CHAPTER 2

REPORT ON THE 1984 EXCAVATIONS
PAINTED PLASTER FROM THE MAIN CHAPEL

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Last season’s excavation of the Outer Hall and of part of the Sanctuary yielded an amount of painted plaster. This year’s work added a much greater quantity, amassing a total of fragments that will take one or more further seasons of conservation and recording. This volume of reports contains a detailed study of the few hieroglyphic fragments (Chapter 7), and here a preliminary account will be given of one wall where the decoration was sufficiently striking to make recording and reconstruction on paper fairly straightforward.

The outline plan, Figure 2.1, shows where the painted plaster was found, and marks separately the areas which produced pieces with hieroglyphs. Account must be taken of how the walls collapsed, something which was recorded on a separate set of plans of the rubble as it lay in each square and which forms the basis of Figure 2.1. Part of the brickwork from the north and south walls fell outwards. On the north this meant collapse into the North Annexe, thus into a narrow space with the result that the falling wall folded back on itself, burying many of the plastered surfaces. The painted plaster found in these rooms should not be taken as evidence that they were themselves decorated. On the south the collapsing sections fell into a more open space. Part collapsed in a single articulated whole, leaving the inner and originally decorated surfaces lying face upwards and exposed to the elements. Not surprisingly, no pieces of plaster were found amidst this rubble. All that has survived from this wall are a few pieces which had fallen inwards on to the floor of the Inner Hall. An area where the loss has been total is the shrine section of the Sanctuary. The rear wall probably fell outwards, into the rear corridor, but the partition walls must have collapsed into the shrines. The corridor had been cleared by Peet, along with the northernmost shrine, and the upper debris had been removed from the other two. He makes no mention in COA I of finding any painted fragments. The deeper front parts of the shrines were left untouched in the earlier work, but when cleared by ourselves were found not to contain a significant amount of rubble or painted plaster. We are thus left with no clues as to what decoration was inside the shrines.

Decoration appears otherwise to have been limited to the corridor in front of the shrines, probably all the walls of the Inner Hall, the rear part only of the Outer Hall, and part of the Side Chapel. In the case of the Outer Hall part of the north wall had collapsed inwards, as Figure 2.1 shows. Despite the much better chances of preservation very little painted plaster was actually recovered from here.

By far the greatest amount of painted plaster came from walls, although it will not be possible to make a definitive statement on this until all the pieces have been properly studied. But ceiling plaster tends to have a distinctive back,
Figure 2.1. Plan of the rubble within the Main Chapel, showing the units which produced painted plaster (originals by A. Bomann).
Figure 2.2. View of the rubble in the Sanctuary corridor, looking north. Note the painted fragments visible in the foreground, and the ancient rain-streaks on the wall behind.

reproducing the surfaces of the roofing materials. In the general handling of the plaster no pieces were noted as conspicuously bearing such back patterns. Moreover, most of the identifiable subject matter belongs to wall rather than to ceiling decoration. Many pieces retain ridges of mortar on their backs from joins between bricks, and a few pieces were found still adhering to complete bricks. The backing material is a straw-enriched alluvial mud plaster. The decoration was applied to a yellow ground, with the exception of a few pieces from the vicinity of the Side Chapel, which had a white background. As to what proportion of the original painted surfaces has survived, it has to be accepted that in general it is very small. The fact that of a large male figure from the north wall of the Inner Hall only a single piece survived (Figure 2.4 top) gives a good idea of the extent of the loss. However, Egyptian religious wall art is so stylised that, small though the preserved part is, when all pieces have been studied a fairly complete reconstruction should be possible. At this stage of
study human figures and hieroglyphs seem to have been in a minority. Much of the total collection is taken up with pieces from tall stylised floral borders from the tops of walls, and with other floral motifs.

Parts of the north wall of the Main Chapel had been preserved to a height unusual in these Amarna chapels: to a maximum of 1.45 metres in the north-east corner of the Inner Hall. An elevation of this wall is provided in Figure 2.3. It also depicts the areas of surviving white gypsum plaster. In the Inner Hall this reached a maximum height of 60 cms., but still bore no signs of painted decoration, even of yellow background. We can calculate that the Sanctuary was originally about 2.50 metres high (see below). If the Inner Hall had the same height some 1.70 metres of the upper part is left for the decoration. Since the walls seem to have had a broad decorative band across the top (as in the reconstructed scene, Figure 2.6), the area that remains for accommodating the actual scenes is only around 1.50 metres tall. This would have been sufficient for a single register, with the main figures probably seated.

The north wall of the Sanctuary was alone in preserving original decoration (Figures 2.2 and 2.3). At a height of about 40 cms. above the floor a thick black line ran the full width of the Sanctuary corridor. Alternate red and black lines rose perpendicularly from it at closely set intervals, presumably forming a simplified "palace-façade" border to a design above, now entirely lost.

This piece of wall in particular bears traces of having been exposed ancienly to the elements, including to rain. This fits the evidence from the late burial against the North Wall described in the previous chapter. The loss of so much of the decoration can be ascribed as much to weathering after the roof had fallen in as to subsequent collapse of the walls themselves.

In Figure 2.4 three specimen fragments are illustrated, all from the north wall of the Inner Hall. The top piece shows part of the face of a man with thick hair or wig. The ground behind the head is yellow; the face is brown-y-orange; the white of the eye is white. The centre piece is a group of fragments which together cover a large part of the face of a woman wearing an elaborate head-piece. The ground is yellow; the face is a brownish-pink defined by outlines in brown-y-orange; the white of the eye is white; the head-piece consists of a turquoise horizontal band above one of dark blue with an ornamental device of white with black zig-zag line on top; the small fragment of shoulder was outlined in red. The lowest piece has a yellow ground with red lines and indistinct red patches at the left end. On the right is a design of red lines over the yellow which may depict a sistrum.

For this report, more detailed treatment of the fragments is confined to those from one individual wall within the Sanctuary, namely the inner, eastern face of the screen wall and door which separates the Sanctuary from the Inner Hall.

The corridor was filled with rubble containing many fragments of painted plaster (Figure 2.2). They belong to two excavation units: [747] and [1082]. The topography of the rubble gave the impression that it had fallen from the north-south walls rather than the end walls, which, as noted above, had tended to collapse outwards. The nature of the decoration confirms this. A great many of the fragments show plumage and other details from winged creatures, which, on closer study, resolve themselves into vulture and winged sun-disc. The
Figure 2.3. East-west elevation of the north wall of the Main Chapel.
Figure 2.4. Three pieces of painted plaster from the Inner Hall, at half-scale.
Figure 2.5. Pieces of painted plaster from the Sanctuary, at half-scale.
disposition of the fragments on the floor as well as certain areas of duplication show that there were two very similar vultures. In Figure 2.5 one of the many vulture pieces is reproduced, and three pieces from the winged disc. [1] The former shows that the vultures grasped in their claws šn-symbols and long ostrich-feather standards (cf. AR I: 20). The others cover the central sun-disc with part of a flanking uraeus on the right. The long fragment in the centre of Figure 2.5 comes from the top of the wing, where the inner downy feathers are almost surrealististically represented by a bold scatter of red dots over a white background, over the top of which runs a bright blue wing rib. Figure 2.6 is a reconstruction of the appearance of two thirds of the wall from which they came. Vulture and winged disc are shown complete, but at this stage a fair portion, particularly of the upper parts, is reconstruction. As study proceeds many more fragments are likely to be added. But the standardisation of these figures in Egyptian art is such that, as they appear in Figure 2.6, they are unlikely to be far wrong. The models used are the vultures from the ceiling of the tomb of Rameses VI at Thebes (Plankoff 1954: Plates 145, 145a, 160, 160a, 172; cf. Nelson, et al. 1982: 22, Plate IV), and the winged discs on the ceiling of one of the shrines of Tutankhamun (Plankoff 1955: Figure 28, opp. p. 70).

The placing of the designs in Figure 2.6 is reasonably certain. Although the length of the winged disc is to some extent elastic, nature provides a minimum for the vultures, and this is more or less reached in Figure 2.6. Yet this length is well in excess of that available on the short east-west walls, which are thus excluded. We can also exclude the facade of the shrines. This is pierced by three doorways. We know that over each shrine doorway a painted cavetto cornice was modelled in brick and mortar. A well-preserved length had anciently dropped vertically and was found propped against the front of the southernmost doorway. When a minimum height is allowed for the doorways, the addition of this cornice reduces the space above to less than can comfortably fit the vultures.

There is, however, a more direct way still of locating the figures. The pieces from the bottom of all three of them have a distinctive form. The painting has been applied to a thick backing of mud which had been moulded over a cylindrical wooden beam. The beam impression remained clearly visible. The painted surface curves somewhat in the vicinity to reflect the moulding. This is illustrated in the sections drawn in Figure 2.5. Higher up the figures, however, the surface is flat and had been formed over bricks, a few of which were found intact with the plaster still on. The deduction has to be that these bottom pieces were above a wooden architrave over a space, and that it was strong enough to support perhaps 80 cms. of brickwork above. These moulded pieces come not only from towards the centre of the figures but, in the case of the vultures, also from towards the ends. The widths of these architraves are much greater than the widths of the shrine doorways, but they can be made (just) to fit the widths of the "windows" in the screen walls.

[1] The following colour abbreviations are used in Figure 2.5: r=red; y=yellow; t=turquoise; db=dark blue; w=white; m=marsn.
Figure 2.6. Reconstruction of part of the west wall of the Sanctuary, covering the doorway and south "window" (vulture and winged disc by Vickie Kemp).
Painted plaster
The principal uncertainty concerns the depths of the painted areas. The overall height of the chapel is fairly well known. The south wall of the Sanctuary had collapsed outwards in a single sheet of articulated brick and had then been covered in sand, so that it was possible to count the likely number of original brick courses. Along the eastern section line of squares R18 and R19 a total of 17 courses could be distinguished, representing an original height of about 1.87 metres. This must be added to the height of the standing wall stump, 70 cms., giving a total original height of 2.57 metres, plus the thickness of the roof.

The depth adopted for Figure 2.6 is close to the minimum available. The winged disc had a deep floral border above it, but its own height was much less than that of the vultures. As yet we have no indication of an equivalent border over the vultures. With both vultures and disc, however, traces remained on a few fragments of a vertical block pattern which is included in the reconstruction.

As for the figures themselves, only a few additional comments are required. The vulture heads did not survive, but have been reconstructed. The band of pointed feathering below the top of the outstretched wings, painted in turquoise on a white ground, is represented by a number of fragments, which also cover what seem to be the ends of this motif. The most uncertain parts of the design are the areas between the body and the outstretched wings, and particularly the feathering over the legs. Further study may produce some modifications. With the winged disc most of the central area, including the cobras, is represented by fragments so that little is uncertain, and the overall design is simpler than that of the vultures.

The whole effect must have been quite arresting: plumage of red, turquoise, pale blue and black; areas of white with red outlines, and yellow with red details, the whole over a deep yellow background. And although the position, behind the windows and door, did not display them to their best advantage, a beam of light from the circular roof aperture kept them from being wholly lost in shadows. If the window had been placed in the centre, as in Figure 2.6, a small shaft of sunlight may well have touched the disc of the sun each morning.