

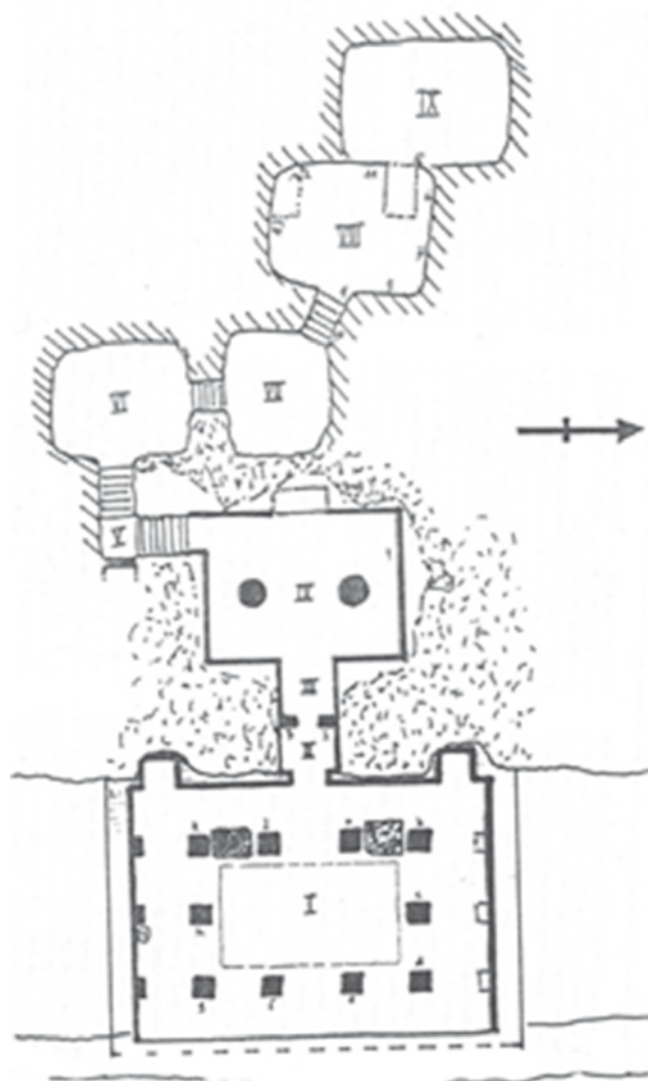
# Nakht-Min: Ramesses II's charioteer and envoy

**Khaled Daoud, Sabry Farag** and **Christopher Eyre** report on the last season at the tomb of Nakht-Min at the Memphite necropolis at Abusir, supported by the Egypt Exploration Society through a fieldwork and research grant.

At the bottom of a cliff overlooking the village of Abusir, the tomb of the Nineteenth-Dynasty official Nakht-Min, the 'First Charioteer of His Majesty' and 'Royal Envoy to All Foreign Lands', stands very close to some random and unplanned modern houses, which are probably in fact built over land containing numerous antique remains. The rock-cut tomb, which was originally found by local antiques hunters over two decades ago, and subsequently properly excavated by a team of Egyptian archaeologists, is now undergoing documentation by a team of Egyptian-British experts.

Connected to his role as charioteer, Nakht-Min was Overseer of Horses, probably in charge of their grooming, training, feeding and general well-being: charioteers formed an army division, first introduced during the Second Intermediate Period. Nakht-Min was also the First Charioteer of his Majesty, a modifier phrase that indicates the close association he enjoyed with Ramesses II. Like many in his position, Nakht-Min also took on diplomatic roles, serving as royal envoy to all foreign lands, leading ambassadorial missions to Egypt's neighbouring states on an *ad hoc* basis. That function had earlier also been carried out by the likes of Horemheb and Paramessu (Ramesses I), who eventually became rulers of Egypt – the first leading the country during a very critical period of its history, the second establishing a new line of rulers, ushering in the Ramesside era of pharaonic Egypt.

The escarpment where the tomb is located is a promising archaeological area, and most likely part of a larger cemetery of the Ramesside era, a period characterised by internal and external political conflicts, as well as societal, religious, architectural, artistic, and textual evolution and innovations. The cliff itself is located at the foot of the hill that accommodates the major First- and Second-Dynasty tombs. About 25 km south-west of Cairo, it lies at the southern end of the area traditionally known as the Abusir Cemetery: an extension and continuation of Saqqara and an integral part of the larger Memphite necropolis. The range of remains from various periods found at Abusir over the last 40 years – most recently by the Czech Institute of



*A sketch of the tomb of Nakht-Min (drawing by Dietrich Raue, courtesy of Mohamed Yousef, South Saqqara Chief Inspector).*

Egyptology, the Ministry of State for Antiquities, and by Waseda University's Institute of Egyptology – call for a major re-assessment of the topographical and chronological landscape of the cemetery.

This year's season, focusing on epigraphic documentation, photographic work, conservation



Door jamb with titles of Nakht-Min, the First Charioteer of Ramesses II (Photo: Christopher Eyre/MSA-Liverpool University Nakht-Min Epigraphic Mission).

and a preliminary analysis of skeletal remains in the tomb of Nakht-min, was bound to reveal new pieces of information and new discoveries. The epigraphic documentation included standing tomb reliefs (*in situ*), large decorated blocks stored in the chapel, decorated fragments stored in three wooden sealed boxes, as well as in rooms VI and VII (see map, right). Most of the tomb's decorated blocks had been removed and stored in the museum-like, purpose-built storeroom no. 1, near the Imhotep Museum (founded in 2006, the Imhotep Museum at Saqqara is a site museum designed to house artefacts from local excavations).

Although the remaining *in situ* decorations are by no means extensive, they provide vital contextual information that will facilitate the virtual reconstruction of the tomb reliefs. Their varied colours, subject matters, the mix between sunk, raised and incised texts, as well as layout enhance our knowledge of the artistic canon of the New Kingdom, particularly in rock cut tombs at the Memphite necropolis. In the antechamber (II), sections of raised relief on the north wall show the remains of a pair of feet of two figures, one male and one female, facing eastwards: the woman's feet are coloured light red, the man's are executed in a darker shade, with red outlines showing the straps of the sandals he is wearing. The remaining parts of the opposite south wall show feet of a striding male figure facing inwards (westwards), and before him are visible the remains of feet standing on platform, possibly of a god receiving the deceased



Parts of a garden scene with a pond at its centre (Photo: Christopher Eyre/MSA-Liverpool University Nakht-Min Epigraphic Mission).

Nakht-Min. This layout, indicating both entry to the underworld and the going forth into this world, provides a semantic representation of the cosmic cycle of life, death and rebirth of the deceased.

Leaving this antechamber, leading deeper into the western sphere, one finds door jambs with a gold-like wash and incised with vividly painted hieroglyphs (see the image on the opposite page). The three columns of text show some of the titles of Nakht-Min:

1. For the soul of the Osiris, the First Charioteer, Nakht-Min, true of voice
2. For the soul of the Osiris, Master of Horses, Nakht-Min, true of voice
3. For the soul of the Osiris, Overseer of Charioteers, Nakht-Min, true of voice.

They outline the stages of Nakht-Min's military career to ever more senior positions, eventually leading to the offices of overseer of the charioteer forces and master of horses.

A large decorated block sits on the floor at the entrance to the chapel, room IV, made of local limestone and covered with a thin layer of decorated plaster. The decoration is highly weathered, with the plaster flaking and coming off the limestone surface. The design depicts a garden (see opposite page), with a pond shown from above, its waves slightly raised by carving and painted with a darker blue pigment. The rectangular pond, bordered by rows of lotus flowers, shows aquatic vegetation, including yet more lotus flowers and floating lotus leaves. Along its sides are identical registers with rows of fruit trees, separated by two narrow registers of patterned lotus flowers and leaves. All registers are bordered by thick red lines. A garden for the deceased was an integral part of his afterlife and social standing: a place for his soul to find rest and refreshment, a symbol of life and resurrection, while its presence in the artistic canon of New Kingdom tomb reliefs also reflects the practical function of gardens in the earthly life of an Egyptian high official.

A further limestone block (above right), located in room IV and part of the north wall, is of significance to us, as it provides information on the wife of Nakht-Min, the lady who accompanies her husband and stands by him in various scenes, portrayed in different parts of the tomb. The bold raised scene on this block shows an elegant figure seated on a lion-legged chair and low back, extending her hand to touch the shoulder of her husband who is similarly seated on a low-back chair, his feet placed on a foot-rest. The lady wears a tight-fitting dress, her long, black wig almost reaching the lower part of her back while some strands (either part of the wig or natural hair) appear around her cheeks and neck. The fresh information brought to light this season was a crudely executed text behind this lady: '... of his house, his sister, his beloved, Chantress of Bastet, Hathor, true of voice.' Of all the inscriptions we have traced, this is the



*The seated figure of Nakht-Min's wife (Photo: Christopher Eyre/MSA-Liverpool University Nakht-Min Epigraphic Mission).*

only text found so far that mentions the name of Nakht-Min's wife. Her role as chantress is, however, mentioned in room VIII, where an Underworld Book showing the passage of gates, is written in cursive hieroglyphs on white-washed plaster. An inscription in this room reads: 'the Osiris, Lady of the House, Chantress of Bastet Lady of Ankhtawy'. A woman of high social standing, who may have inherited her post as chantress from her family, she sang and played the sistrum and possibly took part in festivities and the daily ritual in the sanctuary of Bastet, located not far from where the tomb of Nakht-Min was built. Known as the Bubasteion, it is less than 2 km to the south, above the cliff, where some New Kingdom tombs were excavated by French Archaeological Mission of the Bubasteion at Saqqara under the direction of Alain Zivie.

Music and musicians were an integral part of Egyptian religion and temple ritual, where singing and the sound of musical instruments protected the deity, drove away enemies, dispelled evil, and at the same time provided a tranquil and spiritual atmosphere for participants in the ritual.

This text was not the only significant discovery of the season. During the last week of our intense fieldwork, we managed to invite an anthropological expert to carry out an initial examination of the skeletal remains found during the first season of work in the tomb in 1993. These remains were discovered in room IX, the burial

chamber, and were cleaned, classified and grouped. An initial examination has now shown that the remains belong to three human skeletons and that of a small animal.

According to Dr El-Merghani, Director of the MSA Research and Archaeological Conservation Centre, of the three human skeletons, one is male, another female, while the third was too badly damaged to identify without further conservation and restoration. The animal remains are those of a small dog. The male skeleton belonged to an individual aged 50 to 60 years, while the female would have been 40 to 50 years old.

Next year, we intend to focus on architectural planning and survey, and the completion of epigraphic and photographic documentations. Conservation and restoration work will continue, including specialized analyses such as X-ray diffraction (XRD) for the identification of materials based on their crystalline structure, allowing us to examine building materials (limestone, plaster, mud brick), pigments and binding media. Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) will be used to analyse organic compounds (e.g. food remains)

Further study of the skeletal remains is needed to identify with certainty the skeletons' gender, age, ancestry, height and possible pathologies. For this, the remains will need to be sent to the MSA Research and Archaeological Conservation Centre. Appropriate permissions from the MSA will be sought and all measures will be taken to ensure safe and secure transportation of the skeletal remains to the research centre. Pottery, ceramic, linen, ropes, palm petioles (midribs), stored in rooms VII, VIII and IX, will be analysed during the next season. We will use radiocarbon dating to determine the age of some of the organic materials found inside the tomb, particularly the skeletal remains, linen and midribs, as well as other organic materials found *in situ* inside and outside the tomb. The presence of Ramesses II's name in the tomb, as well as textual, iconographic and paleographic features, point to the reign of this king. Radiocarbon dating will help ascertain whether the skeletal remains do indeed date to the original (Ramesside) occupation of the tomb or derive from later reuse.

*Column of hieroglyphic text showing the titles and name of Nakht-Min's wife (Photo: Christopher Eyre/MSA-Liverpool University Nakht-Min Epigraphic Mission)*



*The titles of Hathor, Nakht-Min's wife, from Room VII (Book of Gates decoration) (Photo: Christopher Eyre/MSA-Liverpool University Nakht-Min Epigraphic Mission).*



*Location of the tomb of Nakht-Min (above) and Abusir (left) (Images: Google Earth).*

### **Keyword: Abusir**

Abusir is located about 25 km south-west of Cairo, sitting at the edge of cultivated land, it is the entry to the realm of the underworld, as also indicated by its Egyptian name Per-Wesir, 'the domain of Osiris'. Already used as a cemetery during the Early Dynastic Period, Abusir rose to importance at the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty when Userkaf, the dynasty's founder, had a sun-temple built here, followed by at least four of his successors. Excavations beginning around the turn of the 20th century revealed several pyramid complexes as well as mastabas dating to that period. Abusir is also the origin of the largest find of Old Kingdom papyri to date (hence 'Abusir Papyri'). Though in continuous use since the Fifth Dynasty, it was during the New Kingdom, and particularly during the Ramesside Period, that the site again witnessed extensive mortuary activity – of which the tomb of Nakht-Min is one example. Abusir once again became an attractive burial ground during the Saite-Persian Period (6th–4th centuries BC), as shown by excavations by the Czech Institute of Egyptology.

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