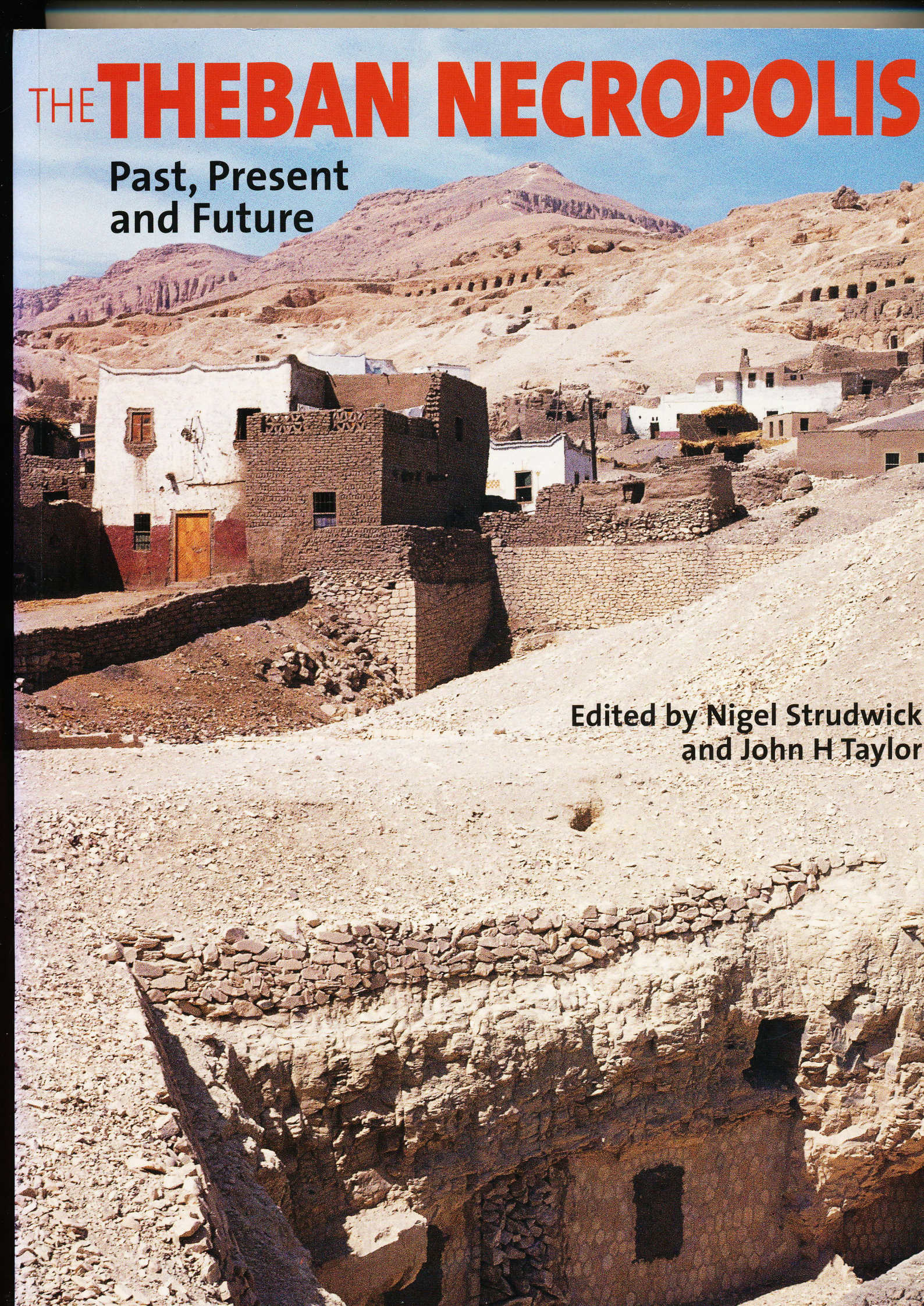


THE THEBAN NECROPOLIS

Past, Present
and Future

Edited by Nigel Strudwick
and John H Taylor



The so-called scenes of daily life in the private tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty: an overview

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Over the past half-century major progress has been made in an attempt to assess, understand and interpret the scheme of decoration of the tombs of private citizens in Egypt. Research has focused, and vastly progressed, on the tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty in particular. Comparable material from earlier periods has at times been included, but an overall historical approach to the subject as a whole is still lacking.

While restricting myself to so-called scenes of daily life (for example fishing and fowling, shooting, agriculture and banquet scenes) I shall attempt to outline the research carried out by individual scholars as far as Eighteenth Dynasty material is concerned. This has been published in a number of articles (for which see below), and in my own works for the general public,¹ I have on numerous occasions tried to combine these interpretations to facilitate meaningful understanding; however, this does seem to have been ignored by some of those having the privilege of dealing with this treasury of information.² Tomb publications (of which an increasing number are forthcoming) are largely descriptive, and so perhaps they should remain. One should, however, never cease to ask the question 'why?' Why were the same scenes selected over and over again? Why were topics that were no longer part of everyday life included as if they were? Why were innovations a relatively scarce phenomenon? And how does it all fit together—and did it fit together at all for the ancient Egyptians? Is there—was there?—a common denominator?

The first scholar to my knowledge who tackled apparently straightforward representations of activities of daily life in order to bring some sense to their presence in tomb decoration was Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt. In 1954³ she wrote an article entitled 'Poissons, tabous et transformations du mort'. The transformation of the dead—this would appear to be the keyword that we should be looking for when attempting to answer the question of the *raison d'être* of the scenes. Noblecourt suggested that the penultimate stage before the rebirth of the deceased was symbolised by the depiction of the *int*-fish, the *bulti*, or *tilapia nilotica*, and

that prior to that, during the course of mummification, it was an *abdu*-fish, *lates niloticus* (as represented in TT2 at Deir el-Medina⁴). And how else could one possibly interpret this scene?

A fishing scene showing the tomb owner harpooning the two fish by means of one throw with his weapon occurs frequently in tombs from the Old Kingdom to the Eighteenth Dynasty.⁵ By catching them (according to Noblecourt) he acquires the sanctity of the *lates* and the vitality of the *tilapia*. The motif—apart from being visually attractive—has a part to play in the quest for eternal life. In addition, Noblecourt relates the fish to the stages of pilgrimage to the holy cities of Sais and Mendes.

It was also Noblecourt who in 1993⁶ saw the agricultural scenes depicted in so many tombs not only as a means of providing for the deceased in the Hereafter, but as a reference to eternal life through capturing the changing seasons, so beautifully summed up in the Old Kingdom tomb of Mereruka,⁷ where he is depicted painting the names of the three seasons on a board. Astronomical ceilings, calendars and the signs of the Zodiac are an extension of this concept of providing an eternal point of reference for the deceased.

It was again Noblecourt who in her popular book on Tutankhamun⁸ prepared the ground for Wolfhart Westendorf's interpretation of the small golden shrine from his tomb. Westendorf's article from 1967 'Bemerkungen zur "Kammer der Wiedergeburt" im Tutanchamungrab'⁹ discussed the individual scenes on the golden shrine in detail and placed them in a context which I shall cite verbatim, as it is quite crucial to an understanding of these scenes: these aids (the decoration and funerary objects) 'serve but one purpose which is to enable the tomb owner's union with his wife for the purpose of future rebirth'.¹⁰ To the minds of the Egyptians, rebirth required re-conception. If we seem to believe that Egyptian art is tacit or at least very discreet regarding this essential episode, it is only—according to Westendorf—because our understanding and interpretation of the available material is inadequate.

Egyptian representations are often narrative. But Westendorf applied a new approach and read the scenes on the

¹ Manniche 1987a, 30 ff.; Manniche 1994, 142 ff.; Manniche 1997a; Manniche 1997b; Manniche 2000, 31 ff.; Manniche 2001, 275–7.

² For a different interpretation of some of the evidence see Graefe and Eaton Krauss 1985, 25–6 ff.

³ Desroches-Noblecourt 1954.

⁴ Saleh 1984, Abb. 1.

⁵ E.g. TT52 of Nakht: Davies 1917, pl. 24; TT69 of Menna: Mekhitarian 1978, ill. on p. 89. For the erotic significance of boating

excursions in the papyrus thicket see also Hermann 1959, 17–18.

⁶ Desroches-Noblecourt 1993, 20–45.

⁷ Duell 1938, I, pls 6 and 7.

⁸ Desroches-Noblecourt 1963.

⁹ Westendorf 1967, 139–50.

¹⁰ Westendorf 1967, p. 140: '... die Ausrüstung der "Kammer der Wiedergeburt" und die dem Toten beigegebenen technischen Hilfsmittel keinen anderen Zweck verfolgen, als ihm die Vereinigung mit seiner Frau zu künftiger Wiedergeburt zu ermöglichen'.

golden shrine as one would read actual hieroglyphs. The flexibility of Egyptian writing is such that, depending on its context, one sign may have more than one meaning. In order to grasp this, it is necessary to have been taught the code. By applying the technique of reading the motifs in the way that we read the hieroglyphs, Westendorf proposed to see in the subject of the king pouring liquid into the queen's hand the very act of procreation, the key word being the verb *sti* which may mean either 'to pour' or 'to ejaculate'. He reads the motif on the golden shrine showing Tutankhamun shooting wild ducks in the papyrus thicket with the queen at his feet in the same fashion because of a third verb spelled *sti* meaning 'to shoot'. Thus the act of engendering, the sexual union required for rebirth in the Hereafter, was written on the shrine in oversized hieroglyphs taking the guise of scenes involving pouring out liquid and shooting with arrows. This interpretation is in both cases underlined by numerous details in the representation, such as the queen receiving the liquid in her hand or reaching out to grasp one of the arrows while she points at the nesting ducks. The sexual significance of ducks had already been pointed out by Alfred Hermann in 1959 and 1962,¹¹ and Westendorf elaborated on the shooting theme in 1977.¹²

The fowling scene, which in tomb decoration is often shown as the more or less symmetrical counterpart of the fishing scene, takes up a separate panel on the golden shrine. Westendorf searches for a suitable verb to describe the action and finds it in *qm* 'to throw' which also means 'to beget'. The king is accompanied by the queen, just as a private individual would be shown accompanied by his wife and sometimes a child, and the ultimate purpose of the scene, clad in the guise of upper class leisure activities, is in fact yet another quest for eternal life.

The coded language of Egyptian representation was well summarised in an article in 1976 by Philippe Derchain, who had in the years just before studied a number of (to quote the title of the article) 'symbols and metaphors in literature and representations of private life'. The case of wigs and hair is an excellent example. In all civilisations hair has a sexual significance. To the ancient Egyptians, an abundance of hair equalled sexual powers, and this was beautifully illustrated by the author of the tale of the Two Brothers, who used an expression that was misunderstood before Derchain. When the wife of Bata relates how Bata's younger brother Anup has lured her to the bedroom he was alleged to have said, 'Come, don your wig, let us spend an hour together' (not, as older translations had it, 'take off your wig'), the whole point

being that the wig emphasised the sexual purpose of the invitation. This interpretation, which has not been unanimously accepted,¹³ was put forward in Derchain's article 'La perruque et le cristal'.¹⁴ Here a fundamental question was also raised, and I translate: 'If as is generally admitted and as representations in tombs may lead us to believe, the Egyptians imagined the Hereafter as a kind of continuation of life on earth, one must wonder why if eating and drinking plays such an important part in tomb paintings, and if the feasts *en famille* express the hope of never parting from the loved ones, why then is there no documentation to indicate that the Egyptians maintained their desire to make love in the Hereafter?' No apparent visual documentation, that is, for Derchain goes on to quote a passage from the Book of the Dead where making love is part of activities wished for in life after death. The complete absence of sexual motifs in tomb decoration made Derchain wonder—and look more closely. He found the answer in symbolic representation. As far as the question of hair is concerned, Derchain draws parallels to hairdressing scenes of the Middle Kingdom, yet another way of discreetly underlining the true meaning and purpose of the activity and the representation in particular. A few tombs actually include pictures of preparing the bed on which the union of the deceased couple was to take place. Only the well known hieroglyph¹⁵ in a tomb at Beni Hasan spells it out.

Another article by Derchain appeared in 1975, highlighting details of symbolic erotic representation: 'Le lotus, le mandragore et le perséa'.¹⁶ The lotus flower is an acknowledged symbol of resurrection through its connection with the birth of the sun god, and the flower plays a similar part at a different level among ordinary mortals. Lotus—like red roses—suggests love and sexual pleasure.¹⁷ Some of these connotations may have been absorbed by the mandrake which is found tied together with the lotus in floral bouquets and mentioned in similar contexts in literature where the persea also appears.

It was these works by other scholars¹⁸ that inspired me to examine the banquet scenes of the Eighteenth Dynasty tombs at Thebes. There is hardly one tomb of this date without one. To see them just as an example of a happy occasion at the tomb owner's house is a simplistic point of view which would do little credit to the research that has been carried out so far.

An apparently realistic rendering of a feast it in fact no more realistic than, for example, the fishing and fowling

¹¹ Hermann 1959, 163–4 and Hermann 1962.

¹² Westendorff 1977, 481–6.

¹³ Graefe (personal communication) in the course of the present colloquium.

¹⁴ Derchain 1975a.

¹⁵ See Manniche 1987b, fig. 2.1 on p. 53.

¹⁶ Derchain 1975b.

¹⁷ Lotus flowers have recently been subjected to chemical analysis. Previously it had been claimed that the flowers contained a narcotic substance (Emboden 1981, 39–83), but a new analysis more than suggests that lotus had a viagra-like effect (TV programme pro-

duced by TV6 for UK Channel 4, broadcast 27 November 2000).
¹⁸ One may now also read O'Connor 1996, 621–33. The author suggests that the scenes 'form a conceptual and (for the Egyptians) magically effective unity' (p. 621), and radically states that 'the significance of such erotic encodement in general in Egyptian tombs is derived from the belief that deceased Egyptians achieved the perpetual regeneration and rebirth required of this state of being by impregnating their deceased wives who—following paradigms based on solar and other mythology—would conceive, and then give birth to a renewed form of the deceased himself' (p. 630).

scene. It is noticeable that all the participants in the feast are of the same age. There are no old people, and, apart from the 'daughter' of the couple and a few nubile servant girls, no children either. The participants are frozen in the procreative period of their lives. Inscriptions pertaining to the scene will in many instances inform us that it takes place on the occasion of the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, when the deceased couple sit facing their guests. At this feast a figure of Amun from Karnak, followed, among others, by priestesses of Hathor, was carried in procession, stopping at mortuary temples of previous rulers, and completed his journey in the sanctuary of the temple of Deir el-Bahari in the area which was primarily the domain of Hathor. A very late visitor to Thebes, Diodorus, saw this as the journey of Zeus to visit Aphrodite to celebrate a sacred union.¹⁹

The feast concerned the inhabitants of Thebes, who gathered along the processional route and no doubt in the tombs of their relatives as well. It was one of the occasions when the earthly and the divine sphere came into contact and the borderline between them could be trespassed. It was also an occasion for the dead to come into contact with the living, and with the divine, for they came up from their burial chambers and brought burnt offerings and libations to Amun, admiring his beautiful face—although the god would always be concealed in his shrine under a white cloth. This wish for the crossing of boundaries was delicately expressed by the Egyptian artists in the pictorial programme of the tombs.

For example: 'the banquet' it is called. A feast it is—but at a banquet one would expect the participants to eat. Here they do not. They drink to their hearts' content, but they are not shown in the process of eating, a subject which is in fact rarely depicted in Egypt. The texts, on the other hand, elaborate on the theme of drinking. 'To your *ka*. Spend a merry day'—*hrw nfr*—I shall return back to that expression below. They drink wine or beer. We know from the wisdom texts that it was recommended to do things in moderation: food, drink, women... But when the beverages came directly from the offering tables of the gods, and from the shrine of Hathor in particular, it was another matter. The purpose was by no means moderation, but intoxication, and the aim of the intoxication would be the transgression of borders, the borders between the earthly and the divine. The Egyptians were familiar with the concept of the soul parting from the body and pursuing its own mysterious ways. Helped along by intoxicating beverages this mobility was greatly facilitated. The Egyptian artist, trained in coded language, took the opportunity of depicting the liquid being poured into the cups of the guests. He would have been well aware of its metaphor.

If the beverages were not potent enough on their own they could be made to be so by the addition of extracts of

herbs. It has been demonstrated that opium extract played a part in New Kingdom Egypt (cf Merrilllees' investigations²⁰). Lotus, too, may have some effect (cf note 17 above) and we may compare this with literary evidence which has not been brought forward in this context: the most important is a text from the Edfu temple describing the effect of sniffing lotus as making 'the eyes marvel and the nostrils dilate...'.²¹ In the banquet scenes we often see a servant girl with a small jug in one hand which surely does not contain sweetener for the wine, but something more potent than that. It should be remembered that it was an Egyptian woman who was alleged to have taught Helen how to doctor wine in order to make the Trojan warriors forget their sorrow.²²

Music, too, has a part to play here. Music helps communication between the earthly and the divine in the seclusion of the temple as well as in the semi-public sphere of funerary beliefs. Music is a great intermediary, it captures a mood and carries a message—literally, for it puts into words the essence of the occasion. 'Spend a happy day'—happy (*nfr*), the word which causes such headache to attempt to translate adequately, but which certainly means more than just 'beautiful' or 'happy'—there are some strong sexual connotations to be aware of when dealing with the word *nfr*.²³

The purpose of these gatherings at the Feast of the Valley would be to provide an occasion for transcending the world of the living, the dead and the divine by means, among other things, of potent drink. Mandrake was another helpful ingredient. Women hide mandrake fruits behind their backs, as in the well-known scenes in TT52 of Nakht and the tomb of Nebamun in the British Museum (Plate 7 for the latter), as they also play with lotus flowers. An overdose of mandrake may be emetic—the vomiting men and women depicted on a handful of occasions in connection with the banquet scene may have had an overdose of mandrake...

Transgressing borders, making past, present and future meet at this glorious feast... A specific occasion was thus used by the artists of the tomb to underline the miracle of a future beyond death for the tomb owner, and as we have seen, sexual power was of the utmost importance. The banquet scenes are littered with such references, above all the lotus flower. It is everywhere being presented, sniffed, carried as a wig ornament or around the neck. The mandrake... The wig... The semi-transparent clothing and abundant jewellery. Scent, along with cosmetics, was part of the earliest funerary equipment, and it continued to play a major part in life, in death, in the world of the gods and the daily ritual. Scent was made visual by the Egyptian artists by placing a lump of scented unguent on top of the heads of the participants²⁴ or by being applied to the skin, or even by being poured over the head of one fortunate guest.²⁵ It may not be a coincidence that the Egyptian word for scent was written with the same consonants *stj* as the word for procre-

¹⁹ Diodorus Siculus I, 97.8–9.

²⁰ Merrilllees 1989, 153–4.

²¹ Ryhiner 1986, 31, 43, 53.

²² Diodorus Siculus I, 97.7.

²³ Bergman 1968, 160 n. 2 and *Wb* II, 260.7 and 261.8 for the words

for phallus.

²⁴ Cf Manniche 1997b, 33–4, and the earlier article Cherpion 1994.
²⁵ A scene in TT77, now much ruined, was copied by Prisse d'Avennes. In his notes to this scene Champollion informs us that the liquid was red. See Manniche 1988, 18, figs 6 and 8.

ation, shooting and pouring. In Egyptian erotic thought scent was of the utmost importance, as we know from tales (as the one about the scented lock of hair in the tale of the Two Brothers) and love poems (where the beloved is said to remind her partner of the land of Punt). Also the little monkey which sometimes appears under the chair of the tomb owner's wife fits into the context. This vervet is related to female sexuality, and its presence in the tomb means more than just being a fortunate household pet.²⁶

The fishing and fowling scene must once more be remembered here, for it is a strange fact that the apparatus and equipment has much in common with the banquet scenes. The women present in the boat wear outfits similar to that worn for a banquet: semi-transparent garments, wigs, unguent cones and so on. In one case we are fortunate in having an inscription which places the scene in its proper context. The fishing scene from the tomb of Nebamun, now in the British Museum (Plate 8), had an inscription added to it after the decoration was finished. Someone else entered the tomb and copied a scrap of the text and claimed that this took place 'at the seat of eternity'. This is an excellent indication that we are not in the world of the living at all, witnessing the leisure activities of a wealthy inhabitant of ancient Thebes.

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²⁶ Derchain 1976, 9.