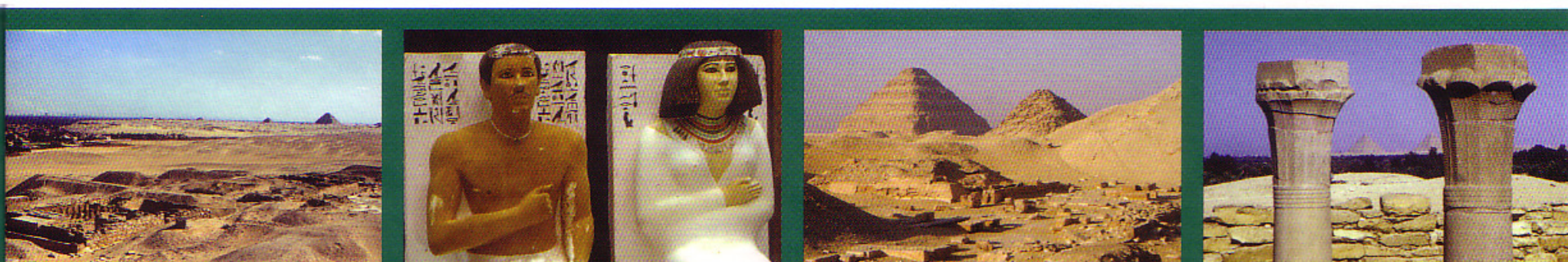
THE OLD KINGDOM ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Proceedings of the Conference



Prague, May 31 – June 4, 2004

Miroslav Bárta
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THE OLD KINGDOM ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD IN PRAGUE, MAY 31 – JUNE 4, 2004

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Czech Institute of Egyptology
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Contributors

Nicole Alexanian, James P. Allen, Susan Allen, Hartwig Altenmüller, Tarek El Awady, Miroslav Bárta, Edith Bernhauer, Edward Brovarski, Vivienne G. Callender, Vassil Dobrev, Laurel Flentye, Rita Freed, Julia Harvey, Salima Ikram, Peter Jánosi, Nozomu Kawai, Jaromír Krejčí, Kamil O. Kuraszkiewicz, Renata Landgráfová, Serena Love, Dušan Magdolen, Peter Der Manuelian, Ian Mathieson, Karol Myśliwiec, Stephen R. Phillips, Gabriele Pieke, Ann Macy Roth, Joanne M. Rowland, Regine Schulz, Yayoi Shirai, Nigel Strudwick, Miroslav Verner, Hana Vymazalová, Sakuji Yoshimura, Christiane Ziegler

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Contents

Foreword

It is with pleasure that after more than two years the publication of the lectures held during the conference on the Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology in Prague in the year 2004 (May 3 – June 4) has been made possible.

The conference held in Prague continued the tradition of previous meetings by being dedicated to the same subject: art and its dating in the Old Kingdom of Egypt: the period that forms the first apogee of the developing Egyptian state. The tradition of these irregular meetings was established in 1991 by Hourig Sourouzian and Rainer Stadelmann, at that time the Director of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo, who organised the first conference.[1] The second meeting also took place in Cairo, at this time the place of the venue was the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology and the conference, held on November 10–13, 1994, was organised by its director Nicolas Grimal.[2] The penultimate meeting took place in Paris, France, on April 3–4, 1998, and was organised by Christiane Ziegler, Chief Conservator of Egyptian Antiquities in the Louvre.[3]

The present volume continues a well-established and successful tradition of post-conference publications. As such, it makes available most of the contributions that were presented during the conference in Prague. It was mainly the scientific profile of the Czech Institute of Egyptology that led us to substantially widen the scope of the conference in 2004. The total of thirty-three contributions presented in this volume cover various aspects connected to Old Kingdom culture, not only its art, but also its archaeology and architecture, selected administrative problems, iconography, texts and the latest, often first time published results of ongoing excavations. From the list of contributions it becomes evident that natural sciences and their application in the widest sense receive general acceptance and support from among Egyptologists. It is one of the few aspects that can in the future significantly enhance our understanding of specific issues connected to the Old Kingdom art and archaeology.

Eng. Marta Štrachová carefully edited the manuscript and was essential in producing this volume. The advice and guidance of Eng. Jolana Malátková also proved indispensable. The Czech Academy of Sciences is to be thanked for the production of the book. Last but not least, it was Prof. Dr. Jean Leclant, Secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Paris, and the chair of the European branch of the Fondation Michela Schiff Giorgini, and Prof. Dr. David Silverman, University of Pennsylvania, chair of the North American branch of the the Fondation Michela Schiff Giorgini and the respective committees that approved this publication and agreed to support it financially.

Miroslav Bárta

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[1] The conference was held in the German Archaeological Institute, Cairo, on October 29–30, and the proceedings published in 1995 in the volume *Kunst des Alten Reiches. Symposium des Deutschen Archäologischen Institut Kairo am 29. und 30. Oktober 1991*, *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo*, *Sonderschrift* 28, Mainz am Rhein.
[2] N. Grimal, ed., *Lex critères de datation stylistiques à l´Ancien Empire, Bibliothèque d´Étude* 120 (Cairo, 1998).
[3] Ch. Ziegler, N. Palayret, eds., *L'Art de l'Ancien Empire égyptien. Actes du colloque organisé au Musée du Louvre par le Service culturel les 3 et 4 avril 1998* (Paris, 1999).

Bibliography

Abbreviations for journals, series and monographs used throughout the volume follow the system of *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (cf. *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, *Band* VII. *Nachträge, Korrekturen und Indices*, founded by W. Helck and E. Otto, edited by W. Helck and W. Westendorf, Wiesbaden 1992, XIV–XXXVIII).

The following additional abbreviations are also used:

ACER – *The Australian Centre for Egyptology: Reports*, Sydney;
AOS – *American Oriental Society*, Michigan;
BSAK – *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur, Beihefte*, Hamburg;
CA – *Current Anthropology*, Chicago, Illinois;
Hannig, *Handwörterbuch* – R. Hannig, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen. Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800–950 v. Chr.)*, Mainz 1995;
Harpur, *DETOK* – Y. Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom. Studies in Orientation and Scene Content*, London and New York 1988;
Harvey, *WSOK* – J. Harvey, *Wooden Statues of the Old Kingdom. A Typological Study, Egyptological Memoirs 2*, Leiden 2001;
KAW – Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt, Mainz am Rhein;
LingAeg – Lingea Aegyptia, Journal of Egyptian language Studies, Göttingen;
OrMonsp – Orientalia Monspeliensia, Montpellier;
PAM – Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean, Warsaw;
SAGA – Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens, Heidelberg;
WES – Warsaw Egyptological Studies, Warsaw.

Tomb and social status. The textual evidence*

Nicole Alexanian

Introduction

The position of a tomb in a cemetery, the total area which it occupied, its architectural lay-out, decoration, equipment, and the burial ceremony have been traditionally regarded as key indicators for the social status of the tomb-owner. A. M. Roth, for example, has compiled a list of criteria for identifying the social position of the tomb-owner.[1] Nevertheless a direct correlation between tomb-size and the titles of the tomb-owner has also been questioned in egyptological literature.[2] The correlation between tomb and social status is also one of the main topics in theoretical, archaeological literature. The discussion was begun by the so-called 'New Archaeology' represented by L. R. Binford, J. A. Brown and A. A. Saxe. They saw a more or less direct correlation between tomb and social status of the tomb-owner.[3] More recent research has modified this direct correlation. 'Post-Processual and Contextual Archaeology' have stressed that the social status is represented in a tomb with a symbolic code. This code can only be understood if one knows the specific social, cultural and religious context of a society. Therefore it seems necessary to examine more closely what was long taken for granted. It seems useful to consider different and independent sources providing information for the same problem. Egyptian texts represent one of these sources. They are of crucial importance for our inquiry because they give an inside view of Old Kingdom society. Consulting Egyptian texts gives us the certainty that we are not dealing with a theoretical construction of a modern scholar but with items considered as important in the ancient culture. Luckily we have quite a lot of textual evidence providing information about Old Kingdom tombs. In the following a number of questions concerning the erection and size of tomb and burial in relation to the status of the dead will be raised and tried to be answered with evidence of Egyptian texts.

The erection of a tomb and the organization of the burial

In archaeological theoretical literature it has been stressed that tombs might rather show the status of the living persons who organized the burial than the status of the buried person.[4] This is of course an important argument but in Ancient Egypt we have the anthropologically quite exceptional situation that the tomb-owner already began the construction of his tomb and the organisation of his burial equipment

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* I am indebted to Paul O. Ford for checking my English.

[1] A. M. Roth, *A Cemetery of Palace Attendants including G 2084–099, G 2230 + 2231, and G 2240, Giza Mastabas* 6 (Boston, 1995), 50.

[2] For example, P. Posener-Kriéger, 'review of N. Kanawati, *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom* (Warminster, 1977)', *BiOr* 37 (1980): 154.

[3] L. R. Binford, 'Mortuary Practices: Their Study and their Potential', in J. A. Brown, ed., *Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices, Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology* 25 (1971), 6–29; J. A. Brown, 'The Search for Rank in Prehistoric Burials', in R. Chapman, J. Kinnes, K. Randsborg, eds., *The Archaeology of Death* (Cambridge, 1981), 25–37; A. A. Saxe, *Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices*, Diss. (Michigan, 1970).

[4] E. Leach, 'Discussion', in B. J. Burnham, J. Kingsbury, eds., *Space, Hierarchy and Society. Interdisciplinary Studies in Social Area Analysis, BAR International Series* 59 (Oxford, 1979), 122.

when he was still alive. The autobiographical inscription of Weni makes this point clear (*Urk.* I, 99, 10–17 and 100, 1–4):[5]

'I requested of the majesty of my lord
that there be brought for me a sarcophagus of limestone from Tura.
His majesty caused a royal seal-bearer to cross over
with a company of sailors under his command,
to bring me this sarcophagus from Tura.
He came together with it in a great barge of the court,
together with its lid, a false-door, an architrave,
two doorjambs (?) and a libation-table.
Never before had the like been done for any servant –
because I was perfect in His Majesty's heart;
because I was rooted (?) in His Majesty's heart;
because His Majesty's heart was filled with me.'

Many other examples in autobiographical inscriptions prove that the tomb owner already looked after his tomb during his lifetime.[6] Therefore the tomb with its architecture, equipment, decoration and texts represented an ideal place for the self-representation of the owner. Of course not every tomb was erected by the tomb-owner himself. The inscription in the tomb of Tjenti at Giza, for example, shows that it was his eldest son who made his tomb for him, and this can be regarded as typical constellation (*Urk.* I, 8, 14–17):[7]

'It is his eldest son, the overseer of the funerary priests, the scribe Ptah-Iut-ni who made it for him,
when he was buried in the beautiful west
according to what he had said him about it
when he lived on his two legs.'

The inscription of Sabni I shows that he organised the entire burial for his father Mekhu after he had died during an expedition to Nubia (*Urk.* I, 139, 1):

'I buried this my father in his tomb in the necropolis.'

In these cases we must of course take into consideration that the tomb reflects the status of its owner as well as the status of the person who erected it.

Tomb and social status – general remarks

Further some have warned that, for example, the living persons who organized the burial might have used the ceremony as an opportunity to disguise or even invert social realities.[8] For the situation in Ancient Egypt one has to regard that

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[5] For the translation see N. Kloth, *Die (auto-) biographischen Inschriften des ägyptischen Alten Reiches: Untersuchungen zu Phraseologie und Entwicklung*, *BSAK* 8 (2002), 214; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* I (Berkeley, 1975), 19 and A. Roccati, *La littérature historique sous l´Ancien Empire égyptien*, *LAPO* 11 (1982), 192 with further reading.
[6] Compare Kloth, *Biographische Inschriften*, 122–128; 211–218.
[7] For the translation see J. Assmann, 'Schrift, Tod und Identität. Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur', in *idem*, *Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten* (Munich, 1991), 179. Further statements that the son erected a tomb for his father are quoted by W. Helck, 'Wirtschaftliche Bemerkungen zum privaten Grabbesitz im Alten Reich', *MDAIK* 14 (1956): 66.
[8] M. Parker-Pearson, 'Mortuary Practices, Society and Ideology: An Ethnoarchaeological Study', in J. Hodder, ed., *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1982), 99–113; I. Hodder, 'Social Structure and Cemeteries: A Critical Appraisal', in Ph. Rahtz, T. Dickinson, L. Watts, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries 1979, BAR British Series* 82 (Oxford, 1980), 167–168.

there is no indication that the social position or wealth of the tomb-owner was diminished or hidden. On the contrary Ancient Egypt was not the cultural setting for under-statement. High social status was regarded as absolutely positive and it can be observed that social hierarchies were even stressed in the language of funerary symbolism. In this context the enormous social inequality between the king and the other people, symbolized by gigantic pyramids versus smaller mastabas, has to be remembered. Furthermore, if the son organized the burial for his father, it has to be remembered that the son traditionally followed his father in his office. In view of his own future position the son was therefore interested to stress or at least to represent appropriately the social status of his father.

Official regulations for the erection of tombs

It is important to know whether or not written regulations existed, which defined who was allowed to have which kind of tomb. Did a central department exist, which regulated the occupation of a cemetery? How much knowledge was present concerning what kind of tomb a person was certain to receive and how was it communicated? Was the knowledge so embedded in social decorum that everyone knew which kind of tomb he could receive? Concerning a pyramid tomb, the answer is quite simple. Everyone in Old Kingdom Egypt would have known that only a king or queen could have a pyramid tomb. But for a mastaba or rock-cut-tomb, the situation seems to have been much more complicated.

The inscription of Debeheni, which is unfortunately now in an almost ruined condition, informs us that King Menkaura came to Giza in order to inspect the work being conducted at his pyramid-complex. During this occasion, the king himself determined the location for Debeheni's tomb (*Urk.* I, 18, 10–12):[9]

'Concerning this tomb, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Menkaura [...], determined its position for me.[10]
This happened [when His Majesty was on the] pathway next to the pyramid plateau, in order to inspect the work of the construction concerning the pyramid 'Menkaura is Divine'.'

Later the autobiographical inscription mentions that His Majesty assigned certain workmen to erect Debeheni's tomb, that His Majesty ordered the tomb chapel to be encased with blocks from Tura-limestone and that the tomb should be equipped with a statue. The end of this inscription informs us that (*Urk.* I, 21, 10–12):

'A royal decree was made for the overseer of [all the work for the king],
[and stone workers] to make it,
(namely) a tomb of one hundred cubits in length, fifty cubits in width and [8] cubits [in height].'

It becomes clear that the size of a tomb was regulated officially and that even the king himself assumed the responsibility of drafting a royal decree.

Another inscription at Deir el-Gebrawi also clearly proves the existence of documents regulating the erection of tombs. Djau states that he was buried together with his father (whose name was also Djau) in one tomb because he wanted to be

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[9] A translation and bibliography of the text is given by Roccati, *Littérature historique*, 91–93. See also Kloth, *Biographische Inschriften*, 184–187.
[10] After Hassan, *Gîza* IV, 168, note 1, fig. 118, who reads the hieroglyph of a seat (Gardiner sign Q 1) which is not inserted in *Urk.* I, 18. When I visited the tomb in 1999, I was almost certain that the seat-sign was there, although it was impossible to check the inscription carefully without a ladder. On the photograph published by Hassan (*ibid.*, pl. 48) it is impossible to make out such details.

close to him. He explicitly mentions that he took this decision although he had a document (ʿ) allowing him to erect his own tomb (*Urk.* I, 146, 16 and 147, 1–56):[11]

'I, however, caused that I was buried in one single tomb together with this Djau,
in order to be together with him at one place
and not because I did not have a document for the erection of two tombs.
On the contrary I erected this (tomb)
in order to see this Djau every day
and because of the wish that I may be together with him at one place.'

Tomb size

One criterium which is traditionally used for the classification of tombs is their size. In my doctoral dissertation I tried to show that tomb size is not just a construction of the modern archaeologist which allows him to classify tombs.[12] Rather, it became clear during a statistical analysis of the area of mastaba superstructures that groups of small (1–7 m^2), medium-sized (10–50 m^2), large (90–600 m^2) and monumental tombs (about 1,000 m^2) can be observed.

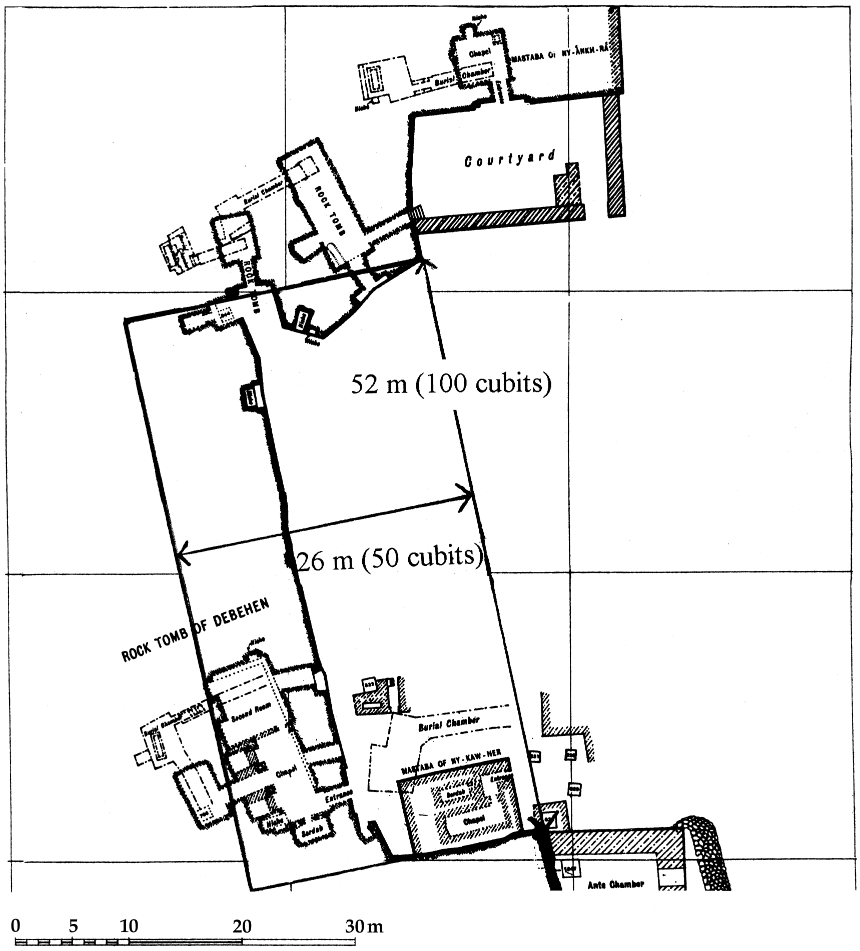

Fig. 1 Parcel of land occupied by the tomb of Debeheni at Giza (Cemetery plan after Hassan, *Gîza* IX)

Textual evidence also gives us an important clue that the size of a tomb was indeed considered to be quite relevant in Ancient Egyptian society. Very important in this respect is the already quoted autobiographical inscription of Debeheni in his rock-cut tomb at Giza. It is explicitly stated here that the size of a tomb was determined

[11] Kloth, *Biographische Inschriften*, 217; Roccati, *Littérature historique*, 227.
[12] N. Alexanian, *Die provinziellen Mastabagräber und Friedhöfe im Alten Reich*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Heidelberg, 2000).

by the length, width and height of the superstructure. The measurements were given in cubits. It can be concluded from the inscription that the size of a tomb was considered to be so important that it was written down in a royal decree.

At this point one should also ask how the information given in the inscription correlates with the actual tomb itself. At first sight, textual information and actual data do not correspond (*fig. 1*). Due to the fact that the size of Debeheni's rock-cut tomb is much smaller than the measurements given in the inscription, Reisner assumed, although he had absolutely no evidence for it, that a now totally vanished mastaba existed above the rock-cut tomb.[13] Selim Hassan on the other hand rightly stressed that the whole facade of the tomb has to be taken into consideration.[14] This facade, which was covered with sand at Reisner's time, has an inclination like a mastaba façade. The total length of the façade is 46.50 m. Although this measurement comes close to 100 cubits, the data does not correspond exactly. A much better correspondence results, however, if one takes into account the whole parcel of land occupied by the tomb, which includes the courtyard before the tomb. The front part of the courtyard measures 52 m in length and this corresponds to the length of 100 cubits mentioned in the inscription. More difficult to determine is the width of the tomb. If 50 cubits (26.25 m) are projected from this front line to the west, one is situated at the back of the chapel, wherefore it seems that this line, and not the maximum extension of the subterranean rooms, was considered as the tomb-limit (compare *fig. 1*). I did not find information on the height of the tomb-façade, but Selim Hassan states that the entrance doorway measures 3 m in height.

Tomb-size and social status

After demonstrating that the size of a tomb was indeed a relevant feature in the mind of the Ancient Egyptian tomb-owner, one should then logically ask whether tomb-size and social-status were related, and if so, in what manner specifically.

In this respect the inscription of Debeheni is again relevant. If the reconstruction and interpretation of the end of the inscription as it was proposed by Reisner, Roccati and Hassan is correct,[15] it is also stressed that the tomb of Debeheni is larger than the one of his father. This makes it clear that the size of one's own tomb was compared to that of others, and would seem to indicate that the tomb-size, in a larger sense, was interpreted as a scale of achievement within one's lifetime (*Urk.* I, 21, 14):

'... larger than that which my father made while he was alive....'

The already discussed autobiographical inscription of Djau demonstrates that one normally would expect a man in Djau's position (as nomarch of Deir el-Gebrawi) to possess his own individual tomb. The fact that Djau is buried together with his father is so unusual that Djau had to explicitly explain his decision in his autobiography.

Another exceptional text in the tomb of Hezi at the Teti cemetery at Saqqara confirms what we concluded from Debeheni´s and Djau´s inscriptions:[16]

'I have ordered (only) one room to be made in this my tomb
for invocation-offerings be made for me therein,
(although) I would have had the possibility to equip it with a lot of rooms.'

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[13] Reisner, *Mycerinus*, 258.
[14] Hassan, *Gîza* IV, 163, fig. 120.
[15] ... [*wr*] *r jr jt(=j) pf sk sw ꜥnḫ.w. Ibid.*, 169; Reisner, *Mycerinus*, 258; Roccati, *Littérature historique*, 227.
[16] N. Kanawati, M. Abder-Raziq, *The Tomb of Hesi, The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara* V, *ACER* 13 (1999), 37–38, pl. 59; N. Kanawati, 'The Tomb of Hesi', *BACE* 10 (1999): 67–76; D. Silverman, 'The Threat-Formula and Biographical Text in the Tomb of Hezi at Saqqara', *JARCE* 37 (2000): 13, fig. 4. For the translation, compare also Kloth, *Biographische Inschriften*, 217.

Here it becomes perfectly clear that Hezi was absolutely aware that more than one room was expected for his tomb. He states that he also had the power (i.e. the position and the means) to equip it with more rooms. Due to the fact that the number of rooms reflect the social position on the part of its owner, Hezi, who held the position of a vizier, felt it necessary to emphasize that he took it freely upon himself to equip his tomb with only one room. Of course one should ask why Hezi took this decision.[17] One could imagine that the available space was not sufficient. This is indeed true for the entire tomb which was constructed in the empty space between three already existing tombs, and which is much smaller than what one would expect for the tomb of a vizier.[18] However, despite the modesty of the tomb's entire measurements, it still would have had enough space to erect more than one room, if this had been desired. Therefore the question as to why Hezi decided to erect only a single room cannot be explained satisfactorily. Another explanation for the modesty of Hezi's tomb could be that Hezi had already built his tomb before he was promoted to the position of a vizier. One cannot exclude that possibility, and in fact Hezi was indeed promoted to the vizierate late in his career.[19] But Hezi, on the other hand, explicitly emphasizes in his autobiography that he decided to build a tomb with only one room, although he had the permission and power to construct a tomb with numerous rooms. One could speculate that Hezi actually wished to possess a tomb close to the pyramid of King Teti and in the vicinity of the tombs of his colleagues. One can assume that Hezi had the royal permission to build a tomb at this specific location. The space in this area was limited, however, and therefore Hezi could only erect a small mastaba. Thus Hezi did what the German proverb terms as '*aus der Not eine Tugend machen*'. Hezi points out that it is important for him that the offering-ritual be performed, and he seems to want to stress that one room is sufficient for the effectiveness of this ritual. It seems as if he wants to point out that, in his opinion, it is not necessary to reflect ones status with numerous rooms.

To sum up the quoted passages in the autobiographical inscriptions of Hezi and Djau makes perfectly clear that their authors felt it necessary to comment on their decisions to erect a small tomb respectively in Djau's case on his decision to renounce an individual tomb. Hezi and and Djau anticipated that every tomb visitor would notice the discrepancy between their high social position and their modest tomb or burial. Due to the fact that they wanted to avoid the impression that they did not have the permission or possibility to erect a more impressive respectively individual tomb they gave individual explanations for their respective renunciations.

Burial

An objection might be raised against the correlation between the size and equipment of a tomb and the status of its owner through the assumption that the modesty of a tomb and its equipment might have been compensated by a costly burial ritual which did not leave any traces. Such a case might be possible in theory but cannot be proved in pharaonic culture. On the contrary, it actually can be shown that the burial in a large tomb with valuable equipment was also carried out with a great deal of effort. This can be concluded, for example, from the inscription on the facade of the tomb of Meresankh III.[20] Here, two dates are mentioned, first the death

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[17] I am grateful to A. McFarlane and K. Myśliwiec for their contributions to this question in the discussion after my lecture in Prague.

[18] Kanawati, *Tomb of Hesi*, 16, pl. 47, *idem*, *BACE* 10 (1999): 70–71, fig. 1. The best plan of the tomb and its vicinity is published by A. Krekeler: M. Abd el-Raziq, A. Krekeler, W. Pahl, '1. Vorbericht über die Arbeiten des Ägyptischen Antikendienstes im nördlichen Teti-Friedhof in Saqqara im Jahre 1986', *MDAIK* 43 (1986): Abb. 1.

[19] Kanawati, *BACE* 10 (1999): 67–68; *idem*, *Tomb of Hesi*, 11, 15.

[20] D. Dunham, W. K. Simpson, *The Mastaba of Queen Mersyankh* III, *Giza Mastabas* 1 (Boston, 1974), 8; J. A. Wilson, 'Funeral Services of the Egyptian Old Kingdom', *JNES* 3 (1944): 202.

of Meresankh and her transportation to the embalming-house (*ḥtp k3=s ḫpt=s r wꜥb.t*), and secondly her procession to her beautiful tomb (*ḫpt=s r jz=s nfr*). Between both dates lies a time-span of 273 or 274 days, and this enormous time can be interpreted as the duration of the mummification and funerary preparations.

An impression of how the burial ceremony of an important person was executed can be found in the autobiographical inscription of Sabni I in the rock-cut tomb of Sabni I and his father Mekhu I at the Qubbet-el Hawa. Sabni reports that his father Mekhu died during an expedition to Nubia and that he brought his body back to Egypt. In the meantime a royal commissioner named Iri was sent to the residence where he received a royal decree. Iri came back to Aswan together with all the things which are necessary for an upper-class, court burial. Sabni lists in detail what he obtained from the royal residence for the burial of his father (*Urk.* I, 137,14–138,9):[21]

'I went down
to bury [this] my father [in his tomb] in the necropolis.
Then this Iri came from the Residence
and he brought a decree in order to welcome the count (ḥ3tj-ꜥ), royal seal-bearer, sole companion and lector priest,
this Mekhu.
He brought [...] embalmers, a senior lector priest, a councilor (he who is in the jz-bureau), an inspector of the mortuary workshop,
mourners, and the equipment of the embalming-place in its totality.
He brought festival-ointment from the embalming-place,
the mystery from the two mortuary workshops,
[...] from the house of arms,
cloth from the two treasuries,
and all the burial material which is issued from the Residence,
exactly as it was issued for the hereditary prince (jrj-pꜥ.t) Meru.'

The text concludes as follows: (*Urk.* I, 139, 2):

'Never before was someone like him buried like this.'

It becomes perfectly clear that the representative architectural lay-out of the rock-cut tomb of Sabni and Mekhu corresponds to an extensive burial ceremony. But the inscription of Sabni is also of great interest in another respect.

Rank system in tombs

The inscription shows that a fixed idea existed concerning how a representative of a certain social group should be buried.[22] The scale for the social status was obviously the hierarchy of rank- titles *jrj-pꜥ.t, ḥ3tj-ꜥ, ḫtmtj-bjtj, smr-wꜥ.tj*. This becomes clear because Sabni stresses that his father, who was 'only' a *ḥ3tj-ꜥ*, was buried exactly as was common for higher ranked *jrj-pꜥ.t* in the Residence. Sabni further states that someone like him was never before buried like that. Now one might object with the argument that Sabni's statements cannot be taken literally because they are *topoi*. This might be true for the last phrase *(n zp ḳrs.t(j) mjtw=f nb m mjt.t=f)*. But the fact that the burial of the *ḥ3tj-ꜥ* Mekhu is compared with the burial of a particular person, namely the *jrj-pꜥ.t* Meru, shows, in my view, that

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[21] For the translation compare Roccati, *Littérature historique*, 218 and Wilson, *JNES* 3 (1944): 202.
[22] Compare S. J. Seidlmayer, 'Funerärer Aufwand und soziale Ungleichheit. Eine methodische Anmerkung zum Problem der Rekonstruktion der gesellschaftlichen Gliederung aus Friedhofsfunden', *GM* 104 (1988): 47.

this statement can indeed be taken literally. In any case, even if the statement cannot be taken at face value, it would nevertheless tell us that the social rank, represented by the rank title, determined which kind of burial he was allowed to receive.

This conclusion corresponds to the results of my analysis of tomb-size.[23] Here it became clear that the rank-titles of the tomb-owners are directly related to the size of their tombs. It could be shown that *jrj-pˁ.t*, *ḥ3tj-ˁ*, *ḫtmtj-bjtj* and *smr-wˁ.tj* are normally buried in large tombs, whereas people with the epithet *rḫ-njswt* can also be found in medium-sized tombs, and *šps*/*šps.t-njswt* can only be found in medium-sized and small tombs.

Changes in burial customs

Examining the inscription of Sabni, another important problem can be discussed. It is the historical dimension of tomb analysis as it was raised by A. Cannon.[24] Cannon stated that burial customs can change in a cyclic manner and compared this with fashion trends. He sees the motor behind this dynamic in the endeavor to take the burial customs of persons with a higher social status or the wish to contrast one's own burial with that of current or former funerary customs. For example, Cannon provided several case-studies from Victorian-to-modern England, where the elite originally used certain funerary symbols in order to contrast themselves against other groups. Later, these symbols were also used by persons of a lower social rank, and thus the elite dissociated themselves again from the lower classes by abandoning the use of these symbols.

In reference to Old Kingdom Egypt, the autobiographical inscription of Sabni proves that the desire to adopt burial customs used in higher social classes did indeed exist. Changes usually occur, however, in long time spans. In this context it is important to note that Egypt had no free market where one could just buy, for example, false-doors from Tura-limestone. In Egypt one had no free access to material, workers or specialized knowledge ('*mystery from the two mortuary workshops*'). The texts unambiguously inform us that it was only the king who had access to these resources. If one wished to have a false-door of Tura-limestone, one had to ask the king or the department representing him, or one had to wait and see whether or not the king would have one made as a present. Old Kingdom Egypt was a closed system where the use of funerary symbols was sanctioned.

Summary

Taken altogether, the texts demonstrate that a fixed system existed regulating what kind of tomb and funeral was appropriate for a particular individual of a particular social status. The existence of such a system can also be concluded from the direct correlation between tomb-size, equipment and architectural lay-out of the tomb and the titles of its owner. Old Kingdom inscriptions supply us with important information about the cultural context that is necessary to reconstruct the symbolic code in which social status is represented in an Egyptian tomb.

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[23] Compare footnote 12.

[24] A. Cannon, 'The Historical Dimension in Mortuary Expressions of Status and Sentiment', *CA* 30.4 (1989): 437–458.

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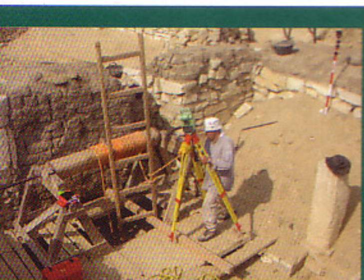


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