



Fig. 1 The mastaba of Rashepses, the western wall of the open courtyard with two entrances to the southern and northern sets of chambers (photo H. El-Tayeb)

## Some newly uncovered blocks from the tomb of Rashepses at Saqqara<sup>1</sup>

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The tomb of Rashepses is located in the Fifth Dynasty cemetery along the northern side of the pyramid complex of Netjerykhet at Saqqara (Porter – Moss – Málek 1974: 494–495; Lepsius 1849: 165–170; Lepsius 1850: Bl. 60–64; Quibell 1909: 23; El-Tayeb 2013: 8). Only a small part of the tomb was explored in the early 1900s (Quibell 1909: 23–24), including the main entrance to the tomb with the famous inscription of King Djedkare’s letter (Quibell 1909: pl. LXI [2], 24; Sethe 1933: 179–180 [24(115)]). The Egyptian mission has been working on the site since 2009, headed by the author, and has uncovered some previously unexplored parts of the tomb, including the chapel with false door fragments (El-Tayeb 2015), the burial chamber with painted decoration (El-Tayeb 2013) and other chambers and corridors (fig. 1).

The work of the Egyptian mission revealed that Rashepses’ tomb is much larger and its plan more complicated than the previously published plans and sketches showed (fig. 2a–b). The tomb measures 30 × 27 m; it is rather well-preserved, and its walls survived in many places to their full height, with the ceiling blocks preserved *in situ*. The architecture of the tomb indicates several stages of

construction in relation to the development of Rashepses’ career (El-Tayeb 2013: 8–9). The walls bear a large part of the original relief and painted decoration, only some parts of which were documented by the earlier excavators.

Some documentation of the scenes is known from James Burton, a British traveler who visited the site in 1827. Burton registered some scenes and inscriptions, which he

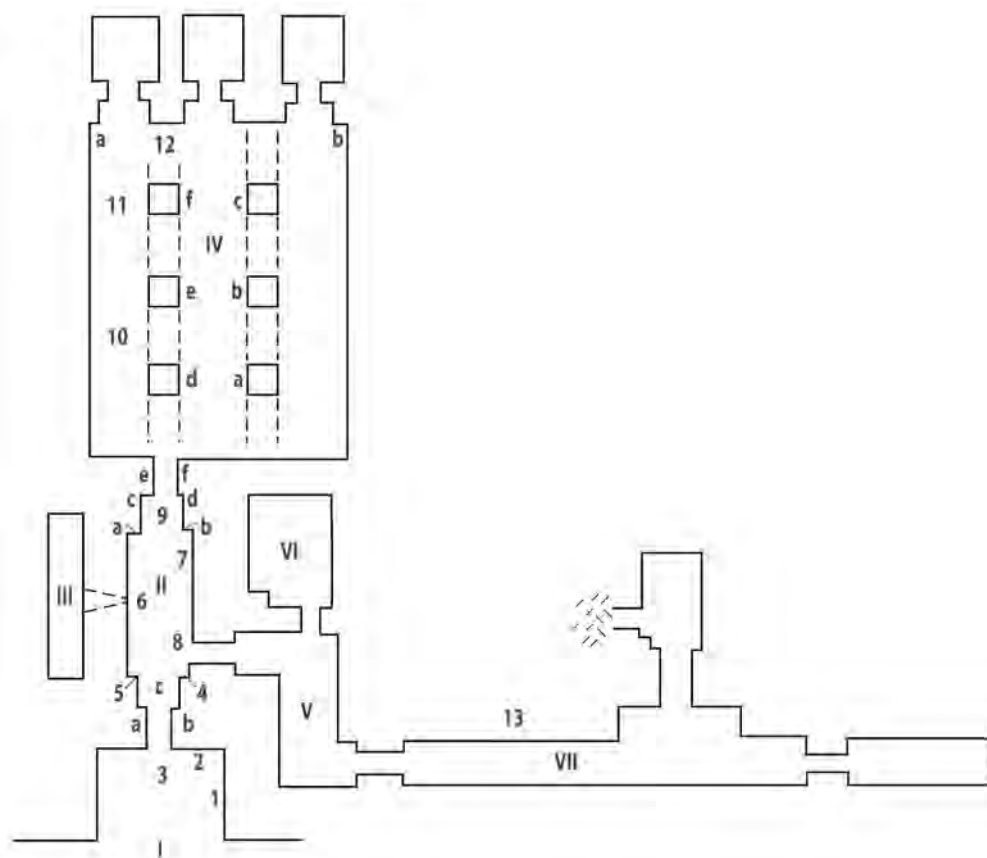


Fig. 2a Plan of Rashepses's tomb (drawing J. Malátková, after Porter – Moss – Málek 1974: pl. XLIX)

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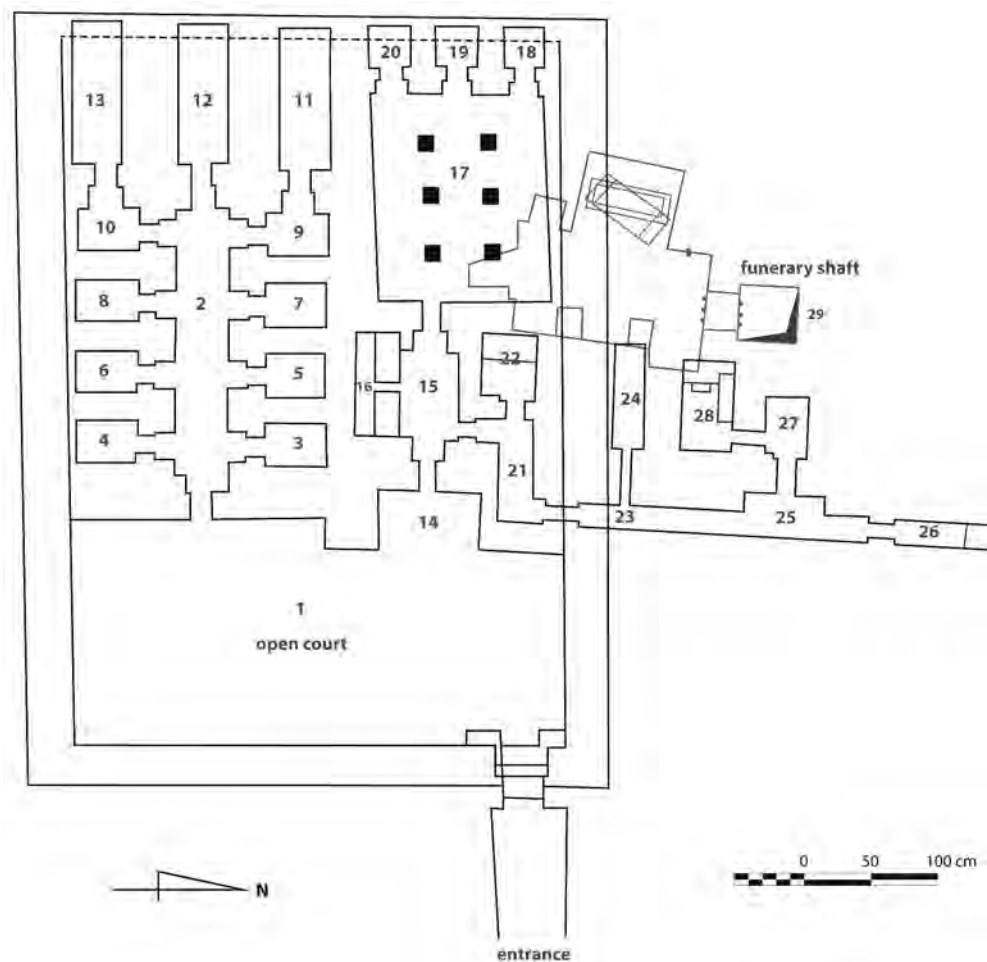


Fig. 2b Updated plan of Rashepses's tomb (drawing J. Malátková, after M. Fathy)

could see in the tomb, including a fragment of Rashepses' false door (Burton, MSS. 25618: 38–40; 25621: 95–103). About 15 year later, the tomb was visited by Karl Richard Lepsius, and it is worth mentioning that his documentation does not include some of the scenes, inscriptions and the false door fragment registered by Burton (El-Tayeb 2015: 239–248). This clearly indicates that the tomb suffered from damage within the short period between Burton's and Lepsius's visits. At that time, Mohamed El-Defterdar, the financial vizier of Mohamed Ali, transferred some blocks from the tomb of Rashepses to decorate his palace in Cairo (Champollion 1835–1845: 485–486).

The current exploration of the tomb enables us to provide documentation of the surviving parts of the tomb, including its architecture and decoration. As mentioned above, a large part of the tomb is well preserved, although some parts need reconstruction; besides this, numerous loose blocks with decoration were also uncovered in the tomb. A selection of these blocks is the subject of the discussion of this paper; the selected fragments are well-preserved and represent examples of decoration from different parts of the tomb.

### Inscribed lintel from the open courtyard

Several loose blocks with relief decoration were found in the open courtyard of the tomb (room 1). This forecourt is located behind the main entrance, and two entrances in its western wall give access to the southern cluster of storerooms (rooms 2–13) and to the northern part with corri-

dors, chapels and a pillared hall with three niches (rooms 14–28). The courtyard is  $15.40 \times 7.10$  m large, and it was filled with sand and rubble; the fill also contained some limestone blocks fallen from the northern wall of the Step Pyramid complex. The lintel fragments were found in the fill of the north-western side of courtyard.

A huge limestone block was found in three pieces (A–C) in the courtyard in 2013 (fig. 3a–c). It originally constituted the lintel above the entrance to the northern group of rooms, situated in the western wall of the forecourt, *i.e.* it was facing the visitors coming through the main entrance of the tomb.

The three discovered fragments of this lintel match together; they are decorated with a hieroglyphic inscription in sunken relief. The inscriptions was surrounded by a rectangular frame, and the pigments preserved on one of the fragments indicate that the signs were painted blue.

Fragment A is  $2.20 \times 0.42 \times 0.50$  m in size; its inscriptions read: *t3ty z3b t3ty imy-r3 zš(w) r(w) n(w)///*, “Chief justice and vizier, overseer of the scribes of documentation of the king [...]” (Jones 2000: 861, no. 3148; 209, no. 780).

Fragment B is  $1.10 \times 0.42 \times 0.52$  m in size; its inscriptions reads: *///imy-r3 k3t nbt nt nzwt (n) mr///*, “[...] overseer of all the works of the king his below[...]” (Jones 2000: 262, no. 950).

Fragment C is  $1.34 \times 0.42 \times 0.50$  m in size; its inscriptions reads: *///r.f R<sup>c</sup>-špss*, “[...]ed Rashepses”.

The lintel in the open courtyard thus provided the highest titles and an epithet of the tomb owner: “Chief justice and vizier, overseer of the scribes of documentation of the

Fig. 3a, b, c Fragments of the limestone lintel with the titles and the name of Rashepses found in the courtyard (photo H. El-Tayeb)





Fig. 4 The western part of the open courtyard in the mastaba of Rashepses, with marked position of the blocks (photo H. El-Tayeb)

king, overseer of all the works of the king, his beloved Rashepses". This indicates that the lintel was inscribed in the later part of Rashepses' life, after he became the vizier. This corresponds to the decoration of the main entrance of the tomb, where the title of the vizier occurs as well (El-Tayeb 2013: 9).

Such entrance lintels constituted usual parts of the Old Kingdom tombs (fig. 4), bearing inscriptions identifying the tomb owner and ending with his figure (Harpur 1987: 44–48). Usually the lintels contain the offering formula and the owner's titles, while in a smaller number of cases only the titles or dedications (Harpur 1987: 47). Rashepses' lintel bears one line of inscription including only his titles and no figure at the end (but a seated figure of a dignitary was part of his name). Similar examples are known from architraves in several Old Kingdom tombs (Brovarski 2000: 13); for instance, a single framed line with the titles and name without the ending figure was found on the architrave in the court of the tomb complex of Senedjemib Inti in Giza (Brovarski 2000: 13, 37–38, pl. 12c–d, fig. 16). Another such architrave, also close to Rashepses in time, can be found above the pillared portico of the tomb of Ptahhetep I at Saqqara (Mourad 2015: 18, pl. 2a–b).

#### Inscribed block with a depiction of Rashepses from the open courtyard

Besides the fragments of the lintel, another large limestone block was found in the open courtyard, broken into two

pieces. It measures  $1.70 \times 0.90 \times 0.20$  m and is decorated with a vertical hieroglyphic inscription ending with a standing figure of Rashepses, carved in sunken relief and marked by lines on both sides. The inscriptions reads: *t3ty z3b t3ty R<sup>c</sup>-šps*, "Chief justice and vizier, Rashepses". The tomb owner is depicted striding, facing left; he wears a collar, a short kilt and holds a long staff in his right hand (fig. 5).

This block was originally part of the western wall of the courtyard, to the right of the entrance leading to the northern group of rooms. This inscription and depiction of the tomb owner thus faced the visitors who entered through the main entrance.

#### Block with the scenes of netting birds and gathering papyrus

Another decorated loose block was discovered in corridor (room 23) in the northern part of the tomb, fallen into the fill. This corridor is  $9.00 \times 0.90$  m large, and its fill consisted of sand and several limestone fragments with remains of reliefs from the decoration of this room. Unlike the previously mentioned large blocks from the courtyard, the blocks found in the corridor were of smaller dimensions.

The block is  $0.59 \times 0.29 \times 0.31$  m in size and bears low relief with preserved polychromy, showing parts of two registers. The upper register comprises part of a scene of netting birds in a marsh, while the bottom register shows part of a scene of men gathering papyrus.



Fig. 5 Block with the title and the name of Rashepses, ending with his depiction, found in the courtyard (photo H. El-Tayeb)

### Scene of netting birds

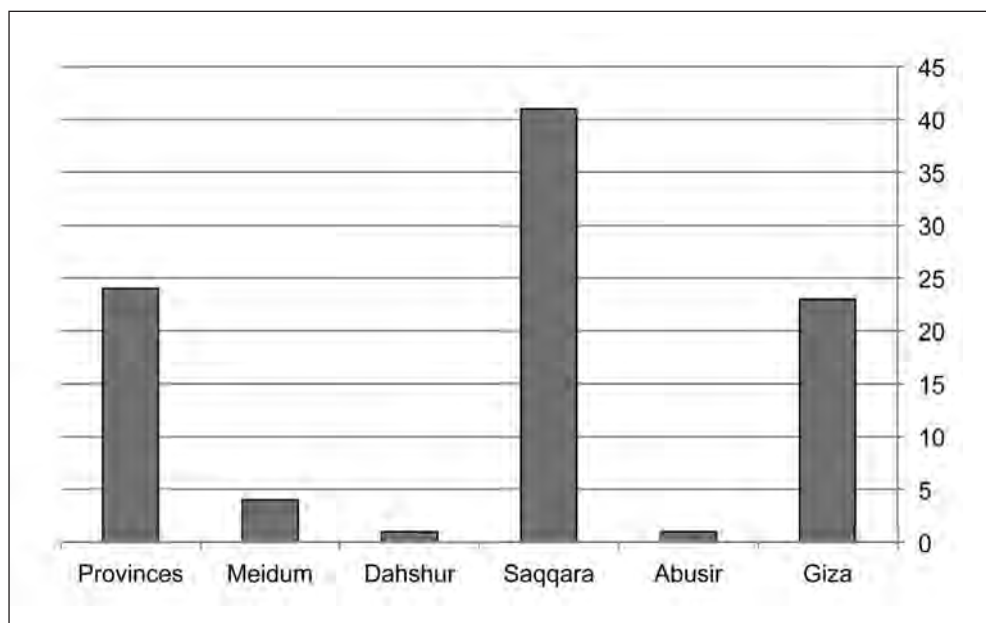
A small part of the bird-netting scene is preserved on the fragment; it shows the rope of the net painted black, which surrounds a group of three birds. One bird is preserved completely as it bends down to catch the bait, while only the bottom parts of the two other standing birds survived. Water plants are depicted both in and around the net. Scenes of netting birds comparable to this example can be found in many Old Kingdom tombs (see chart 1).

Chart 1 shows that scenes of netting birds appear in Saqqara more than at any other Old Kingdom cemetery. We know 41 examples from Saqqara while only 23 from Giza, and the provinces with examples from 24 tombs (see the database of the Oxford Expedition to Egypt (OEE) at [http://archaeologydata-service.ac.uk/archives/view/oe\\_ahrc\\_2006](http://archaeologydata-service.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006)). This indicates the importance of the Saqqara cemetery for the study of these scenes.

Only a small part of the scene survived on our block from Rashepses's tomb. However, better preserved examples show the context of such a scene, including a hauler holding the rope of the net and a signalman hiding near the trap and giving a signal to the hauler at a suitable time to pull the rope to close the net full of birds. Such examples are attested for instance in the tombs of Werirmi at Sheikh Said (Davies 1901: pl. XII top), or the tombs of Neferiretnef (Van de Walle 1978: pl. 13), Hesi (Kanawati – Abder-Raziq 1999: pl. 55) and Ankhmahor (Kanawati – Hassan 1997: pl. 42) at Saqqara. It is worth mentioning that in Old Kingdom tombs, the net is never shown before the capture (Harpur 1987: 142).

Chart 2 shows that most of the attested scenes of netting birds appear in the Fifth Dynasty and a slightly smaller number are known from Sixth Dynasty tombs. The increase of attested examples after the end of the Fourth Dynasty corresponds to the general trends of development of that period; the overall number of chambers and decorated walls is higher in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties than in the Fourth (database of the OEE [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe\\_ahrc\\_2006/](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006/)). Therefore, not

Chart 1 Scenes of netting birds attested at the cemeteries of the Old Kingdom



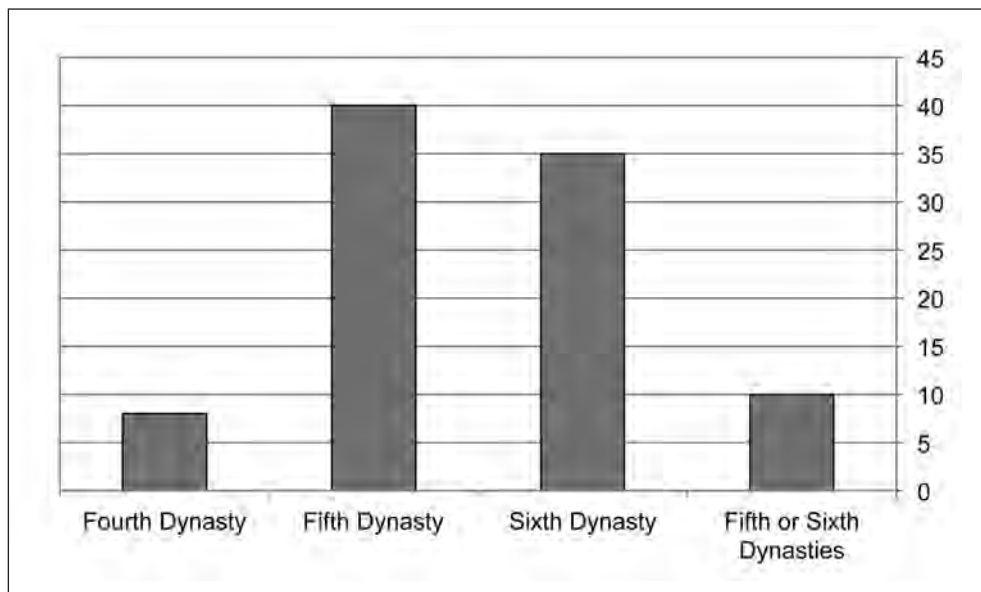


Chart 2 Old Kingdom scenes of netting birds according to their date

only the netting of birds but also many other scenes appear more frequently from the Fifth Dynasty onwards (database of the OEE [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe\\_ahrc\\_2006/](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006/)).

Chart 3 indicates the various locations of bird-netting scenes within Old Kingdom tombs. The highest number of these scenes, especially those in Giza and Saqqara, were carved on eastern walls of the chambers; occurrences on the southern, western and northern walls are much less frequent.

**Scene of gathering papyrus**

The bottom part of the block bears part of a scene of gathering papyrus (pl. 3). Four figures are partly preserved on the fragment, showing four men with receding hair wearing narrow bands around their wastes, tied in front. The two men in the middle face right and each holds a bundle of papyrus stalks with both arms. The two men on the sides of the fragment face left and carry their tied papyrus bundles on

their backs, holding the ropes in their right hands. The men's skin is painted in red ochre, while the papyrus stalks are painted green. The papyrus is shown without flowers, except for the first person on the right, whose bundle has flowers.

Scenes of gathering papyrus can be found in many Old Kingdom tombs. Such scenes are attested most frequently in Saqqara, where 18 examples are known, while 11 such scenes occur in the tombs in provinces, and in 6 tombs at Giza and 2 tombs in Abusir (chart 4; see also database of the OEE at [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe\\_ahrc\\_2006/](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006/)). The better preserved and more complete examples of gathering papyrus scenes show gatherers standing near the edge of a swamp and pulling out the stalks of the papyrus to collect them into bundles, which are then taken by other men to be transported to papyrus boat builders or to the tomb owner (Harpur 1987: 149). The earliest scene of gathering papyrus

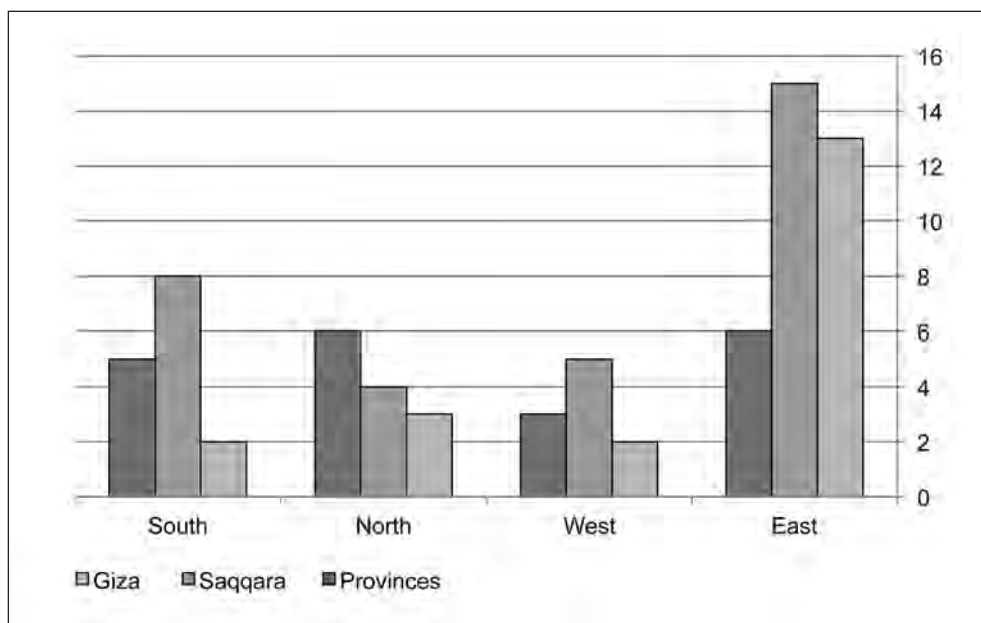
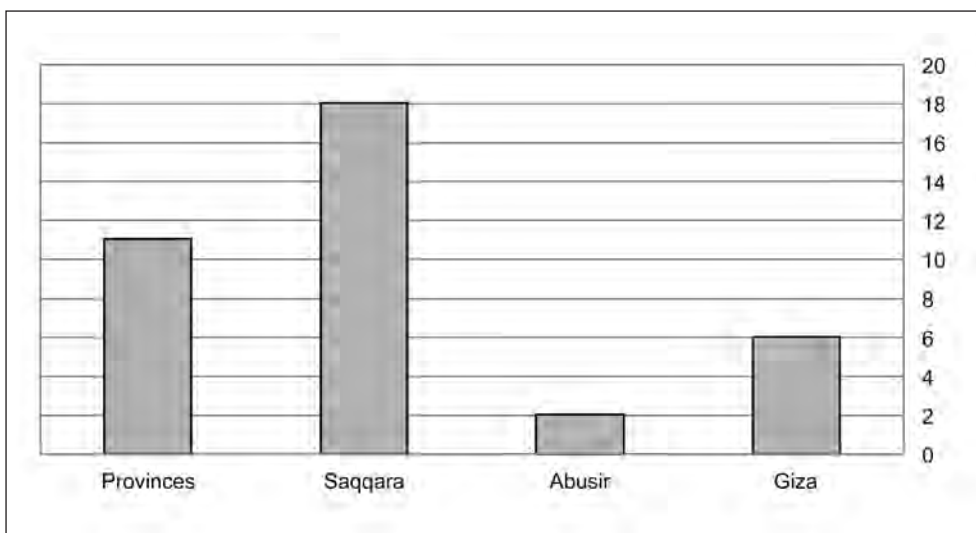


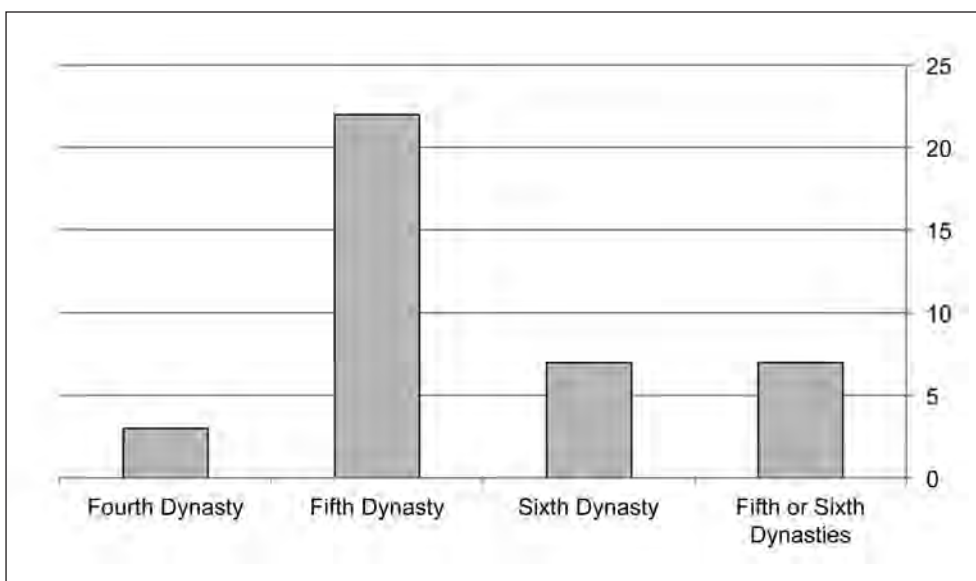
Chart 3 Attested scenes of netting birds according to their location in the tomb



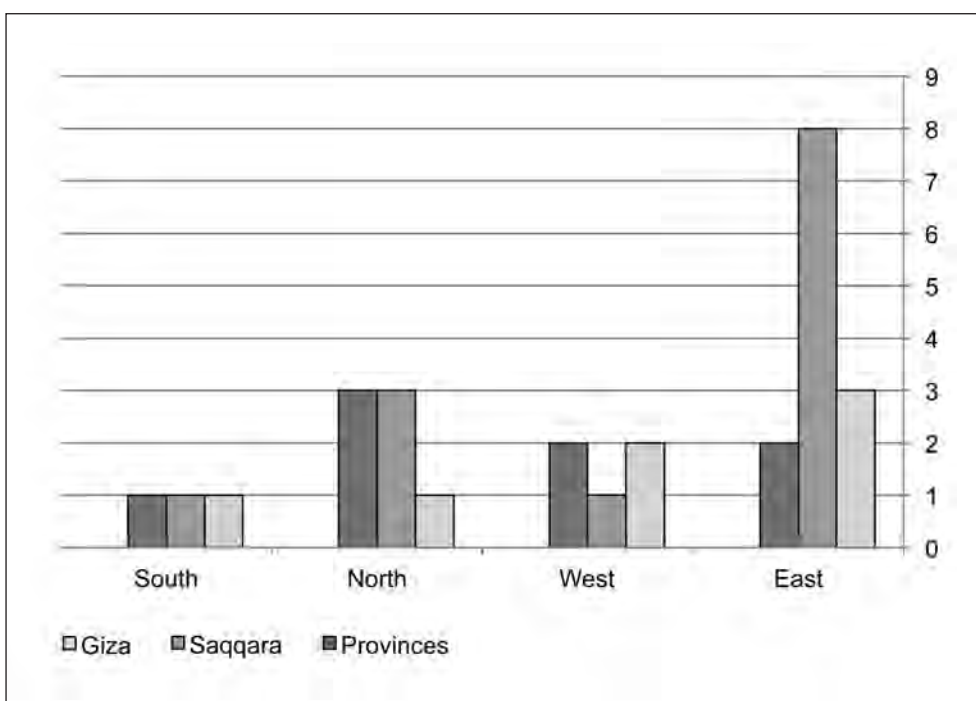
**Chart 4** Scenes of gathering papyrus attested in the Old Kingdom cemeteries



**Chart 5** Old Kingdom scenes of gathering papyrus according to their date



**Chart 6** Attested scenes of gathering papyrus according to their location in the tomb





appears in the tomb of Nebemakhet, dated to the reign of King Shepseskaf (Harpur 1987: 149). It has been noticed that the gatherers in Giza are depicted with slender bodies, while those in Saqqara that date to the reign of Neferirkare and later are often depicted with coarse pot-bellies and receding hair (Harpur 1987: 149). Such features also appear in the fragment from Rashepses' tomb.

It is worth mentioning that the papyrus without flowers, which can be found on the fragment from Rashepses' tomb is rather unusual. It is much more common to find the stems with flowers, as for instance in the tombs of Ti (Epron

1939: pl. cx), Mehu (Altenmüller 1998: taf. 14) and Kaiemnofret (Simpson 1992: fig. 6) in Saqqara and in the tomb of Werireni in Sheikh Said (Davies 1901: 24, pl. xii).

Chart 5 shows that a major part of the attested Old Kingdom scenes of gathering papyrus date to the Fifth Dynasty, this includes 22 tombs out of 35. As mentioned above, this corresponds to the general increase of decorated rooms in tombs from the later parts of the Old Kingdom. In this case, however, the number of Sixth Dynasty examples is not very high either, indicating a specific role of this scene in the Fifth Dynasty (database of the OEE



Fig. 6 Block showing Rashepses in front of the offering table found in the chapel (photo H. El-Tayeb)





at [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe\\_ahrc\\_2006/](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/oe_ahrc_2006/)).

The last chart (chart 6) indicates that the majority of the attested scenes of gathering papyrus were depicted on the eastern walls of the respective rooms. The block with remains of the scenes of netting birds and gathering papyrus from the tomb of Rashepses was found in a corridor (room 23) where it was most likely originally located. As the corridor is north-south oriented, the scene could have been depicted either on its eastern, or western wall. Considering the statistics on the spatial distribution of both types of scenes in Old Kingdom tombs, especially in the Fifth Dynasty tombs at Saqqara, presented above in charts 3 and 6, the eastern wall of the corridor seems the most plausible original position of the block with the scenes of netting birds and gathering papyrus in Rashepses' tomb.

### Block with the tomb owner in front of an offering table

A decorated loose block was discovered during the cleaning of the chapel with a false door in 2010. This chapel is located in the northern part of the tomb and a small part of the false door is preserved *in situ* in the western wall of the room (El-Tayeb 2015: 239–248). The loose block is 15.00 × 0.80 × 0.90 m large and was found in the southern side of the chapel (room 28) in the fill of sand and rubble. The low relief bears part of a scene showing the tomb owner sitting in front of an offering table, facing left (fig. 6). The scene thus originally came from the chapel's southern wall.

Above the depiction of the tomb owner, remains of three vertical columns of hieroglyphic inscription identify him as:

<sup>1</sup> ///[imy-r3] k3t nbt (nt) nzw

<sup>2</sup> ///[ny nsf] hntt

<sup>3</sup> ///[iwn] knmwt.

<sup>1</sup> “[... overseer] of all the works of the king (Jones 2000: 262, no. 950),

<sup>2</sup> [...] he who belongs to the foremost seat (Jones 2000: 471, no. 1755),

<sup>3</sup> [support] of *knmwt* (Jones 2000: 6, no. 22)”.

The following columns of inscriptions, which contained more titles and the name of the tomb owner, are not preserved on the block.

Underneath the inscription, Rashepses is depicted sitting on a chair with ox's legs and a large pillow. His body is well-shaped with muscles shown on his legs. He wears a shoulder length wig covering his ears and has a short beard on his chin. He wears a *wsh*-collar with remains of green pigment, a short kilt and a leopard skin with its paw on his right shoulder. The skin covers Rashepses' chest and belly and goes under his left shoulder; it is tied on the right shoulder where the shield-shaped ending of the tying band is visible. In his left hand, the tomb owner holds a “handkerchief”, which is exceptionally long (it might be the end of the leopard skin). His right hand is extended towards the offering table, on which bread is placed; the bread is depicted as conventionalized half-loaves of breads, similar to, for instance, the scene in the offering room of Senedjemib Inti (Brovarski 2000: 70–71, pl. 38, fig. 61), not in

a formalized form of bread loaves imitating reed leaves (e.g. Bárta 2009: 103). Twelve half-loaves are preserved on the block; originally the table perhaps contained fourteen half-loaves.

Above the bread loaves, a short inscription reads: *h3 šs h3 mnht h3 t h3 hnkt III*, “a thousand of alabaster jars (of ointment), a thousand of (pieces) of linen, a thousand of breads, a thousand of beer jars [...]”, perhaps originally followed by the same number of meat and poultry offerings. Above the text, some offerings are depicted, including a table with four vessels and two bowls underneath. Some more offerings were depicted to the left but did not survive. Above this depiction, several columns of inscriptions seem to have been carved, but only small parts of it are preserved on the fragment.

Underneath the offering table with bread we can trace remains of some food offerings. These remains seem to show figs and remains of other vegetables.

Scenes of the tomb owner sitting at the offering table are very common, as they constitute one of the central motifs of Egyptian tomb decoration. We can find it above all in chapels, on false door panels as well as on walls beside false doors, *i.e.* the northern and southern walls of chapels. The scenes usually face the entrance of the rooms and registers of offering bearers who are depicted approaching the tomb owner. Well-preserved examples of such a scene are attested, for instance, in the tomb of Shepesiptah in Saqqara (Kanawati 2001: pls. 37, 40), tombs of Itisen (Hassan 1944: fig. 125), Senedjemib Inti (Brovarski 2000: pls. 39–46[b]) and Ity (Weeks 1994: fig. 51) in Giza, *etc.* Rashepses in this scene is facing left, which indicates that this scene was originally depicted on the southern wall of his chapel.

### Summary

The evidence uncovered in the tomb of Rashepses contains many relief fragments and architectural elements that require a detailed study. The tomb is large and contains a number of chambers and corridors, and therefore the complete description of its architecture and decoration needs sufficient time and will continue. Restoration of many parts of the tomb, moreover, still continues as well. Thus, a small selection of interesting scenes from the tomb was presented in this article in order to make the material from Rashepses's tomb accessible to the readers.

The several loose blocks with relief decoration presented above constitute decoration from different parts of the tomb of Rashepses. The large limestone blocks with sunken relief inscriptions once decorated the entrance to the northern group of rooms. Of the entrance decoration, fragments of the right-side depiction and fragments of the lintel were uncovered, bearing sunken relief. These decorative elements refer to the highest title of Rashepses, indicating that the courtyard, the main tomb entrance and the entrance to the cultic rooms were built (or at least decorated) in the later part of Rashepses' life, after he became vizier (see also El-Tayeb 2013: 9).

Another discussed relief fragment most likely belonged to the decoration of the corridor leading to the chapel. It

included parts of scenes of netting birds and gathering papyrus, the former depicted above the latter. The relief still bears much of its original paint.

The large loose block from the chapel itself shows the usual motif of the tomb owner sitting in front of the offering table and piled offerings, with columns of inscription above him giving his identification. Only a small part of this inscription, however, survived, and some remains of the original paint are still visible on the tomb owner's figure. The orientation of the scene indicates that it was depicted on the southern wall of the chapel.

Besides these relief fragments, other loose blocks were also discovered in the tomb, and in addition, some parts of the decoration survived *in situ* in various parts of the mastaba. It is thus possible that more parts of the same scenes will be identified in the future, which will help reconstruct the decoration scheme of the individual rooms of Rashepses's tomb.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this article to my father, Abdallah El-Tayeb, as well as to my mother, and to Dr. Robert Anderson. I would like to thank Dr. Hana Vymazalová for her kind help with the preparation of this article, to Petr Košárek for his help with adjusting the photographs and to Anthony Arias for editing and correcting my English.

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**Abstract:**

The tomb of the Vizier, Rashepses, located in Saqqara to the north of Netjerykhet's pyramid complex, belongs among the large and complex mastabas of the late Fifth Dynasty. The paper presents some of the decorated blocks which were uncovered during the exploration of the tomb by the Egyptian mission. These blocks include architectural components with the inscribed titles and name of the

tomb owner, a fragment of a scene of the tomb owner at the offering table and a fragment of scenes showing the netting of birds and gathering papyrus.

Saqqara – Old Kingdom – Fifth Dynasty – mastaba – Rashepses – tomb decoration

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