



## Beni Hassan Landscape: A Nile Landscape of Ancient Egyptian Legacy<sup>1</sup>

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### Keywords

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### Abstract

The tombs of Beni Hassan, dating to the Middle Kingdom, offer a unique insight into the artistic representation of Nilotic backgrounds in Egyptian tomb scenes. The term "Nilotic landscape" refers to any artistic representation of landscapes that are influenced by Egypt's Nile River. This word is used to describe hunting and fishing scenes in Egyptian art.

The aims of this paper are to identify the Nilotic landscape, examine the Nilotic backgrounds in the tombs of Beni Hassan, classify the different types of Nilotic representations, identify the species of flora and fauna depicted in Nilotic scenes and examine the placement of landscape scenes to determine whether they follow a fixed orientation. Descriptive and analytical methodology was employed to achieve the objectives of this study, which was reinforced through a field visit to the site.

Significant results of this study reveal that animal depictions are limited compared to birds and fish in the Nilotic backgrounds. The tombs of Baqet III and Khnumhotep II are characterized by a great diversity of birds and fish rather than the other tombs.

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## 1. Introduction

Beni Hassan is 25 kilometers south of El-Minia in Middle Egypt. The site has multiple necropolises from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period, but the Middle Kingdom one is most important. The four best-preserved Beni Hassan tombs are open to the public. Two tombs, Baqet III (No.15) and Khety (No.17), dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> dynasty. While the tombs of Amenemhat (No.2) and Khnumhotep II (No.3) belong to the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty. The tombs were built for the local governors and high officials of the Oryx Nome. The tombs are situated on a terrace overlooking the Nile and the fertile farmland of Beni Hassan village. The rock-cut tombs at Beni Hassan are among the most well-preserved and valuable of the Middle Kingdom tombs, with lengthy biographical writings and wall scenes bearing much information. These tombs offer valuable insights into daily life, as well as the social and political structures of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Landscape is a term used to describe artistic representations of the repertoire, which is inspired by the natural surroundings. The production of the landscapes as well as their iconography and interpretations relies on the provenance of the work and the culture in which it was presented. Regarding the painted wall scenes depicted on the rock cut tombs of Beni Hassan, the term is coined to refer primarily to landscapes created by the artist who expressed the domestic environment. Landscapes illustrated at Beni Hassan varied from Nilotic and desert to agricultural. They were commonly used to refer to daily life scenes of wild hunting, fishing, fowling, rowing, harvesting, horticulture and other routine activities. The regular iconographic elements included papyrus swamps, Nile fish, birds, pets and wild animals, much of which is native to plants and animals in ancient Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

Nilotic landscape refers to any creative representation of landscapes that imitates or is influenced by Egypt's Nile River.<sup>4</sup> In Egyptian art, the phrase referred to scenes of hunting and fishing. A Nilotic landscape is a river landscape with diverse plant and animal life, much of which is indigenous to Egypt. Papyrus, lotus, palm trees, fish and water birds, hippopotamus, monkeys, and crocodiles are all common iconographic elements of the Nilotic landscape.<sup>5</sup>

This study aims to identify the Nilotic landscape, examine the Nilotic backgrounds in the tombs of Beni Hassan, classify the different types of Nilotic representations and examine the placement of landscape scenes to determine whether they follow a fixed orientation. This study will follow the descriptive and analytical methodology applied to the wall scenes of the four open tombs of Beni Hassan and use tables for analyzing the results.

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<sup>2</sup> Kanawati, N. & Woods, A., (2010) Beni Hassan: art and daily life in an Egyptian province. Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo, pp. 5-8.

<sup>3</sup> Tiradritti, F. & S. Vannini, (2008) Egyptian Wall Painting. English language ed., 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Abbeville Press, New York, p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Versluys, M.J., (2015) Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic scenes and the Roman views of Egypt (Vol. 144). Brill, p.28.

<sup>5</sup> الطنبولي، محمد عبد اللطيف. (١٩٥٥) طرق تصوير الطبيعة في مناظر الدولة القديمة، رسالة ماجستير، كلية الآداب، جامعة الإسكندرية، ص ٢.

## 2. The Contexts of the scenes

This study investigated the Nilotic backgrounds of the four open tombs at Beni Hassan (Baquet III, Khety, Amenemhat, and Khnumhotep II). The scenes were classified into five principal contexts: (fishing and fowling in the papyrus marsh, cattle fording the Nile, agricultural context, fighting boatmen and sacred journey to Abydos and Busiris).

### 2.1. Fowling and fishing in the papyrus marsh

It is believed that hunting birds in marshes was a popular activity in ancient Egypt, as evidenced by the frequent depictions of this practice in tomb decorations. While spear-fishing and using a throw-stick to catch birds are traditional activities depicted in wall scenes from the Old Kingdom onward, the tomb owner is typically depicted carrying a throw stick in one hand and multiple decoy birds in the other. Above the shrine's doorway, Khnumhotep II is seated behind a reed screen, pulling on a rope to close the net (Figs. 5, 6). The clapnet at Beni Hassan appears to be situated within a body of water, as evidenced by the zigzag lines clearly drawn below the net and the birds depicted swimming amid the waterweeds, lotus buds, and flowers floating on the surface. However, the trees that border the body of water serve as resting places for a variety of bird species, which are also carefully shown with great attention to the feathers' colors and patterns.<sup>6</sup>

The fishing and fowling scene in ancient Egypt has a clear type that includes a mirrored scene with two depictions of the tomb owner looking forward. A bident spear is used to kill two fish, *Tilapia nilotica* and *Lates niloticus*, in the first figure. The fish are held above the water, with a water arch and papyrus plants all around them. The second figure has a straight back and holds a few decoy birds by his feet. His wife and kids often go with him on his small reed boat, and there are female figures standing in front of or behind him or squatting between his legs. There may also be male figures on the side carrying dead animals or extra weapons. With this general outline, a lot of scenes of fishing and hunting have been found in private tombs. Some examples, mostly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, are different from this type because they show the two hunting figures on separate walls or only use half of the scene.<sup>7</sup>

This landscape is depicted on the north wall lower register of the tomb of Baquet III (Fig.1). The entire register, which is double the height of the others on the wall, focuses on river activities. A big dragnet near the shore is dragged by ten fishermen and contains a variety of fish species, including a possible elephant fish, *Synodontis schall* (catfish), tilapia, *Petrocephalus* (moon fish, but inaccurately drawn), a barbel, and two unidentifiable fish. The inscription above reads *hb nfr pw* "It is a good catch". The central scene depicts the tomb owner and his family fowling in the marshes. The papyrus thicket in the background contains three rows of open umbels, some of which

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<sup>6</sup> Kanawati, N. & Woods, A., (2010) Beni Hassan, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, E. J., (2012) *Time and Meaning: The Use of the Fishing and Fowling Scene through Time in Ancient Egyptian Non-Royal Tombs*. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Pp. 5-8.

bend sideways. A sub-register surrounding the thicket displays several birds and bats, each labeled with a unique Egyptian name.<sup>8</sup>

The mentioned birds and bats are; female and male Golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*), Masked shrike (*Lanius nubicus*), Roller (*Coracias garrulus*), Pin-tailed sandgrouse (*Pterocles alchata*), Egyptian fruit bat (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*), Insectivorous bat (*Microchiroptera*), Greater painted snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*), Eurasian bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*), Pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), Pigeon, Kingfisher, Ringed or Little plover (*Charadrius*), Purple gallinule (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), White stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) or ruft (*Philomachus pugnax*), Pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), European coot (*Fulica atra*), Spur-winged plover (*Vanellus spinosus*), Black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Common crane (*Grus grus*) and Black crowned night heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*).<sup>9</sup>

Numerous aquatic species can be found in the water band beneath the battling boatmen and throughout the register, including (from left): *Petrocephalus*, Nile carp (*Labeo niloticus*); an unidentified fish swimming left: An elephant snout fish (*Mormyrus caschive*) and moonfish: Nile crocodile (*Crocdylus niloticus*): a second *Mormyrus caschive*, a catfish, hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), a small tilapia, mullet (*Mugil* ), *Petrocephalus* , a very large tilapia; an unidentified fish; an elongate tigerfish (*Hydrocyon forskalli*); an unidentified fish; and finally a *Petrocephalus*.<sup>10</sup>

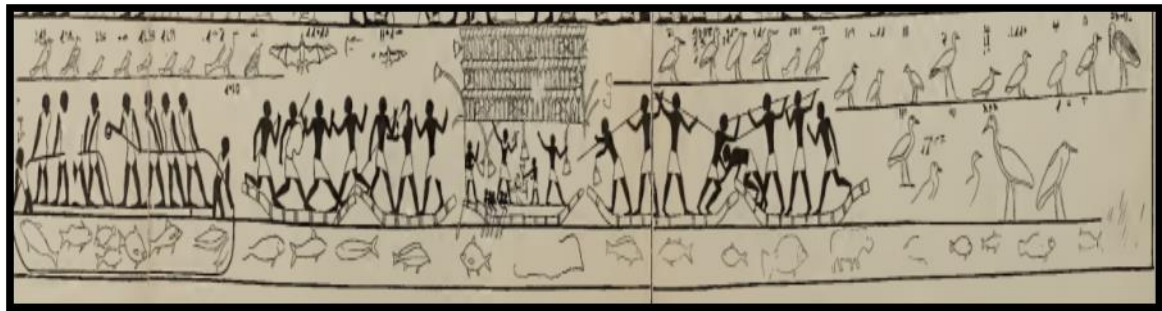


Figure 1: Fishing in the papyrus marsh. Tomb of Baqet III, north wall (lower register), Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E., Griffith, F.L. and Fraser, G.W., (1893). Beni Hasan part II, Egypt Exploration Fund, London.pl. IV).

A fishing scene from the tomb of Amenemhat (Fig.2) is depicted on west wall south side, occupying the left side of the register. The scene shows a group of eight men in short tunics pulling a dragnet from the shore, assisted by two men in loincloths who work from the water. The net, furnished with floats and sinkers, successfully captures ten fish, rendered in remarkable detail. The identified species include *Barbus bynni*, *Petrocephalus*, *Labeo niloticus*, two *Alestes dentex*, *Synodontis* catfish, *Citharinus* moonfish, another *Petrocephalus*, *Tilapia niloticus*, and another *Barbus bynni*. There are two sub-registers on the register's right side. Among lotus-covered marshes, the upper sub-register depicts a scene of birds being trapped with a clap-net. Mostly

<sup>8</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2019) *Beni Hassan: volume IV: the tomb of Baqet III*. Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports, no. 42, vol. 4, Aris and Phillips, Oxford. Pp.30-31.

<sup>9</sup> Kanawati, N. & Evans, L., (2019) *Beni Hassan: volume IV*. Pp.31-33.

<sup>10</sup> Kanawati, N. & Evans, L., (2019) *Beni Hassan: volume IV*. P.33.

pintail ducks (*Anas acuta*) are depicted, with four birds escaping and a few captured and one dead. Four men hiding behind papyrus, ready to pull the net, while a decoy duck perches on an umbel of papyrus.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2: Practicing various Nile activities. Tomb of Amenemhat, west wall (north side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E et al., (1893). Beni Hasan Vol I. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, London, pl. XII).

This landscape from the tomb of Khnumhotep II is depicted on the north side of the eastern wall, is marshy, as evidenced by a band of water colored with light blue and dark blue for the water zigzag (Fig.3). The water filled with fish, a hippopotamus, and a crocodile, as well as a papyrus thicket with birds and their nests, butterflies, and a little genet. Khnumhotep II raises the throw-stick behind his head with his right hand while holding three birds in front of him with his left. An inscription above the head of Khnumhotep II, reads: "traversing the swamps and marshlands by the Hereditary Prince, Count, Master of Secrets of the Sacred Writings, True King's Acquaintance, Overseer of the Eastern Desert, Intimate of the King, Foster Child whom he created, Foster Child of the King, whom he reared, the Count, Neheri's son Khnumhotep".<sup>12</sup> One significant apotropaic element of this action may be the symbolic destruction of birds, which are seen as the creator god's enemies, in order to preserve the correct order of the Egyptian cosmos.<sup>13</sup>

It is believed that fowling with a throw-stick was a form of hunting that was used in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Fowling with a throw-stick could also have indicated the performance of a cultic ritual in honor of Hathor in her form as the goddess Sekhet, who has a special cultic origins in the papyrus thicket.<sup>15</sup> Sekhet is referred to in the inscription above a scene representing Khnumhotep II harpooning fish on the other side of the shrine's doorway.<sup>16</sup> Khnumhotep II's wife khety is identified as a priestess of Hathor.<sup>17</sup> This

<sup>11</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2016) Beni Hassan: volume III: the tomb of Amenemhat. Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports, no. 40, vol. 3, Aris and Phillips, Oxford, UK. Pp.29-30.

<sup>12</sup> Kamrin, J., (2013). The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan. Routledge, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> David, A. (2014) Hoopoes and acacias: Decoding an ancient Egyptian funerary scene, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 73(2), p. 246.

<sup>14</sup> Helck, W. & Otto, E. (1986). Lexicon der Ägyptologie, Band VI, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, Germany. Pp.1051-1052.

<sup>15</sup> Helck, W. & Otto, E. (1986). Lexicon der Ägyptologie, P.1052.

<sup>16</sup> Newberry, P.E. et al., (1893). Beni Hasan Vol I. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, London pl. 16.

Kanawati, N. & Woods, A., (2010). Beni Hassan, p.70.

<sup>17</sup> Newberry, Beni Hasan I, pl. 16. Kanawati, N. and Woods, A., (2010). *Beni Hassan*, p. 43.



connection together with the presence of his second wife Tjat giving the scene sexual character.<sup>18</sup>

The birds flying above the papyrus stems are as follow; a golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*), two rollers (*Coracias garrulus*), a kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), a sacred ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*), two African spoonbill (*Platalea alba*) and three African monarch butterflies (*Danaus chrysippus*). There are 5 nests within the papyrus thicket containing eggs, baby birds as well as some birds such as another kingfisher and a cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*). There is also a mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) trying to attack the nests.<sup>19</sup>

The water band under the skiff painted in light blue with high transparency showing the water creatures, with zigzag pattern in brown color imitating the waves of moving water. The water reveals a crocodile, hippopotamus, Nile perch, Nile tilapia, *barbel*, *mormyrus*, *Anguilla* and *Gnathonemus cyprinoides*.<sup>20</sup>

The lower section features a depiction of fishing with a dragnet. The net is being drawn ashore by ten men, five on each side. The event likely occurred in shallow water or near the shore, as one man on each side of the net is positioned in water that extends below their buttocks. The many fish species captured in the net may be distinctly identified as two grey mullets (*Mugil*), a Nile perch, an additional mullet, a tilapia, and a *Mormyrus*.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 3: The tomb owner is fowling in the papyrus marsh. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, east wall (north side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E et al., (1893). Beni Hasan Vol I. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, London, pl. XXXII).

<sup>18</sup> Kamrin, J., (2013). The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan: Vol. I: The tomb of Khnumhotep II. Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports, Aris and Phillips, Oxford. P.54-55.

<sup>20</sup> Keith, M., (2017) Fish and fishing in Old Kingdom tomb wall scenes: a comparative analysis of fish and fishing related scenes from the Memphite and provincial regions (Doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University).p.31.

<sup>21</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.56.

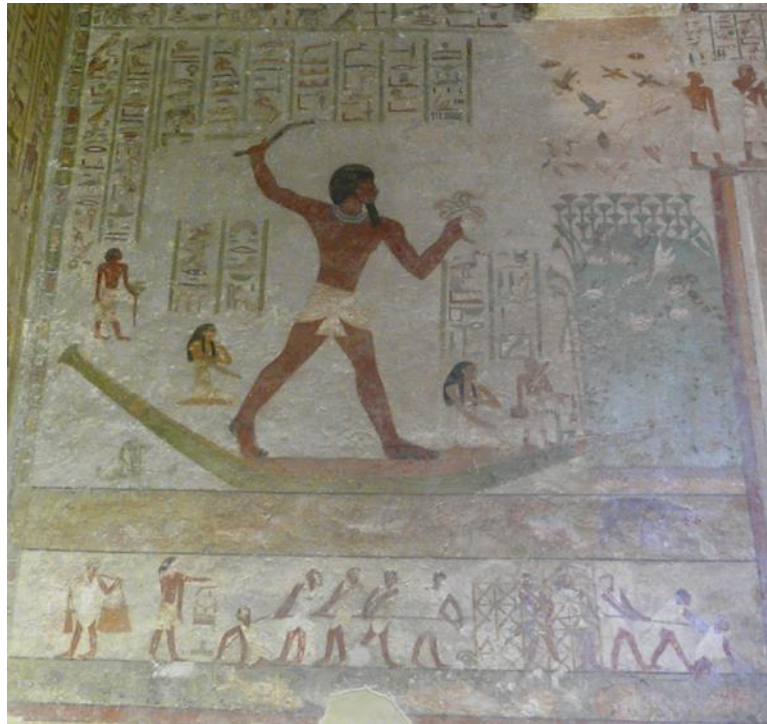


Figure 4: Fowling and fishing in the papyrus marsh. Khnumhotep II. (Photographed by professor Samar Mostafa Kamal).

This background from the tomb of Khnumhotep II is characterized by various natural elements, which is depicted on the central panel on the eastern wall above the entrance to the shrine, the tomb owner is shown seated behind a screen made of reeds and pulling the rope that attached to the clap-net which contained different types of waterfowl. The net is put in a marshy area surrounded by lotus flowers (*Nymphaea*) and waterweeds (*Potamogeton lucens*) (Figs. 5, 6).<sup>22</sup>

The plentiful birdlife in this scene may frequently be identified with certainty because to their painted patterns and shape. Four pintail ducks fly above and away from the net. Two ruddy shelducks may be found in the clap net (top left), followed by common teal and four shovellers. Below them (from left), there is a black and white barnacle goose next to an unidentified bird, which could be a female pintail duck, given both it and the five male pintails that follow all have a little hook at the end of their beaks. Behind the pintails, three European wigeons face another barnacle goose and maybe a white-fronted goose, which has a prominent white forehead. To the far left, a variety of brown waterbirds can be seen. The first appears to be a common teal (despite the lack of a white outline around its green eye patch), followed by two female teal with unique green wing patches. Nearby are four ducks with similar colours but dark breasts, which are difficult to identify but could be female teal. Immediately beneath this group are three pintail ducks, two of which face four mallard males, probably accompanied by two mallard females, which unlike the drakes, are uniformly brown.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Rabehl, S.M., (2006) *Das Gräb des Amenemhet (jmnjj) in Beni Hassan oder der Versuch einer Symbiose* (Doctoral dissertation, PhD thesis, University of Munich).p. 259.

<sup>23</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) *Beni Hassan*, Pp.56-57.

Where the feet are visible, the pursed toes clearly indicate that all of the birds in the clap net are swimming. Below the net, however, only the heads of a flock of waterfowl can be seen filling the pond. Many of the species caught in the net may also be seen here, including shovellers, male and female common teal, mallards, and, most notably, pintail ducks, whose enormous numbers highlight nature's bounty.<sup>24</sup>

On either side of the flock is an acacia tree (*Acacia nilotica*), each brilliantly adorned with multiple pairs of leaflets and golden-yellow blooms in round heads. The tree closer to the seated tomb owner is better rendered than the one on the right. The former's leaflets are individually painted in green on a cream backdrop, whilst the latter's complete background is painted in green with black leaflet outlines. Different bird species are depicted in both trees with astounding accuracy.<sup>25</sup>

On the left, there are two masked shrikes (*Lanius nubicus*), one perched and the other flying to the right. To the right, a red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*) with a grey head (executed blue), reddish back and black eye bar faces the birds, as does a male common redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) perched on the branches below. Finally, on the left, a hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) stands alert, its bent beak, black and white wings, and characteristic crest raised. Birds abound in the acacia bush to the right as well. Two masked shrikes could be seen again, one flying to the left and the other perched, while another redstart faces the flock of waterfowl in the top left. However, at lower left, a turtledove with characteristic neck bars matches the hoopoe's alert posture.<sup>26</sup>

Rabehl suggests that the depiction of the tomb owner's son at this location suggests a conceptual connection to the birth of Horus in the papyrus thicket and, consequently, involves the royal "rebirth myths" as they were at the *wp-rnpt* festival in cultic festivities were revived. The Pyramid Texts also emphasize the importance of bird-catching in terms of provision. Later, wishes for a rich catch were even integrated into the sacrificial ritual. In the present case, the deceased secured his provision himself: he already had the large catch in his net.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 5: The tomb owner netting birds using clap-net, tomb of Khnumhotep II, central panel (the eastern wall above the entrance to the shrine), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Kamrin, J., (2013). *The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan*. Routledge, p.109. Fig. IV.39).

<sup>24</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) *Beni Hassan*, P.57.

<sup>25</sup> Davies, N. de G., (1936) *Ancient Egyptian Paintings*, vol. III, University of Chicago press, Chicago. Pp.21-23.

<sup>26</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) *Beni Hassan*, P.57.

<sup>27</sup> Rabehl, S.M., (2006) *Das Gräb des Amenemhet*, p. 259.





Figure 6: Khnumhotep II, fowling with a clapnet. (Photographed by professor Samar Mostafa kamal).

Another marshy background from the tomb of Khnumhotep II is represented on the south side of the eastern wall, showing khnumhotep standing and harpooning lates and tilapia fish (Fig.7). The fishes are surrounded by a water arch. The papyrus thickets are inhabited by numerous water birds, while spotted genets and ichneumons climb up reeds.<sup>28</sup> The register of inscriptions under the Kheker freize reads: “The Hereditary Prince, nomarch, great of fish and fowl, whom Sekhet Mistress of the Chase loves, Khnumhotep”. The inscription above the head of khnumhotep reads: “canoeing in the papyrus beds, the pools of wild-fowl, the marshes and the streams, by khnumhotep, the chief canoer in the papyrus beds and pools of wild-fowl, capturing birds and fish ,spearing with the bident, he transfixes thirty fish; how delightful is the day of hunting the hippopotamus!”<sup>29</sup>

The birds flying above the papyrus stems are as follow; a pintail duck, A glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) exhibits a characteristic crest at the back of its head, which is typically absent, indicating it may instead be a Waldrapp ibis (*Geronticus eremita*), two sacred ibis, a spoonbill, a grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and a comorant (*Phalacrocorax lucidus*).<sup>30</sup> There are three nests inside the papyrus thicket containing eggs and baby birds. There are some animals such as an African wild cat (*felis silvestris lybica*), two Genet cat and a mongoose. They are in alert attitude ready to attack the nests and eat the birds.<sup>31</sup>

The nomarch was designated not only as 'beloved of Sekhet' but also as “*imy-r wh'w š3w sšw wh' hb*” 'Overseer of the fishermen/fowlers of the marshes and fowl ponds, fisherman/fowler of the catch', further emphasizing his crucial position.<sup>32</sup>

The water band under the skiff painted in light blue with high transparency showing the water creatures, with zigzag pattern in brown color imitating the waves of moving water. The water reveals a crocodile, hippopotamus, a barbell, moon fish, an Alestes, Nile perch and Nile Tilapia.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ferguson, E.J., (2012) Time and meaning. Pp.28-29.

<sup>29</sup> Newberry, P.E et al., (1893) Beni Hasan Vol I, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.60.

<sup>31</sup> شديد، عبد الغفار، (٢٠١٦). مقابر بني حسن في مصر الوسطي، المركز القومي للترجمة، القاهرة، ص.٧٣.

<sup>32</sup> Bashford, L.M., (2023) Egyptian observations of the avian world: categorisation through human, bird, language, and landscape interactions. PhD thesis, Macquarie University, p.408.

<sup>33</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.60.



Figure 7: The tomb owner is harpooning Lates and Tilapia fish. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, east wall (south side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E et al., (1893). Beni Hasan Vol I. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, London, pl. XXXIV).

Occupying the north wall of the same tomb on the fourth register the left side of this register shows clap-net bird capturing (Figs. 8, 9). The son of Khnumhotep controls two nets' ropes. Two nets facing each other wouldn't be possible unless they were closed simultaneously, which is not the case here. A man is collecting captured birds and giving them to another, who gives them to a third man carrying pintail ducks on a pole over his shoulders. The lower net is closed. Another man will give a signal to close the upper net. Top net has a green background, while bottom net is blue with zigzag water lines. The individuals who are closing the nets hide behind two screens: one on the east wall, likely constructed of reed, and the other of papyrus, which fits the marshy environment.<sup>34</sup>

Each net attracts different birds, exclusively pintail ducks in the lower net (two of which fly upward to the left) and a mix of species in the top. At extreme right, two male mallard ducks (*A. platyrhynchos*) with green heads and white collars; at top left, maybe three shovelers (*A. clypeata*) with green heads and green-and-white wings; at top right. three ruddy shelducks; bottom left, three common teal males potentially followed by a mixed flock of male and female teal in non-breeding plumage, the males with green eye patches and the ladies with a green and white bar on their wings. The scene may be an attempt to blend two events from separate dates and places.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Kamrin, J., (2013) The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II, p.97.

<sup>35</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.50.

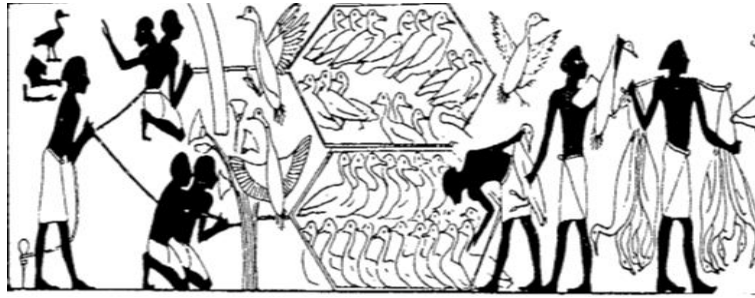


Figure 8: Netting birds using two clap-nets. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, north wall, Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Kamrin, J., (2013). *The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan*. Routledge, p.97, fig. IV.28).



Figure 9: Netting using clapnet. Khnumhotep II. (Photographed by professor Samar Mostafa Kamal).

## 2.2. Cattle Fording the Nile

A genius representation from the tomb of Amenemhat occupying the west wall's southern side, register seven to the north of the false door illustrates a herd of cattle (*Bos taurus*) across a body of water, directed by men in two punted canoes at the front and rear. A calf is tethered to the first boat by a rope attached to its muzzle, held by a kneeling herdsman, thus tempting the remainder of the herd to follow; unfortunately, one animal has become panicked and changed his path. Four herdsman occupy the first boat, while three are in the second boat, potentially performing spells to safeguard the animals from Nile crocodiles (*Crocodylus niloticus*); indeed, two reptiles conceal themselves in the water below, hiding between the lotus plants and bushes (fig. 10).<sup>36</sup>



Figure 10 : Cattle fording the Nile. Tomb of Amenemhat, west wall (south side), Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E et al., (1893). *Beni Hasan Vol I. Archaeological Survey of Egypt*, London, pl. XII).

<sup>36</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2016) *Beni Hassan*, p.31.

Another depiction from the tomb of Khnumhotep II represented on the lower register on the west wall north side, focuses on water activities, which were likely commonplace due to the proximity of most Egyptians to the Nile and its canals (Fig. 11). A herd of cattle is crossing a body of water to the left. This theme frequently manifested in tombs from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, depicting herds either swimming or fording based on the water's depth. The herds were typically represented in an organized manner, even with the occasional appearance of a crocodile in the water and the herdsmen's recognition of the threat, prompting them to recite protective spells. The cattle in this location exhibit signs of disturbance, as evidenced by two hornless oxen swimming against the current and, in contrast to their counterparts, elevating their bodies above the water.<sup>37</sup>

The remainder of the register highlights various fishing techniques. A squatting man holds a hand-line with an unidentified fish, while a standing man behind him uses a fishing rod to catch a catfish (*Syndontis*). Two men are holding the ropes connected to a small dragnet, while a third man is engaged in gutting a fish. The last fisherman showed using a hand trap and has successfully captured a fish.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 11: A group of oxen fording the Nile. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, west wall (north side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Kamrin, J., (2013). *The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan*. Routledge, p. 75, fig. IV.16).

### 2.3. Agricultural Scenes

The decoration of the northern west wall of the tomb of Baqet III is badly preserved. No strict lines were used to separate registers, although a pattern of rows is already suggested. Inscriptions, if they existed, are no longer recognizable. It is a marshland scene contains a hunting scene in papyrus marshes (Fig. 12). Small motifs of papyrus and lotus flower fields are arranged freely in various formations. Interspersed among these are papyrus boats with fishermen and farmers collecting papyrus. In the center on the left is a pile of cut papyrus stalks.<sup>39</sup>

It is obvious that this background included agricultural tasks such as gathering the papyrus stalks and placing them aside. The artist used the green color for the leaves and the flowers and the brown color for the stems of the plant. He also used brown color for the soil underneath the plants. As for the water, he used the light blue color.

<sup>37</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.39.

<sup>38</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, P.40.

<sup>39</sup> Rabehl, S.M., (2006). *Das Gräb des Amenemhet*, pp.136-138





Figure 12: Marsh scene from the tomb of Baqet III. Tomb of Baqet III, west wall (north side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: شديد، عبد الغفار. (٢٠١٦). مقابر بني حسن في مصر الوسطي، المركز القومي للترجمة، القاهرة، ص. ٣٥)

The scene from the west wall (north side) of Tomb No. 17 at Beni Hasan (Figs. 13, 14). The wall consists of eight registers featuring three prominent figures of the tomb owner. Khety is depicted in the upper left, spearing fish in the marshlands with a spear equipped with a retrieving line, standing on a baseline instead of the conventional papyrus skiff. The central scene depicts Khety grasping a throw stick, presumably in willingness for fowling. In the lower left, a third figure, the tomb owner, is seated on a chair orientated towards the entrance doorway. The remaining section of the wall features eight registers, all focused on marshland activities, which include: first register, Possible papyrus harvesting. Second and third registers, Aquatic fauna in marshlands. Third register, possibly cattle crossing a river. Fourth and fifth register, marshland environment. Sixth register, possible papyrus harvesting. Seventh register, catching birds using a clapnet. Eighth register, returning boatmen.<sup>40</sup>

It represents hunting scene in the papyrus marshes is transformed into a landscape containing more than one papyrus and lotus field, and a rare or unusual formation of marshes with a wide strip of light brown land adorned with water zigzag lines. The vegetation is rigorously arranged: in the lotus field, beneath each open flower, there is a closed flower next to it, and in the papyrus fields, a tall papyrus flower alternates regularly with a low flower, in addition to some curved stalks. In the center of the scene, there are two papyrus boats. On the left, a shepherd pulls a young calf from the marsh with some ropes under his arm. On the right, in the boat, there are two supervisors giving instructions.<sup>41</sup> The tomb owner is represented harpooning a *Tilapa* fish. The animals which are represented here on this wall are as follow; hippopotami, calves and wild boars.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2016), Beni Hassan, P.50.

<sup>41</sup> شديد، عبد الغفار. (٢٠١٦). مقابر بني حسن في مصر الوسطي، ص. ٤٣.

<sup>42</sup> Newberry, P.E. et al. (1893). Beni Hasan part II, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, pp.55-65.

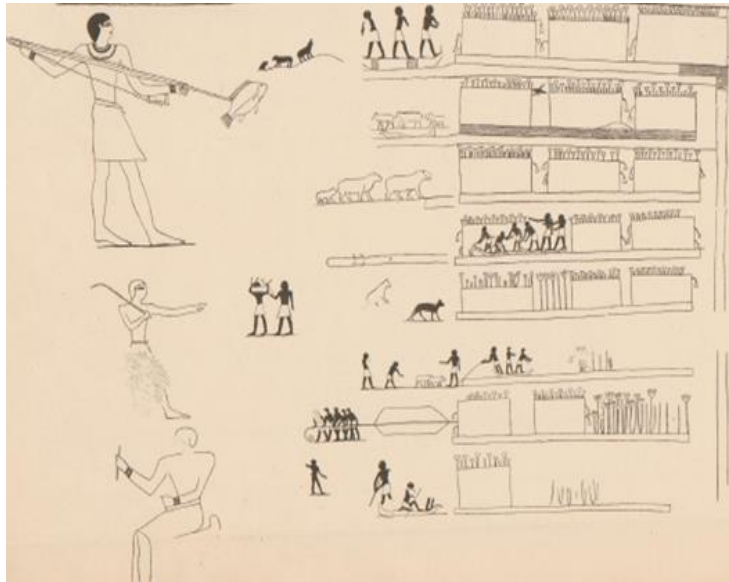


Figure 13: Marsh scene from the tomb of Khety. Tomb of Khety, west wall (north side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E., Griffith, F.L. and Fraser, G.W., (1893). Beni Hasan part II, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, pl. XI).



Figure 14: Lotus and papyrus marsh. Tomb of Khety. (Source: [https://meretsegerbooks.cdn.bibliopolis.com/images/gallery/403\\_20016\\_full.jpg?v=1492675564](https://meretsegerbooks.cdn.bibliopolis.com/images/gallery/403_20016_full.jpg?v=1492675564) - accessed in 21/8/2025)

## 2.4. Fighting Boatmen

A common theme in the Old Kingdom is the depiction of boatmen, who are either returning from the marshlands with diverse food items, such as fish and fowl, or engaging in a game where men on one boat attempt to push those on another off the papyrus skiffs. Numerous men are frequently illustrated in the water, balancing on two papyrus skiffs, a position that poses significant risk due to the widespread presence of crocodiles in the waterways. The theme continued during the Middle Kingdom, with Khnumhotep II providing a notable example on the east wall (south of the shrine), directly beneath the depiction of the tomb owner spearing fish (Fig. 15).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2016) Beni Hassan, P. 75.

The depiction in the lower register is notably significant. It is unclear whether it signifies the final outcome of the so-called fighting boatmen or a distinct portrayal of boatmen rescuing colleagues in the marshes. Three boats, each carried three individuals, are illustrated in the lower register. Lotus plants and flowers are illustrated in the water, although no crocodiles or other aquatic fauna are visible.<sup>44</sup> This might mean that the attention is on the people in the scene instead of the dangers in the environment. The calm atmosphere created by the lotus plants and flowers contrasts with the boatmen's situation, which could be very chaotic. This makes people think about how complicated their situation is.



Figure 15: Fighting boatmen. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, east wall (south side), Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom. (Source: Newberry, P.E et al., (1893). Beni Hasan Vol 1. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, London, pl. XXXIV).

## 2.5. The Sacred Journey to Abydos and Busiris

Abydos lies on the edge of the Western Desert. In Egyptian texts, Abydos was known as Abdu later becoming Abydos in Greek, a name it still retains in modern times. Abydos was the religious capital of the Eighth Nome of Upper Egypt and the main cult center for the god Osiris, along with the rest of the triad: his wife Isis and their son Horus. It was considered sacred throughout Egyptian history because the ancient Egyptians believed that the head of the god Osiris rested in this spot, and for this reason, the site became a pilgrimage center with a special sanctity.<sup>45</sup>

The village of Abu Sir Bana is located about six kilometers southwest of the city of Samanoud in the Gharbia Governorate. It was referred to in ancient Egyptian texts as "Pr-wsir" or "Bu-wsir," and in Greek texts as "Busiris," meaning "the place of Osiris" indicating the presence of Osiris's tomb in this city before it was moved to Abydos in Sohag, another sacred site for Osiris in Upper Egypt. Busiris held a sacred status among the ancient Egyptians; it was a primary center for Osiris and an important religious pilgrimage destination for the ancient Egyptians. It was associated with sowing the land ritual, which later transferred to Abydos. This ritual was linked to the burial of Osiris underground and subsequently became a symbol of resurrection, akin to a seed planted in the ground that undergoes a life cycle of germination and growth, reflecting the concept of life and resurrection after death. The land of Busiris contained the spine of Osiris, as well as his jaws.<sup>46</sup>

The pilgrimage to Abydos in the south or Busiris in the Delta is a common motif at Beni Hassan, and it is documented in the tombs of Baqet III, Khety, Amenemhat and

<sup>44</sup> Kanawati, N & Evans, L., (2014) Beni Hassan, Pp. 60-61.

<sup>45</sup> نور الدين، عبد الحليم. (2009)، مواقع الآثار المصرية القديمة (الجزء الثاني) مواقع مصر العليا. الخليج العربي للطباعة والنشر. ص. ١٤٤.

<sup>46</sup> نور الدين، عبد الحليم. (2009)، مواقع الآثار المصرية القديمة (الجزء الأول) مواقع مصر السفلى. الخليج العربي للطباعة والنشر. ص. ٢٢١.

Khnumhotep II. Khety's tomb depicts two registries of ships traveling in different directions, but there are no accompanying inscriptions. The two Twelfth Dynasty tombs of Amenemhat and Khnumhotep II depict the pilgrimage on the east wall, and the inscriptions clearly specify the ships' destinations, with those heading south towards Abydos raising their sails and dragging a papyriform boat with the coffin of the tomb owner.<sup>47</sup> The south half of the east wall in Amenemhat's tomb depicts the journey to Busiris.<sup>48</sup>

It's depicted here in the tomb of Khety on the west wall south side (Fig. 16). This depiction illustrates the sacred pilgrimage to Abydos, a ritual honoring Osiris. The spotlight is on several ships across the Nile, some manned by rowers and others with constructions perhaps symbolizing a shrine or burial goods. The layout of the boats implicitly suggests the river as the background, despite the absence of water. The image represents the spiritual journey of the deceased to Abydos, illustrating the Nile's significance in both everyday existence and the sacred passage to the afterlife.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 16: Sacred journey to Abydos. Tomb of Khety, west wall (south side), Middle Kingdom.  
(Source: Newberry, P.E., Griffith, F.L. and Fraser, G.W., (1893). *Beni Hasan part II*, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, pl. XII).

**Table 1: The orientation of each scene context inside the tombs**

	<b>Baqet III</b>	<b>Khety</b>	<b>Amenemhat</b>	<b>Khnumhotep II</b>
<b>Fowling and fishing in the papyrus marsh</b>	-North wall	-----	-West wall (south side)	-East wall(north side) -East wall (above shrine) -East wall(south side) -North wall
<b>Cattle fording the Nile</b>	-----	-----	West wall (south side)	West wall (north side)
<b>Agricultural scenes</b>	West wall (north side)	West wall (north side)	-----	-----
<b>Fighting boatmen</b>	-----	-----	-----	East wall (south side)
<b>Journey to Abydos and Busiris</b>	West wall (south side)	West wall (south side)	East wall	West wall

(Designed by the researcher)

<sup>47</sup> Kanawati, N. & Woods, A., (2010). *Beni Hassan*, p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Newberry, *Beni Hasan* 1, pl. 16. Kanawati, N. & Woods, A., (2010) *Beni Hassan*, p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> Newberry, P.E. et al. (1893). *Beni Hasan part II*, pl. XII.



**Table 2: The birds represented in the Nilotic backgrounds**

	Baqet III	Khety	Amenemhat	Khnumhotep II
Golden oriole	✓			✓
Roller	✓			✓
Kingfisher	✓			✓
Pied kingfisher	✓			✓
African spoonbill				✓
Cattle egret				✓
Ruddy shelduck				✓
Common teal				✓
Shoveller				✓
Barnacle goose				✓
Pintail duck			✓	✓
European wigeons				✓
Mallard				✓
Masked shrike	✓			✓
Red backed shrike				✓
Redstart				✓
Hoopoe				✓
Glossy ibis				✓
Sacred ibis				✓
Grey heron				✓
Cormorant				✓
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	✓			
Greater painted snipe	✓			
Eurasian bittern	✓			
Pied avocet	✓			
Ringed/little plover	✓			
Spur-winged plover	✓			
Purple gallinule	✓			
White stork	✓			
Black stork	✓			
European coot	✓			
Common crane	✓			
Black crowned night	✓			
Egyptian fruit bat	✓			
Insectivorous bat	✓			

(Designed by the researcher)

**Table 3: The fish represented in the Nilotic backgrounds**

	Baqet III	Khety	Amenemhat	Khnumhotep II
Nile perch (lates)	✓			✓
Nile tilapia	✓			✓
Barbel				✓
Mormyrus	✓			✓
Anguilla				✓
Gnathonemus cyprinoides				✓
Moon fish	✓		✓	✓
Catfish (synodontis)	✓		✓	✓
Mullet (mugil)	✓			✓
Alestes			✓	
Petrocephalus	✓		✓	
Nile carp (labeo niloticus)	✓		✓	
Tiger fish (hydrocon forskalli)	✓			
Barbus bynni			✓	

(Designed by the researcher)

**Table 4: The animals represented in the Nilotic backgrounds**

	Baqet III	Khety	Amenemhat	Khnumhotep II
Mongoose				✓
Genette				✓
African wild cat (felis)				✓
Oxen	✓		✓	✓
Wild boars	✓	✓		
calves	✓	✓		

(Designed by the researcher)

**Table 5: The semiaquatic animals represented in the Nilotic backgrounds**

	Baqet III	Khety	Amenemhat	Khnumhotep II
Hippopotamus	✓	✓		✓
Crocodile	✓		✓	✓

(Designed by the researcher)

**Table 6: The plants represented in the Nilotic backgrounds**

	Baqet III	Khety	Amenemhat	Khnumhotep II
Lotus	✓	✓	✓	✓
Papyrus	✓	✓	✓	✓
Acacia				✓

Waterweeds				✓
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(Designed by the researcher)

## Conclusion

The term "Nilotic landscape" describes any artistic depiction of a landscape that imitates or draws inspiration from the Nile River in Egypt. The expression alluded to hunting and fishing scenes in Egyptian art. A Nilotic landscape is a river environment with rich plant and animal life, much of which is unique to Egypt. After examining the Nilotic backgrounds in the four open tombs of Beni Hassan, it was found that there are 16 Nile scenes: three scenes in the tomb of Baqet III, two scenes in the tomb of Khety, three scenes in the tomb of Amenemhat, and eight scenes in the tomb of Khnumhotep II. The contexts of the Nile scenes were classified into five contexts, which are fishing and fowling in the papyrus marsh, cattle fording the Nile, agricultural context, fighting boatmen and sacred journey to Abydos and Busiris.

Nilotic landscapes usually depicted on the west wall (except the tomb of Khnumhotep II as fishing and fowling scenes are depicted on the East wall), reinforcing that using water in fishing and fowling scenes have a symbolic meaning associated with the ability to control chaos of the after life. Using west orientation is also suitable for the context of the sacred journey to Abydos as it is the place of dead in ancient Egypt. It was never depicted on the south wall.

The context of **fishing and fowling in the papyrus marsh** is recorded six times within the four tombs of Beni Hassan. One scene on the north wall of the tomb of Baqet III (11<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the west wall (south side) of the tomb of Amenemhat (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty), four scenes in the tomb of Khnumhotep II (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty), two scenes on the west wall (north side), one scene on the east wall above the shrine and another one on the east wall (south side) (table: 1). The birds that were mentioned in this context are as follow: Golden oriole ,Masked shrike, Roller , Pin-tailed sandgrouse, Greater painted snipe, Eurasian bittern, Pied avocet, Pigeon, Kingfisher, plover, Purple gallinule, White stork, Pied kingfisher, European coot, Spur-winged plover, Black stork, Common crane, Black crowned night heron, sacred ibis, African spoonbill, pintail duck, ruddy shelducks, common teal , shoveller, barnacle goose, European wigeon, red-backed shrike, redstart, hoopoe, glossy ibis , Waldrapp ibis , grey heron and cormorant (table:2).

The fish that were mentioned in this context are as follow: Nile perch (lates), Nile tilapia, Barbel, Mormyrus, Anguilla, Gnathonemus cyprinoides, Moon fish, Catfish (synodontis), Mullet (mugil), Alestes dentex, Petrocephalus, Nile carp (labeo niloticus), Tiger fish (hydrocon forskalli) and Barbus bynni (table: 3). The semi aquatic animals that are shown within this context are hippopotamus and crocodile (table: 4). The animals that were represented in this context are Mongoose, Genette, African wild cat (felis), Egyptian fruit bat and Insectivorous bat (table: 5). The flora recorded in this context are papyrus, lotus, waterweeds and acacia (table: 6).

The context of **cattle fording the Nile** is recorded twice within the tombs of Beni Hassan. One scene on the west wall (south side) of the tomb of Amenemhat (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the west wall (north side) of the tomb of Khnumhotep II (12<sup>th</sup>

dynasty) (table: 1). the fish that was mentioned in this context is catfish (Syndontis) (table: 3). The semi aquatic animals that are shown within this context is crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus) (table: 4). The animal that was represented in this context is cattle (Bos taurus) (table: 5). There is no representation for any birds in this context (table: 2). The flora recorded in this context is lotus (table: 6).

The context of **agricultural scenes** is recorded twice within the tombs of Beni Hassan. One scene on the west wall (north side) of the tomb of Baqet III (11<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the west wall (north side) of the tomb of Khety (11<sup>th</sup> dynasty) (table: 1). the fish that was represented in this context is a tilapia fish (table: 3). The semi aquatic animals that are shown within this context is hippopotamus (table: 4). The animals that were represented in this context are calves and wild boars (table: 5) . There is no representation for any birds in this context (table: 2). the flora recorded in this context are papyrus and lotus (table: 6).

The context of **fighting boatmen** was not a popular context in the Nilotic backgrounds of Beni Hassan tombs, as it was represented once in the tomb of Khnumhotep II on the east wall (south side) (table: 1). There are no birds (table: 2), fish (table: 3), semi aquatic animals (table: 4) or even animals are represented in the background of the scene (table: 5), but some lotus and flowers (table: 6).

The context of **the sacred Journey to Abydos and Busiris** is represented in the four tombs of Beni Hassan. One scene on the west wall (south side) of the tomb of Baqet III (11<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the west wall (south side) of the tomb of Khety (11<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the east wall of the tomb of Amenemhat (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty), one scene on the west wall of the tomb of Khnumhotep II (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty) (table: 1). Although they are sailing in the Nile heading to the sacred sites (Abydos or Busiris), the artist didn't pay attention to the natural elements in the background, so he didn't represent any birds, fish, semi aquatic animals, animals or even plants.

The tombs of Baqet III and Khnumhotep II characterized by a huge diversity of birds and fish. Animal depictions are limited comparing to birds and fish in the Nilotic backgrounds. Hippopotamus and crocodile are the most semiaquatic animals represented in fishing scenes.

A unique scene is represented in the tomb of Baqet III on the north wall, lower register. This scene is representing 29 species of birds and bats each labeled with a unique Egyptian name indicating the Egyptians' extensive knowledge of the area fauna.

The tomb of Khnumhotep II feature fishing and fowling scenes with greater detail. The majority of the birds in Khumhotep II's tomb have retained their natural color, making it possible to identify the various species.

The scene on the east wall of the tomb of Khnumhotep II represent the tomb owner fishing and fowling, giving the scene sexual character. The identification of Khnumhotep II's wife Khety as a priestess of Hathor emphasizes the link between fowling and Hathor in this fowling scene; this connection, together with the presence of both Khety and Tjat, may also give a sexual aspect to this scene. It provides the tomb owner with continual resurrection and keeps the idea of immortality, than other tombs, which may reflect the status of the tomb owner. This opinion is supported by



the representation of Tilapia fish on both sides of this wall, which is one of the symbols of goddess Hathor.

Using water in fishing and fowling scenes may have a symbolic meaning, as fishing and fowling in ancient Egypt was associated with the ability to control chaos, an important religious concept. Some scenes depict small ponds or irrigation channels, indicating that the artists did not limit themselves to portraying the Nile River only, but also included other forms of water bodies that were part of the lives of the ancient Egyptians. In some scenes, such as those in the tomb of Baqet III and Khety, water appears in agricultural contexts related to collecting papyrus, which may reflect the importance of water in the concept of renewal and continuity after death.

### خلفية المناظر النيلية في بني حسن: الخلفية النيلية للميراث المصري القديم

#### الملخص العربي

تقدم مقابر بني حسن التي تعود إلى عصر الدولة الوسطى نظرة فريدة على التمثيل الفني للخلفيات النيلية في مناظر المقابر المصرية. مصطلح "المنظر النيلي" يشير إلى أي تمثيل فني للمناظر الطبيعية التي تتأثر بنهر النيل في مصر. أستخدم هذا المصطلح لوصف مناظر صيد الطيور والأسماك في الفن المصري.

أهداف هذه الورقة البحثية هي تحديد المناظر الطبيعية النيلية، وفحص الخلفيات النيلية في مقابر بني حسن، وتصنيف الأنواع المختلفة للتمثيلات النيلية و تحديد انواع الحيوانات و الاسماك و النباتات التي ظهرت في خلفيات المناظر النيلية وفحص وضع المناظر الطبيعية لتحديد ما إذا كانت تتبع اتجاهًا ثابتًا. تم تطبيق منهجية وصفية وتحليلية لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة.

أظهرت النتائج أن تمثيل الحيوانات محدود مقارنة بالطيور والأسماك في الخلفيات النيلية. تتميز مقابر باقت الثالث وخنوم حنب الثاني بتنوع هائل من الطيور والأسماك مقارنةً بالمقابر الأخرى.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** خلفيات نيلية- بني حسن- الدولة الوسطى- المناظر الطبيعية- النباتات والحيوانات.

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