

Monographs of the Sydney University Teleilat Ghassul Project 3

THE MYSTERIOUS WALL PAINTINGS OF TELEILAT GHASSUL, JORDAN

IN CONTEXT

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PLATE 1: RE-ARRANGED 'STAR' PROCESSION



PLATE 2: RE-ADJUSTED 'TIGER' / MOUNT NEBO LANDSCAPE FRESCO



PLATE 3: RE-ARRANGED HENNESSY 'PROCESSION' FRESCO. FRAGMENTS, LINE ART AND INTERPRETIVE SKETCH

Chapter 1.1 Introduction

'We don't need another Tutankhamen's tomb with all its treasures. We need context. We need understanding'
(W. Herzog, *Archaeology*, Vol. 64, No. 2, March/April 2011).

It is a regrettable fact that many ancient artefacts are unearthed by archaeologists, only to be briefly recorded and then put aside, to be covered once again with dust and obscurity. Due to a number of circumstances this was largely the case with the fragmentary wall paintings uncovered at the Chalcolithic site of Teleilat Ghassul in Jordan, which were excavated between 1930 and 1977. It is the goal of this research to brush the dust from the surface of these ancient murals once again and to bring them firmly back into the view of art historians, archaeologists and the wider public, in the hope that they might achieve the level of artistic appreciation and scholarly acclaim that they most richly deserve.

This study will begin by placing the paintings within a firm contextual framework constructed out of evidence collected from both published and unpublished material derived from the excavation archives of the various teams that worked at Teleilat Ghassul, the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Jerusalem (hereafter PBI), the British School of Archaeology, Jerusalem and the University of Sydney, Australia, in addition to other relevant source material. It is hoped that a detailed re-examination of the wall paintings will provide new insights into the Chalcolithic (ca. 4700-3700 cal. BC) culture of the Southern Levant illustrating the considerable amount of information that can still be obtained from the fragmentary frescoes, when examining them from artistic, technological and anthropological viewpoints.

The distinctive perspective brought to this research comes from my unusual academic background consisting of an undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree in Ancient History and an Honours degree in Natural History Illustration, both undertaken at the University of Newcastle, Australia. The amalgamation of this unique training with my passion for Near Eastern archaeology provides the current study with a trans-disciplinary approach, combining the research skills and associated structure of the humanities with the practical component of a Natural History Illustration project.

The research strategy crosses many disciplinary boundaries, seeking to create a holistic approach, and focuses on problems that cross the borders of different research areas, such as archaeology, anthropology, art history, ancient history, experimental archaeology and natural history illustration. Naturally this brings with it some limitations and although a comprehensive study has been presented, the fact remains that I have trained as an ancient historian and artist, not as an archaeologist, anthropologist or art historian, and this study will therefore

differ to those more traditionally associated with these fields. However, to address the fact that much of this research is very closely connected to the archaeological evidence, I have been working in collaboration with the current director of excavations at Teleilat Ghassul, Dr. Stephen Bourke from the University of Sydney. Dr. Bourke has graciously provided much feedback and access to unpublished material held by The University of Sydney Teleilat Ghassul Excavation Project.

In addition to the frequent visits to the University of Sydney; research trips to Jerusalem, Rome, Amman and Teleilat Ghassul in the south Jordan Valley of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan were also undertaken in order to collect the primary data necessary for this undertaking.

These trips would not have been successful without the generous assistance of Father Nguyen, Director of the PBI in Jerusalem, who willingly opened up doors and gave me permission to freely use their material; Father Maurice Gilbert, also of the PBI, who spent many hours with me in the museum, library and attic locating forgotten records, artefacts and fresco fragments; Dr. Jaimie Lovell, then Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, for assisting my research when resident in Jerusalem; Mr. Miki Sebbanne, Curator of the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, for allowing me to view some of the remaining fragments of the 'Star' fresco; Ms. Silvia Krapiwko, Head of The Rockefeller Archives, who assisted me with locating unpublished excavation reports written by Koeppel; Friar Jean-Michel de Tarragon, historian of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem, for preserving the original glass photographic negatives from the PBI and graciously sharing these with me; Ms. Maram Naes, Conservator of Hennessy's 'Processional' fresco at The Jordan Museum, Amman, whose personal kindness and willingness to discuss her work was most helpful; Mr Roger Quinn, for his generous assistance with the digital reconstructions; and Mr. Colin Whitehead, for translating the French excavation records.

The key objectives of this research project are:

1. Collect and record any unpublished material that relates to the wall paintings from Teleilat Ghassul.
2. Locate and photograph the surviving fresco fragments and examine these for clues relating to the technical processes used in their creation.
3. Collect and scan original slides of the fresco fragments and where possible digitally re-arrange these fragments using the excavators' sketches,

plans, notes and visible surface designs to achieve the most plausible compositions.

4. Collect information from a variety of different sources to establish a comprehensive contextual framework for the murals, through a consideration of their geographical and environmental surrounds, their settlement and architectural contexts within the site of Ghassul, their artefactual associations, and their technical artistic aspects.
5. Establish the position of the Ghassul murals within the corpus of prehistoric Near Eastern symbolic representations, and to assess these symbolic representations as comparative artefacts rather than stand-alone artworks.
6. Explore the relationship between the murals and their creators, by consideration of the importance of the creative process and the potential significance of these images to the individuals living at Ghassul.
7. Draw some meaning from the contextual associations of the murals to make better sense of the images, using a methodology based on subject analysis.
8. Use the information from any such interpretations to achieve an enriched understanding of the Ghassulian society, in particular its level of socio-economic complexity, stratification, religious beliefs and ritual practices.
9. Explore current art-history theories related to composition style and the birth of narrative art to assess whether the Ghassul murals challenge or support existing models.
10. Perform experimental replication of the frescoes, at half original size, to explore aspects of the manufacturing process (time, technique and labour) and to document this process photographically.

To achieve these aims, the study will consist of the following components:

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 History of Research

This chapter provides a brief overview of the previous literature and sets the foundations for the current study.

Chapter 2: Culture, Materials and Context: The Ghassulian Culture, the Discovery and Original stated Contexts of the Wall Paintings

This chapter takes a deliberate context-based approach and presents evidence relating the background, original data and initial statements corresponding to the wall paintings. The sections of chapter two follow the sequence listed below:

2.1: Geographical and Environmental Context

The geographic and environmental data are presented in this chapter to aid our understanding of the factors influencing the Ghassulian culture, both natural and

human, and assist our understanding of what every day life was like for the inhabitants and creators of the murals.

2.2: Society, Culture and Ritual Context:

The cultural context of the Ghassulian period is established in this chapter, which provides an important groundwork for the following study. This is achieved by examining the different aspects that made up the distinctive Ghassulian culture, with particular focus on their social forms, burial customs, beliefs and religion.

2.3: Prehistoric Artistic Context

This section provides a brief overview of symbolic representations from the Ancient Near East in order to place the wall paintings from Ghassul within their artistic contextual setting. The comparative artworks were selected because they relate to the Ghassulian collection stylistically, symbolically or technically. The representations are presented in chronological order, starting with pre-Ghassulian artworks in the Southern Levant and in adjacent regions. Consideration of contemporaneous artworks and those of the later Early Bronze Age follow treatment of these.

2.4: The Wall Art of Teleilat Ghassul: Discovery and Archaeological Context

Information related to the wall paintings' original discoveries is introduced in chronological order. This section also provides translations from the PBI excavation reports, which were originally presented in German and French, extracts from the unpublished handwritten dig books and from other PBI sources, such as the Fernandez-Festschrift. Due to the fact that much of this material is either difficult to locate or was written in languages other than English, some of this information is presented verbatim for ease of reference by future researchers. Prior interpretations of the scenes, made by the excavators and other scholars, are also presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Analysis, Composition and Creation

This chapter presents the re-analysis of original contexts, associated artefacts, new composition suggestions, comparative analysis and technological and artisanal data.

3.1: Settlement, Structural and Ritual Context

Re-analysis of the contextual information is introduced here with particular attention paid to the location of the wall paintings and the artefacts and burials associated with these. To determine whether the painted structures could be classified as having a ritual-cultic use Verhoeven's 'Properties of Framing' methodology is employed.

3.2: Subject Matter – New Interpretations

This section presents all of the data that was unearthed during the early stages of renewed research and introduces new observations related to selected paintings. New

material in relation to the ‘Star’ fresco is offered, including photographs of fragments and some observations are presented. This is followed by new material relating to the ‘Tiger’ fresco, which consists of photographs of the original artist’s interpretive scene; comments made by the excavator relating to the various layers of the mural and the adjustments made to the scene digitally after these were taken into consideration. Presentation of new information related to the ‘Geometric’ fresco follows, with particular attention paid to the position of the craters and direction and placement of the fresco within the room according to North’s hand-drawn diagram and notes. The chapter concludes with some new material related to Hennessy’s ‘Zig-Zag’ fragment and the ‘Processional’ frieze, with information gathered from the ICCROM conservation report, site plans and the original coloured slides, which were digitally re-arranged into a more plausible format, as presented recently in *Antiquity*.

Chapter 4: Technology of Ancient Painted Wall Plaster and Modern Replication Studies

4.1: Ghassulian Technological Innovation

This section presents the innovative technological achievements made by the artisans belonging to the Ghassulian cultures, with particular focus on metallurgy and fresco production. It is suggested that these like-minded pyrotechnical specialists most likely guarded their knowledge carefully and were strongly linked to the ritual practitioners and cultic activities. In addition, data from the original scientific analyses conducted by the PBI and ICCROM teams is presented and the question as to whether the frescoes were created using the ‘*buon fresco*’ technique is explored.

4.2: Replication Studies

This portion presents the data from the original scientific analyses conducted by the PBI and ICCROM teams and explores the question as to whether the frescoes were created using the ‘*buon fresco*’ technique. This is followed by the data gathered whilst conducting experimental replications. These trials were conducted by the author under a ‘learn by doing’ mantle and attempted to answer three research questions relating to the difficulty of the fresco manufacturing process; the time required to make a fresco; and the effect of different fillers on the surface. An evaluation and discussion of the information gained through the experimental process is presented in conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion – Art and Society in the Ghassulian

Chapter five aims to assess the evidence from the preceding chapters in the light of current academic debate. The discussion is presented in the following two components:

5.1: Subject Analysis

This section explores the benefits and pitfalls of subject analysis before offering tentative interpretations of

the individual scenes in light of the revised contextual information outlined earlier. A discussion of the new insights obtained through the subject analysis is then presented.

5.2: Art and Society

This section discusses the significance of the murals and explores the way that they contribute to and complement our understanding of the Ghassulian culture. Current theories relating to the interpretation and evolution of representation and visual narrative are explored and challenged and a new model is proposed. The position of these early frescoes in relation to later Aegean murals and their role in the materialisation of culture, ideology and history is also considered.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this component previous arguments will be reviewed and summarised. Key points will be emphasised and closing thoughts outlined.

My Role

I became interested in the wall paintings of Teleilat Ghassul in 2009 when I was working on the University of Sydney excavations in Pella, Jordan. My reaction upon viewing the ‘Star of Ghassul’ for the first time was one of incredulity, as I found it difficult to comprehend how people 6000 years ago could have created a fresco that was so intricately designed and executed. My fascination with the paintings grew, as did my frustration that so little was known about them. When Dr. Bourke offered me the opportunity to carry out research on the paintings and provided me with the coloured slides of Hennessy’s ‘Processional’ fragments I knew that I had to accept the challenge.

While I am not an archaeologist, I am an ancient historian and artist, and if there were a job-description of ‘contextualist’ I would happily wear that label. I see myself as a student of material culture whose work is both empirical and interpretive. The main objective of this project was to apply a comprehensive contextual framework to the paintings, so that they could be established, studied, interpreted and appreciated in a way that reflects their socio-cultural setting. Anthropologist Randall White has stated, ‘Cultural understanding is the goal; representation is one of the means, neither less nor more important than technology, economic systems, language, or religion’ (2003:25), and I agree wholeheartedly. I hope that my review of these representations will lead to an enriched understanding of the Ghassulian culture and will be discussed and challenged by other scholars who share my fascination with this creative and mysterious culture.