

THE RAMESSIDE PERIOD IN EGYPT
STUDIES INTO CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PROCESSES
OF THE 19TH AND 20TH DYNASTIES

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ABTEILUNG KAIRO

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Tombs and their owners

Art and identity in late Ramesside Thebes

By TAMÁS A. BÁCS

Introduction

As in previous periods, the late New Kingdom Theban tomb-chapels offer intriguing insights into appreciating the ways in which funerary art could be used to convey the multifaceted identities of the social elite of contemporary Thebes. Identity communication and self-presentation being a basic function of tomb-chapels has been widely recognized and discussed of course, as have its many aspects¹. Besides the most basic signifier publicising social status, namely the fact of being in a position to own a mortuary monument comprising a decorated tomb-chapel at all, these include a host of referential features ranging from spatial context, size, or architecture to decorative program including the textual².

While the late Ramesside makeup of the Theban necropolis' mortuary landscape differed significantly from that of earlier periods of the New Kingdom, the established form of elite burial remained the so-called 'temple-tomb'³. Despite socio-political realities the Theban elite and sub-elite upheld and continued a funerary behaviour that was by the second half of the Twentieth Dynasty, if not earlier, impractical and in a sense outdated⁴. Similarly to the Eighteenth or Nineteenth

Dynasties, however, membership in either social group did not automatically translate into possessing a decorated mortuary monument⁵. Except for the very highest elite, the evidence for understanding who could and who could not "afford" to have one among those belonging to comparable social levels is simply missing, making it nearly impossible to generalize. Even a cursory glance at the titles of an admittedly arbitrary sample of late Ramesside tomb-owners taken only from the Sheikh Abd el-Qurna area of the necropolis clearly reflects their patchwork-like social composition (Table 1)⁶.

Tracing the once undoubtedly existing networks of clientele, professional or other associations, and friendship between tomb-owners of different social backgrounds and standings, on the one hand, or those connecting them to the artisans who were capable of such work, however, proves nearly impossible, not the least because of a lack of a finer chronology. But even when direct evidence exists that shows, for example, that the chief draughtsman of Deir el-Medina, Amenhotep, decorated a middling non-royal tomb (TT 113) during the reign of Ramesses VIII, questions, as how, unlike others, a mid-level priest such as Kynebu could employ the leading artist of contemporary Thebes, still

¹ For the multifunctionality of tomb-chapels in general, see ASSMANN 1983, XVI–XVII; for the Old Kingdom, e.g. ALTENMÜLLER 2006; more recently for Eighteenth Dynasty examples, ROBINS 2016. From the extensive literature on identity expression and mortuary monuments, see e.g. BICKEL 2006; ENGELMANN-VON CARNAP 1995; ENGELMANN-VON CARNAP 1999; FITZENREITER 1995; FITZENREITER 2004; HARTWIG 2004; HOFMANN 2012; or VERNUS 2009–2010.

² Summarized most recently in ROBINS 2016.

³ See ASSMANN 2003; or alternatively named as 'tomb-temple', RUMMEL 2013a and with further literature, RUMMEL 2013b; for a survey of late Ramesside mortuary monuments in Thebes, see BÁCS 2011b.

⁴ BÁCS 2015; also COONEY 2011; COONEY 2012.

⁵ Even from the early to mid-Eighteenth Dynasty, where these seem to reflect more or less contemporary status and wealth differentiation, tomb-ownership shows discrepancies not easy to explain, see ENGELMANN-VON CARNAP 1995; in more depth ENGELMANN-VON CARNAP 1999; noted also in ROBINS 2016, 202.

⁶ Based on KAMPP's (KAMPP 1996, 147–148) calculations. 54 tombs or at least some parts/phases of their decoration date to the Twentieth Dynasty in the Theban necropolis, to which a so far indefinable number should be added from those 114 labelled as "Ramesside" or "Ramesside – Twenty-first Dynasty"; see also the review in BÁCS 2011b, 6–10.