic features typical of Amenhotep.

24 AMER 1981.

25 On an estimation of the rate of tomb production, see ROMER 1994; see now also the remarks in LABOURY – TAVIER 2010, 103 with n. 46.

26 For a summary of the tomb-chapel's late antique history, see BÁCS – FÁBIÁN – SCHREIBER – TÖRÖK 2009, 147–149.

27 BÁCS 1998; BÁCS 2001.

28 BÁCS 2001; BÁCS 2002; BÁCS 2004; and BÁCS forthcoming1.

29 See KELLER 2001.



Fig. 4 The figure of Ramesses IX on the Northern Front Wall



Fig. 6 Minor figures decorating the bark of Amun, detail from the Southern Front Wall



Fig. 5 Southern Rear Wall:
i) feet of Wiy; ii) feet of Tanedjmet

working side by side, since two clearly different drawing styles are detectable in the rendering of such anatomical details as navels and especially the feet (Fig. 5). One reflects the drawing style of Hormin and the other, that of Amenhotep.

Predictably, this is far from being an isolated example, as the figural style of Amenhotep appears in those scenes as well, where the painting of the main figures may be associated with others, as seen on either of the two front walls or the southern end wall. Among the minor figures decorating the bark of Amun, for instance, several display the hand of Amenhotep unmistakably (Fig. 6).³⁰ As these minor figures exhibit less formality and a freer drawing style, they compare more favourably with the ostraca drawings, that in the future may incidentally also facilitate differentiating other, less able hands or the recognition of possible style imitations.

The presence of Amenhotep, however, is not evidenced solely by the peculiarities of his artistic style, but

³⁰ On the representations of the processional bark of Amun in TT 65, see now BÄCS forthcoming2.



Fig. 7 Detail of the ceiling inscription in the entrance



Fig. 8 Isis and Nephthys, Panel No. 5, lower row, northern wall of the Axial Corridor

also by his recognisable hieroglyphic hand.³¹ Revealing examples are furnished by both monochrome and poly-

31 For the significant study of Amenhotep's hieroglyphic hand in the tomb of Ramesses IV (KV 2), see MÜLLER 1986.

chrome texts despite the formalising effect of their monumental inscriptional style. To single out only one of his typical idiosyncrasies: the elongated pharyngeal *H* is written with two loops instead of three in many of the texts (Fig. 7). Concurrently, these also indicate that the majority of the tomb-chapel's inscriptions can be associated with him.

For recognising the individual stylistic mannerisms of Amenhotep in TT 65, the decoration of the tomb-chapel's axial corridor in a sense has proven to be more informative than the transverse hall.

Intriguingly, albeit not unexpectedly, in decorative content the vaulted corridor accommodates two different concepts, namely that of a contemporary royal tomb, on the one hand, and that of a Deir el-Medina-style burial chamber, on the other.³² To invoke the imagery of the former, a composition was specifically created for this tomb that should essentially be understood as an *Underworld Book*. In its constituent scenes, then, the artist had the opportunity to reproduce motifs he was intimately familiar with and could deal with in a routine fashion.

The link with Ramesside Deir el-Medina burial chambers, both visually and thematically, expresses itself most conspicuously in scenes featuring Book of the Dead material. No doubt attributable to the interaction of Imiseba and Amenhotep, it suggests a more complex intellectual relationship of patron/tomb-owner and artist, then hitherto assumed.

In respect of layout, its side walls were divided into two registers with each containing five-five panels of equal dimensions. Of the altogether twenty scene panels, however, only three can be regarded as basically finished. Furthermore, when comparing the two sides of the corridor a curious difference in treatment immediately stands out. Thus, while in the southern wall's lower register three of its panels were finalized, two were left completely empty. Whereas the ones on the northern wall all received their intended scenes, but were abandoned in a variety of preliminary stages of work. Setting aside here the problems this raises in respect of the work process employed by the painters, their unfinished state offers many advantages for stylistic assessment.

To avoid a lengthy and in many respects repetitive description and discussion of these, three shall be singled out here. While all of the panel scenes contain elements or features that can be associated with Amenhotep, the scene most unmistakably bearing the hallmarks of

32 See in more detail in BÄCS forthcoming1.

his drawing style is to be found in the last scene of the lower row of northern panels. Presenting Isis and Nephthys adoring the rising sun, they display most visibly his typical facial profile, eyes with emphasised inner canthi, the firm, almost fleshy chin and what may be called as “wrestler’s ear” (Fig. 8).

Of his uneven linework encountered typically on ostraca drawings those figures provide the most telling examples where these have not been finalised yet. One random illustration is the ram-headed Sun-god and the stern divinities of one of the northern wall’s unfinished bark-scenes (Fig. 9). The figure of Imiseba in the same scene, on the other hand, having received its final line-work, displays all other diagnostic features of his style: the frontal profile, (here semi-)detached nipple, triangular navel, belly folds and rounded hip.

Finally, the last example is presented to show that although Amenhotep’s personal style seems to dominate the majority of the panel scenes, there is at least one that gives the impression that the finalising linework was the effort of two painters. The sequence’s first panel carrying the vignette of BD Spell 68 (with the inconspicuous title of “Spell for going forth by day by N.”) two symmetrically placed figures of Imiseba are shown (Fig. 10). Of the two figures adoring the double doors of the Netherworld, the one on the right, despite suffering damage to its face, suggests the authorship of Amenhotep. The high waisted figure on the left, in contrast, bears the diagnostic marks of the painter already found to have collaborated closely with him in the transverse hall, namely Hormin.

In answering the question raised by the graffito chosen as our starting point, as to what degree can and should the decoration of Imiseba’s tomb-chapel be considered as Amenhotep’s work, a definitive answer may be given according to the above said. Although many details had to be left aside here, the quoted examples may have been sufficient enough to demonstrate the defining artistic presence of the chief draughtsman. Our perception cannot be different either even if the graffito text is understood in the narrower sense of pertaining only to the painting of the axial corridor. Having gained a certain degree of familiarity with the actual wall paintings, however, the part of the quote that refers to the decoration’s completion can only be accepted with strong reservations, to say the least.



Fig. 9 Solar bark detail, Panel No. 3, upper row, northern wall of the Axial Corridor



Fig. 10 Vignette of BD 68, Panel 1, lower row, northern wall of the Axial Corridor (drawing by Krisztián Vértés)

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