An apprentice’s board from Dra Abu el-Naga

The Spanish-Egyptian mission at Dra Abu el-Naga, working in the Eighteenth Dynasty tombs of Djehuty and Hery, has found pieces of a wooden board which had been used for drawing and writing. José Manuel Galán and Mohamed el-Bialy report on this significant find.

The Theban tombs of Djehuty (TT 11) and Hery (TT 12) are located at the eastern extremity of the modern settlement of Dra Abu el-Naga (where the area known as ‘Dra Abu el-Naga north’ begins). Djehuty was a high official under Queen Hatshepsut, while Hery lived during the reigns of Ahmose and Amenhotep I. Both tombs were hewn into the foothill, and they are interconnected through a third tomb (~399~), also of the early Eighteenth Dynasty. The open courtyards of the three tombs are in a row, separated by walls carved from the rock and following the descending hill-slope. Each wall is surmounted by a few courses of mud bricks.

During the first three seasons (2002-2004), the work of the Spanish-Egyptian mission has been concentrated outside the tombs themselves, excavating the mound of accumulated rubble over the courtyards. Many objects have been unearthed, comprising the remains of funerary equipment of various periods from the Eighteenth Dynasty onwards. The objects were found mixed up, due to successive reuse of the area in antiquity, and the activities of nineteenth century robbers and early Egyptologists.

In the first season of work, in the disturbed sand in

Aerial view of Dra Abu el-Naga. The contiguous open courtyards of TT 11, tomb ~399~ and TT 12 are in the centre, to the left of the tent

The modern entrance to Djehuty’s tomb (TT 11) and the still covered courtyard of tomb ~399~, by the time the 14 fragments had been uncovered. The area of the discovery is marked out in red
front of the tombs, three small flat pieces of painted wood were found, and at the beginning of the second season further fragments gradually appeared. Although they all belong to one and the same board, the fragments were scattered throughout an area covering the eastern side of Djehuty's courtyard and that of the neighbouring tomb, and running over the separating wall between the two, at about 2 m above the original ground level. In all, 14 pieces were found, representing a little over half the rectangular board. It was made of don-palm, and would have measured, when complete, 31 cm × 45.8 cm × 1 cm. It is covered with a fine coat of creamy-yellowish stucco and linen tissues can be seen in some places, between the wood and the stucco, probably intended to fill the irregularities of the wood grain. The corners are curved, and the edges taper and are slightly rounded.

The board was used for drawing and writing on both sides. On the right half of what is being considered as the ‘recto’ are six vertical columns of cursive hieroglyphs written from right to left and without separating lines. They can be grouped in pairs, since the text in fact consists of the same passage written three times. It is the opening paragraph of the school text ‘The Book of Kemit’:

'It is the servant who says to [his lord that he (the servant) wishes that he (the lord) may live, be prosperous and healthy for the length of] eternity and for ever, as [this (his) humble servant wishes]. The first pair of columns to be written were those furthest to

the right (A), of which only traces of the opening sign and three words at the top of the second column remain. The handwriting is small and tight compared to the other two versions; it thus seems reasonable to assume that the first one was probably written by a master and was used as a model. The signs of the two subsequent copies (B and C) are larger, disconnected, and show hesitancy and doubt in their tracing. However, the second time the model was copied (the pair of columns furthest to the left – C), the calligraphy improved significantly. The copies were certainly done by an apprentice, most probably the board’s owner.

On the left half of the recto is a drawing of two frontal human figures. Like the cursive text, one (the figure further to the right) was done by a master, and the left-hand figure is a copy made by the pupil. The line drawing of the figure to the right is thin, and its tracing is firm and continuous. The figure to the left has been drawn with a much thicker line, and looking closely one can see that the brush strokes are short, showing a certain insecurity in the apprentice’s hand. Both figures were first sketched in red, with the final drawing traced over in black.

A squared grid, ruled in red, was used to adjust each
figure to a set of pre-determined relative proportions, and it is interesting to note that the frontal view of the human figure was not divided in two by a vertical line acting as a symmetrical axis; the width of the body was divided into five squares. The central column of squares served as the vertical axis, and its side lines helped to locate the exterior of the eyeballs, the vertical line of the lower part of the nemes headdress, the folding of the kilt, the knees and the feet.

The two draughtsmen have depicted a frontal view of a pharaoh's standing statue. It could have been a preliminary drawing before the carving of a sculpture, or a practice outline based, perhaps, on an existing statue similar to Tuthmosis III's greywacke statue wearing the nemes, now in the Luxor Museum (J 2). The closest parallel to the Dra Abu el-Naga board is the British Museum drawing board (EA 5601), on which there is a profile portrait of the young Tuthmosis III seated on a throne. However, the fact that the new drawing lacks the false beard, added to the way in which the inner side of the eyes and the upper lip have been depicted (without smiling dimples in the corners of the mouth), may also point to Hatshepsut as a good candidate for the pharaoh depicted. The archaeological context could support identification with either ruler.

On the 'verso', there is a drawing on the left half that can be seen correctly by flipping the board with a vertical twist (if it is turned around horizontally, the scene is upside down). The figure, drawn inside a red squared grid, has been first outlined in red and then traced over in black ink. It represents a king in profile, fowling in the marshes and holding a duck in his left hand as a decoy, while his right hand (not preserved) must have grasped a throwing stick held high. His legs are wide apart, and the heel of his rear foot is elevated to indicate movement. The king is wearing the red crown, and it is noteworthy that it has no uraeus, and that the crown's coil is quite large, its spiral extending beyond the frame of the red grid.

Although the fowling scene was a recurrent theme on the walls of nobles' tombs from the Old Kingdom, the earliest attestation of a king performing this activity is found in Ay's tomb (KV 23) in the West Valley. Since the figure on the board is likely to be Hatshepsut or Tuthmosis III (the rounded nose, eyes and lips are of the 'co-regency style'), it would seem to be the earliest known representation of a pharaoh hunting ducks.

On the right half of the verso there are traces of a second red squared grid, which has been washed out. It would seem that the board's owner was inclined to wash and reuse the right half of both the recto and verso, preserving the fine drawings on the left intact. The same seems to be true of the British Museum board, as its right half was also washed much more often than the left, which bears the carefully outlined figure of the king.

This apprentice's board, possibly part of Djehuty's tomb equipment, gives an insight into ancient teaching methods and illustrates that drawing and writing were learned and practised together. It is now on display in the new galleries of the Luxor Museum.

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