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CONTEXTUALIZING OLD KINGDOM ELITE TOMB DECORATION: FIXED RULES VERSUS PERSONAL CHOICE

Nico STARING
(Leiden University)

The study of Old Kingdom elite tomb decoration for a long time focused on the scenes' representational content. In recent years the focus of research has shifted towards contextualizing the decoration in the tomb's architectural setting and towards an understanding of the motives behind its establishment.

Such an approach, in which the profane scene's content is understood as offering an insight into the elite society *as it was* is subsidiary to the context in which these scenes are applied, is the subject of my research¹. The same profane scenes still present us with the main source for the study of Old Kingdom elite society. However, this study does not necessarily focus on a scene's representational content alone, but also on the wider context, which is the overall layout and disposition of the iconographic programme. This results in a more systematical, holistic approach to the study of Old Kingdom elite tombs: from studying isolated, individual scenes towards a psychology behind the establishment of these programmes. An all-encompassing, coherent study of all scenes has to date proven to be unattainable. Therefore, this same vast amount of iconographic data has paradoxically obstructed the examination of data to its full potential. From the early 1980s onwards, a database incorporating all data related to the iconographic programmes of all published Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs has been compiled at the University of Leiden². This mastaba database has provided me with the majority of data³. Without this access, it would not have been feasible to process and examine the same number of scenes.

A first problem one encounters when studying a tomb's decoration, even before considering its wider context, is to divide the enormous collection of scenes into a selected number of themes. Over the years, several such sub-divisions have been

¹ The subject of the present paper is abstracted from my MA-thesis, submitted to the University of Leiden: N.T.B. STARING, *Fixed rules versus personal choice. The dynamics of Memphite Old Kingdom elite tomb decoration*, Unpublished MA-thesis (Leiden, 2008).

² R. VAN WALSEM, *Mastabase: a research tool for the study of the secular or "daily life" scenes and their accompanying texts in the elite tombs of the Memphite area in the Old Kingdom* (Leuven, 2008).

³ I am indebted to René van Walsem, my thesis supervisor, for providing me access to the *MastaBase* and for his stimulating discussions on the subject.

proposed⁴. The thematic sub-division adopted for the Leiden Mastaba Project resulted in a total number of 17 main themes⁵. These could be further subdivided into 172 sub-themes. On the basis of a selection from this larger collection, I have aimed to attain a notion on the relationship between the iconographic programme and tomb architecture. The selection has been made on the basis of the shared main subject of scenes. This similarity is expressed through their exclusive occupation with desert cattle. As such, the desert hunt, slaughtering of desert cattle, the offering procession of desert cattle and stock/cattle breeding have been studied. These four themes have been included in the decoration of 118 tombs of the larger Memphite region, distributed over the cemetery fields of Giza, Abusir, Saqqara, Dahshur and Maidum. The same tombs were constructed in the course of the Old Kingdom⁶. Since the information on the decorative content of all published elite tombs of the region and period has been collected in the *MastaBase* (337 tombs), one can be sure to cover all tombs containing any of the selected themes⁷. The selection constituting the present dataset thus represents 35% of all known Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs.

Theme	Sub-theme	Tombs	Scenes	Registers
Hunt	Desert Hunt	16	18	46
Offerings	Procession of desert cattle	107	140	231
Slaughtering	Desert animals	19	24	24
Stock / cattle breeding	Care of desert cattle	5	5	10

Fig. 1. Studied (sub-)themes and their distribution over tombs, scenes and registers (quantity).

⁴ One of the most important of these studies is Y. HARPUR, *Decoration in Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom* (London, 1987). Harpur did not study the scene's contents, but moreover tried to contextualize the decoration and analyzed the *developments and innovations* that altered the composition of scenes.

⁵ R. VAN WALSEM, 'Sense and Sensibility. On the Analysis and Interpretation of the Iconography Programmes of Four Old Kingdom Elite Tombs', in: M. FITZENREITER and M. HERB (eds.), *Dekorierter Grabanlagen im Alten Reich: Methodik und Interpretation*, Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie 6 (London, 2006), Appendix 2.

⁶ For the chronology of the Old Kingdom, I follow E. HORNING *et al.*, *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 83 (Leiden, 2006), table on p. 490-1.

⁷ The tombs collected in the *MastaBase* not necessarily present all elite tombs that were ever constructed in the Memphite region during the Old Kingdom. To the contrary, they only constitute those tombs that have been preserved, even with as little traces as a few relief fragments, recovered and eventually documented. The extend to which this selection covers the total number that has ever been constructed, remains unknown.

Theme	Dynasty				Site				
	4	5	5/6	6	AS	D	G	M	S
Desert hunt	3	6	1	5	1	–	3	3	8
Procession of desert cattle	16	53	4	28	1	2	55	1	42
Slaughter of desert animals	2	8	–	6	–	–	5	2	9
Care of desert cattle	–	2	–	3	–	–	–	–	5

Fig. 2. Chronological and geographical distribution of themes.

The tenor of the present research could be well illustrated with Andrey Bolshakov, who noticed that “Every Egyptian tomb is unique as concerns its architecture and decoration, and unique is its decoration as regards the selection of represented topics, their treatment and their arrangement”⁸. The fact that no two tombs were identically executed regarding their decoration, let alone in combination with tomb architecture, seems to implicate that the tomb owner was totally free in composing the iconographic programme as he wished. Nevertheless, the restricted number of identified themes and the fact that these themes were repeatedly included into successive tombs, implicates that the choice was restricted, which then assumes the existence of certain rules to which a tomb owner had to conform. What I would like to discuss here, is to what extent the four desert animal-related themes were liable to fixed rules. The analysis of the selection of four themes might eventually present us with indications on the overall existence, or perhaps the absence of such fixed rules. Through a systematic analysis the character of the relation – consistency versus variation in placement – might be allocated.

The apparently random distribution of themes over the integral tomb layout could be illustrated with two examples. These constitute the tomb chapels of Ptahshepses and Atet: two tombs that differ in size, layout and their inclusion of either of the four selected themes. Both are also well separated in time and were constructed at different cemetery-sites. Nevertheless, both are obviously considered elite tombs. Their owners belong to the same layer of Egyptian society and their tombs are well recognizable, unmistakably destined for a member of the elite. Ptahshepses held the office of vizier during the second half of the Fifth Dynasty and constructed his tomb in Abusir, in close proximity to the royal funerary complex of his father-in-law, king Niuserre⁹. It concerns the largest private tomb built during the entire Old Kingdom. Notwithstanding the unprecedented stretch of wall surface potentially available for the application

⁸ A. BOLSHAKOV, ‘Arrangement of Murals as a Principle of Old Kingdom Tomb Decoration’, in: FITZENREITER and HERB (eds.), *Dekorierete Grabanlagen*, 37.

⁹ M. VERNER, *The Mastaba of Ptahshepses. Reliefs I/1*, Abusir I (Prague, 1977), 80-2, pl. 41-2.

of decoration, only one of four selected themes has been included into the tomb's iconographic programme¹⁰. The offering procession of desert cattle has been applied on the wall of the doorway between the cult chapel and the columned hall. The much smaller Maidum based tomb chapel of Atet, the wife of Nefermaat, consists of only one single, cruciform room with the false door in a niche in the western wall¹¹. Nevertheless, three of the four selected themes have been included. In the entrance corridor one notices the offering procession and desert hunt, while the cult chapel contains the offering procession, desert hunt and a slaughtering scene. Deduced from only these two examples, one assumes no direct, linear relationship between tomb size and the inclusion of certain themes. To be able to study the exact coherence between the two, a much larger number of tombs should be considered. Also a method should be developed through which a possible relationship and development could be allocated.

By dividing the total iconographic programme into themes, and by arranging scenes from different programmes into these themes, one also de-contextualizes the individual data. In order to analyze the context in which scenes were arranged, an opposite approach towards the study of these scenes is required. In that respect, a single scene could be analyzed on several levels. The context of the scene or theme within the larger iconographic programme *and* the iconographic programme in the context of the tomb structure will be considered as the external aspects. The study of the scene's representational content, then, will be regarded as the internal aspects. As opposed to these descriptive, quantitative data are the qualitative aspects. Such a study is concerned with the meaning or message that is integrated in the representation¹². A problem connected to the study of the qualitative aspects, is that the meaning of an image is not always made apparent unambiguously through the depiction only. As a result, the interpretation of these data will be highly subjective. I will restrict myself to the quantitative data, more specifically the external aspects.

The external aspects could be divided into a large number of different factors that define the place of a certain scene or theme inside the architectural entity of the tomb chapel. While I speak here of *the* external factors, it should be stressed that these not

¹⁰ One should, however, be aware of the fact that the tomb's superstructure has not been preserved undamaged. It is only in the current state of the tomb that just the offering procession of desert cattle has been documented. The original decoration could not be reconstructed and therefore the iconographic programme might, potentially, have included more of the selected themes. This is not only a limitation regarding the tomb of Ptahshepses. The problem is much more widespread and is a severe limitation to the research.

¹¹ Y. HARPUR, *The Tombs of Nefermaat and Rahotep at Maidum. Discovery, Destruction and Reconstruction*, Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom I (Oxford, 2001), 77-94, fig. 79-80, 86, 88.

¹² R. van Walsem defines the qualitative aspects, which he considers the *Sinnbild* character of a scene, as "[...] a mental image having a literal plus a metaphorical or allegorical meaning in a one-to-two relation with a material and immaterial reality, coinciding with a representation of the optically observable, material, but in fact ideological and/or ideational reality [...]": R. VAN WALSEM, *Iconography of Old Kingdom Elite Tombs. Analysis & Interpretation, Theoretical and Methodological Aspects* (Leiden, 2005), 71.

necessarily include all factors that were of any influence, large scale or small scale, on a certain theme in the tomb chapel. As long as we do not clearly understand the inter-dependability of all factors and of all sources that were of any influence on the iconographic programme, we cannot be certain when ascribing particular events as the driving force behind changes in these data. Many more factors are responsible for the resulting tomb per individual, irrespective their social status and wealth. Some argue that there are several “key indicators” for the social status of the tomb owner¹³. Only two such “key indicators”, architectural layout and decoration, will be considered in my research¹⁴. The external factors that were selected and analyzed at least should offer a good point of departure. When the outcome of the analysis inclines towards a consistency, such as in orientation, tomb size and location, this might expose the existence of “rules”, whereas randomness repudiates a direct correlation and implies a rather free, personal choice of the tomb owner for the in- or exclusion, composition and disposition of themes in the iconographic programme and tomb layout.

Before turning attention to the relation between tomb architecture and its decoration, one should first consider its implications. The general trend in elite tomb development during the Old Kingdom could be characterized as one from a single-room tomb chapel, such as the chapel of Atet, towards the multi-roomed tomb complexes, consisting of many different space units, such as the tomb of Ptahshepses. This does not rule out that single-roomed and multi-roomed chapels were constructed simultaneously *or* that multi-roomed chapels predate single-roomed structures. Apparently, the tomb has developed far beyond its primary *raison d'être* of simply localizing a burial, as R. van Walsem has noticed¹⁵. The more than 30 rooms in the tomb of Mereruka¹⁶ were not necessary if the tomb's single function was only for the disposal of the body of the deceased tomb owner. The tomb is moreover a medium to display the owner's status already acquired during his life and to the memory of his status after death. Since the tomb owner starts building his tomb during his lifetime, the tomb, with its architecture, equipment, decoration and texts, presented the ideal place for the self-representation of the tomb owner¹⁷. Already some time ago, N. Kanawati suggested that the costliness of the tombs reflects the tomb owner's wealth¹⁸. This hypothesis supposes a one-to-one relation between wealth and tomb size. N. Strudwick (amongst others) commented that such a thesis must then assume that every tomb owner would put exactly the same

¹³ N. ALEXANIAN, 'Tomb and social status. The textual evidence', in: M. BÁRTA (ed.), *The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology. Proceedings of the conference held in Prague, May 31 – June 4, 2004* (Prague, 2006), 1.

¹⁴ The other “key indicators” include the position of a tomb in the cemetery, the total area the tomb occupies, its equipment, and the burial ceremony.

¹⁵ VAN WALSEM, *Iconography*, 2.

¹⁶ P. DUELL, *The Mastaba of Mereruka* (Chicago, 1938), pl. 1.

¹⁷ ALEXANIAN, in: BARTA (ed.), *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology*, 2.

¹⁸ N. KANAWATI, *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom: evidence on its economic decline* (Warminster, 1977), 1.

proportion of their wealth in their tomb¹⁹. That a large tomb was indeed desirable for the elite is well illustrated by the autobiographical text in the tomb of Hezi, who was vizier during the reign of Teti and was buried in Saqqara²⁰. Hezi states that he had the opportunity to construct a larger tomb, but, for non-specified reasons, decided not to act accordingly. Thus, the combination of status, wealth and even royal permission do not result, by definition, in a correspondingly anticipated tomb. There is a difference between royal permission and the ability, through financial potential, of the tomb owner to fulfill the associated expectations. Even *if* both these factors are favourable for the tomb owner, these do not necessarily result in a large tomb, the superstructure of which contains space units that are not of direct, utmost relevance for a successful performance of the cult for the benefit of the deceased tomb owner. These factors might be multifaceted, dependent on the unique circumstances surrounding each individual tomb and its owner²¹.

The communicative character of a tomb, in addition to the practical function of localizing a burial, has also been argued by D. Vischak²². The tomb owner, by constructing such a tomb, expressed high status, which is his or her identity as an elite member of Egyptian society. The early elite initially expressed their status through tomb architecture²³. Only much later, with the ascendance of the Old Kingdom, this was supplemented with representations or writing, thus an iconographic programme. The subject matter of the royal and non-royal sphere differ considerably. The royal art has a limited *cosmos*, focusing on the king, and stressing a degree of exclusiveness, as J. Baines formulates: “The exclusiveness of art is part of a wider exclusiveness”²⁴. None of the Old Kingdom tombs, for example, ever included the image of the king. So even though there seems to have been possibilities in choice, the content and number of subjects was restricted²⁵.

¹⁹ N. STRUDWICK, *The administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom: The highest titles and their holders* (London, 1985), 5.

²⁰ N. KANAWATI and M. ABDER RAZIQ, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara. Volume V: The Tomb of Hesi*, The Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports 13 (Warminster, 1999), 38, pls. 33a, 59a. For a more extensive discussion on the implications of this text, see D.P. SILVERMAN, ‘The Threat-Formula and Biographical Text in the Tomb of Hezi at Saqqara’, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 37 (2000), 1-13.

²¹ Also V. Chauvet argues that, what she calls, a “contextual analysis” is a “[...] crucial element in understanding Hezi’s motivations”: V. CHAUVET, ‘Royal involvement in the construction of private tombs’, in: J.-C. GOYON and C. CARDIN (eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists. Grenoble, 6-12 septembre 2004. Volume I* (Leuven, 2007), 319. In the case of Hezi, this might very well have been the geographical location of the tomb in the middle of the, at that time already, crowded Teti Cemetery.

²² D. VISCHAK, ‘Agency in Old Kingdom elite tomb programs: traditions, locations, and variable meanings’, in: FITZENREITER and HERB (eds.), *Dekorierte Grabanlagen*, 262.

²³ J. BAINES, ‘Communication and display: The integration of early Egyptian art and writing’, *Antiquity* 63 (1989), 479-80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 476.

²⁵ The differing subjects of themes included in the private tombs and the royal funerary complexes are striking. Not many themes have been included in the iconographic programmes of both. For a list of the

The rules of decorum in art are hierarchical, as Baines argues, being “[...] a set of rules and practices defining what may be represented pictorially with captions, displayed, and possibly written down, in which context and in what form”²⁶.

These considerations indicate that there are already some thoughts and ideas on the iconographic programme beyond its representational character. The external data of the four selected themes are analyzed systematically in order to allocate eventual rules in private tomb decoration, expressed through its relation with tomb architecture. My hypothesis is that the size of a tomb, and in accordance the disposition of architectural elements, was of direct influence on the composition of the iconographic programme. Basically, one can assume that the larger the tomb is, the more wall space will be available for the application of decoration. To test this hypothesis, the 118 tomb chapels in which the four selected themes occur, have been divided into five basic types (fig. 3). The construction of this typology is based on the relative size of the chapels, expressed through the number of, not necessarily decorated, rooms. Although a much more refined subdivision is possible, the applied categorization should suffice for answering the present research question. In order to determine the exact location of a scene inside the tomb chapel, irrespective of tomb size, a set of architectural elements has been distinguished. The results of the analysis are presented in the graphs of figure 3. For each sub-theme, the relation between tomb size and architectural element has been indicated in a diagram. The size of the circles corresponds to the frequency with which a specific combination has been attested.

Even though the scenes were distributed over some tomb types, all differing considerably with regards to their architectural build-up, complexity and size, the data indicate preferences for the placement of themes inside the tomb structures. This high consistency for the choice of location within the tomb structure, also compared between structures of different types, implies rules for the arrangement and distribution of the iconographic programme over the tomb's interior. If a tomb owner decides to include, for example, the slaughtering of desert animals into his tomb's iconographic programme, these should be depicted in the cult chapel. Eventual additional depictions of this activity could be applied on the walls of other rooms, though in close proximity to the cult chapel. Since the available wall space in the cult chapels is restricted and the fact that there is (normally) only one such chapel containing a false door, the tomb owner should decide which theme to include *and*, as a result, also which theme to exclude. The fact that the subject already occurs in the smallest tombs and that it was not included in the larger complexes outside the cult chapel, even though there would

thematic sub-division of scenes from the royal funerary complexes, see A. ĆWIEK, *Relief decoration in the royal funerary complexes of the Old Kingdom. Studies in the development, scene content and iconography*, PhD thesis (Warsaw, 2003), 152-271.

²⁶ J. BAINES, 'Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy, and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 27 (1990), 20.

have been plenty of wall surface available, indicates that the theme could only be represented in this single architectural space unit. To which degree, if at all, this has been due to the existence of certain rules, based on the connotations of the theme relating it exclusively to the cult chapel, is hard to determine based on the results of four themes only. It seems, though, that if one decides to include other themes into the decoration of the cult chapel, one has to leave the slaughtering theme out of the programme: out of the cult chapel since it simply has no more available wall space, and out of the remaining part of the superstructure, since the theme loses its cultic or symbolic meaning there.

The personal choice of the tomb owner is evidenced in the selection of themes included into the overall tomb programme and not so much so in the location he allocated for that particular theme. Each theme had (a) specific location(s) where it *could* be applied. The selection of one particular theme, therefore, could result in the necessary exclusion of another, not only from that locality, but moreover from the iconographic programme all-together. This conclusion is supported by the results of all selected themes discussed here: the exclusion of the theme from the larger majority of Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs on the one hand and the confined choice of location for the application of the theme on the other.

To return to the main question posed at the beginning of this paper, the selected themes indeed indicate a certain degree of homogeneity with regards to their inclusion, and disposition over the tomb chapel. The degree of restrictedness, either to tomb size, architectural entity, orientation of the wall on which the scene has been applied, or its place in the wall's composition seem to comply with the degree of dispensability or indispensability of the scene. The lower the esteem for the (deceased) tomb owner, expressed in the absolute number of examples of the concerned theme, the more obvious the relation with the external aspects, although not all necessarily to the same degree. None of the indicators tend towards complete randomness nor restrictedness. This ambiguous result leaves one to conclude that the "rules", applied to private tomb decoration, offered a set of possibilities instead of one definite choice. Furthermore, it seems as if the thematic content of the tomb chapel's iconographic programme constituted "basic needs" that could only be supplemented with additional, less indispensable themes when extra wall surface so allowed. The association which is inherent to a certain thematic representation, for example to a certain physical orientation or architectural space unit, furthermore regulated a theme's possible inclusion. Therefore, the inclusion of themes in the iconographic programme of a tomb chapel was indeed subject to certain rules. Nevertheless, it remains the tomb owner who decides in the first place which theme to include. It is especially the less common themes that offered an excellent tool to personalize one's tomb superstructure.

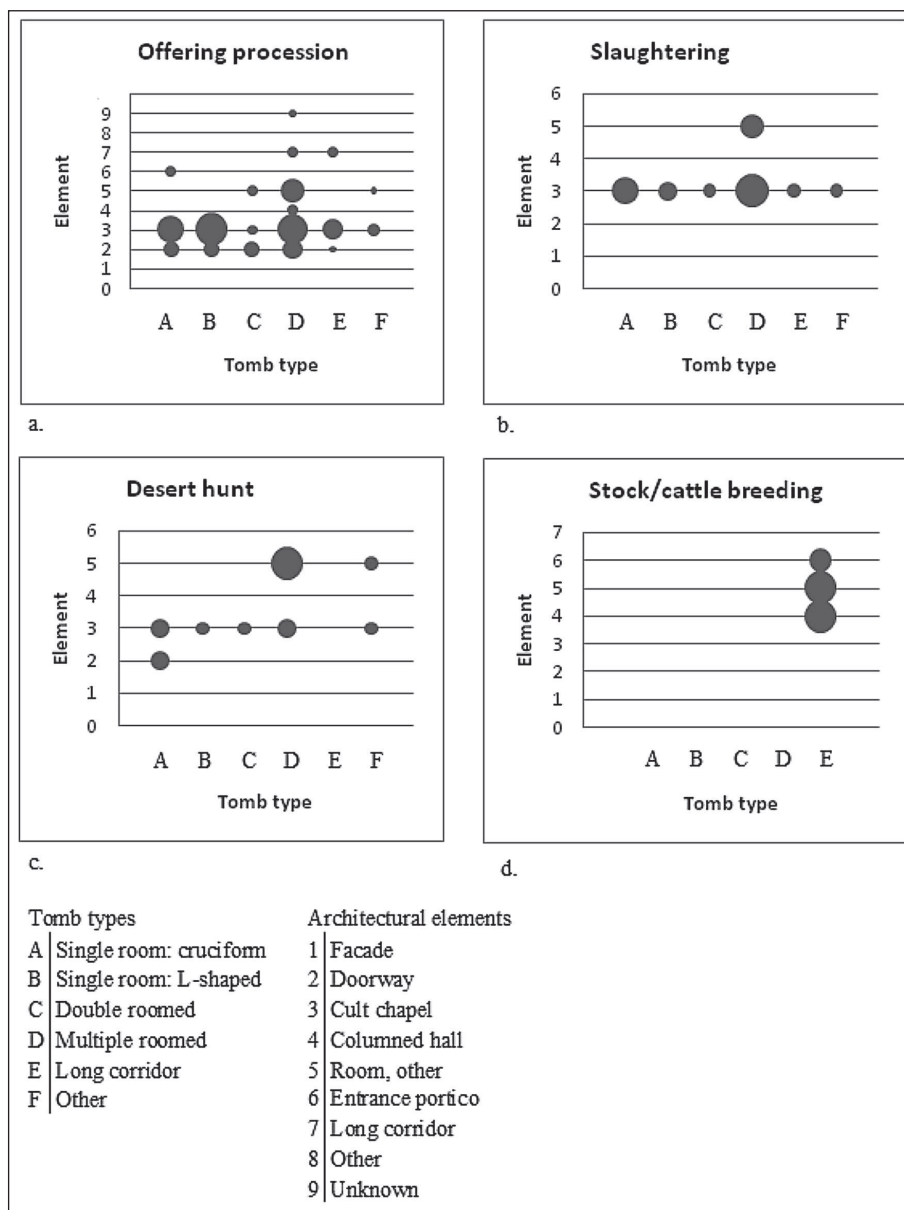


Fig. 3. Graphical renderings of the relation of four selected iconographic themes with a combination of tomb size and architectural elements.