A comparison of the polychrome geometric patterns painted on Egyptian “palace façades” / false doors with potential counterparts in Mesopotamia

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Abstract: In 1st Dynasty Egypt (ca. 3000 BCE), mudbrick architecture may have been influenced by existing Mesopotamian practices such as the complex niching of monumental façades. From the 1st to 3rd Dynasties, the niches of some mudbrick mastabas at Saqqara were painted with brightly-coloured geometric designs in a clear imitation of woven reed matting. The possibility that this too might have drawn inspiration from Mesopotamian precedents is raised by the observation of similar geometric frescoes at the Painted Temple in Tell Uqair near Baghdad, a Late Uruk structure (ca. 3400-3100 BCE) that predates the proposed timing of Mesopotamian influence on Egyptian architecture (Jemdet Nasr, ca. 3100-2900 BCE). However, detailed scrutiny favours the idea that the Egyptian polychrome panels were an indigenous development. Panels mimicking reed mats, animal skins and wooden lattices probably proved popular on royal and religious mudbrick façades in Early Dynastic Egypt because they emulated archaic indigenous “woven” shelters such as the per-nu and per-wer shrines. As with Mesopotamian cone mosaics – another labour-intensive technique that seems to have mimicked textile patterns – the scope of such panels became limited over time to focal points in the architecture. In Egyptian tombs, the adornment of key walls and funerary equipment with colourful and complex geometric false door / palace façade composites (Prunkscheintüren) continued at least into the Middle Kingdom, and the template persisted in memorial temple decoration until at least the late New Kingdom.

Introduction

Mesopotamian influences on ancient Egyptian art are evident during the pre- and proto-dynastic period. For example, the “master of animals” motif attested on stamp seals from western Asia (ca. 4000-3500 BCE) appears in rudimentary form on the wall paintings in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis (Naqada IIC/III, ca. 3500-3200 BCE) and proficiently on the Gebel el-Arak knife handle (Naqada II/III, ca. 3300-3200 BCE). The chimeric serpopards on the Narmer Palette and Two Dog Palette (Naqada IIIC, ca. 3100-2900 BCE) also seem to be distinctively Mesopotamian. Clay nails from Naqada IIB to Early Dynastic layers found at Buto, Hierakonpolis and other Egyptian sites resemble decorative clay cones of Late Uruk manufacture. Architecture, too, may have been influenced: the unusual oval-shaped revetment of the Early Dynastic temple at Hierakonpolis reportedly has counterparts in temple platforms at Uruk- and Jemdet Nasr-era Sumer.

In 2000, a review of Egypt’s likely contacts with the Ancient Near East led Alexander Joffe to conclude that “The relationship between Uruk Mesopotamia and late predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt was lengthy, complex, and almost completely one-sided. Critical symbols and technologies were transmitted at times when first incipient and then developed Egyptian elites could adapt and apply them effectively.” However, the inclusion of Mesopotamian motifs in the Egyptian repertoire may have been achieved quite indirectly – prompted, for example, by migration of just a few craft specialists and/or a local emulation of “exotic” motifs on cylinder seals that had been traded between the two cultures.
practices need not have any common ancestry. For example, the inscribed clay cones/nails used in both cultures (Mesopotamian temple foundation cones, 2400-1712 BCE; Egyptian funerary cones, 2125-332 BCE)\textsuperscript{10} probably reflect independent innovations.\textsuperscript{11}

A stylistic chasm separates the pre-formal figurative wall-paintings of predynastic Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis\textsuperscript{12} from the coloured geometric panels painted on the walls of Early Dynastic tombs at Saqqara. Egyptian antecedents of the latter include the simple monochrome geometric designs that appear on white cross-lined pottery (Petrie’s C-ware, Naqada I, \textit{ca.} 3900-3750 BCE) and on decorated ceramic vessels (D-ware, Naqada IICD, \textit{ca.} 3650/3450-3300 BCE).\textsuperscript{13} Also included are the small geometric motifs incised on some rhomboid stone palettes (Naqada I - early Naqada II), including the chevron-filled lozenges on a newly-discovered one from Hierakonpolis,\textsuperscript{14} as well as some patterns on engraved objects and clay impressions from Abydos (\textit{ca.} 3300 BCE) that will be discussed later. Moreover, polychrome art with curvilinear elements and simple grid patterns is evident on small-scale plaster objects found at Hierakonpolis and Abydos that date to Naqada IIA (\textit{ca.} 3700 BCE),\textsuperscript{15} and fragments of the white plaster that originally covered the wooden post superstructures at/near Tombs 23 and 73 in Hierakonpolis cemetery HK6 (Naqada IIAB) bear traces of red, yellow, green and black pigments.\textsuperscript{16} However, the dazzling large-scale polychrome art adorning the walls of two 1\textsuperscript{st} Dynasty tombs at Saqqara – Tombs 3505 and 3121, both niched mudbrick mastabas – is seemingly without precedent in the Egyptian archaeological record. As this artistic innovation seems to have arisen around the same time as the new style of architecture that it decorates – mudbrick constructions with complex niching, a style long suspected to have been inspired by Mesopotamian practices\textsuperscript{17} – one might reasonably ask whether the two have a common origin outside of Egypt.

\textit{Mudbrick niching and the “palace façade”}

Hand-formed mudbricks appear first at sites in the Southern Levant (Jordan Valley, e.g. Jericho) and Upper Mesopotamia during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (\textit{ca.} 9600-8500 BCE),\textsuperscript{18} and mudbrick houses become common in the Levant during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (\textit{ca.} 8500-6400 BCE).\textsuperscript{19} Form-moulded bricks appear first in Mesopotamia and Syria \textit{ca.} 6500 BCE and become standard in Mesopotamia from \textit{ca.} 5200 BCE.\textsuperscript{20} These bricks were manufactured by shaping a mixture of wet earth and straw in a wooden mould and letting the resulting composite blocks dry in the sun.\textsuperscript{21} In Egypt, mudbrick appeared in the foundations of semi-subterranean houses at Maadi in the Delta \textit{ca.} 3600 BCE.\textsuperscript{22} Since these structures resemble buildings of the Beersheba culture, the building practices appear to have been imported from the Levant.\textsuperscript{23} Mudbrick architecture appeared slightly later in Upper Egypt;\textsuperscript{24} brick walls are attested as early as Naqada IIBC at Hierakonpolis HK11C, where they enclosed an animal pen or storage room (radiocarbon dated to 3627-3363 cal BCE) and a meat-cooking facility (dated to 3514-3109 cal BCE);\textsuperscript{25} the painted Tomb 100 is also lined with mudbrick.\textsuperscript{26} These walls consist of hand-made rather than mould-formed bricks, the latter being a later development. Monumental architecture first appeared during Naqada IID-IIIA (\textit{ca.} 3350-3200 BCE) at the Hierakonpolis cult precinct HK29A.\textsuperscript{27} The earliest known mudbrick mastaba in Egypt is a Naqada IIIA2/B1 structure located in the Eastern Delta at Tell el-Farkha.\textsuperscript{28} These mudbrick wall surfaces are all flat.

The surface convolution known as “niching” (which could involve buttresses, recesses, panels and grooves) was adopted early as a feature of the external walls of Mesopotamian
temples; it may have taken its inspiration from the surface topography of the wooden post-
and-plank architecture that is presumed to have preceded it.29 Similarly, the advent of niching
in Egypt has been explained as “the imitation of architecture in light materials such as reed
and wood, resulting automatically in walls with a vertical structure which were strengthened
by the use of recesses.”30 Some of the missing superstructures of the protodynastic (“Dynasty
0”) elite tombs at Abydos and Hierakonpolis may have had simple mudbrick niching.31
Moreover, from the very beginning of the 1st Dynasty, the outer walls of the 1st- and 2nd-
Dynasty royal mortuary enclosures at Abydos had “regularly placed and closely set recesses”
which were shallow and equal in size, with grouping into sets of three or four along the
northeast façades.32 Complex or compound niching, in which the façade is punctuated by
nested niches,33 developed in Mesopotamia during the Late Uruk phase, and was both well
established and widely diffused by the Jemdet Nasr period (ca. 3100-2900 BCE).34 It
appeared in Egypt at that time, and is thus contemporary with the early 1st Dynasty (ca. 3100/2950-2800 BCE);35 in the words of Barry Kemp, “the palace façade style of architecture
[... ] appears suddenly, its details fully formed, at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty.”36 The
mastabas of Queen Neithhotep at Naqada and Saqqara Tomb 3357 (reign of Hor-Aha) are
examples.37 As mentioned above, the apparently sudden arrival of complex mudbrick niching
in the Egyptian archaeological record has long encouraged a suspicion that the technology –
or at least the concept – of niching was imported from Mesopotamia,40 an idea that Kemp has
judged “not as far-fetched as it might seem at first.”41 Knowledge of the practice may have
arrived via trade routes between Uruk settlements in northern Syria and the Nile Delta,42
given that genuine or imitation Amuq F pottery has been found at sites in the Levant and at
Buto I-III (ca. 4000-3100 BCE).43 Even Stan Hendrickx, who strongly favours an
indigenous origin for mudbrick niching in Egypt,45 concedes that complex niching, “as it
occurs from the time of Hor-Aha (Naqada IIIc1) onwards, could be the result of an indirect
Mesopotamian influence on a previously existing Egyptian architectural template.”46

The serekhs on pre- and protodynastic Egyptian artefacts are mostly rudimentary rectilinear
designs that are taken to depict, in miniature, the front of a building of great importance.47
Although they bear some resemblance to the “temple façade” designs common on Late Uruk
and Jemdet Nasr-era cylinder seals from Mesopotamia (ca. 3300-2900 BCE)48 – a point that
will be reprised below – Stan Hendrickx has mounted a strong case for the serekh having an
independent origin in Upper Egypt during the Naqada IIIA2 period (ca. 3200 BCE).49 Walls
built from overlapping wooden planks were an established feature of Egyptian residential
architecture by the 1st Dynasty,50 so the earliest serekhs may represent earlier high-status
walls/gates of wood and/or wattle.51 As Hendrickx writes, “the palaces of the Late
Predynastic and Early Dynastic period were at least partially built in very light materials for
which wood and reeds will have formed the framework. [...] This will normally result in
vertical building elements and the use of reinforcements and niches will give greater stability
to the walls.”52 When niched mudbrick architecture appeared in Egypt, the drawing of
serekhs would equally have reflected the panels and grooves of the resulting façades. Since
later serekhs house the king’s name, the emblem is taken to represent the royal palace, and
the grooved-wall-with-gates design has come to be known in Egyptology as the “palace
façade.”53 The Early Dynastic building discovered within the ancient walled town of
Hierakonpolis (Nekhen) is thought to have been just such a royal residence; it is the only non-
funerary niched mudbrick building discovered in Egypt thus far.54
The “false door” and complex painted patterns

In Mesopotamia, the Ubaid-era Temple VIII at Eridu (ca. 4500-4000 BCE) contained “false doorways,” some of which served as cult niches for offerings, while niched recesses are present in some later temples, such as the temple in the Ur III GIPAR at Ur. In Egypt, the false door can be considered a simplification of the continuous niching of mudbrick façades, insofar as the number of niches was diminished during the 1st-2nd Dynasties to just one or two; these were focal points that served as symbolic portals between this world and the next. In the 3rd and 4th Dynasties, these niches – which typically bore inscriptions and figurative art – were accommodated in external chapels. In the chapel of Hetepi at Abusir (AS20, early 3rd Dynasty) it seems that a true two-leaved wooden door once protected a decorated cult niche in the western wall; soon after, such doors (along with their alternative, the drum-door of rolled matting) were being rendered in stone. In the 4th and 5th Dynasties, the resulting “false doors” were typically housed in chapels within the body of the mastaba.

An uninscribed and highly ornate variant of the false door design, which recapitulates the palace façade – including abstract geometric decoration reminiscent of that adorning Tombs 3505 and 3121 at Saqqara – appeared as decoration on coffins and sarcophagi (e.g., Fig. 1)
Figure 1: False door / palace façade composites on sarcophagi. (a) Design on the end of a 4th-Dynasty sarcophagus, from the tomb of Fefi in Giza, Cairo (JE 66681). (b) Design on the side of an anonymous 4th-Dynasty limestone sarcophagus from Giza; Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 54934 / CG 6170). On top of the lid (not shown) is carved and painted a spread panther skin, a motif discussed later in the main text. (c) Design on the end of the sarcophagus whose side is shown in panel (b). (d) Close-up of the papyrus flower pairs from panel (c). All photos by the author.

from as early as the 2nd Dynasty. In German, this false door / palace façade composite is called a *Prunkscheintür* (“ornate false door”). The painted low-relief counterparts of this template in Old Kingdom decorated burial chambers – such as that of King Unas (Dynasty 5) – are full-scale, but seldom seem to have served a cultic function. These designs, which equally attract the false door, palace façade and *Prunkscheintür* labels, have the appearance of textiles (Fig. 2a,b). “Intricate geometric and floral patterns arranged in rows and columns

Figure 2 (below): Burial chamber of Unas, last king of Dynasty 5, Saqqara. (a) Walls of the burial chamber, facing east; photostitch with sarcophagus in centre. (b) Raking light on left-hand (south) wall to show depth of relief. The outline of the human figure with rear arm raised – in the act of harpooning – is thought to be Djedkara, the penultimate king of Dynasty 5, whose figuratively-decorated alabaster blocks seem to have been (incompletely) erased and reused by Unas. (c) Detail from the left (south) wall; the outer strips in this panel show four instances of the “chain motif with terminal crescent stack,” a template discussed later in the text. All photos were taken by the author.
cover the whole of the palace façade motif and are thought to be in imitation of perishable adornments such as matting and weaving which would have been draped over the walls.68 The non-royal examples, too, are impressive.69 Reflecting on the development of the palace façade / false door composite from its Early Dynastic roots, Barry Kemp observed that “The whole design of panels, recesses, and applied matting-patterns became a fixed scheme of decoration on later sarcophagi and offering-places in tomb chapels.”70 Colourful and complex geometric adornment of palace façade / false door composites in tombs continued at least into the Middle Kingdom (Fig. 3a), and such designs survive within the decorative programs of some Ramesside memorial temples (e.g., the Temples of Seti I and Ramses II at Abydos; Figs. 3b,c).

Let us focus on the origins of this later virtuosity and consider in detail the painted decoration of niches in the Early Dynastic period and early Old Kingdom. Emery’s excavations of elite tombs at Saqqara revealed the oldest examples known, which date from the late 1st Dynasty (reign of Qa’a, ca. 2916-2842 BCE)71 – the aforementioned Tombs 3505 and 3121. The former mastaba has a continuously niched façade, and it is on this that the paintings were found: “elaborate frescoes of matwork design [...] Executed in red, white, black, blue and yellow, this painted decoration was well preserved and even the guiding lines of the craftsmen were still visible.”72 The panels go so far as to record in paint the suspension loops and wooden frames used to stretch the mats taut (Fig. 4a,b). Tomb 3121 has only the simplified two-niche façade, of which both the wall and its niches “bore traces of painted decoration.”73 Some corridors within the mastaba retained vestiges of similar decoration, and parts of the designs adorning a passageway leading down to the substructure could be reconstructed from surviving fragments of plaster (Fig. 5).74

In 3rd-Dynasty mastabas one often finds a revival of continuous niching, although usually the resulting “palace façade” is limited to just one wall that has been enclosed so that it forms the west wall of a long “corridor chapel” parallel to the eastern edge of the superstructure. This is the origin of the “painted corridor” in Hesyre’s 3rd-Dynasty mastaba at Saqqara, Tomb 2405. The western wall of the corridor contains eleven false door-like recessed niches, but the “palace façade” has been modernised by embellishing the central niche as the focal point / true false door.75 All of the niches are painted with geometric mat patterns of the same type as those on Tombs 3505 and 3121. Like Tomb 3505, Hesyre’s panels record the suspension system used to stretch the mats (Fig. 6a,b). Compared to other tomb paintings of similar type known at the time, which included neither Tomb 3505 or 3121, Quibell notes that “a few details are shown more clearly, notably the method of stretching the hangings tight by a cord running through a series of loops and round a horizontal rod. It is clear, too, that the hangings were the inside decoration of a room and that some of them were woven patterns.”76 Some of Hesyre’s woven designs (the central strips from panels 1-3 in Fig. 6b) have been recreated as ceiling-to-floor banners, complete with suspension system, by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where they are on public display.77
Figure 3: The Prunkscheintür motif in the Middle and New Kingdoms. (a) North wall of the shrine of Khnumhotep, Tomb 3, Beni Hasan (Dynasty 12). Drawing from Newberry 1900. (b) Osiris suite, Temple of Seti I, Abydos (Dynasty 19). (c) Temple of Ramses II, Abydos (Dynasty 19). Photos (b) and (c) were taken by the author.
Figure 4: Tomb 3505 at Saqqara, late Dynasty 1. Images are from Emery 1958, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society (with whom copyright remains). (a) Painted decoration of the small niche of the superstructure façade (Emery, Pl. 7); the painted decoration of the large niche (Emery, Pl. 6, not shown) uses a subset of these designs. (b) Painted decoration of the simplified panelling of the superstructure façade (Emery, Pl. 8).
Figure 5: Tomb 3121 at Saqqara, late Dynasty 1. Images are from Emery 1949, © Minister of Antiquities, Egypt, reproduced here by kind permission. Patterns were reconstructed from surviving fragments of the painted wall decoration (Emery, Pl. 50). Top left panel was scaled 1:3, the others 1:2. The chain motifs in the bottom centre panel occur in a template discussed later in the text.
Figure 6: Tomb 2405 at Saqqara: tomb of Hesyre, Dynasty 3. Images are from Quibell 1913;\textsuperscript{79} original height of panels was 2.15 m.\textsuperscript{80} (a) Patterns on the niches, designs 5-8, with wall plan at top (Quibell, Pl. 8). (b) Patterns on the niches, designs 1-4 (Quibell, Pl. 9).
From the foregoing we may infer that the grooves and recesses of Egyptian mudbrick niching and false doors were at first decorated with woven mats and banners containing geometric patterns and bordered by wooden scaffolds. In the funerary context, this practice must soon have been supplanted by painted representations. Gay Robins notes that “The exterior of the [1st-Dynasty mastaba] superstructure took the form of a niched ‘palace façade’ that was plastered and painted to resemble the brightly coloured reed matwork that decorated contemporaneous palaces and houses.” Of the paintings adorning the external mudbrick niching on Tomb 3505 at Saqqara, David Wengrow writes that “the façade of the superstructure preserved on its outer surfaces an array of multi-coloured designs [...] These replicate in precise detail the appearance of reed mats lashed to a framework of wooden poles, and have a kaleidoscopic quality that is at once mesmerising and disorientating.”

Similarly, but on the inside, “the funerary priest entering the chapel of Hesyre’s tomb met a blaze of colour where variegated mat patterns painted on the panelled mudbrick wall [...] created] a gay but garish setting.” In the modern world, artists in traditional societies use the shimmer of optically active repetitive patterns to convey spiritual power, and a similar motivation may have informed the creation of the dazzling tableaux at Saqqara.

As anticipated in the Introduction, repetitive geometric patterns were not without precedent in pre- and protodynastic Egypt. Some vessels found in the predynastic Tomb U-j at Abydos (ca. 3300 BCE) bear mud sealings with what appear to be cylinder-seal impressions. On each of these a central rectangular panel with figurative imagery “is surrounded or flanked by elaborate, brocade-like geometric patterns that cover a wide area.” The cylinder seal is a quintessentially Mesopotamian device, and – although the device was adopted enthusiastically in Egypt – these particular impressions are now thought be Egyptian simulations of seal-rollings rather than real ones. Each was formed by the sequential application of an engraved stamp and bracelet, both probably made of ivory; carved bracelets with just such geometric designs have been found in the 1st Dynasty tomb of Djer (ca. 3000 BCE) at Abydos. Some of the “interlocking lozenge” patterns on the bracelets and sealings (not reproduced here) are identical to those present – on a much larger scale – in Late Uruk cone mosaics (ca. 3400-3100 BCE) in Babylonia (Fig. 7); for example, bracelet “pattern A” is identical to that on the right-most of the three complete columns shown in the figure. Pattern A also matches the lozenge patterns on panels at Saqqara Tombs 3503 and 3121 (Fig. 4a, far left and far right; Fig. 4b, centre; Fig. 5, lower left) and at Hesyre’s tomb (Fig. 6a,b, panels 1, 4, 8, etc.). Such correspondences naturally prompt a return to the question of whether the geometric designs on the Saqqara tomb walls might not have derived some inspiration from Babylonia. More specifically, are there Mesopotamian antecedents, counterparts or equivalents to the paintings on the niched mudbrick façades at Saqqara?

**Mesopotamian counterparts to the painted geometric patterns**

There is some evidence for the adornment of niched mudbrick structures with woven mat-like designs in Mesopotamia. For example, there is a remarkable resemblance between the geometric patterns painted onto the Early Dynastic niches / false doors at Saqqara and the chevron/lozenge/trellis designs that adorn the serekh-like façades on Mesopotamian
cylinder-seals (Fig. 8). As anticipated above, architectural templates of this kind on Mesopotamian cylinder seals are usually interpreted as temple façades. The actual medium of the wall patterning cannot be discerned from the engraving; this issue – which is common to most secondary representations – need not concern us now, but will be addressed in the next section.

A more striking parallel is afforded by the Late Uruk period Painted Temple at Tell Uqair (ca. 3400-3100 BCE), near Baghdad. While it is not the earliest known temple with coloured geometric decoration in Greater Mesopotamia, it is the best preserved. Its outer
façade consists of “buttresses alternated with vertical chases – in this case doubly recessed [..., with] similar ornamental recesses in the interior of the central hall. Small vertical flutes were sunk in the plaster of the buttress faces, three to each normal buttress and four where the spacing at the corners became wider.”98 The white-plastered interior contained vividly painted designs, which are among the oldest known from southern Mesopotamia.99 “The best preserved paintings in the building were upon the front and sides of the altar [...] The design on the front is of an architectural character, and one sees in it the representation of the façade of a building, the altar itself, in fact, being treated as a miniature temple. On the buttress even the three flutes are represented by vertical lines, while the recesses between [the buttresses] are filled with a geometric pattern comparable to the mosaic ornament found in a similar position in several temples at Warka [Uruk].”100 (A later commentator observed that the presumed altar might equally well be a pedestal for a cult statue,101 a distinction of little importance to the present discussion.) A reconstruction of this fresco is shown in Fig. 9. A second wall in the temple presents another painting of an architectural façade (Fig. 10).102 A third and fourth wall, whose frescoes are preserved more completely, presents another set of vertical banners with geometric or woven patterns (Fig. 11).

One difference between the Babylonian and Egyptian wall-decoration relates to the placement of the painted panels. At Tell Uqair, the geometric banners are shown flanking buttresses (vertical projections from the façade) whereas in Saqqara they flank niches (vertical recesses in the façade). Another technical difference is the predominance of black, white, red and yellow pigments (including plum and orange tones) in the frescoes at Tell Uqair and the associated lack of blue and green colours in the designs.103 In contrast, the geometric panels at Saqqara use a balanced palette of black, red, yellow, blue, green and white.104 When excavating the mastaba of Hesyre, Quibell repeatedly noted the poor colour

Figure 9: Fresco on altar front at the Painted Temple at Tell Uqair (Late Uruk, ca. 3400-3100 BCE). Redrawn from Lloyd & Safar 1943, with colour essentially following the reconstruction of the temple fresco for the exhibition Ana Ziqquratim – Sur la Piste de Babel.105
Figure 10: Reconstruction of frescoes on Wall F at the Painted Temple at Tell Uqair (Late Uruk). Image is from Dermech 2016a, reproduced here by kind permission of Sarah Dermech. © Université de Strasbourg / infographie Margaux Dabin, Sarah Dermech et Maurice Frey / restitution des couleurs Sarah Dermech.

preservation in areas of blue and especially green paint, primarily due to flaking. While Lloyd too noted flaking at Tell Uqair, it is unlikely that green or blue paint was originally present but lost in this way because the resulting pigment-free areas would have been unmistakable. Lloyd was actually more concerned about the light- or air-sensitivity of the pigments, for – upon exposure – the “tone and brilliance of all colours [...] faded and changed with extraordinary rapidity.” However, since the colours recorded in the excavation report were those observed upon discovery, the absence of green and blue appears to have been intentional. A likely explanation will be advanced below.

Many walls in the Painted Temple have a red dado which is bordered by long painted strips of coloured geometric patterns; from the scheme painted on the altar-front, we may presume that these walls would also have borne similar friezes near ceiling-level that are now lost. In Hesyre’s mastaba, one pilaster preserves a fragment of the frieze that used to adorn a small room adjacent to the serdab; this involves a red band surmounted by coloured zig-zag lines of complex construction (Fig. 12). In addition, the wall surface opposite
**Figure 11:** Reconstruction of frescoes on Walls A and B at the Painted Temple at Tell Uqair (Late Uruk). Image is from Dermech 2016a, reproduced here by kind permission of Sarah Dermech. © Université de Strasbourg / infographie Margaux Dabin, Sarah Dermech et Maurice Frey / restitution des couleurs Sarah Dermech.

**Figure 12:** Frieze pattern in a small room adjacent to the *serdab* in the tomb of Hesyre (Dynasty 3, Saqqara). Reconstructed by the author from the colour-keyed monochrome line-drawing in Quibell 1913.
Hesyre’s niched and painted wall-face is occupied by a depiction of the interior of a tent that is held up by red mast-poles and floored with reed matting. The weave of the tent-cloth roof is shown using long horizontal strips of high-contrast geometric patterns (Fig. 13) which are flanked by horizontal green borders with yellow edges (not shown). Although many of the patterns consist of subdivided lozenges (Fig. 13, panels 2, 3 & 5) and some are comprised of chevrons (panel 4), these elements are arranged very differently to the chevron-infilled lozenges on the predynastic Hierakonpolis palette mentioned in the Introduction. Rather, the long tent-cloth strips resemble the vibrant chequered border strips at Tell Uqair. Some details are highly comparable; for example, the fine-grained black-and-white subdivision of the lozenges in two of the tent-cloth strips (Fig. 13, panels 3 & 5) is conceptually close to that seen in the outermost vertical bands of Wall A at the Painted Temple (Fig. 11).

In terms of overall composition, another commonality between frescoes at the two sites is that Hesyre’s “tent wall” and Walls B, D, E (and others) of the Painted Temple combine figurative representations with geometric patterns. However, the figurative depictions in that wall of Hesyre’s tomb are all of inanimate objects, whereas those that survive in the Painted Temple are mostly of people and animals.

**Chronology, technology and context**

This report considers the vividly coloured geometric paint-on-plastered-mudbrick designs found at some mastabas of Dynasties 1-3 at Saqqara in light of the similar decorative program at the Painted Temple of Tell Uqair near Baghdad. The Painted Temple belongs to the Late Uruk period (ca. 3400-3100 BCE) and therefore predates by at least 180 years the Egyptian Early Dynastic mastabas that we have been examining. If the technique or concept of complex mudbrick niching did travel from Mesopotamia to Egypt, then this probably occurred in the Jemdet Nasr period (ca. 3100-2900 BCE). It may have diffused via Late Uruk sites in northern Syria such as Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda. Since the practice of embellishing complex mudbrick niches with vivid geometric decoration seems to have appeared in Egypt at the same time as the niching technology itself, it potentially could have formed part of the same package of inter-cultural transfer. Once again, the proposed transfer may have been mediated by Uruk sites in northern Syria or southeast Anatolia; for example, Marcella Frangipane’s report on the mudbrick Temple D at Arslantepe (Period VII, abandoned ca. 3500-3400 BCE) mentions that “in the preserved northwestern corner of th[e main cult] room, the walls were decorated with multiple recessed niches in the Mesopotamian style, combined with local, and original, geometrical relief/impressed decorations painted in red and black on the white plaster.” Later temples at this site (Period VIA / Late Uruk, contemporary with the Painted Temple at Tell Uqair) had highly stylised figurative paintings on their external walls along with trellis motifs, spirals and fields of stamped nested lozenges. Fig. 14 presents a tentative flow-chart of thematically related developments in Mesopotamia and Egypt, in which a transfer of geometric wall painting practices from the former to the latter is postulated in red. Aspects of the figure not yet addressed in the text will be dealt with in subsequent discussions.
Figure 13: Tent-cloth patterns from the middle register of the non-niched wall of Hesyre’s painted corridor (Dynasty 3, Saqqara). Images are from Quibell 1913.\textsuperscript{122} Pattern 1 recurs on both sides of each tent-mast while each of the other patterns occupies one of the spaces between a pair of masts.\textsuperscript{123} The patterns are bordered by three horizontal stripes: a green one in the centre, flanked above and below by yellow ones.\textsuperscript{124}
Figure 14: Diagram showing elements discussed in this paper and their inter-relationships; developments in Egypt are shown on the left with those in Mesopotamia on the right, while time runs from bottom to top (i.e., older elements appear in lower positions). The main topic of the paper – geometric polychrome frescoes – is highlighted in cyan. Thematically inter-related elements (e.g., mudbrick niching, palace façades, serekhs, etc.) are linked by sharing the same background colour (yellow/pink) or by enclosure in a single black rectangle. The many possible relationship arrows between elements within each colour block has been omitted for clarity. As elsewhere in this paper, matting and textiles are not systematically distinguished from one another, since both form part of the spectrum of woven fabrics.\(^{125}\)
Beyond visual similarities in the decorative program of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian frescoes, one cannot help but notice shared aspects of execution. At Tell Uqair, the brickwork was plastered to a depth of 3-5 cm using mud mixed with “much chaff” and painted white with gypsum prior to decoration. Similarly, at Saqqara, the 1st Dynasty tomb walls “had been faced with a thick mud plaster” on top of which was a thin layer of “white gypsum stucco [... which] served as a background to elaborate frescoes of matwork design,” while Hesyre’s 3rd-Dynasty walls were faced with 2 cm of mud plaster topped with 0.5 cm of white plaster (presumably gypsum), both layers containing much straw. But, equally, one should recognise that the preparation of the wall surfaces at Saqqara is not very different to that in the predynastic painted Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, where “The whole of the brickwork, including the floor, had been plastered over with a layer of mud mortar about 5mm. (¼ inch) thick; this, in turn, when on the walls, had been covered with a coat of yellow ochre or whitewash.” In the Painted Temple of Tell Uqair, the figurative drawings were first outlined on the white ground in red or orange and corrections were applied in black. Interestingly, this is exactly how Egyptian artists went about preparing their wall-scenes in the Early Dynastic periods, and indeed for millennia afterwards. But, once again, the practice is not very different to that used in Egypt in earlier periods; in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, for example, figures were first drawn in red, which was rubbed out where revision was required.

Painted pottery of the Jemdet Nasr period is often decorated with geometric patterns, some of which resemble those already established in the cone mosaics at Uruk and frescoes at Tell Uqair. Such vessels would have provided a portable reference-collection of Mesopotamian geometric templates at the time when the idea of complex niching in mudbrick was potentially being transferred to Egypt. However, apart from the similarities noted in the previous two sections – many of which could be considered generic – the geometric motifs in the 1st Dynasty polychrome panels that survive at Saqqara are not direct copies of any of those patterns. The Egyptian designs are generally more sophisticated, with a complexity that may never have been equalled in Mesopotamia. Since they bear even less resemblance to the geometric patterns painted on Egyptian decorated pottery, they presumably reflect local textile designs, plaster-painting practices from Upper Egypt (of which some surviving remnants were listed in the Introduction), or innovations on the part of the tomb-painters at Saqqara. A combination of such inspirations seems likely.

At Tell Uqair, the painted geometric panels occur inside a temple and indeed within the painted depiction of a temple façade – an example of hypericonicity or visual self-reference. The putative instances on Mesopotamian cylinder seals (Fig. 8) probably relate to temple façades as well. The temple context differs from that of surviving examples of similar panels in Egypt, which all occur in funerary settings. This raises various questions that cannot – as yet – be answered conclusively. Were colourful geometric panels also used to adorn some niched funerary enclosures in Jemdet Nasr-period Mesopotamia? None are known. Were any temple precincts constructed in Early Dynastic Egypt decorated in this way? An un-niched mudbrick building of Dynasties 2-3 at Buto has traces of black, red and yellow-brown wall decoration over plaster, which could be the remnants of geometric mat
paintings, this complex structure may have been a temple for divine worship, a funerary offering centre, or a store for the divine paraphernalia used by the king during ceremonial visits. Did the practice in Mesopotamia or Egypt extend to the exterior or interior of rulers’ palaces? If the Egyptian serekh does in fact depict a palace façade, then the cross-hatched trelliswork on the serekh of King Djet’s ivory comb (Dynasty 1; Fig. 15) – something not seen in its protodynastic predecessors – suggests that the palace’s exterior may sometimes have borne geometric decoration.

At this point we should also question whether the Mesopotamians and Egyptians did initially hang real woven-reed mats over the panels and/or niches of mudbrick walls, as tentatively inferred above for the Egyptians, or whether – from the outset – they merely painted simulacra of such mats on plastered wall surfaces. No hanging mechanism or frame is shown for the panels on the Tell Uqair altar, leaving open the possibility that the Babylonian painters were in fact emulating the region’s colourful geometric mosaics (Fig. 7). Since Mesopotamian mosaics mainly use a colour-scheme of white, black and red, this would potentially explain the lack of blue and green in the frescoes at the Painted Temple. The engravers of façades on cylinder seals (Fig. 8) may also have been depicting such mosaics. The mosaics in turn “are suggestive of reed matting or textile hanging,” so the ultimate referent is probably the same (Fig. 14), but of course the mosaics did not require hanging because they were made by studding the mudbrick surface with fired clay (or sometimes stone) cones.

In contrast to the panels in the Tell Uqair temple, suspension systems are clearly depicted in the panels on the Saqqara mastabas (Figs. 4 and 6). In 1st Dynasty Egypt, reed mats were routinely laid between every six courses of mudbrick. If colourful versions of these mats were already standard furnishings in elite homes, as suggested above by Gay Robins, it would have been a simple matter to hang them as decorative “niche banners” on the tomb-owner’s “home for eternity.” The transition from woven banners to painted images in Egypt could, of course, have been accelerated by an awareness that their contemporary equivalents

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**Figure 15:** Drawing of the serekh from the ivory comb of King Djet, mid-Dynasty 1, Abydos. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE47176).
in Mesopotamia – be they cone mosaics or paintings on plaster – were more durable than any plant-derived fabric. As mentioned in the Introduction, clay cones similar to the ones used in Late Uruk mosaics have been found at predynastic and Early Dynastic sites in Egypt, although none appear to have been used to decorate mudbrick façades.149

A more potent motivation for adorning the walls of mastabas with actual or imitation coloured matting could be that mats of this type were used structurally and/or decoratively in the Egyptian tomb structures that preceded mudbrick architecture.150 Such usage has been speculated, for example, for predynastic Tomb 23 in Hierakonpolis cemetery HK6 (Naqada IIAB, ca. 3700-3400 BCE.151 “Slats of coniferous wood found adhering to the posts of the so-called chapel suggest that the lower walls (at least) were composed of wood screening to which, one may propose, colourful mats were attached in the manner painted on Saqqara mastaba 3505, among others.”152 Posts from the same period with matting attached have been found at Hierakonpolis.153 Stan Hendrickx believes that matting was a structural component of early tomb superstructures, within whose lightweight frames it formed “an integral part of the architecture.”154 He also believes that the painted polychrome panels refer directly back to the structural use of matting in those lightweight superstructures, rather than reflecting an interim stage where such mats were hung or stretched over mudbrick wall surfaces as decoration.155

Whether or not reed mats were ever actually hung over niche panels, the pointed inclusion of the stretcher mechanism in the paintings shows how important it was to the Egyptians to make clear that this is what the geometric designs represented. This was true in the 3rd Dynasty as much as in the 1st; in Hesyre’s tomb, “the detail of the cording by which the mats were stretched taut was more carefully and less conventionally executed than in any examples known hitherto.”156 Indeed, the suspension cords are still unmistakable in the design adorning the 5th Dynasty tomb of Tepemankh at Abusir (Fig. 16).

Forgetting and remembering

The geometric frescoes in the Painted Temple of Tell Uqair and on the Early Dynastic mastabas at Saqqara have not hitherto been compared. This is somewhat strange because the main excavation report of the Painted Temple was published in 1943 with a foreword by Henri Frankfort, the archaeologist who – two years earlier – had pioneered the idea that monumental mudbrick architecture in general, and complex niching in particular, might have been imported from Mesopotamia to Egypt. Frankfort’s 1941 paper to this effect contains a detailed treatment of the painted niches in Hesyre’s tomb at Saqqara, so the omission is surprising. Thereafter, the resemblance seems to have remained unnoticed and the possibility of a connection unexplored.

This is not the first aspect of Egyptian palace façade / false door designs to have been unexpectedly overlooked. René van Walsem has recently provided a compelling identification for the original referent of the recurring “chain motif with terminal crescent stack” in the designs of painted palace façade / false door composites (Prunkscheintüren)

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Figure 16: Right portion of false door from the tomb of Tepemankh, Dynasty 5, Abusir. Monochrome image with the (painted) suspension cords for the (painted) woven mats/banners highlighted in red for clarity. Adapted from a photograph in Borchardt 1907.
(Fig. 2c). We have already encountered Egyptian examples of this from Dynasty 1 in Fig. 5 (chain only, bottom centre) and Fig. 4a (chain and terminal crescents). As a prelude to his analysis, van Walsem noted that the chain portion of the template may in fact be adapted from a Mesopotamian motif, since a vertical design of this kind adorns a building façade on an Uruk period seal (dotted arrow, Fig. 14).\(^{158}\) He then went on to identify the Egyptian representation as the schematic of a leopard-skin\(^{159}\) — the pelt that would have been laid over the roof of an archaic shelter of high status, such as a per-nu or per-wer tent-shrine (Fig. 17).\(^{160}\) The chain motif represents the black circular markings on the fur of the pelt along the spinal ridge, while the black crescent-shaped striations at the end of such chains depict the distinctive curved markings along the animal’s tail. Van Walsem’s interpretation (which has been integrated into the flow-chart of Fig. 14) extends to panther- and cheetah-skins (cf. Fig. 1b, legend).\(^{161}\) The spotted tails dangling from the belts of Naqada I “power figures” may provide the earliest examples of an elite preoccupation with big cat tails.\(^{162}\) As Van Walsem observes, the big-cat-pelt identification had in fact been made back in 1946 by Stevenson Smith, who also happened to point out the schematic’s occurrence in the painted niches of Hesyre’s mastaba (Fig. 6a,b).\(^{163}\) However, his observation was thereafter “ignored or accidentally overlooked by all Egyptologists,”\(^{164}\) and there is a danger that van Walsem’s rediscovery may suffer the same fate.\(^{165}\)

Figure 17: Egyptian per-nu and per-wer shrines. (a) Per-nu schematic, redrawn from Verner 2012;\(^{166}\) (b) per-nu on an ivory label of King Aha, Dynasty 1, redrawn from Petrie 1901;\(^{167}\) (c) Per-wer on a seal impression from Saqqara, redrawn from Brandl 2016;\(^{168}\) (d) per-wer from a seal impression of King Djer, Dynasty 1, redrawn from Petrie 1901.\(^{169}\) The “tail” at the right-hand end of the per-wer building may refer to the dangling tail of an animal pelt used to cloak the roof (e.g. a leopard-skin, as discussed in the text),\(^{170}\) a loose mat that can be raised to air the building,\(^{171}\) or both.
The chain motif continued to serve as a decorative element in Egyptian funerary art for millennia (e.g., Figs. 2c, 3a,b, 4a, 5, 6 and 16), appearing *inter alia* on coffins of Middle Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period. Mat-like painted geometric panels, too, remained popular in Egyptian private tomb art, with woven designs appearing to roof Middle Kingdom tomb-chapels at Beni Hasan and lozenge, zig-zag and chequered banners adorning the ceilings of New Kingdom tomb-chapels and burial chambers in Thebes (Fig. 18). Real-life thatched/woven architecture like that underpinning the *per-nu* and *per-wer* shrines survived in Egypt into the Ptolemaic period. In Mesopotamia, it

Figure 18: Ceiling decoration in the tomb of Sennefer (TT96), Dynasty 18, Tombs of the Nobles, Thebes. (a) Decoration along central axis of burial chamber facing southwest toward entrance; author’s photograph. (b)-(d) Panels from intercolumnar strips, © Thierry Benderitter / www.osirisnet.net, reproduced by kind permission. Panels (b)-(c), southeastern strip; panel (d), northwestern strip (two panels of this design); edges of panels (b) and (c) are just visible at the lower far left and right of panel (a).
survived even longer, persisting into our own times among the *ma’dan* or Marsh Arabs of south-eastern Iraq.\textsuperscript{178} In the serif-style architecture of these marsh-dwellers (Fig. 19), “thick pillars of bundles of reeds form the supports for houses made entirely of reeds, very similar to those depicted on cylinder seals and on stone reliefs of the Uruk period more than 5,000 years ago.”\textsuperscript{179} The dwellings consist of “tightly wrapped, slim bundles of tall reeds serving as poles [...] which] form a framework covered with reed mats.”\textsuperscript{180} The various survivals have been integrated into the flow-chart of Fig. 14.

Returning to Hesyre’s mastaba at Saqqara, we might recall that the flat wall of the niched and painted corridor is occupied by a depiction of the interior of a tent held up by red mastpoles and floored with reed matting. “This [matting] was drawn with curious care, in little oblongs of two colours, a yellow and a greenish yellow. These colours must represent the bands of reed alternately above and below the string warp.”\textsuperscript{181} The weave of the tent-cloth

![Figure 19: A modern Marsh Arab reed house, south-eastern Iraq. Image by Alamy Stock, reproduced under licence.\textsuperscript{182}](image-url)
roof is emphasized using high-contrast geometric patterns (Fig. 13).\(^\text{183}\) In combination with the brightly-coloured niches depicting the woven reed matting of earlier tomb superstructures and the chain-and-crescent references to animal-skin roofing or wall-cloaking, one can see in the decorative program a pervasive nostalgia for the simpler architecture of a bygone era.\(^\text{184}\)

From this realisation arises a key question: could the geometric mats and animal-skin motifs painted on mudbrick mastabas ultimately represent an homage to archaic “woven” shelters such as the potentially portable per-nu and per-wer tent-shrines (Fig. 17)?\(^\text{185}\) Mark Lehner has proposed as much. “[W]hen we consider the decoration painted on the plastered surface of the niched walls [...] we find that recessed panels are painted yellow to imitate wood, while the forward, broadest faces are painted in varied patterns of squares, crosses and lozenges. These are the patterns of woven mats that the 1st-dynasty builders knew from their daily lives. They were simulating the wood-frame and woven reed-mat structures such as formed the Per Wer and the Per Nu, the predynastic shrines that became emblematic for Upper and Lower Egypt.”\(^\text{186}\) Barry Kemp infers from later stone structures that “the wrap-around application of tent architecture to a building of more solid form set the style for centuries to come [... where the] wood and matting building became a façade, the proper wrapping for a [brick/stone] building whose interior reflected the practical needs of the occasion.”\(^\text{187}\) Accordingly, the per-nu and per-wer tent-shrines are thought to have served as the prototypes of temples, sacred barques, barque stations, coronation chambers and palaces.\(^\text{188}\) It seems inevitable that the funerary structures we have been focusing on – the mat-painted niches and, by extension, designs derived directly from them such as palace façade / false door composites (Prunkscheintüren) – should be added to this list (Fig. 14).

Beyond elements already discussed, additional details attest to the ongoing valorization and commemoration of plant-based architecture in dynastic Egypt. The fact that bound pairs of papyrus flowers – an emblem that looks suspiciously like the reworking of a Mesopotamian window-grille motif\(^\text{189}\) – feature in the 1st-Dynasty serekh of Djet serves to connect palace façades with bundled plant material; the very same motif can be seen in Figs. 1c,d. Some geometric elements of the palace façade / false door composites carved around the stone sarcophagus of Menkaure (Dynasty 4) have long raised the “hypothesis of an origin in woodwork, the character of which seems so clearly to be indicated. The parts above the (presumed) doors [...] are curiously like wooden latticework.”\(^\text{190}\) The horizontal registers of dynastic Egyptian art may in fact perpetuate “the methods used in prehistoric constructions [...] where] reeds tied in bundles [...] were fastened horizontally between the verticals, thus as it were forming registers,”\(^\text{191}\) while the kheker frieze, which depicts “stylized bundles of reeds or plant stem[s ...] typical of the mat hanging on the walls of ordinary houses” became a decorative staple from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period.\(^\text{192}\) The blue-green tiles decorating the walls of funerary apartments in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara (King Djoser, Dynasty 3) clearly emulate reed matting,\(^\text{193}\) and thus continue the 1st-Dynasty practice of lining the walls of the burial pit with such matting to mimic a simple reed shrine.\(^\text{194}\) This in turn is probably an extension of the predynastic practice of using reed mats to line simple pit graves and to cover the occupants’ bodies prior to burial.\(^\text{195}\) It seems that the Egyptian penchant for retrospection and archaism was always present (Fig. 14)\(^\text{196}\) – in this case reaching back wistfully from the stone and mudbrick solidity of the Old Kingdom to the autochthonous lightweight shelters and sanctuaries of the pre- and protodynastic
period. The colourful “woven” ceilings of Middle and New Kingdom rock-cut tombs (mentioned earlier; Fig. 18) testify to the longue durée of such archaism, insofar as they point back – across some 1600 years – to matted burial chambers and the same lightweight shrines.

In Mesopotamian architecture, too, there are indications of vegetation-oriented retrospection (Fig. 14). At Uruk, wall inserts of burnt clay from the end of the 4th millennium BCE take the form of a reed bundle, a practice still attested ca. 2600 BCE. Moreover, as mentioned above, the niching of mudbrick façades may well have been intended to emulate earlier wooden post-and-plank architecture. In addition, the fluting of the buttresses in temple walls – noted above at Tell Uqair – was so that wooden poles could be installed in the resulting grooves; while the poles were originally structural elements needed to bolster the wall, they “came to be used for decorative purposes to articulate the façade, using the wooden lines to break it up rhythmically.” Also, as remarked previously, the designs in cone mosaics (Fig. 7) – a decorative feature prominent in walls of the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods – recapitulate woven plant materials. Their presence “on both inner and outer walls minimized the difference between interior and exterior. The geometric patterns, closely imitating woven and pleated fabrics, suggest textile wall hangings and lend an intimate aspect to what are large open spaces as well as to inner rooms. This textile skin also incidentally contradicts the monumentality of the architecture.” The construction of cone mosaics was very labour-intensive. Just like the painting of intricately woven polychrome mats in Egypt, whose scope was rapidly scaled down from whole mastaba façades to just one or two niches or false doors, the mosaic technique “was later restricted to the recessed panels of the brickwork. In this later form it survived at Uruk into Early Dynastic times.”

Perhaps because mudbrick architecture was a much earlier development in the region and its development was wholly indigenous, the reverence and nostalgia for archaic plant-based architecture seems to have been far more muted in Mesopotamia than it was in Egypt. Mesopotamian gestures in that direction often served a practical purpose as well; for example, the cone mosaic sheath on an external wall surface helped to weatherproof the otherwise vulnerable mudbrick façade.

**Conclusion**

The 1st-Dynasty practice of painting the niches of plastered mudbrick façades at Saqqara with colourful frescoes of reed matting has conventionally been taken to be a local development that arose purely from pre- and protodynastic Egyptian antecedents. It most likely represents an early form of archaism in Egyptian architecture, whereby the relatively novel and perhaps “foreign” brick structures – buildings produced using a technology originally imported from the Ancient Near East, whose complex surface topography may have reflected a style adopted from Jemdet Nasr-period Mesopotamia – were reimagined as if they were the heirs of traditional Egyptian religious and domestic structures made from plant products.

This paper points out the existence of a similar practice of wall decoration in Late Uruk Mesopotamia, the phase preceding the Jemdet Nasr period. At Tell Uqair, near Baghdad, vividly-coloured geometric patterns were painted as frescoes onto plastered mudbrick – including representations of niched/buttressed building façades decorated in this way – in a
style similar to local mosaics, which in turn are thought to emulate woven matting. An awareness of this Ancient Near Eastern practice could have travelled to Egypt alongside the concept of complex niching in mudbrick, thereby prompting or contributing to the development of similar painted decoration on mudbrick façades in Lower Egypt. However, direct evidence in favour of this hypothesis is lacking. On balance, therefore, it is more likely that the paintings at Saqqara solely recapitulate the Egyptian use of coloured mats in predynastic tomb construction and/or decoration, as speculated for Tomb 23 at Hierakonpolis cemetery HK6. Accordingly, they should be seen as the technical and artistic culmination of a process whose origins may be discerned in the Naqada IIB-era painted plaster superstructures at/near Tombs 23 and 73 in HK6. Whether wholly indigenous or encouraged by Mesopotamian counterparts, it is in Egypt that this form of decoration seems to have acquired its greatest sophistication.

Like the Mesopotamian application of geometric cone mosaics to mudbrick walls, the practice of niching the façades of Egyptian tomb superstructures and painting them with abstract textile-like patterns became restricted over time to small portions of whole, thereby establishing focal points in the architecture. In the Egyptian case, such cult niches were the precursors of false doors, which went on to become a staple of Egyptian funerary art. Of special interest to this study is the ornate but uninscribed palace façade / false door composite (Prunkscheintür); derived directly from the geometrically-painted niches, this template went on to adorn royal and elite burial chambers and tomb chapels, and appeared additionally on sarcophagi, coffins and canopic chests. From predynastic roots, the complex artistic template established in the 1st Dynasty continued to flourish until the end of the Middle Kingdom, and persisted in royal temple decoration until at least the late New Kingdom. Indeed, some of its components – such as the chain motif – survived even longer, appearing as decorative elements on funerary equipment until at least as late as the Third Intermediate Period.

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**NOTES**

All URLs were accessed 3 Oct, 2018.

1 Mark 1997; Ataç 2015.

2 Naqada IIC: Smith 1992, 235-38; Ataç 2015, 424. Naqada III: Huyge 2014, who suggests that the tomb’s original Naqada II artistic program was repainted and updated in the Naqada III period, at which time the master of animals motif was introduced.

3 Étienne n.d.

4 Wengrow 2006, 178-184 & 273 (Table 2); Stevenson 2016, 425 (Table 2).

5 Ataç 2015, 424. For example, serpopards twinned in the same manner as on the Narmer Palette appear on a green jasper cylinder-seal of the Uruk period, Louvre n.d.
6 Mark 1997, 66; Friedman 2000; Joffe 2000, 113 fn. 3; Rice 2003, 29; Demand 2011, 71; Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011, 50 & Fig. 5.10.

7 Rice 2003, 78-80.

8 Joffe 2000, 119.


11 It is difficult to find publications that consider Mesopotamian and Egyptian cones/nails jointly; the two types are compared fleetingly by von Dassow 2009, 83 (fn. 53). Although Mesopotamian cones/nails are usually inscribed on their sides and Egyptian ones are inscribed only on their bases, some Mesopotamian cones do have inscribed bases; one example is the dedicatory cone of Enanedu, an EN-Priestess of Nanna at Ur (BM 130729; Gadd 1951, Pl. VIII). The physical overlap between the Mesopotamian and Egyptian artifacts is therefore greater than is commonly realised.

12 Green and Quibell 1902, 20 describe these as “coloured drawings, very similar in design to those seen on the pottery of the period.”

13 Wengrow 2006, 90-93; Roche 2010. Date-range for Naqada I estimated from Hendrickx 1996, 64 (Table 9). The earlier start date for Naqada IIC is from the source publication (Wengrow 2006, 93) and is consistent with Dee et al. 2014; the later one is from Stevenson 2016, 425 (Table 2) and Dee et al. 2013.

14 From near HK6 Tomb 84; Hendrickx and Eyckerman, 2018.


16 Friedman (2008), 15; Friedman et al. 2017, 268 & 275. The colours mentioned in the main text were found on fragments from Tomb 73. Fragments from near Tomb 23 were from the above-ground “pillared-hall” structures and had a more restricted palette; they had been painted with black geometric and figural designs coloured with red and/or green.


18 Love 2013.

19 Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2014, 156.

20 Wright 2009, 237-240; Olson 2010, 174. For example, Leick 2001, 6, describes a brick chapel of ca. 4900 BCE excavated in Ubaid level 1 at Eridu.

21 Olson 2010, 174.

22 Moeller 2016, 62-64.

23 Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011, 48-50; Moeller 2016, 62.

24 Moeller 2016, 62.

25 Baba and Friedman 2016, 194-203.

26 Green and Quibell 1902, 20. See also Hendrickx 2001, 102, for other examples.

27 Hikade 2011, 84.

28 Ciałowicz and Dębowska-Ludwin 2013.

29 Frankfort 1941, 335-338.

30 Hendrickx 2001, 104. An alternative hypothesis – that an instance of three adjacent door-slits in a partition wall within Tomb U-j at Abydos (Naqada IIIA1, ca. 3200 BCE) may prefigure the later niching of tomb façades [Hendrickx 2001, 99] – is less credible, especially given the uneven spacing of the slits in this wall. There may be a circuitous connection; some of the slits in Tomb U-j seem to prefigure the aperture of classical false doors, insofar as they are surmounted by a wooden cross-piece on which a rolled matwork door would have been suspended [Dreyer 2011, 129].


32 “This recessing is much simpler in plan than the elaborate, repetitive niching that makes up the complex so-called “palace façade” exteriors of the 1st Dynasty elite grave superstructures at Saqqara.” O’Connor 2009, 169-170 & Figs. 90 & 93.

33 For a schematic showing the difference between simple and complex niching, see Podzorski 2008, 93 (Fig. 3).

34 Van de Mieroop 2016, 55.

35 Frankfort 1941, 336.

36 Earlier start date from Wengrow 2006, 276 and Dee et al. 2013 (Table 1); later one from Schneider n.d.

37 Frankfort 1941.


Since no mudbrick structures in Egypt predating the complex-niched structures of the 1st Dynasty were known at the time when Frankfort was writing, he went so far as to propose that mudbrick architecture *in toto* must have been imported into Egypt from Mesopotamia. As mentioned earlier in the main text, recent evidence does favour the diffusion of mudbrick building technology to northern Egypt from the Ancient Near East via the Levant, but *ca.* 3600 BCE – much earlier than the 1st Dynasty. Many modern authors accept that Egyptian mudbrick niching technology was adopted from the Mesopotamian practice (e.g., Demand 2011, 71) and some have even amplified Frankfort’s original hypothesis (e.g., Mark 1997, 56-68; Wright 2009, 240), whereas others are vigorously opposed to it (e.g., Hendrickx 2001; Baba and Friedman 2016, 202-203).

Many modern authors accept that Egyptian mudbrick niching technology was adopted from the Mesopotamian practice (e.g., Demand 2011, 71) and some have even amplified Frankfort’s original hypothesis (e.g., Mark 1997, 56-68; Wright 2009, 240), whereas others are vigorously opposed to it (e.g., Hendrickx 2001; Baba and Friedman 2016, 202-203).

Kemp 2008, 144.

Joffe 2000, 116-117; Mark 1997, 64-68. On the issue of northern Syria, Mark writes that “Crenelated architecture, clay cones and clay pegs have also been found at Habuba Kabira / Tel Qannas in northern Syria.” He suggests that Queen Neithhotep’s above-ground burial chamber at Naqada – an unprecedented feature for such a tomb – is consistent with her originally coming from the Delta, where the high watertable would preclude subterranean burial chambers. These and other considerations lead him to conclude that the concept and/or technology of complex mudbrick niching entered the Egyptian Delta from northern Syria and spread from Lower to Upper Egypt at time of state formation. He identifies numerous factors which suggest that “trade between Egypt and northern Mesopotamia did not stop at the end of the Naqada II period but continued until the end of Djer’s reign. Such trade would have depended mainly on a direct sea route between Egypt and northern Syria.” Mark 1997, 128.


Von der Way 1993, 34-35; Mark 1997, 67 (Fig. 33); Köhler 1998, 37-38; Yener *et al.* 2000, 214 (incl. fn. 141). The Amuq valley is in southern Turkey. Yener *et al.* observe that “The Amuq played a peripheral role in the Uruk expansion during the fourth millennium, [...] but] it can be plausibly argued that societies in the Amuq played the role of gatekeeper over the road to the sea,” by which they mean trade with the southern Levant and Nile Delta.


Raffaele 2003; composite figure online at <http://www.francescoraffaele.com/egypt/hesyra/Dyn0serekhs-fig.htm>. For an earlier compilation, see Kaiser and Dreyer 1982, Fig. 14; composite figure online at <http://www.francescoraffaele.com/egypt/hesyra/serekh-Kaiser.jpg>.


Hendrickx 2001, 91 (Table 2).

Olson 2010, 168.

Hendrickx 2001, 104.

Hendrickx 2001, 102-103.

E.g., Balse 1930; Reisner 1936; Kaiser 1982; Hendrickx 2001 (esp. p.104).

Kemp 2006, Fig. 26 (p.82); Friedman and Bussmann 2017.


Bietak 2018, 13. The structure, which he calls “a blind rabbeted niche (false doorway)” is in the south corner of room C7, and thus in a side-wall of the main room/courtyard of the Ur III-Larsa period temple (*ca.* 2110-1790 BCE) within the GIPAR of the EN-priestess of Nanna. The temple has traditionally been taken as the Temple of Ningal, i.e. dedicated to the wife of the moon-god Nanna/Sin, but Bietak argues that it is actually dedicated to Nanna/Sin himself.

Frankfort 1941, 348-354; Hendrickx 2001, 86. The retention of all-around palace façades on tombs at el Kab until the 4th Dynasty most likely reflects the provincial traditionalism of this site; Hendrickx 2001, 86.

Bärta 2010, 8 & 53-56.


Giza Project 2017a. For a line drawing, see Hassan 1932, Pl. 65; also Kemp 2006, Fig. 35D (p.102-103).

Giza Project 2017b.

Robins 2008, 70 (incl. Fig. 65). This is Type 3, “Decorative or palace- façade door” (*fausse-porte ornée, Prunkscheintür*), in the classification of Wiebach-Koepke 2005.

E.g., Altenmüller 1997.

Offerings were usually focused on the conventional false door with its inscriptions, offering-table scene, etc.; Wiebach-Koepke 2005.
Type 3, “Decorative or palace-façade door” (fausse-porte ornée, Prunkscheintür) in the classification of Wiebach-Koepke 2005.

No attempt will be made in this paper to distinguish qualitatively between matting and textiles; the two are best considered as opposite ends of a continuum of woven fibres in which the component material ranges from coarse (plant leaves, leaf-strips, etc.) to fine (e.g. spun linen or woollen yarns).

Youssef 2011. Compare with Youssef’s Pl. 44, which is a less oblique view of the same wall taken under raking light.

De Trafford 2007.

Kanawati 2010, Pls. 28-29 (Ihy); Pls. 43, 53-54, 67-68 (Mereruka); Pls. 103-105 (Pepyankh-heryib); Pls. 112 -113 & 115 (Hewetiaah); Pls. 123 & 125 (Shy).


Date range from Dee et al. 2013, Table 1 (calculated from 14C 95% hpd interval).

Emery 1958, 8.

Emery 1949, 116-117.

Emery 1949, 117.

Watson 1987, 41-43; Frankfort 1941, 353-354.

Quibell 1913, 16-17 & Pls. 8-9.

They hang at the end of the room containing the Narmer mace-head, behind the statue of King Khasekhemwy. For photographs, see for example online at

< https://cdn-images-1.medium.com/max/1600/1*vl2db4lCS5F0vY_qWWnpFw.jpeg >;
< https://themathematicaltourist.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/ashmolean04.jpg >;
< https://farm4.static.flickr.com/3854/33578392112_a80589ea66_b.jpg >;
< http://www.nefershapiland.de/images/ChasechemuiHeidi.jpg >.


Public domain, copyright expired.

Quibell 1913, 16.


Wengrow 2006, 240.


O’Connor 2009, 146 and Fig. 79.


Brandl 2016.

Brandl 2016, Figs. 5-6.

Lenzen 1964.

Van de Mieroop 2016, 21.

Frankfort Fig. 9 top right.


Date range from Dermech 2016a, 121; Dermech 2016b, 1:15 (Slide I: Introduction). Matthews 2000 gives the range as 3300-3000 BCE, which makes no difference from the perspective of the current analysis.

It is predated, for example, by Temple D at Arslantepe in the Upper Euphrates; Frangipane et al. 2017, 70 and Fig. 4-2. This site will be discussed later in the main text.

Frankfort 1941, Fig. 9 top right. The publisher (University of Chicago Press) regards this image as being in the public domain.


Brandes 1979, Tafel 30, detail: right-hand end of bottom image (seal rolling).

Lloyd and Safar 1943, 139.

Dermech 2016b, 2:42 and 5:03; Frey and Dermech, 2016.

Lloyd and Safar 1943, 140.

Van Buren 1946, 500.
102 Dermech 2016a, 124-125, Mur F; Dermech 2016b, 4:37.
103 Lloyd and Safar 1943, 140-142.
104 For Hesyre’s tomb: Godlove 2011, 114; Quibell 1913, 2. For 1st Dynasty tombs: Emery 1949, Pl. 50; Emery 1958, 8 and Pls. 6-8.
105 After Lloyd and Safar 1943, Pl. 10. The painting of the full-scale exhibition display can be seen at 24:00 (in progress) and 14:44 (completed) in the video “Ana Ziqquratim - Sur la Piste de Babel” (Dantzer 2017). The sub-pattern of black arrowheads for the panels comprised of small triangles does not seem to be supported by Lloyd and Safar’s Pl. 10, so I have used it only for the central panel; the other panels of this type have just been coloured red and white. The central panel, which occurs between two white pillars, is in fact likely to have been a depiction of the door/entrance in the original, but – as no details could be recovered – it was presented as just another panel in the excavation report [Lloyd and Safar 1943, 141]. The altar patterns seen in Fig. 3 of Dermech 2016a are understandably inexact because of the small scale of the model to which they were applied.
106 Dermech 2016a, 125 (Fig. 4, Mur F). The original monochrome drawing is in Lloyd and Safar 1943, Pl. 12, bottom left.
107 Quibell 1913, 2, 20 and 28-29.
108 Lloyd and Safar 1943, 140.
109 Quibell’s comment on some seemingly unpigmented items in a wall-painting at Saqqara was that “all are now colourless but originally they were doubtless green and blue;” Quibell 1913, 20.
110 Lloyd and Safar 1943, 140.
111 Dermech 2016a, Fig. 4; Frey and Dermech 2016, Figs. 3 & 4.
112 Dermech 2016a, 124 (Fig. 4, Mur A-B).
113 Quibell 1913, Fig. 1 & p.9.
114 Quibell 1913, 36. Pls. 16-22 show the horizontal strips in situ, while Pl. 23 compiles examples of the patterns side-by-side for ease of comparison.
115 From near HK6 Tomb 84; Hendrickx and Eyckerman, 2018.
116 Other walls in Hesyre’s tomb do show animals and human figures, e.g. Quibell 1913, 10, 16-18, and Pls. 7 (panel 2) and 15 (panels 4 and 6).
117 Lloyd and Safar 1943, Fig. 4; Frey and Dermech 2016, Figs. 3-4.
118 Frankfort 1941, 339; corresponding date range from van de Mieroop 2016, 55.
119 Joffe 2000, 116 nominates a contact horizon of ca. 3100 BCE and mentions the contemporaneous sites of Habuba Kabira, Jebel Aruda, and Hassek Höyük (locations in northern Syria and Anatolia) as examples of far-flung Uruk settlements via which such a transfer might have occurred.
118 Frangipane et al., 2017, 70 and Fig. 4-2. These walls were plastered and decorated with coloured lozenges and triangles in what seems to be a sparse manner (i.e., a style not intended to emulate woven/textile designs).
119 Frangipane 2018, 36 and Fig. 11a. Joffe 2000, 214, likens Arslantepe VIA to Amuq F, an Uruk site/stratum in northern Syria which traded with the southern Levant and Nile Delta (see note 44 above).
120 Quibell 1913, Pl. 23.
121 Quibell 1913, 36.
122 Quibell 1913, 36.
123 As stated in an earlier footnote, no attempt has been made in this paper to distinguish qualitatively between matting and textiles; the two are best considered as opposite ends of a continuum of woven fibres in which the component material ranges from coarse (plant leaves, leaf-strips, etc.) to fine (e.g. spun linen or woollen yarns).
124 Quibell 1913, 139-140.
125 Emery 1949, 117; Emery 1958, 8.
126 Quibell 1913, 5.
127 Green and Quibell 1902, 20-21.
128 Lloyd and Safar 1943, 140-141.
129 Green and Quibell 1902, 21; Robins 2008, 27.
130 Green and Quibell 1902, 21.
131 Field and Martin 1935, Pls. 30-31 and 34-35; Mackay 1931, Pls. 68-69 and 78-80.
132 This is a favoured trope in Mesopotamian art and may have been intended to enhance the religious efficacy of the artwork. Bahrani 2013, 105-106; Bahrani 2017, 183 and 212.
The small scale of the altar decoration meant that there was little scope for such detail. The upper part of the larger-scale decoration on the painted walls is missing, so it is just possible that these might have shown a suspension rail and hanging cords.

As proposed, for example, for Wall F: “…la représentation d’un édifice urukéen (mur F) est reconnaissable à ses mosaïques de cônes et son décor géométrique, et offre un deuxième exemple de mise en abyme d’une représentation architecturale au sein du temple.” Dermech 2016a, 124-125, Wall F.

Accordingly – to address the question that initiated this paragraph – it remains quite possible that actual reed mat hangings over mudbrick walls preceded and inspired the development of wall mosaics in Mesopotamia. This, of course, would long predate the era of the Painted Temple.

The designs from Tomb 3121 (Fig. 5) are not well enough preserved to allow a decision on such details.
On the white cross-lined vessel E.3002, for example, the animal tail dangling from the belt of each human power figure is denoted by a series of dots which gives it a chain-like appearance; Hendrickx & Eyckerman (2012), Fig. 1a (p.26). Less speculative is a chain motif that provides decorative boundaries on several fragments of a box of Narmer; Heagy 2014, 69 (Fig. 8, top centre and right fragments).

Stevenson Smith 1946, 261.

Van Walsem 2017, 561.

As van Walsem’s paper pointing out the oversight forms part of the proceedings of a conference devoted to polychrome coffins of the Third Intermediate Period, available in print but not searchable online, there is a danger that his corrective message will again be overlooked by those whose focus is on Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom tomb art.


Petrie 1901, Pl. 10 #2, central register, far right. The courtyard extension and the bird surmounting the building have been omitted.

Brandl 2016, Fig. 9b, top left.

Petrie 1901, Pl. 16, #116, right.

Van Walsem 2017, 563-564.

Kuhlmann 1996, 128.

Middle Kingdom example (where the banded tail is preserved at the end of the chain): Coffin of Khnumnakhte, Dynasty 12; O’Neill 1987, 34-35 (esp. Fig. 20, detail). Third Intermediate Period examples: Ankhefenkhonsu and Penpy, Dynasty 22 [Leiden AMM 18-g and AH.188, Weiss 2018, 76-77]; Van Walsem 2017, 557 and Pl. 1a (with other examples listed on p.557-558).

E.g., Beni Hasan Tomb 2, Amenemhat: Newberry 1893, Pl. 6.

Examples include the following. May (TT338): Donadoni Roveri 1980, 31. Userhet (TT56), Menna (TT69), Nakht (TT52) and Inherkhau (TT359): Weeks 2005, 420, 431, 437 and 503.


Kuhlmann 1996; Bahrani 2017, 36 (incl. Fig. 1.30).

Roaf 1990, 51 (figure legend).


Quibell 1913, 5-6.

Alamy image reference MHYXB9, cropped at left; invoice IY01022597 (18 Sep, 2018).

Quibell 1913, 36 and Fig. 23.

Porta 1989.

It is even possible that the convoluted niching of such walls was originally understood in Egypt to reprise – in a highly stylized manner – the complex surface topography of walls made from reed-bundle posts and woven matting. As pointed out near the start of the article, Henri Frankfort thought that the Mesopotamian development of niching might have been an homage to the wooden architecture that mudbrick technology had supplanted. Of the mudbrick mastabas at Saqqara, Mark Lehner writes that “the elaborate niching of this fictive architecture accentuated the painted rendering of reed mats and wood frame. It was a way to ‘show the construction’ of the skeletal system while freezing it for eternity in mudbrick.” Lehner 1997, 80.


Kemp 2006, 150.


The decorative window-grille can be seen on some Mesopotamian façades, such as the one engraved on an Uruk-period cylinder seal from Tell Billa; Frankfort 1941, 343-346. Although Helene Kantor claims that “the plant design […] is apparently unrelated with either the recessed brickwork, or with the mat motives of the false doors,” it – like the reed mats – is consistent with a general theme of plant-based construction involving bundled stems and woven leaves. Quotation from Kantor 1999, 20.

Brown 1903, 420. Of course, the decoration also reflects the fact that early palaces would have been partially or wholly constructed of wood and/or reed bundles [Hendrickx 2001, 102], as mentioned previously.
191 Gaballa 1976, 4.
192 Shehab 2017.
194 Wengrow 2006, 232; Lehner 1997, 74 and 80; Watson 1987, 9. Emery gives an example where the reed matting seems to have been embossed into the plaster of the burial chamber to impress it with the required “woven” texture; Emery 1954, 11.
195 For example, at the predynastic workers’ cemetery of Hierakonpolis, HK43 Burial 632 was covered with no less than 10 different mats; Hierakonpolis Expedition (2012-2017). Burial of bodies wrapped in matting was also common in Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic and adjacent time-periods; Leick 2001, 79 & 113.
196 It can be discerned within the predynastic period, too – for example, the geometric decoration on white cross-lined pottery (Petrie’s C-ware) mimics the woven patterns of basketry; Roche 2010; Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2018.
197 Google Arts & Culture n.d. (Two entries, a & b, in Bibliography). The knotted reed bundle was an emblem of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar (e.g., Leick 2001, Pl. 5, detail from Warka Vase); “Inanna’s knot” therefore forms an interesting counterpart to the Egyptian “Knot of Isis,” which underpins a hieroglyph (Gardiner V39) and the tyet amulet. (e.g., Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 337).
198 Roaf 1990, 62.
199 Bahrani 2017, 45.
200 Nicholas 1990, 81.
202 Frankfort and Davies 1971, 77. Much later, fired clay cones were used in Egypt to form façade friezes that may have been intended to emulate the cut ends of wooden roofing poles (and may therefore continue the theme of vegetation-oriented archaism in Egyptian architecture). From the Middle Kingdom onward, and especially in the New Kingdom, rows of funerary cones – variously painted red, blue and white – were used to adorn the tops of some rock-cut tomb façades in the Theban necropolis. The ends of New Kingdom cones typically bear inscriptions identifying the tomb owner. While there is no direct evidence that Egyptian cone mosaics of this type were inspired by the Mesopotamian practice, the possibility cannot be excluded. See Manniche 2005 for details.
203 Frankfort and Davies 1971, 78.
204 Friedman 2008, 18 and Table 2.
205 As mentioned in the Introduction; Friedman (2008), 15; Friedman et al. 2017, 268 & 275. Note that the above-ground cult structures adjacent to HK6 Tomb 23 have been suggested to bear both genuine coloured reed mats and polychrome painted-plaster decoration, a very suggestive nexus. A reconstruction of one such “pillared hall” (HK6 Structure 7) is shown at Hierakonpolis Online – HK6: the Elite Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemetery, about a quarter of the way down the page: see online at http://www.hierakonpolis-online.org/index.php/explore-the-predynastic-cemeteries/hk6-elite-cemetery. The image (by Claire Thorne) seems to show brightly coloured woven mat panels as integral constituents of the lightweight post-and-trellis walls, whereas the accompanying text mentions that “fragments of plaster with red and green pigment, and some with figural designs, indicate that these structures were both colourful and impressive.”
206 The conventional false door (represented by a niched symbolic doorway bearing inscriptions and figurative art) persisted as a concept in Theban tombs until the Amarna period, after which it was supplanted by a naos stela; Assmann 2003, 48-49.

REFERENCES


