

The great cemeteries
of ancient Thebes lie
across the Nile from
the modern town of Luxor and

beyond the broad swath of cultivation between the river and the Libyan plateau.

The plateau is a vast desert region that extends westward from the Nile more than a thousand miles. Made of fossil-rich limestone laid down by incursions of ancient seas, it stretches from magnificent cliffs formed over millennia by the meanderings of the river. Innumerable bays and canyons have been etched by wind, sand,

and the thermal stress of hot days and cold nights. Such forces of nature broke down the rock still more into scree that now rings the bases of the cliffs. In this desolate region lie the world-famous cemeteries of western Thebes: the Valley of the Kings, the Tombs of the Nobles, and the Valley of the Queens.

Placing their cemeteries to the west was instinctive for the ancient Egyptians, who localized the netherworld in the land of the setting sun. This association took on particular meaning in Thebes because

*Previous page:
A view across the river Nile toward western Thebes.*

The main wadi in the Valley of the Queens showing some of the tombs of queens and royal children. Nefertari's tomb is indicated. Photo: A. Siliotti.



of the great western peak of Qurna, by far the most prominent landmark around.

From its summit, one can look down into the Valley of the Kings or east across the cultivation to the river. Beyond the Nile, barely visible through the haze, are the pylons of Luxor Temple. Along the edge of cultivation stands a row of mortuary temples. The largest of these, Medinet Habu, was erected to the memory of Rameses III.

Just behind this temple, an asphalt road follows an ancient track and wends its way back to the peak, running near the workmen's village of Deir el-Medineh. After passing a rock-cut shrine to the god Ptah, another to the local goddess Meret-Seger, and the ruins of a Coptic monastery, the road peters out in a small valley directly beneath the peak of Qurna. This is the Valley of the Queens.

At its western limit is a gorge. In front of that are vestiges of an ancient dam that once diverted runoff from sudden cloudbursts. Signs of wind and water erosion abound. Weathered chunks of limestone and flint litter the ground. Finer material washed down to the valley floor has softened the contours. Suggestions of rude huts made from tabular limestone are all that remain of the shelters used by the workmen who excavated the tombs in the Valley of the Queens.

It's unclear precisely why this area was selected for burials. Though vulnerable and hard to police, its chief virtue may have been convenience. But certainly the looming mass of Qurna and its divine associations with the beyond would have appealed to the ancient Egyptians. It is also possible that the gorge suggested to them the vulva of the sky goddess Nut, depicted in tombs and coffins giving birth to the sun god each morning.



ERNESTO SCHIAPARELLI

Italian Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856–1928) began his studies with Francesco Rossi at the University of Turin, and continued them in Paris between 1877 and 1880 with the great French Egyptologist, Gaston Maspero. For many years, Schiaparelli was director of the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

As head of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Egypt between 1903 and 1920, Schiaparelli also explored numerous Egyptian sites. His most enduring achievements were in the vicinity of

Thebes — in the workmen's village at Deir el-Medineh and in the Valley of the Queens.

In 1906, while working at Deir el-Medineh, Schiaparelli discovered the undisturbed burial of Khai, an overseer of works, and his wife Meryt. The abundant household materials from their tomb, now on display in Turin, provide a detailed picture of life among the workmen who dug and decorated Egyptian royal tombs.

In 1904, Schiaparelli opened Nefertari's tomb, one of thirteen that he cleared or discovered in the Valley of the Queens. Though he spent only a year in the tomb, Schiaparelli compiled an important photographic record of its condition and decoration. These 135 glass plate negatives — housed in the Turin Museum — have served as

a benchmark ever since.

Schiaparelli and his assistant Francesco Ballerini assigned numbers to all the tombs in the valley, installed iron gates at their entrances, and pioneered site management by laying out pathways between the tombs. The arched, brick portal that now protects the entrance to Nefertari's tomb was also built by the Italian mission.

Ernesto Schiaparelli published a volume on his work in the Valley of the Queens in 1924. A second volume, on his explorations at Deir el-Medineh, was published in 1927, a year before his death.



Stereo view of Ernesto Schiaparelli (far right) at the entrance to the tomb of Nefertari after construction of the brick portal.

Photo: Courtesy of the Museo Egizio, Turin.



An ephemeral stream surging down the gorge might have reinforced this image of sacred issue.

There are eighty numbered tombs in the Valley of the Queens. Only twenty are decorated. Most are little more than pit tombs, without decoration or inscription. The larger openings of the more substantial tombs probably suggested the common Arabic name for this site: “Biban el Malikat” or “the Portals of the Queens.”

The most ancient of these large tombs date from the Eighteenth Dynasty and were private or anonymous. But early in the Nineteenth Dynasty, it became the fashion to bury queens and royal children in this lonely valley. Throughout the next two centuries, many important members of the court found their final resting place here. Along the northern flank of the valley are tombs of the queens and daughters of Rameses II; along the southern flank, the sons of Rameses III.

The ancient Egyptians initially referred to this locale as simply “the Great Valley.” But after the surge in royal interments — queens, dowager queens, and children — it became known as “the place of the beautiful ones.”

Archaeology has confirmed what the texts say. Most of the burials in this valley are royal. They include those of three very important queens from the early years of the Nineteenth Dynasty: Sat-re, wife

of Rameses I; Mut-tuy, wife of Sety I; and, of course, Nefertari, favorite consort of Rameses II.

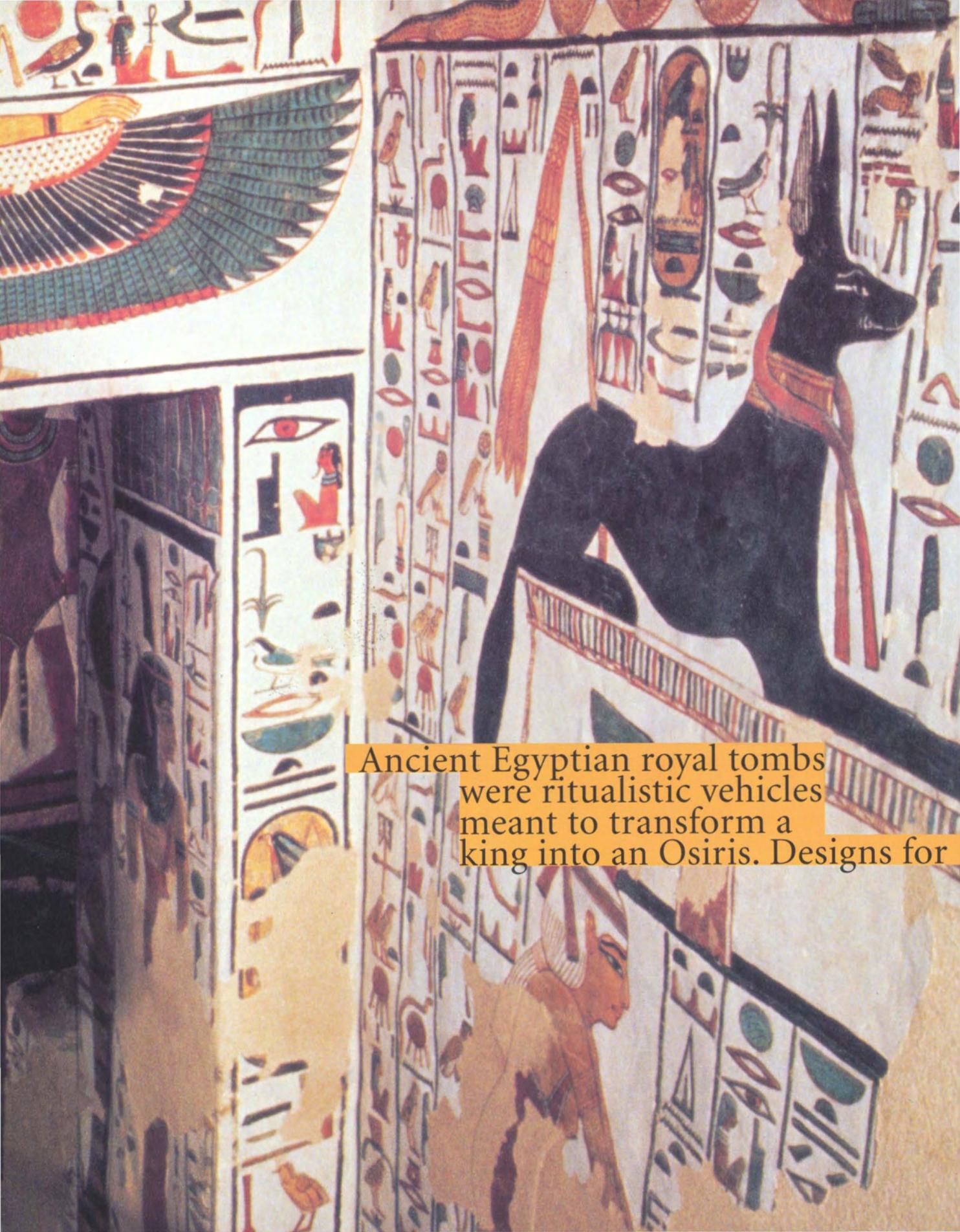
Why was this place reserved for queens? Several explanations come to mind. Most likely is that Hatshepsut had a tomb prepared for herself in a neighboring canyon before she became pharaoh, and the three foreign-born wives of Thutmose III were interred not far away.

The designation “Valley of the Queens” was introduced by Jean François Champollion in the nineteenth century C.E., then taken up by other Egyptologists. The first Europeans to explore the site were J. G. Wilkinson (1821–33), Champollion (1828–29), Ippolito Rosellini (1834), and C.-R. Lepsius (1845). Lepsius correctly identified the tomb of Meryetamun, Nefertari’s eldest daughter, but missed locating the queen’s, just adjacent. That honor fell to Ernesto Schiaparelli, who explored the valley between 1903 and 1904. For this and his efforts at the workmen’s village, Schiaparelli earned himself a lasting place in the annals of Egyptology.

*Opposite:
The camp site of
Ernesto Schiaparelli’s
expedition in the
foothills of the Valley
of the Queens, 1904.*

*Photo: Courtesy of the
Museo Egizio, Turin.*





Ancient Egyptian royal tombs were ritualistic vehicles meant to transform a king into an Osiris. Designs for



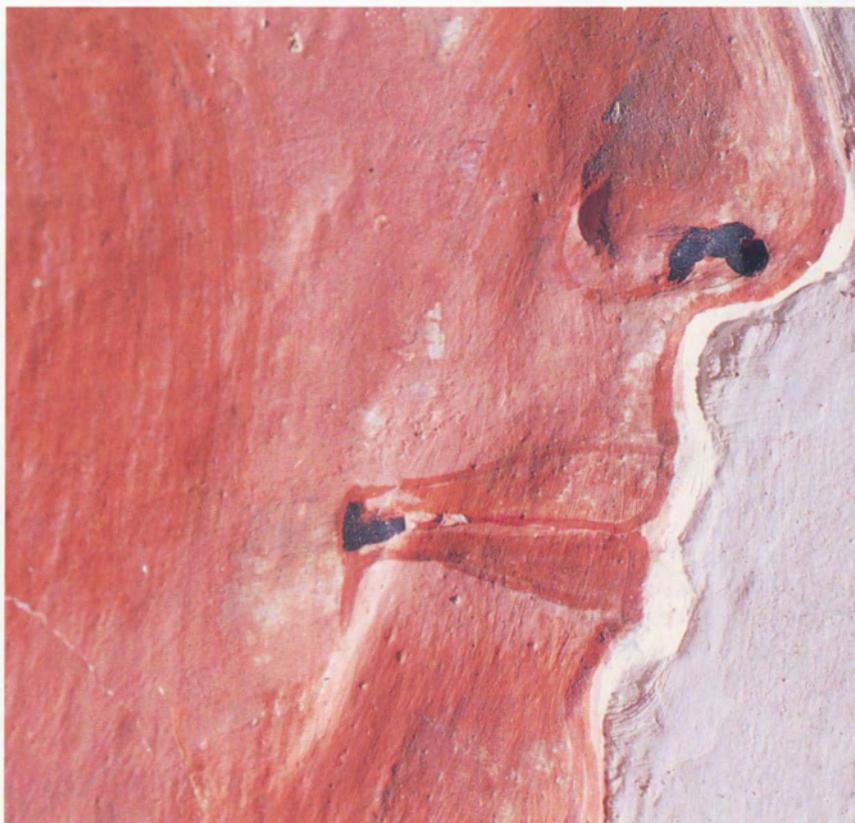
royal tombs were probably drawn up by court architects, with the king's involvement. Yet no one

knows exactly how the sovereign expressed his wishes for the tomb's location, size, and decoration.

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms, they took the form of pyramids. There are some seventy such pyramids in the Nile valley. During the New Kingdom, royal tombs underwent fundamental redesign ultimately evolving into a pencil-thin shaft, sunk obliquely into the hillsides of the Valley of the Kings. Beginning with the pharaoh Thutmose I (1504–1492 B.C.E.) and for five centuries afterward, Egyptian sovereigns ordered their tombs excavated in this remote canyon.

New Kingdom tomb design at first consisted of a series of descending corridors, small waiting rooms, and then a sarcophagus hall with annexes. These elements were usually assembled in the repeating pattern of corridor followed by chamber, corridor followed by chamber: a rhythm of down-pause, down-pause.

This design accomplished two aims. First, it reminded the Egyptians of the "crookedness of the beyond." For the tomb was meant to evoke the twisted topography of the netherworld. Turns and plunging stairways imitated the convoluted path that the deceased had to follow to become an effective, blessed soul. Second, the doubling of the basic unit — down-pause, down-pause — may have alluded to the traditional division of Egypt into northern and southern kingdoms, or have suggested the duality of earthly versus timeless existence.



Detail of Nefertari's face on the west wall of the descending corridor showing the painted correction to the relief work.

Previous spread: Looking into the burial chamber from the descending corridor. The goddess Ma'at, with outstretched wings, adorns the lintel.

Opposite: The head of Nefertari on the west wall of the descending corridor showing carved relief work.



Detail from the north wall of Recess E illustrating a correction in the painting.

A simple, painted wall primed with whitewash had been the standard in the tombs of the early Eighteenth Dynasty. Carved limestone was not introduced until the reign of Horemheb (1319–1307 B.C.E.), but was then immediately adopted as the standard in royal tombs. Carved plaster imitating limestone made its appearance about this time — most sublimely in Nefertari’s tomb — and remained a feature of Ramesside tomb decoration.

The overall design of Nefertari’s tomb borrows from the architecture of contemporary royal tombs. It also reflects the increasing religiosity that pervades Ramesside tomb decoration.

For his own tomb, Rameses the Great reintroduced a sharp ninety-degree turn just before the burial chamber and increased the number of its supporting pillars around the sunken sarcophagus emplacement to eight. A shelf around the

perimeter of the burial hall was a feature repeated from Nefertari’s tomb. In strictly architectural terms, Rameses’ tomb remains the most complex and interesting in the Valley of the Kings.

From Rameses’ death forward, Egyptian royal tombs underwent immense simplification, especially in their ground plans. The tomb of Merneptah, Rameses’ immediate successor, stressed length over annexes and chambers, which began to diminish in size or vanish altogether. The descending stairway was replaced by a shallow, continuous ramp leading deep into the mountainside.

The logical conclusion of these trends was the tomb of Rameses VI: long, straight, spare. Its decoration also showed evolution characteristic of the later Ramesside era: illustration and text were drawn in outline, with a minimum of modeling or internal detail. The many colors of

Nefertari's tomb were replaced by predominantly golden hues to reinforce solar imagery.

A royal tomb's design could not be turned over to the workmen until a site was selected. This task proved increasingly difficult as the royal valleys became filled with burial sites. In some instances, architects chose unwisely, siting their work where it eventually intersected older tombs and so had to be abandoned or modified.

Once construction had begun, many steps in the work — from cutting to smoothing to decorating — may have gone on simultaneously, heavy work preceding lighter. Quarrymen first opened the shaft by hammering the porous rock with heavy mauls. They then removed the shattered pieces with chisels and adzes. All such heavy-duty tools were provided by the state and rigorously



Hammers and chisels used in the construction of royal tombs.

Photo: J. Hyde.

Detail from the east side of the south wall of the upper corridor showing uncorrected overlapping paint.



accounted for. Tailings from the cutting were dumped right outside the tomb, a convenient but untidy practice. However, this custom had at least one happy consequence. The entrance to the tomb of Tutankhamun was buried beneath an avalanche of rock from the excavation of Rameses VI's tomb. Had it not been, the boy king's tomb might have been found and looted long ago.

As work progressed into the selected hillside, an army of artisans followed at the quarrymen's heels. Masons rough-leveled the walls using a boning rod (a primitive sighting gauge consisting of two flat rods connected by twine) and ensured that walls were vertical by means of a plumb bob. Imperfections, such as flint nodules, were either left in place or removed, as the situation warranted. Any large holes or weak pockets of rock were plugged with mortar made of crushed limestone and gypsum. Smooth-leveling was probably achieved by abrasion. Once this stage was complete, the walls were primed with a gypsum wash.

With the walls prepared, apprentice draftsmen could begin drawing both illustration and text. Working first in red, they outlined hieroglyphic text and images that were subsequently corrected and adjusted in black by master draftsmen, exactly the reverse of the Western artistic custom. Guided by these outlines, sculptors then carved and scoured away the background so that the designs stood out in relief.

Painters and varnishers came last, carefully painting over the carved design, sometimes making inspired deviations that improved upon the composition. Details too fine to execute in rock or

plaster were liberally supplied in paint. The completely self-assured brushwork of these artists has given a fresh and spontaneous effect to many scenes throughout the Theban necropolis.

Some tombs were constructed in distinct stages, with long intervals between successive trades plying their crafts. Yet when time was short — as it likely was in the case of Nefertari — there is reason to believe that quarrymen, plasterers, outline draftsmen, carvers, and painters all worked at the same time. Under these conditions, parts of the tomb were completed from the inside out, the squads of workmen eventually finishing up back at the entrance where they began.

Workers seem to have maintained “left” and “right” crews, each performing two four-hour shifts a day. At night, they camped out in huts midway between the tomb and their village, on a ridge beneath the peak of Qurna. Their “weeks” lasted ten days, eight days of labor and two days off back in the village.

Besides the tools provided by the state, other materials and supplies had to be brought daily to the site. Food and water were essential to sustain the men; but water was also required for painting and plastering. Critical lighting was provided by shallow pottery saucers that burned oil or animal fat mixed with salt to reduce smoke. Wicks for these lamps were made of twisted flax and were supplied by the state. Like the tools, these wicks were strictly rationed.



Ceiling detail showing black underpainting.

TOMB PAINTS AND MATERIALS

Paints used in Nefertari's tomb consisted of pigment for color, water to make the paint flow, and gum to bind it to the surface of the wall. The Egyptian palette was limited to vivid, primary colors. Only a handful of words for these colors existed, and none captured the nuances between shades of the same hue.

Egyptian pigments were mineral, not organic. Earth colors — reds and yellows — were

made from burnt umber, cooked iron oxide. Shades of red resulted from trace amounts of manganese, while yellow was prepared from a hydrated iron oxide or ochre. Blues and greens were compounded from natural copper ores: malachite or azurite. Occasionally, these ores were cooked with calcium and quartz or other forms of silica, producing a glass that was then pulverized.

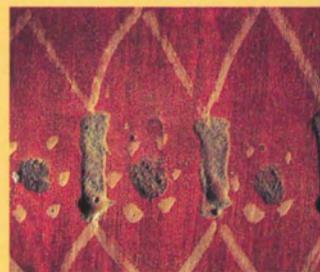
Blue and green pigments tended not to adhere well to the wall surface and consequently show more damage today. The black in Nefertari's tomb was powdered charcoal. It too could be easily brushed off. Whites

were made of chalk (calcium carbonate) or gypsum (calcium sulphide) or some blend of the two.

The binder was gum arabic, derived from the local acacia tree. Unlike egg tempera, which becomes insoluble over time, gum arabic can redissolve under certain conditions and is damaged by ultra violet radiation. Thus, if the paint in Nefertari's tomb were to become damp enough, it could "flow."

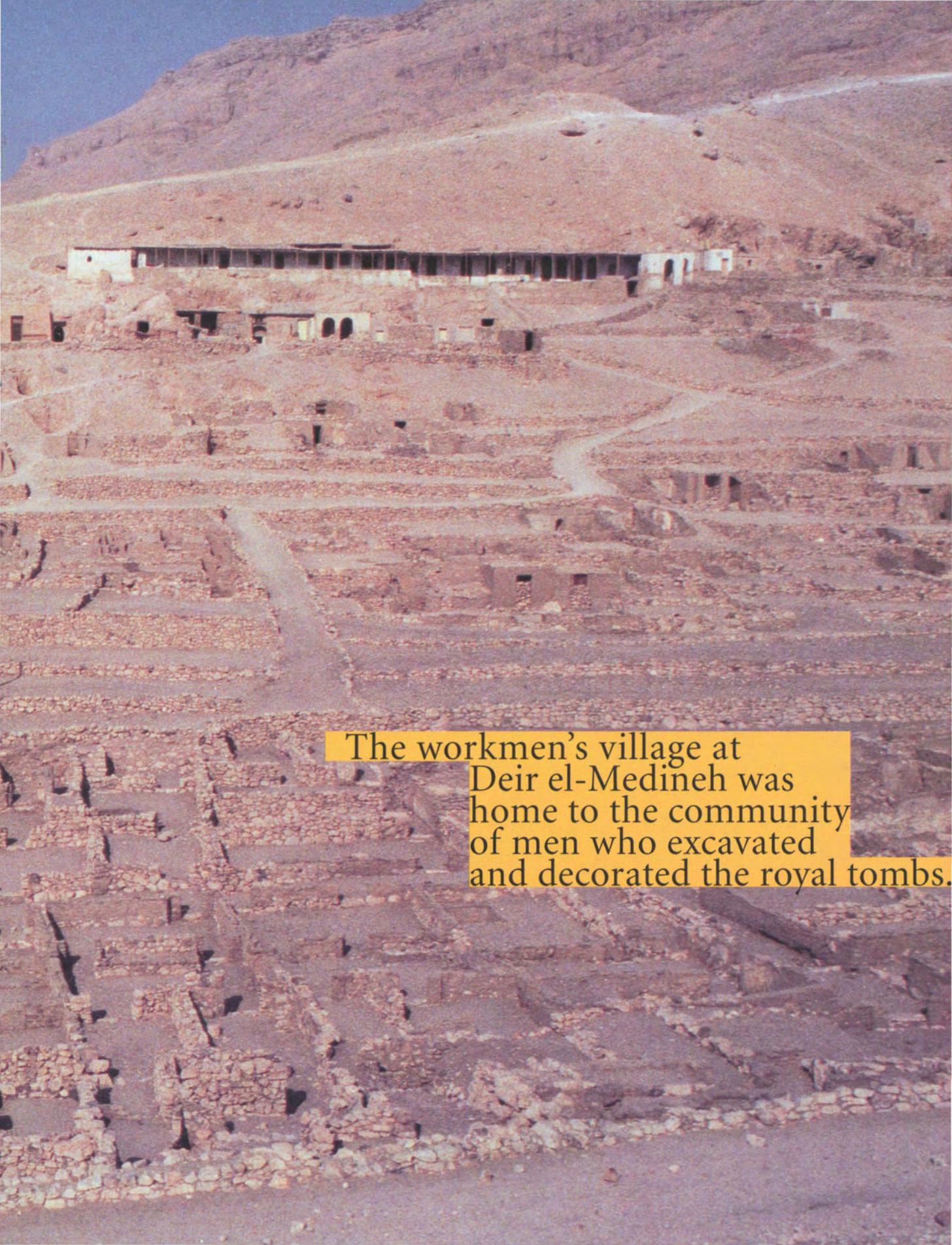
Surface coatings in the tomb consist of tree resin and egg white (albumen). Employed chiefly as a glaze on red and yellow areas, they enhance the brilliance of

the color beneath. But since resin and albumen have always been readily available, no one knows if these coatings are original or, if not, when they were applied.



Detail of impasto paint.





The workmen's village at Deir el-Medineh was home to the community of men who excavated and decorated the royal tombs.



Workmen excavating in the Theban necropolis during the expedition of the Italian Archaeological Mission led by Ernesto Schiaparelli in 1904.

Photo: Courtesy of the Museo Egizio, Turin.

Previous page: The community of the pharaoh's tomb builders at Deir el-Medineh.

Photo: C. Leblanc.

Their simple homes were made of limestone and flint.

Each house had an entryway leading to a living room, which was often provided with a built-in sleeping couch. This was the only piece of fixed furniture. Behind were a tiny room and an unroofed kitchen, with oven and silos beyond. Stairs made of a notched palm trunk led to the roof, used for storage and sleeping in hot weather. Some houses also had a tiny storage cellar beneath the living room floor.

The community was founded early in the Eighteenth Dynasty by Thutmose I, the first pharaoh to dig a sepulcher in the Valley of the Kings. The settlement grew, but not steadily. The Amarna period, when the court was resident in middle Egypt, could not have been a prosperous time for the village. But it was reinvigorated and reorganized during the reign of Horemheb, who enclosed the settlement and organized the workmen into crews. Under Rameses II the community consisted of perhaps 48 men and their families, but reached its zenith in the reign of Rameses IV, when the population peaked at about 120 families.

Much of what we know of the village comes from tens of thousands of inscribed limestone flakes on which the workmen recorded their daily affairs. These, the paper of ancient Egypt, summarize important matters such as law suits and divine oracles. But they are also filled with the mundane. They chronicle the revictualing of the village, tell us when the men were sick or shiftless, speak of marital problems, and hint at drunkenness. They describe what other jobs the workmen performed and what they did on holidays, feast days, and occasional days off. We can even reconstruct the genealogies and fortunes of thirteen families and so form a picture of life in a community that enjoyed work, prayer, and leisure.

The workmen spent their entire careers as privileged state employees. When not digging in the necropolis they stayed in the community and when they died, they were buried in tombs of their own making, in the hillside just opposite the village. Two of these were discovered intact with their full complement of funerary equipment: the tomb of Sennedjem in 1885 and that of Khai in 1906.

The men of the community were known as “servitors in the place of truth,” a reference to the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The men were organized into teams known as “gangs,” modeled after a ship’s crew. The most important members of the community were the foremen of the gangs, followed closely by the scribes. The foreman functioned as chief of works and had a deputy to distribute tools and collect them again at the end of each shift. The scribe functioned as director of personnel, recording workers’ attendance and calculating their pay.

Originally, these village captains were appointed by the vizier, the king’s chief minister. But in the Ramesside age, the positions became hereditary; dynasties of scribes and foremen over five and six generations were not uncommon.

The men were trained as stone masons, draftsmen, carvers, carpenters, and painters, all skills acquired from fathers and passed down to sons. Wages varied according to rank; but everyone was paid in kind: grain, oil, and beer drawn from state storehouses. Supplementing these were disbursements of fish, vegetables, water, pottery, and fuel.

Estimates of the value of wages suggest that the workmen had enough left over to barter for durable goods or luxury items not readily available inside their compound. They even undertook contract work on each other’s tombs, helped out on state projects outside the necropolis, and perhaps invested some free time in private projects not sanctioned by the state. It is conceivable that some of these men worked on the Tombs of the Nobles, not far away.

With the workmen spending most of their time on state-funded projects or engaged in occasional “freelance” work, they had to rely on a staff of water carriers,



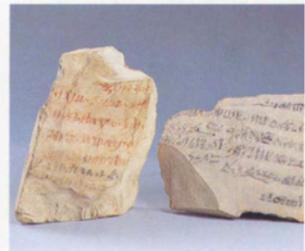
fuel porters, victualers, and provisioners of all sorts to supply many of their essential needs.

After repeated attacks by bandits sweeping down out of the western desert, Deir el-Medineh was abandoned in the early Twenty-first Dynasty (1070–945 B.C.E.). The community of workmen was relocated to the safety of Medineh Habu, the mortuary temple of Rameses III.

In any event, the industry of royal tomb construction was now all the more literally a dying business. Tombs might yet be constructed for the Theban priesthood, but the kings of the Twenty-first Dynasty, who resided in distant Tanis, preferred burial in the temple enclosure there rather than in Thebes with its hallowed valleys of the kings and queens.

Recently restored dwellings of the workmen in the Valley of the Queens.

Photo: A. Siliotti.



Example of limestone flakes inscribed with daily events in the workmen’s lives.

Photo: J. Hyde.