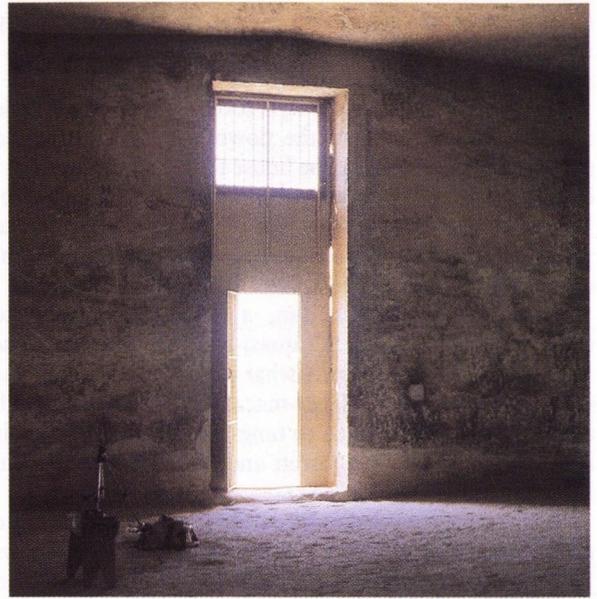


Anyone going to Beni Hassen should realize that it lies in the “fundamentalist” backcountry of Egypt, a long way from the outback of my native Australia. On the day I arrived I was the only foreign visitor. An armed-escort was provided for my protection while crossing the Nile and exploring the exposed cliffs of the tombs. Tourists in this region have been shot by local extremists.

This sense of intrigue added to the...

# MYSTERY OF BENI HASSAN

BY JIM McKEAGUE



Entry to the tomb of Baqt III. Because flash-photography was forbidden, a mirror and an aluminum foil reflector was used to illuminate the mural wall with sunlight to take pictures.



Magician/explorer Jim McKeague's goal: the first color photo (ever published) of the so-called “cups and balls” scene on the southern mural wall of tomb number 15 of Baqt III at Beni Hassan. Taken by the author, November 7, 1994.

Near the village of Beni Hassan, 300 kilometers south of Cairo, are 39 ancient tombs carved high into a cliff-face above the Nile. The tomb walls are covered in frescoes, with murals showing myriad scenes of daily life in antiquity. One of these scenes has been of tremendous interest to magicians. It is found in the tomb of Baqet III, the provincial governor circa 2,000 B.C. Variant spellings of Baqet appear as Baqt, Baket and Batqui in Egyptologist's literature.

A scene on one wall has been claimed to portray "cups and balls" conjuring. But does it? This question is important to magic history, because this could well be the oldest depiction of a sleight-of-hand performance in the whole of pictorial art.

So far, the arguments "for" and "against" the "cups and balls" interpretation of the scene have all been based on two drawings made by archaeologists long ago: the Rosellini-Wilkinson drawing from the 1830s and the Percy Newberry drawing of the 1890s. The drawings of the mural art differ in certain important points of accuracy.

To know which of the two drawings was accurate, there needed to be a comparison to a photograph of the tomb wall at Beni Hassan. Yet, no museum, library or governmental body could provide such a photograph. Apparently no one had been to the tomb for historical photography since the early 1890s.

A ban on tourism had been lifted in early 1994, and photography was now allowed within four of the 39 tombs at Beni Hassan.

Together with Egyptologist Sami Hassan, I visited the tomb to photograph the mural. At last, we can theorize on this ancient artwork mystery with a photograph in hand.

As revealed in the recent photo, the painting has deteriorated. The plaster is coming away from the limestone walls, which accounts for the spotty or pitted effect in the photo. Just above the mural, a long crack in the wall caused by earthquakes has been patched with cement. Sami said these painted scenes have faded considerably since he was last there, possibly the result of a cleaning process used by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. In the Beni Hassan tombs, there has never been any painting restoration, only cleaning.

The actual depiction of the activity with "cups and balls" is about ten feet above the floor level. There was only a tiny stool to stand on, making it impossible for inspection with a magnifying glass. It was only possible to aim cameras upwards for

close-up shots. Flash photography is forbidden. Fluorescent lighting has been installed; but for some of the photography, the caretakers used a mirror and an aluminum foil reflector to illuminate the walls with subdued sunlight.

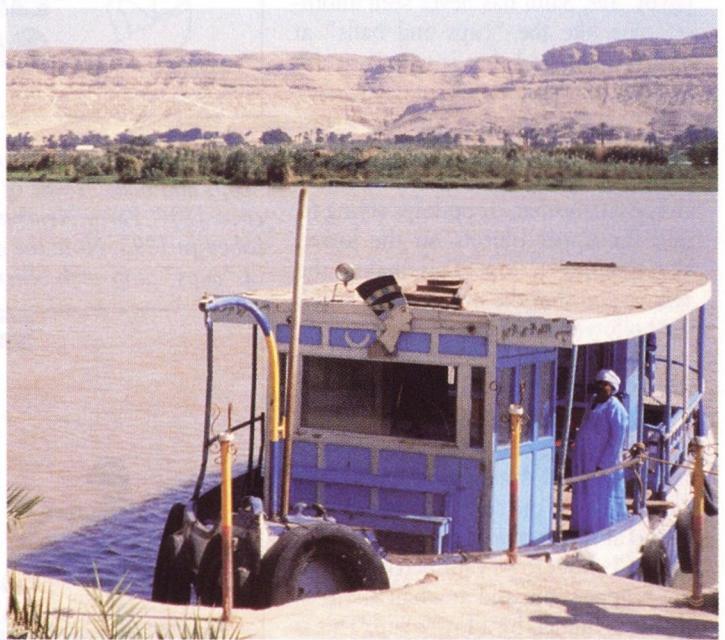
Is this scene related to the con-

juror's "cups and balls?" Among the magicians who have speculated positively in their writings are Sidney W. Clarke, Victor Farelli, Milbourne Christopher and Peter Warlock. What follows are opinions from Egyptologists, collected over the many years.

Sir J.G. Wilkinson, in his ongoing scholarly work, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837-1878), published the Rosellini-Wilkinson drawing with the comment: "Conjuring appears also to have been known to them, at least in the game of cups, in which a ball was put, while the opposite party guessed under which of the four it was concealed." In his index, Wilkinson labeled the drawing: "Conjurers or Thimble-rig," describing the figure on the left as "man placing cover" and on the right, "man holding cover." In a 1878, Samuel Birch (a prominent official of the British Museum), acting as editor of the Wilkinson tome, added a footnote referring to the hieroglyphs above the drawing: "The inscription reads *ar en ar*, and is translated, 'atop of one another,' but it is doubtful how it was played."

Percy Newberry spent about four years recording all the murals at Beni Hassan. His detailed drawing and analysis of Baqet's tomb is found in his paper "Beni Hassan Part II," which appears in the earliest volumes of the *Archaeological Survey of Egypt* (1893), edited by E.L. Griffin. Here are found full details of the setting around the "cups and balls" scene.

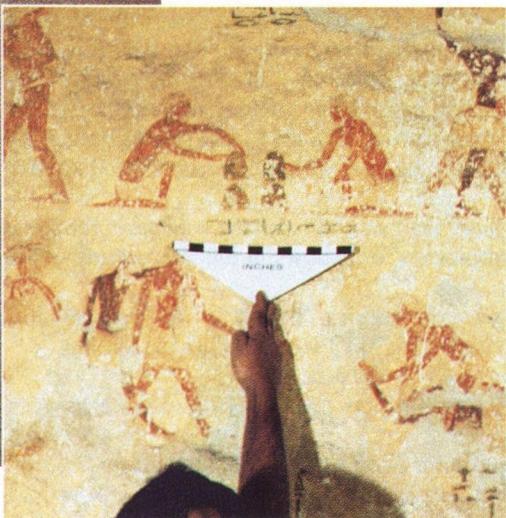
Just to the left of the supposed conjuring scene, Newberry describes a group of field scenes, watched over by a large figure of Baqet. A vertical inscription in front of him is translated: "Watching the work of the fields by



The ancient tombs of are set into a strata line of the cliffs, clearly visible across the Nile River. Being about 120 meters above the water level, they have never been flooded in 4,000 years (contrary to Milbourne Christopher's writings).

the ha-prince, the Great Chief of the Oryn Nome, the devoted one of Baqt."

According to Newberry the next group of scenes, which includes our supposed "cups and balls," represents "exercises and games." These activities were apparently watched over by another large figure of Baqet (his depiction at the right of the mural has been destroyed, but the area it occupied is surrounded by hieroglyphs of his name and titles). With apparent doubt, Newberry describes the scene as a "game of thimble-Rig (?)." Immediately to the right, he notes a "game with spikes," and still farther to the right, "three men exercising with



Egyptologist/guide Sami stands on a stool, holding a 12-inch rule to give scale to the supposed "cups and balls" scene, which is ten feet above floor level of the tomb.

clubs.” Just below the “cups and balls” is a painting which looks like a fight or punishment in progress and shows people holding onto each other and watching with interest. Newberry thought this might be a game something like the old English game of “Prisoners’ Base.”

Egyptologists who were consulted with seemed to agree with Newberry on this point: The “cups and balls” scene is among a group of games scenes, but the exact nature of the particular game is unknown.

Professor Wolfgang Decker is one of the world’s leading authorities on ancient Egyptian sports: therefore, the English translation (by Allen Guttmann) of Decker’s *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* was consulted. The scene is described as a game played with pairs of “pots.” Decker cites another Egyptologist, Luise Klebs, who suggested the point of the game was to guess *what* was hidden under the pots. He regards her interpretation as debatable, for it assumes that *one* player had control over all four pots, which is definitely not evident in the tomb painting.

Sami Hassan was my official guide while in Egypt and, unlike most tourist guides, he is a university-trained Egyptologist. Sami said the mural at Beni Hassan is unique, because as a rule, tomb murals are repetitive. Similar herdsmen, scribes and fowlers are seen on the walls of tomb after tomb in Egypt. Yet, Sami has never seen another scene like the “cups and balls” at Beni Hassan, and that is why is so difficult to interpret.

From the position of the arms, Sami speculated that the two men might be trying to balance one object on top of another, or perhaps trying to spin the upper objects on the lower, like spinning a top. This makes the assumption that the objects were *solid*, not hollowed-out cups.

When asked his opinion on the “cups and balls” theory, his response was immediate: “But where are the balls?”

It was explained that the most basic move in a “cups and balls” routine is the stacking of the cups atop one another, and at that moment no ball is visible. Any ball about to be vanished is covered by an upper cup, and any ball about to appear is hidden by a lower cup. This is why I wanted the photograph. Was

there a space between upper and lower cups, as the Wilkinson drawing showed, or little or no space, as the Newberry drawing indicated?

My photo shows that Newberry produced the more accurate drawing. There is the suggestion of a tiny space between the upper and lower cups, but not sufficient space to portray any balls about to be vanished. The painting is primitive enough for the artist to have intended the upper and lower cups to be on the point of nesting together. In my own opinion, the conjurer’s “knock-through” move, which is so simple it forms a part of nearly every “cup and ball” routine, could well be pictured here.

Sami made a point that it is important to remember. The Egyptian tomb artist worked “direct and clear” — with no deviousness, no veiled meaning. The inscription relates directly to the picture. The scenes at Beni Hassan show events that probably occurred during Baqet’s life, and something which he wished to enjoy in his afterlife.

After days of discussion, Sami said (perhaps just to please me): “You know, I really wish we could prove that this is the ‘cups and balls!’”

Dr. Saleh is the Director General of the huge Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Sami Hassan brought us together for a short discussion. Dr. Saleh said the inscription, *ar en ar*, indicates “something above something else.” When considered with the scene, it suggested to him the idea of balance, the notion of balancing one thing atop another (the same as Sami’s speculation). When asked if Milbourne Christopher’s translation of the hieroglyphs as “up from under” was applicable, Saleh rejected it as unrealistic. He considered the 1878 translation of “atop of one another” (Wilkinson) a better rendering.

Dr. Saleh was of the definite opinion that the scene didn’t have anything to do with magic. It was a game. And although he did not know the particular game, he did recognize the game pictured alongside: the game with the pointed sticks (Newberry’s “spikes”). Both he and Sami assured me that this game is still played in Egyptian villages.

The statement that the game “didn’t have anything to do with magic” needs to be clarified. When Egyptologists refer to “magic” they mean it in the ancient sense of dealing with the spirit world, not magic in the sense of tricks and entertainment.

Naguib Kanawati is an Egyptian professor who heads the Australian Centre for Egyptology at Macquarie University in Sydney. Sami and I met him on the site at his dig at Saqqara in November of 1994. When questioned about the Newberry drawing and the “cups and balls” scene in particular, he felt the only thing one could say for certain is it shows a game of unknown type. Kanawati suggested the most likely form of the game was something like putting an object under one of the cups and challenging to “guess which one.” In other words, something like the classic thimble-rig game.

Much to my surprise, Kanawati had a completely different opinion of the tomb painting which appeared in the New Zealand magazine, *Magiana* (December 1995/January 1996 issue). A letter from the Egyptian Embassy in Canberra, claimed that Dr. Kanawati

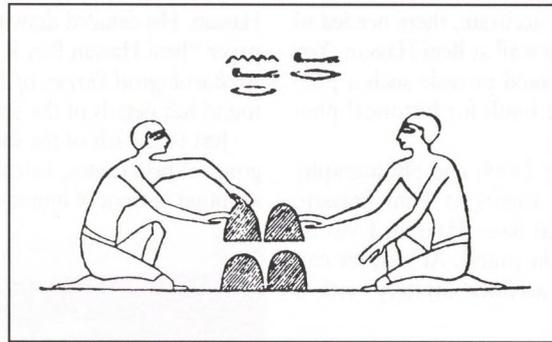
had confirmed that the scene represents “bread produced after baking.” Anxious that I could have misrepresented him, I contacted Dr. Kanawati again in September of 1996. Dr. Kanawati was puzzled by the Embassy’s letter. He still agrees with the earlier opinion he gave me: “This is a game.”

He kindly spent more than an hour with me, analyzing the scene and explaining Egyptologists’ difficulties in the interpreting of the inscription *ar en ar*.

The word “ar” is a verb, meaning “mount up” or “ascend.” It is usually with a preposition “to” as “ascend to” (a place). But “ar” can also mean to “extend” or to “penetrate.”

As stated, “en” is a preposition, meaning “to.” It can also mean “for” and sometimes “in.”

Thus, the inscription reads something like “ascend to ascend” This is not a sentence, but just an odd group of words, perhaps a colloquialism.



Rosellini/Wilkinson drawing [above], of so-called “cups and balls” scene of the Beni Hassan mural, circa 1837. Percy Newberry drawing [below], published in 1893. Note the difference in the position of “cups” atop each other.

