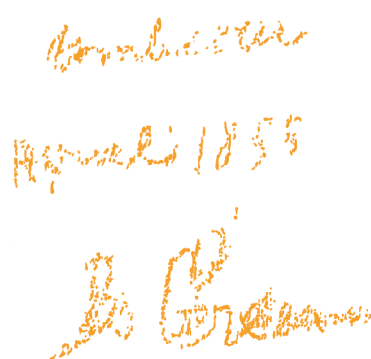


A forgotten chapter in the history of Egyptology: John Beasley Greene at Deir el-Bahari in Egypt



Abstract: Édouard Naville, upon entering the Northern Room of Amun at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, found inscriptions written in pencil high up on the walls, bearing the signature of John Beasley Greene and featuring the date 1855. J.B. Greene was a young Frenchman known mainly as one of the pioneers of photography. He is sometimes mentioned in the context of the excavations at Medinet Habu, but his activities at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari are unknown. It appears that, in addition to the Northern Room of Amun, he discovered another small chapel and documented both rooms. His plans to publish the results of his research were interrupted by his untimely death in 1856. As a result, Greene's Egyptological achievements have been consigned to oblivion. This article aims to recall his accomplishments in the fields of Egyptology and archaeological documentation.

Keywords: 19th century, history of Egyptology, excavations, history of archaeology, Temple of Hatshepsut, Northern Room of Amun

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CHARACTER OUTLINE

John Beasley Greene, a pioneer of photography and archaeology of ancient Egypt, was a son of a banker born in France to American parents (Keller 2018: 12–14) — although, according to one of the French journals, Greene was a Frenchman “if not by birth, at least by education” (Camus 1855). His life was relatively brief, spanning only 24 years (1832–1856), and his Egyptological career was a mere three years long — from 1853 to 1856 (Keller 2018: 9–10). Short as it was, his scholarly career was marked by significant and noteworthy achievements. He took on photography as a way to document various archaeological sites in Egypt and Algeria. Additionally, he engaged in excavation work at the temple at Medinet Habu in Egypt, subsequently publishing the results of his work (Greene 1855). Unfortunately, after his death, his achievements were largely forgotten for several decades, until the second half of the 20th century, when his legacy once again captured the attention of scholars, particularly within the context of the history

of photography (Jammes 1981; Howe 1996: 231–294; Topham 2006; Keller 2018).¹ However, despite his pioneering role in the application of modern documentation methods, he remains a relatively poorly known figure in the history of Egyptology. A brief mention of him can be found in *Who was Who in Egyptology*, but it is limited to information about the identity of his parents, his academic mentors in Egyptology, the two publications he produced, and the observation that he took approximately 200 photographs in Egypt during his relatively short life (Greene, John Beasley..., 2019). A somewhat more detailed biographical note found in *Wonderful Things. A History of Egyptology 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Thompson 2020: 248), which highlights Greene’s contribution to the development of methods of documenting Egyptian monuments.

This paper focuses on an almost completely unknown chapter of Greene’s life: his unfinished research at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, Egypt, in 1855.

EGYPTOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

John Beasley Greene presumably studied Egyptology at Collège de France, where he had good relations with several distinguished Egyptologists of the period,

including Théodule Devéria, Emmanuel de Rougé, and François Chabas (Keller 2018: 29).² He also may have known Émile Prisse d’Avennes, who incorporated a se-

1 Also exhibitions, e.g. *John Beasley Greene: Egypt and Algeria 1853–1856* at The Robert Koch Gallery; *Signs and Wonders: The Photographs of John Beasley Greene* in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and in The Art Institute of Chicago; and *From Alexandria to Abu Simbel: Egypt in early photographs 1849–1875* in Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

2 Keller suggests that Greene knew Charles le Normand, Émile Prisse d’Avennes, and Auguste Mariette quite well, and claims that le Normand may have been Greene’s lecturer. However, at least based on Greene’s correspondence known to the author of this article and his joint publications, one can only speak of his closer relations with Devéria, de Rougé, and Chabas. Nevertheless, a couple of Greene’s photographs depicting A. Mariette’s excavations are known.

lection of photographs taken by Greene during his stay in Egypt into his own publication (Prisse d'Avennes 1827–1879).

Greene visited Egypt twice, in 1853–1854 and in 1854–1855 (Jammes 1981: 306; Keller 2018: 9). He embarked on a third expedition in late autumn of 1856, but died shortly after his arrival in Cairo (Jammes 1891: 305; Keller 2018: 128). After his first journey to Egypt, Greene published a photographic album entitled *Le Nil: monuments—paysages. Explorations photographiques*, where he included a photograph of the granite doorway on the Up-

per Terrace of the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, the now-lost relics of the Coptic monastery, part of the valley with the Temple's processional avenue, and the debris covering part of the Upper Terrace (Greene 1854: Pl. (36) 39).³ The archives of the Musée d'Orsay also contain another photograph, most probably taken by Greene in 1854 during the same visit to the Temple. It depicts the same granite doorway, but the photograph was taken from the other side, overlooking the inner part of the Upper Terrace, which was largely covered in debris.⁴

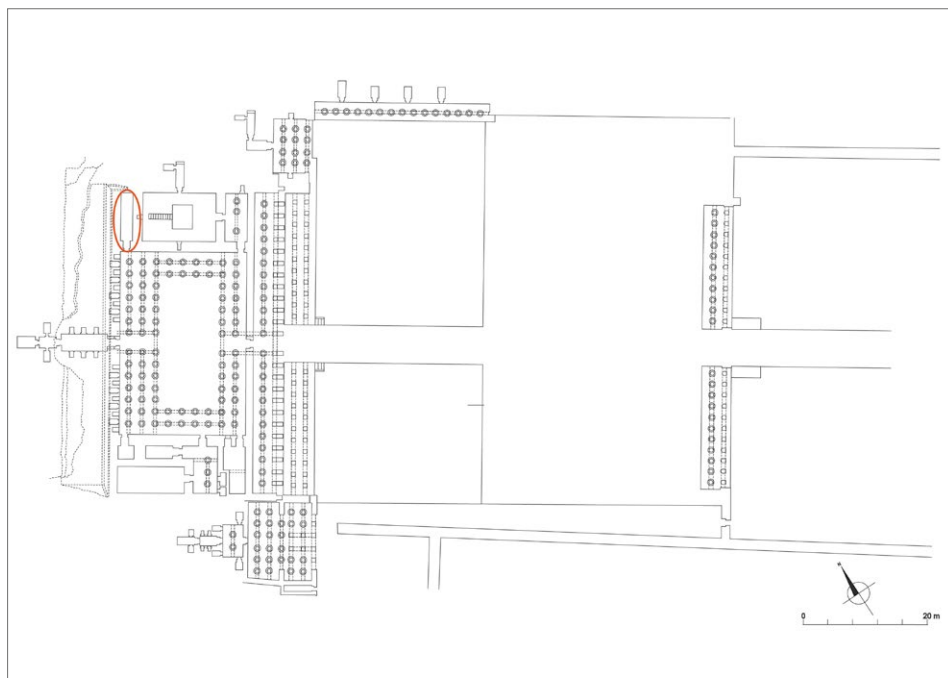


Fig. 1. Location of the Northern Room of Amun in the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari (After Wysocki 1985: Pl. 1, redrawing K. Kasprzycka)

3 Musée d'Orsay, on-line catalogue <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections>, Inv. No. PHO 1986 143 215 (accessed: 09.08.2025).

4 Musée d'Orsay, on-line catalogue <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections>, Inv. No. PHO 1986 143 214 (accessed: 09.08.2025).

GREENE'S INSCRIPTIONS IN THE NORTHERN ROOM OF AMUN AT DEIR EL-BAHARI

During his second visit to Egypt, Greene returned to the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari to conduct further excavations, as evidenced by two graffiti executed in pencil on the west wall of the so-called Northern Room of Amun, situated on the Upper Terrace of the Temple [Fig. 1]. This room was assumedly discovered and excavated in 1893 by Édouard Naville on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund (Naville 1895: 1), and he is customarily credited

with its discovery. However, Naville himself acknowledged in his publication that he had found two inscriptions by Greene, written in pencil on two opposite walls (east and west) of the Northern Room of Amun (Naville 1895: 2).

INSCRIPTIONS NOS 1 AND 2

Inscription No. 1, west wall:

*La monographie de ce tombeau a été terminée
le 17 avril 1855*



Fig. 2. Location of the Inscriptions Nos 1 and 3: A – on the plan (After Karkowski 2003: Pl. 1, redrawing K. Kasprzycka); B – on the west wall (PCMA UW | photo K. Kasprzycka)

Translation:

"The monograph of this tomb was completed on 17 April 1855."

Inscription No. 2, east wall:

Ouvert par Greene en 1855

Translation:

"Opened by Greene in 1855."

According to Naville (1895: 2), Inscription No. 2 was placed below the ceiling. Despite a thorough search con-

ducted by the author of this paper, this particular inscription has not been found, and its existence remains attested only by Naville. The inscription may have been destroyed during the numerous conservation and reconstruction works carried out after the discovery of this room in 1893. The inscription on the west wall (No. 1), which was placed approximately 3.88 m above the pavement [Fig. 2], sur-

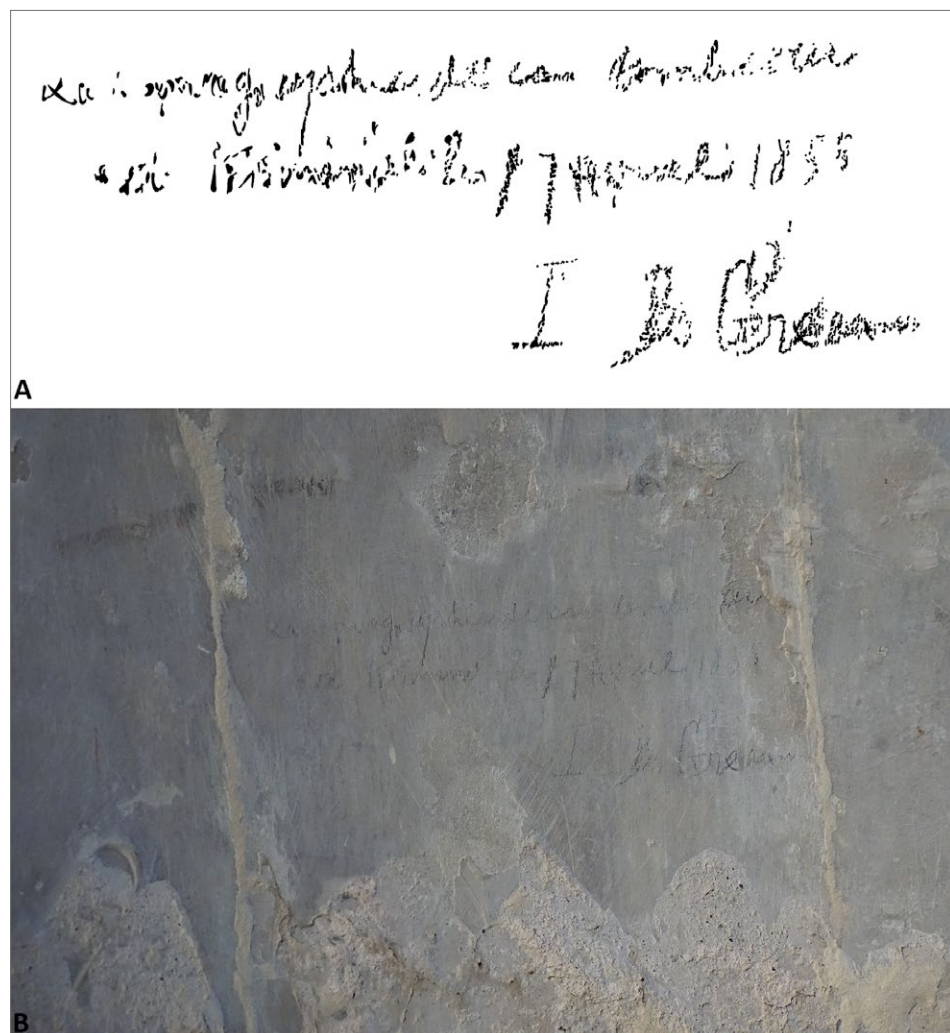


Fig. 3. Inscription No. 1 (A – drawing K. Kasprzycka; B – PCMA UW | photo K. Kasprzycka)

vived, although it is not very clearly legible [Fig. 3].⁵

There is, however, yet another inscription by Greene (No. 3) in the Northern Room of Amun, which escaped Naville's attention. It was made on mortar used to restore a depiction of Amun following the Amarna period. Unfortunately, part of the mortar detached from the wall, resulting in the partial destruction of the inscription. Nevertheless, what remains is still more clearly legible than the still-extant Inscription No. 1.

INSCRIPTION NO. 3

Inscription No. 3 is located below Inscription No. 1 and approximately 3.40 m above the pavement. It reads as follows [Fig. 4]:

Ouvert p(?)[...]a
c(?)[...]b J(?)[...]c Greene
185[...]d

^a The “p”-shaped sign now stands alone. Its uncertain reading is supported by a comparison of the duct of the p-shaped character in the inscription with a strikingly similar letter “p” in Greene's letter dated to 9 November 1855 (Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Ms 2572/f.99). Unfortunately, it is merely this single letter that survives of the whole word. Assuming that this sign was indeed “p”-shaped, it could have represented the beginning of the word *par* (“by”), thus yielding a text analogous to the now-missing Inscription No. 2, as described by Naville.⁶

^b The next word may have comprised two letters. The first visible character resembles the shape of the letters “c” or “e”. Unfortunately, the mortar in this place has partly detached and the following letter or part of the word has not survived. The curved line of the hypothetical letter “c” or “e” is intersected by a small fragment of another line, which may have been, for instance, a piece of the “loop” from the letter “e”. The second letter of this word is illegible.

^c The third fragment of the inscription preserves only a part of a vertical line, which likely formed the initial “J” — for John — as in Inscription No. 1. The blank space between the suggested “J” and Greene's name is indicative of the presence of another letter. It was most likely the initial “B”, for Beasley, but the mortar in this place has fallen off and no trace of the letter remains. Nevertheless, in Greene's signatures the letter “B” is typically seen as an abbreviation of his middle name.

^d In the last fragment, only the top horizontal stroke of the numeral 5 is preserved, but taking into account the two inscriptions discussed above, as well as some secondary mentions discussed below, this fragment can only be read as a date — 1855.

The whole text could thus be reconstructed as follows:

Ouvert p[ar] [J. B.] Greene e[n]185[5]

Translation:

“Opened by J.B. Greene in 1855.”

5 According to the oral testimony of Adam Łukaszewicz, it was still clearly legible in the 1990s, before the conservation work undertaken in the 2003/2004 and 2004/2005 field seasons (cf. Szafrański 2005: 231; 2007: 252).

6 Adam Łukaszewicz, in a private conversation, after seeing only a photograph of the inscription was inclined to such an interpretation.

However, this reconstruction has one serious flaw — the notation. If Inscription No. 3 was indeed a duplicate of Inscription No. 2, then the letter “p” in line 1 would be the beginning of the

French word “par”, and line 2 would begin with “en”. Thus, the entire text would have to be reconstructed as *Ouvert par en J.B. Greene 1855*. This, however, is faulty French.

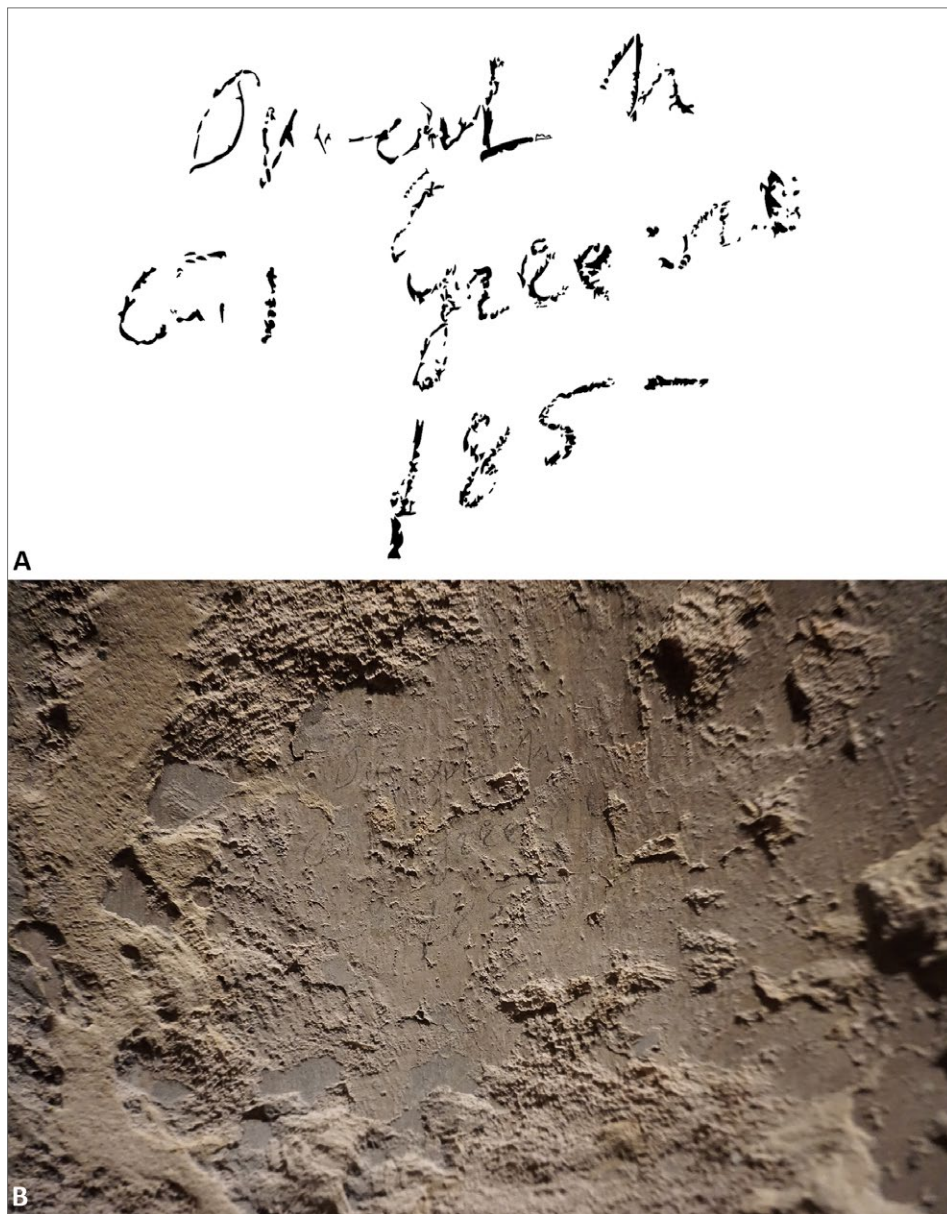


Fig. 4. Inscription No. 3 (A – drawing K. Kasprzycka; B –PCMA UW | photo K. Kasprzycka)

There is still another possibility, although fairly hypothetical, that Greene started writing the word *par*—hence the character resembling the letter “p”—but the rough and uneven surface of the mortar there, with a lot of lumps, hindered the completion of this word, and he had to change the content of the inscription slightly, starting a new line and writing the word *çà* (“this”). The visible fragment of the letter discussed in point b. above could be read as “ç”, and the strokes remaining of the second letter would rather correspond to an “à” than to an “n”. If so, then the text would have a more abbreviated form:

Ouvert *çà* J.B. Greene 1855

Translation:

“Opened this J.B. Greene 1855.”

MEANING OF THE INSCRIPTIONS

At first glance, all three inscriptions are surprisingly ambiguous in several places. What did Greene mean when he wrote “opened”, and what is the meaning of the sentence “The monograph of this tomb was completed”?

Basically, the French word *ouvert* translates into English as “opened”, but it can also mean “uncovered”. In archaeology, this term is often used to mean “discovered” or “found”. Thus, Greene most likely meant that he himself discovered this room, i.e. that he uncovered this room.

The sentence “The monograph of this tomb was completed” calls for a more detailed commentary and carries a number of implications.

Greene acquired the permission to conduct excavations at Medinet Habu and at Deir el-Bahari from Sa’id Pasha,

the Viceroy of Egypt (Fouilles... 1855; see Keller 2018: 48). Surviving sources show that the young explorer focused primarily on the excavations at Medinet Habu, which took place in 1855.

The results of Greene’s excavations were widely discussed by the French press. *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, on 14 June 1855, reported on Greene’s work and discoveries at Medinet Habu and mentioned the discovery of a small chapel and a tomb, both dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty (Camus 1855). The latter reference, however, clearly concerned Deir el-Bahari. On the other hand, according to a brief note in *L’Athenaeum français*, published on 11 August 1855, Greene discovered two royal chapels from the Eighteenth Dynasty (Fouilles... 1855). In his own publication, dated to November 1855 and entitled *Fouilles exécutées à Thèbes dans l’année 1855*, Greene reported at the end that at Deir el-Bahari he had discovered two royal chapels from the Eighteenth Dynasty and reproduced inscriptions from their interiors (Greene 1855: 12). In fact, a mention that he made squeezes of the discovered monuments with all their details is found already in the aforementioned June issue of the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (Camus 1855).

What did Greene actually discover at Deir el-Bahari: a tomb and a chapel, or two royal chapels? The inscription stating that “the monograph of this tomb was completed” clearly indicates the conviction of the young scholar that he had discovered a tomb, but then why did the French press initially report on two chapels?

Firstly, one should consider the position of the three inscriptions. All three were located high above the pavement — according to Naville (1895: 2), one (No. 2) was just below the ceiling. This information is of crucial significance, as the room is about 5.70 m high. Inscriptions Nos 1 and 3 were situated somewhat lower, but still at a height of over 3 m, and, in the case of Inscription No. 1, almost 4 m above the pavement. To answer the question about how Greene managed to place his inscriptions so high up, one must go back to the history of the Temple of Hatshepsut.

The Northern Room of Amun, the Solar Complex, and the Upper Anubis Shrine were covered with debris subsequently leveled by Copts to form a kind of platform, on which a part of their monastery was built (Godlewski 1986: 21–22, n. 1). Following the abandonment of the monastery, its ruins, together with another part of the Temple also used by the Copts, were again covered with debris. The almost completely concealed upper part of the Temple of Hatshepsut is clearly visible in Greene's photograph mentioned above.

Greene may have set up a trench somewhere on the platform made by the Copts, and, digging from the top, discovered the Northern Room of Amun. Naville, too, excavated this room from the top of the Coptic platform (destroying the remains of the monastery in the process), and, as recorded in his excavation diary, during the explora-

tion he discovered many huge flat stone slabs that constituted the remains of the room's ceiling. Naville's description indicates that these elements of the ceiling did not fall directly onto the pavement, but remained partly suspended, leaning against the walls of the room. This is very likely, given that sand, debris, as well as some Coptic ostraca and pottery were found between them. Some of these stone ceiling slabs must have, reportedly, been cut prior to their removal in order to continue the exploration of the room. Naville (1893–1896: 4–5, 11–12) assumed that Greene must have likewise started his excavations from the upper level of the Coptic platform to move down. If so, he would have stumbled upon the same partly suspended ceiling slabs and debris later seen by Naville. Greene's entering the room from the top explains why all his inscriptions are so high up.

Greene may have initially thought that he had discovered a tomb. He presumably considered the “hanging” stone slabs of the ceiling to be the blockage used by ancient builders to protect the tombs. In addition, he may have been misled by the room's dimensions (long, narrow, and high, approximately 11.90 m × 2.40 m × 5.70 m) and wall decorations depicting mainly offering scenes, two of which included an offering table. It also appears that he did not read hieroglyphs (Keller 2018: 51),⁷ and thus was unable to understand the inscriptions, which are typical of temples, not tombs.

7 This hypothesis is supported by Langlois (1855), who asserts that all hieroglyphic texts published in *Fouilles exécutées à Thèbes dans l'année 1855* were translated by de Rougé. Greene himself, in the introduction to his publication, extended thanks to de Rougé for sharing the results of his studies on hieroglyphic texts.

Judging by the abovementioned press releases, sometime between 14 June and 11 August 1855 Greene must have concluded that the room he had discovered was not a tomb but rather a chapel. Perhaps the change of interpretation resulted from a careful examination of the nature of the scenes depicted in this room. It is also possible that someone (Greene himself or de Rougé) read the hieroglyphic inscriptions and realized they were not funerary texts. Finally, a combination of these two facts may have led Greene to realize that what he had discovered was not a tomb but two chapels.

Inscription No. 1, left by Greene on the west wall of the Northern Room of Amun, asserts that “the monograph of this tomb was completed”, implying that he prepared a complete documentation of this room. This is also confirmed by the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* article, which proves that the scholar had at his disposal the so-called squeezes made on the site (Camus 1855). A squeeze, or a relief copy, was made with the use of cardboard soaked in water and left to dry. Then, a photograph of it could be taken (Personal... 1854: 320). Squeezes could also be painted prior to photographing (Keller 2018: 34).

According to his own testimony in *Fouilles exécutées à Thèbes dans l'année 1855*, in November 1855 Greene had nearly finished reproducing the depictions of texts from Deir el-Bahari (Greene 1855: 12). Unfortunately, none of his works from this site are currently known, the exception being one sepia photograph from the Musée d'Orsay, discussed below.

The second chapel reportedly discovered by Greene has not been identified to date. A short note indicates that it was small (Camus 1855), and it may be reasonably inferred that it was located somewhere near the Northern Room of Amun. However, few locations in the Temple of Hatshepsut match this description. The nearest potential locations which would fall in with such criteria are the niches in the west wall of the Upper Terrace and two additional niches in the Solar Court and the Upper Anubis Shrine.

The sepia photograph by Greene, housed in the Musée d'Orsay,⁸ depicts a squeeze of a king's figure seated on a throne in front of a small offering table, with only the end of the pile of offerings visible. Above the king's head, the lower parts of two cartouches are visible clearly enough to identify the royal figure as Thutmose I. In addition, the upper part of the offering name is clearly visible, as are small fragments of signs related to the offering name and placed below the offering table. The figure of the king occupies only two stone blocks, which clearly indicates the small size of the room.

This scene corresponds precisely to the typology of depictions found in the so-called “small niches” located in the west wall of the Upper Terrace of the Temple of Hatshepsut. As seen in Greene's photograph, at the time of his visit, these niches were also covered with debris. There are five such niches near the Northern Room of Amun. Their side walls bore the same scenes as the one in Greene's photograph, depicting the king

8 Musée d'Orsay, on-line catalogue <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections>, Inv. No. PHO 1986 131 341 (accessed: 09.08.2025).

seated on a throne in front of an offering table and a list of offerings. The figure of the king also occupied the space of two blocks and had cartouches with his names above his head. The walls further away from the axis of the Temple bore the names of Thutmose III, Thutmose I, and Thutmose II, respectively. Depicted closer to the main axis was Hatshepsut herself (Karkowski 2001: 138–139). It therefore seems most likely that Greene discovered one of these niches and made a squeeze of a fragment of one of its walls.

It should be noted that similar depictions are present in the niches in the Solar Complex of the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. However, they differ in a number of details, such as the arrangement of the inscriptions around the ruler, the lack of traces of the name of Thutmose I in the cartouches, and the fact that in some of them the figure of the ruler has been erased (Karkowski 2003: Pls 41–41 bis, 42–42 bis, 45–48 bis). Thus, the photographed squeeze could not have been made in either of these niches.

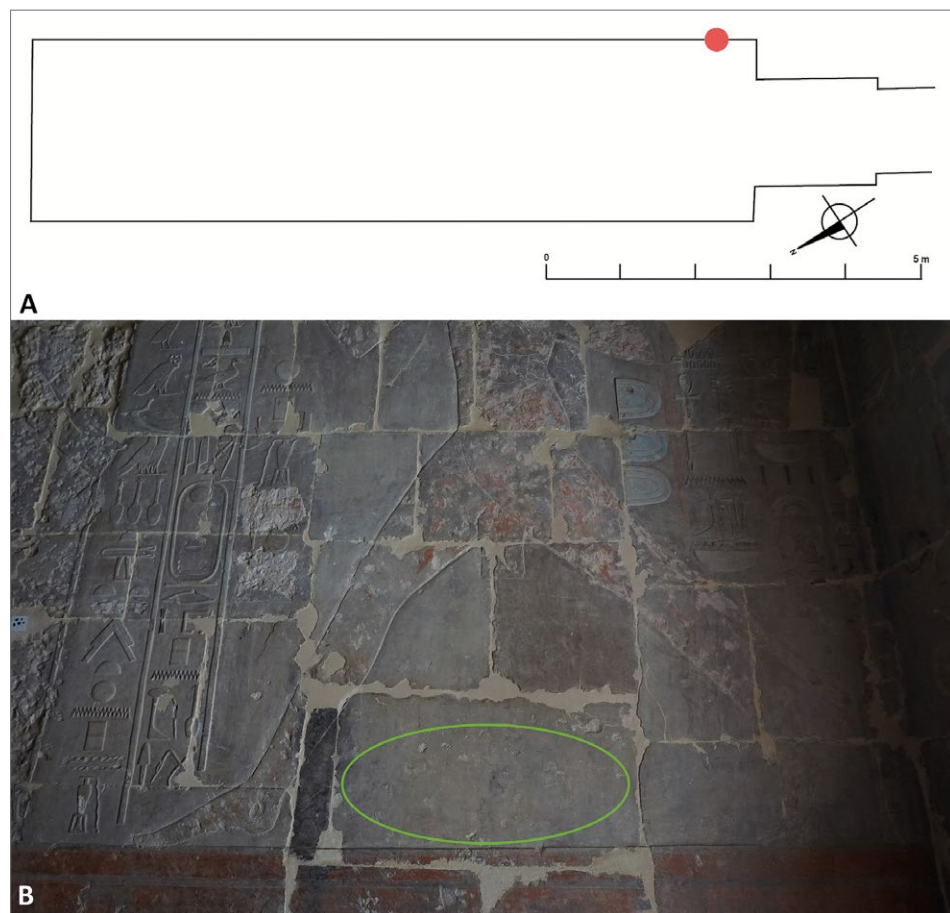


Fig. 5. Location of the drawings: A – on the plan (After Karkowski 2003: Pl. 1, redrawing K. Kasprzycka); B – on the east wall (PCMA UW | photo K. Kasprzycka)

It cannot, of course, be excluded that the scene recorded in the photograph came from some other, unknown monument. Nevertheless, the similarity of Greene's photograph of the squeeze and the depictions in the so-called "small

niches" in the west wall of the Upper Court of the Temple of Hatshepsut is remarkable. Given Greene's presence in Deir el-Bahari and his exploration of the Northern Room of Amun, it is highly likely that the squeeze in the photograph was made in one of the "small niches".

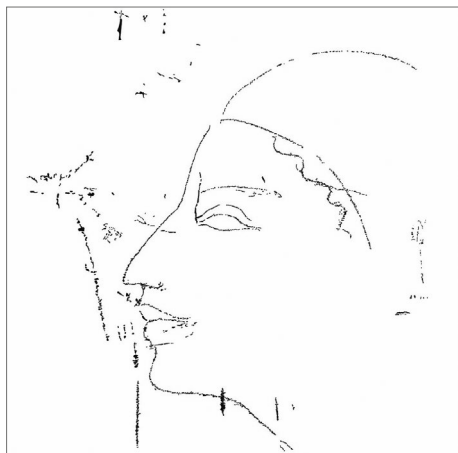


Fig. 6. Drawing of a head on the east wall (Rendering K. Kasprzycka)

MYSTERIOUS DRAWINGS

The east wall of the room featured barely visible drawings, made in pencil, at a height of approximately 1.6 m above the pavement [Fig. 5]. One depicts a face in profile [Fig. 6], while another is a cartoon-like image of a head of a pharaoh wearing a white crown [Fig. 7:A], accompanied by a few individual lines [Fig. 7:B]. The drawings are undated and could have been created at any time between 1855 (or earlier) and 2018, when they were first recorded. While the circumstances

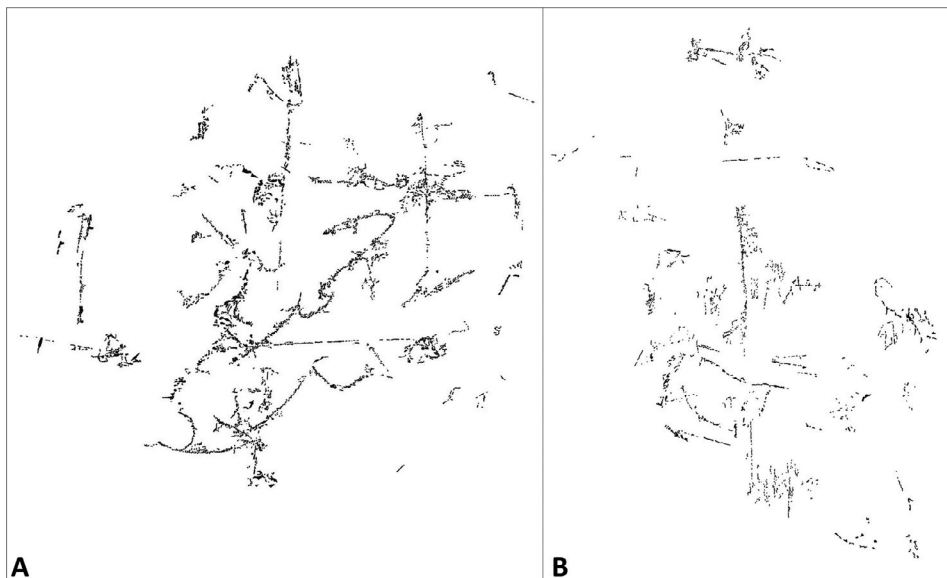


Fig. 7. Drawings on the east wall: A – a head of a pharaoh wearing a white crown (?); B – a few individual lines (Rendering K. Kasprzycka)

of their creation remain unknown, it is tempting to hypothesize that they were made by Greene. The latter, though impossible to prove, is based on a note by Naville (1895: 2), who maintained that Greene reached the southeast corner of the Northern Room of Amun, where the pencil drawings were found.

Naville also believed that the young scholar may have discovered and excavated the three tombs from the Third Intermediate Period located in this chamber. When the Swiss archaeologist excavated these tombs, they proved to be almost empty, except for a few artifacts he considered of no value (Naville 1895: 2). A fourth tomb from the Third Intermediate Period in the same room, rediscovered in 1999/2000 by the Polish-Egyptian Ar-

chaeological and Conservation Mission at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, also appeared to have been discovered and partly excavated in the past (Szafrński 2001: 196–199; Barwik 2003: 122). Naville assumed that because Greene entered the Northern Room of Amun, he must have found the tombs and explored them. It seems very likely, though by no means certain, that Greene was the only explorer of the Northern Room of Amun before Naville. However, nothing supports the hypothesis that it was Greene who discovered the tombs. They could also have been excavated much earlier, even in antiquity. In spite of this, the hypothesis that J.B. Greene was their first discoverer remains very appealing, even if impossible to prove at present.

EPILOGUE

In autumn 1856, Greene returned to Egypt. Already seriously ill, he had hoped that the climate there would help him recover quickly, but he died soon after arriving in Cairo (Keller 2018: 128). As indicated in an obituary published by the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, Greene's intention was to extend and complete his previous research (Faits... 1856). Perhaps this information refers to the research conducted at Deir el-Bahari in 1855, which he found so interesting

that he decided to pursue it further.

Unfortunately, the documentation created by Greene in the Northern Room of Amun at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari is now lost, and it appears that the young scholar did not manage to publish it. One can only hope that it survives somewhere in the archives and will one day be found, thus helping to restore the memory of Greene's achievements in Deir el-Bahari to the history of Egyptology.

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