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OLD KINGDOM, NEW PERSPECTIVES
Egyptian Art and Archaeology 2750–2150 BC

edited by

Nigel Strudwick and Helen Strudwick

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Fixed rules or personal choice? On the composition and arrangement of daily life scenes in Old Kingdom elite tombs

Nico Staring

The tombs built for the elite during Egypt's so-called pyramid age exhibit a wide variety of decorative programmes within their accessible parts of their superstructures.¹ These so-called mastaba tombs, which in fact incorporate various tomb types,² were commissioned by members of the elite section of the strictly hierarchically Old Kingdom society. The aim of the present paper is to contextualise the elite tomb's decoration within its architectural setting, thereby analysing the diachronic development and local variations through the representational content of a selected number of iconographic themes. This study is, however, not an attempt to analyse the meaning, or changing meaning,³ of the tomb's decoration. Rather than studying isolated, individual daily life scenes, it is their coherency, together

with a consideration of other architectural elements, which is the focus of the present study.⁴ Emphasis is laid on the arrangement of iconographic themes within the context of the tomb's superstructure. The key figure in this analysis is the person of the tomb owner and his responsibility as composer of the decoration in his own funerary monument. Whether the composition and arrangement of the iconographic programmes followed more or less fixed rules (or rather conventions), or whether these were susceptible to a certain degree of personal choice (preference) will be the subject of the discussion below.

Fixed rules versus personal choice: theory and practice

Let us first consider the tomb owner's motive and (theoretical) capacity to distinguish his or her tomb from that of any other individual from the same hierarchical group, in our case the elite segment of Old Kingdom society.⁵ Bolshakov already noticed the heterogeneous character of elite tombs, when stating that 'Every Egyptian tomb is unique as concerns its architecture and decoration, and unique is its decoration as regards the selection of represented topics,

¹ The present article is based on the research conducted for my MA thesis at Leiden University (2008), *Fixed rules versus personal choice. The dynamics of Memphite Old Kingdom elite tomb decoration*. I would like to thank Karen Exell for checking my English, Karuna Sewdas for her help with the rendering of the tables and figures, and Nigel and Helen Strudwick for their useful comments. The opinions expressed in this article as well as any mistakes rest solely with the author.

² R. van Walsem, *Iconography of Old Kingdom Elite Tombs. Analysis & Interpretation, Theoretical and Methodological Aspects* (Leiden 2005), 17–19. Van Walsem argues that since *mastaba*, 'bench' in Arabic, does not reveal anything of its hidden physical complexity, the word 'tomb' is best in keeping with the Old Egyptian word for the same: *js*. For a recent study on the Egyptian word for tomb, see I. Régen, 'Aux origines de la tombe *js* 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏'. *Recherches paléographiques et lexicographiques*, *BIFAO* 106 (2006), 245–314.

³ That is, not only the *Sinnbild* aspects of a scene, referring to the meaning or message that is integrated in the representation, but also the meaning for the tomb owner as exemplified by the choice to include the scene into his or her chapel's decorative programme. For a discussion of the term *Sinnbild*, as opposed to *Sehbild*, see van Walsem, *Iconography*, 71–83.

⁴ Such an holistic approach towards studying the tomb as one coherent unit is in accordance with the approach utilised by Vischak. Her tomb-as-object approach considers the tomb as a single, integrated unit, within which the formal and functional interdependence of the elements within this structure are emphasised. D. Vischak, 'Common ground between pyramid texts and Old Kingdom tomb design: the case of Ankhmahor', *JARCE* 40 (2003), 133–134.

⁵ The elite population should, however, certainly not be considered a homogeneous entity, but rather stratified, as was Egyptian society as a whole. Within the scope of the present research, no further subdivision is attempted.

their treatment and their arrangement.⁶ To Van Walsem, this ‘astounding variation’ raised the question of individual ‘pluriformity’ behind and in relation to the collective ‘uniformity’ of the overall collection of tombs in the various elite cemeteries of the Memphite region.⁷ Here, according to Van Walsem, we touch upon a sharply contrasting pair of concepts as characteristics of ancient Egyptian culture, that is, the individual versus the collective, or society.⁸ The elite tomb is the result of various steps of realisation.⁹ Decoration represents only one such step. The others concern the location and their construction, externally as well as internally. The rationale behind these ‘steps of realisation’ is not always made explicit by the data at our disposal. We are confronted only with the end result, or at least with what is left of it. Thus, we are trying to reconstruct ancient thought processes through highly incomplete data, unaware even of the degree to which these data are incomplete. In any case, the potential elaborateness of the decoration of an individual’s tomb chapel was constrained quite simply by the overall available wall surface. This applies principally to the interior walls.¹⁰ Thus, the larger the chapel in terms of rooms and consequently wall surface, the more possibilities existed for variation in relation to the execution of the iconographic programme. With the link between tomb size and the potential space available for the application of decoration, we necessarily and inevitably arrive at the discussion of the apparent direct relationship between tomb size and rank. Concurrently, this discussion relates to the issue of status and wealth of the tomb owner in connection to the degree of appropriation of wealth for the construction of an individual’s tomb.¹¹ What parameters determined the size of a tomb? According to Strudwick, the appropriation

of a person’s wealth for the construction of a tomb was a personal choice.¹² Direct textual evidence appears to confirm the hypothesis that the tomb owner himself, depending on his own wealth, was responsible for the execution of his tomb, thus delimiting the potential size of his funerary chapel.¹³ That an official was nevertheless restricted in his freedom to choose the dimensions of his tomb (that is, delimiting its maximum size) is proposed by Alexanian, who argues that the size of a tomb was regulated officially, with the king eventually assuming the responsibility of drafting a royal decree.¹⁴ Similarly, Chauvet argues that the absence of ‘[...] some form of central royal institution overseeing the organization of the Memphite necropolis’ is something hard to imagine, because of the ‘[...] nature and the central role of the administration in the Old Kingdom society [...]’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, she concludes that, based on inscriptional evidence hinting at the royal involvement in private tomb building, the central administration, not necessarily the king in person, was rarely involved directly in private tomb building.¹⁶

Tomb size, however, is not the only indicator of the social status of a tomb owner, nor the only indicator of the costs of its construction. Traditionally, several key indicators for the tomb owner’s status have been accepted, including the position of the tomb in the cemetery, the total area the tomb occupied, its architectural layout, decoration, equipment, and the burial ceremony.¹⁷ Setting aside the

⁶ A. O. Bolshakov, ‘Arrangement of murals as a principle of Old Kingdom tomb decoration’, *IBAES* 6 (2006), 37.

⁷ R. Van Walsem, ‘Diversification and variation in Old Kingdom funerary iconography as the expression of a need for “individuality”’, in S. Seidlmayer (ed.), *Religion in context. Imaginary concepts and social reality in Pharaonic Egypt* (Freiburg–Göttingen in press), 1 (provisional page number).

⁸ Van Walsem, in Seidlmayer (ed.), *Religion in context*, 5 (provisional page number).

⁹ *ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ The exterior walls are not, except for the facade near and around the entrance doorway, as a rule employed for the application of decoration.

¹¹ A direct relation between tomb size and wealth has been argued by N. Kanawati, *The Egyptian administration in the Old Kingdom: evidence on its economic decline* (Warminster 1977). He analysed the trend in the wealth of Old Kingdom officials on the principle that the costliness of their tombs reflects their wealth (*ibid.*, 1). This presupposes a one-to-one relation between wealth and tomb size. According to Kanawati, it was the official himself who paid for the construction of the tomb, based on two inscriptions in which the tomb owner states that he paid the artisans (Meru-ka and Remnu-ka called Imy).

¹² N. Strudwick, *The administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom: The highest titles and their holders* (London 1985), 5.

¹³ V. Chauvet, ‘Royal involvement in the construction of private tombs in the late Old Kingdom’, in J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin (eds), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists = Actes du neuvième Congrès international des égyptologues, Grenoble 6–12 Septembre 2004* (OLA 150; Leuven 2007), 1, 313–321. In order to study royal involvement in private tomb construction during the Old Kingdom, Chauvet analysed documents mentioning or referring to their construction. She inventoried 150 such statements, dating to the fifth and sixth dynasties. Only seventeen documents indicate the presence of royal involvement. She concludes that the central administration (not necessarily the king in person) was rarely involved directly in private tomb building (*ibid.*, 315). However unusual the provision of a complete tomb to an official might be, there is inscriptional evidence for such provisions (e.g. Mer-Khufu/Debehen; Kanawati, *Administration*, 2). Building materials (e.g. Weni/Djau; Kanawati, *Administration*, 2), and particularly sarcophagi (e.g. Hetep-her-akhti; H. T. Mohr, *The Mastaba of Hetep-Her-Akhti: study on an Egyptian tomb chapel in the Museum of Antiquities Leiden* (Leiden 1943), 35) are more commonly cited as gifts from the king.

¹⁴ 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), 3.

¹⁵ Chauvet, in Goyon and Cardin (eds), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, 315.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Alexanian, in Bárta (ed.), *Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology*, 1.

question of a direct correlation between these indicators and social status, our understanding of several of these indicators themselves is rather poor.¹⁸ The social status of an elite member of Old Kingdom society might nevertheless have implications towards certain expectancies regarding tomb size and/or execution. This is well illustrated in the autobiography of Hesi, who was vizier during the reign of Teti and who constructed his tomb near the pyramid of that king in Saqqara.¹⁹ The tomb he 'ordered' consisted of only a single room, cruciform chapel. This is obviously much smaller than one might expect from a person of his stature and indeed exceptionally modest when compared with his near-contemporaries Kagemni and Mereruka. Hesi seems to have been aware of this discrepancy between tomb size and social position when he states that he 'caused that a single chamber be made' in his tomb, although he was 'capable of constructing it in multiple chambers'.²⁰ For whatever reason this passage was included by Hesi in his tomb chapel, and whether he indeed did have the choice to have a larger tomb constructed, either financially or in accordance with his rank and social status, it nevertheless demonstrates a theoretical self-determination.

In her article, Alexanian tempers this apparent direct correlation, practiced in Egyptology by, for example, A.M. Roth, *A Cemetery of Palace Attendants* (Giza Mastabas 6; Boston 1995), 50. Adopted from Post-Processual and Contextual Archaeology, social status is said to be represented in a tomb with a symbolic code. In order for this symbolic code to be understood, it is recommended, according to Alexanian, that Egyptian texts, which can provide an insight view of Old Kingdom society, are studied.

¹⁸ For example, the original burial equipment is rarely found intact. The burial ceremony is even less well known. For a study of the activities in the mastaba tomb during and after the burial ceremony, see N. Alexanian, 'Ritualrelikte am Mastabagräbern des Alten Reiches', in H. Guksch and D. Polz (eds), *Stationen. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Ägyptens. Rainer Stadelmann Gewidmet* (Mainz 1998), 3–22.

¹⁹ N. Kanawati and M. Abder-Raziq, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, Volume V: The Tomb of Hesi*, (ACE Reports 13; Warminster, Wiltshire 1999), 38. For further discussion of this text, see e.g. D. P. Silverman, 'The Threat-Formula and Biographical Text in the Tomb of Hezi at Saqqara', *JARCE* 37 (2000), 1–13.

²⁰ Silverman, *JARCE* 37 (2000), 13. Several reasons could be put forward for Hesi's construction of such a modest tomb. Alexanian (in Bárta (ed.), *The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology*, 6) suggested motives such as insufficient available space in that part of the cemetery, the building (and finishing) of the tomb before his promotion to vizier, or the wish to construct his tomb in close proximity to the pyramid of the king under whom he served. The private cemetery surrounding the complex of Teti had been designed in conjunction with his pyramid. Viziers predating Hesi had taken the spaces closest to the pyramid (Chauvet, in Goyon and Cardin (eds), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, 319), which thus left Hesi with the choice of building a large tomb a distance away or a smaller tomb at a more prominent plot, where there was little space for a large tomb. He apparently chose the latter option.

Since the tomb owner started building the tomb during his or her lifetime, the tomb, with its architecture, equipment, decoration and texts, according to Alexanian, presented an ideal place for its owner's self-representation.²¹ The tomb functions as a medium to display the status of the owner during his lifetime. After death, it commemorates the status achieved by the deceased tomb owner. The tomb had thus evolved from its primary *raison d'être* of simply marking a burial²² into an integrated monument, the goal of which was both functional and expressive,²³ emphasizing its communicative character. Van Walsem even considers the tomb and its decoration programme as a kind of 'portraiture' of its owner, expressing his individuality.²⁴ The tomb owner thus potentially appears to have had plenty of possibilities to personalise his tomb. The question is, as Van Walsem argues, whether the steps in the realisation of a tomb actually do reflect the choices made by the tomb owner, or whether these, to speak in Baines' words, are led by 'rules of decorum'.²⁵ The wide variety of tomb construction, primarily internal, and the unique arrangement and composition of the iconographic programmes displayed by the available tombs, seem to imply that the opportunities for personal choice regarding the composition of the decorative programme was infinite. Such a view contrasts with the observation that only a restricted number of themes (of daily life scenes) can be identified. This seems to imply that personal choice was rather restricted, which in turn suggests the existence of certain *rules* to which the composer (either the tomb owner or the artist executing the design) had to conform. Baines states that the essential form of display for the early elite was architecture and only much later was this supplemented with representation or writing,²⁶ that is, with an iconographic programme. The subject matter of the private and royal sphere differ considerably, with the latter stressing a degree of exclusivity.²⁷ No non-royal

²¹ Alexanian, in Bárta (ed.), *The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology*, 1–2.

²² Van Walsem, *Iconography*, 2.

²³ D. Vischak, 'Agency in Old Kingdom elite tomb programs: traditions, locations, and variable meanings', *IBAES* 6 (2006), 262.

²⁴ Van Walsem, in Seidlmayer (ed.), *Religion in Context*, 8 (provisional page number).

²⁵ J. Baines, 'Restricted knowledge, hierarchy, and decorum: modern perceptions and ancient institutions', *JARCE* 27 (1990), 17–21. Baines (op. cit., 20) refers to (the rules of) decorum as '[...] a set of rules and practices defining what may be represented pictorially with captions, displayed, and written down, in which context and in what form'.

²⁶ J. Baines, 'Communication and Display: the integration of early Egyptian art and writing', *Antiquity* 63 (1989), 296.

²⁷ Baines, *Antiquity* 63 (1989), 476. The thematic content of the iconographic programmes of private tombs and royal funerary complexes differ considerably. Compare for example A. Ćwiek, *Relief decoration in the royal funerary complexes of the Old Kingdom. Studies in the development, scene content and iconography* (PhD Thesis; Warsaw

Table 1: Overview of studied data

	Desert hunt	Offering procession	Care for desert cattle	Slaughtering	Total
Tombs	15	107	5	19	118
Scenes	18	140	5	24	187
Registers	46	231	10	24	311
Giza	3	55	-	5	63
Abusir	1	1	-	-	2
Saqqara	8	42	5	9	64
Dahshur		2	-	-	2
Maidum	3	1	-	2	6
Dynasty 4	3	16	-	2	21
Dynasty 5	6	53	2	8	69
Dynasty 5/6	1	4	-	-	5
Dynasty 6	5	28	3	6	42

Totals of course include some tombs which contain more than one of these scene types

tomb, for example, ever included the image of the king. Even though there appears to have been a limitless number of possibilities, the content and number of subjects was restricted and regulated. The themes regularly included in the iconographic programmes of these tombs, some of which seem to have been considered indispensable, do not seem to offer many possibilities of ‘personalising’ one’s tomb. Conversely, to be in the possession of something unique differentiates a tomb from any of the others. It is likely that the personal choice of the tomb owner is present in these ‘minor’ themes, or in the minor aspects of each such theme. Adhering to the subdivision employed by the Leiden Mastaba Project, the complete inventory of decorative programmes consists of seventeen main themes and 172 sub-themes.²⁸ Every individual tomb only displays

a small selection of this larger potential. Some themes were present right from the start of the fourth dynasty, others were introduced later, some ceased to be included while others reappeared again at later stages.²⁹ Allowing for 425 years of Old Kingdom elite tomb building,³⁰ which has resulted in 337 identified tombs,³¹ the number of themes and sub-themes appears to be rather small. Only one theme is certainly ubiquitous: the tomb owner seated behind an offering table. This scene was considered necessary for his well-being in the afterlife, and thus appears to have been the only certain prerequisite for a sound decorative programme. It seems that any of the other themes could be included or

University 2003), 152–271, and R. Walsem, ‘Sense and Sensibility. On the analysis and interpretation of the iconography programmes of four Old Kingdom elite tombs’, *IBAES* 6 (2006), Appendix 2. The thematic subdivision of the iconography programmes of either sphere is, however, largely dependent on the scholar making the subdivision. Compare, for example, the subdivision of the iconographic programmes of Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs produced by Müller (I. Müller, ‘Die Ausgestaltung der Kultkammern in den Gräbern des Alten Reiches in Giza und Saqqara’, *FuB* 16 (1974), 79–96), and Harpur (*Decoration in Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom: studies in orientation and scene content* (London 1987), 175), and Van Walsem (*IBAES* 6 (2006), Appendix 2).

²⁸ R. Van Walsem, *MastabaBase. 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–Leiden 2008).

²⁹ Such a development is the subject of Harpur’s 1987 study, referred to by the author as a ‘[...] practical study of the developments and innovations which have altered the composition of scenes [...]’. Harpur, *Decoration*, 1.

³⁰ For the present paper, the chronology of E. Hornung, R. Krauss and D. A. Warburton (eds), *Ancient Egyptian chronology* (Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 1. The Near and Middle East 83; Leiden 2006), 490–491, has been applied.

³¹ This is the number of tombs identified and entered into the mastaba database of the Leiden Mastaba Project (Van Walsem, *MastabaBase*). This amount does not necessarily equal the number of all elite tombs ever constructed during this time frame. The total number of tombs constructed during the Old Kingdom and the number thereof which are (fully) published is separated by a gap of unknown proportions. This discrepancy between original number and currently identified tombs has been illustrated appositely by Van Walsem, *Iconography*, 44, scheme A.

excluded according to the will of whoever was responsible for the tomb's execution.

Data and research methodology

Selected (sub-)themes

The vast quantity of available data (recorded iconographic scenes) renders an all-encompassing study impossible. For the purpose of the present study, a sample of four sub-themes has been extracted from this larger collection. The selection is based on the depiction of desert cattle as their main subject: desert hunt, offering procession, slaughtering and care for desert cattle (Table 1). Through a detailed analysis of these scenes, the extent to which iconographic themes in general were liable to fixed rules, regarding their composition and arrangement, will be assessed. Although the selection represents only 2.3% of the total available sub-themes (172) attested in Memphite Old Kingdom elite tombs,³² the relatively modest size of the dataset does not detract from its representative nature. The data derive from a fixed dataset, which encompasses a substantial part of the published elite tombs, a wide time span covering the total length of the Old Kingdom, and a distribution over all the cemeteries of the Memphite region.³³

Dataset:³⁴ quantitative versus qualitative

For the present study, each single scene is analysed quantitatively on two levels.³⁵ The first level of analysis looks at the context of the scene or theme within the larger iconographic programme. This larger programme is likewise considered within the spatial context of the tomb's structure. In addition to this contextualising approach, the representational content of each scene is analysed. The meaning or message that is integrated in these representations—the qualitative

aspects—will not be examined.³⁶ Only the objectively observable and quantitatively researchable content will be taken into consideration.

External aspects

The external aspects refer to the arrangement of scenes in the total iconographic programme of a tomb, or collection of tombs, and an understanding of a scene's location within the architectural unity of the tomb's superstructure. These define the place of a certain scene or theme within the tomb's architectural context. As noted above, we do not yet clearly understand the inter-dependability of all factors that influence the eventual establishment, composition and design of the iconographic programme. It should also be stressed that the aspects selected for the present research do not necessarily include all the factors that were influential on their inclusion/exclusion and distribution within the tomb chapel. With these limitations in mind, several external aspects have been identified and analysed. These include the relative tomb size, distribution of scenes over the tomb's architectural features, their position on walls (including relative height and physical orientation), and the mutual coherence of scenes.³⁷ Each of these aspects has been surveyed and analysed for every single scene. The outcome eventually describes the sub-theme's disposition within the architectural unity of the tomb chapel. An outcome that inclines towards consistency, either with regard to orientation, connection with certain space unities, architectural elements and so on, might present an indication on the existence of certain 'rules'. On the other hand, randomness repudiates any correlation and therefore might indicate a rather freer, individual interpretation by the tomb owner regarding the inclusion or exclusion of themes, composition and disposition of the iconographic programme.

Relative tomb size

For the purpose of the present study, chapels encountered in the selection of tombs are divided into four main types.³⁸ Classification is according to the relative size measured through the number of rooms represented: single room;

³² Van Walsem, *MastaBase*; the Leiden Mastaba Database has been the main source for the present research.

³³ Only Abu Rawash is not included in the present research. This exclusion is due to the fact that none of the studied scenes has been found in a secure context in mastaba tombs of this site. Recently, the French mission working in Abu Rawash discovered a photograph from the excavations of Pierre Montet (1913) in the archives of the IFAO, showing a block with part of a procession scene with two human figures and an ibex. The block is attributable to the ruined mastaba M IX (M. Baud, 'Nécropole d'Abou Rawach: un récit de la saison 2006', <http://www.pernebou.fr/pdf/per-nebou-abou-rawach-2006.pdf>, accessed 12/01/2010).

³⁴ The total number of tombs is lower than the sum of tombs for each sub-theme, since several themes occur together in one tomb. Five tombs could not be securely dated to a single dynasty, hence the denotation 'fifth/sixth dynasty'.

³⁵ For a more elaborate discussion on this approach, see N. Staring, 'Iconographic programme and tomb architecture: a focus on desert-related themes', in V. Gashe and J. Finch (eds), *Current Research in Egyptology 2008. Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Symposium held at the University of Manchester, January 2008* (Bolton 2008), 129–138.

³⁶ One of the pitfalls when studying the qualitative aspects of a scene is that the meaning or message is not made unambiguously apparent through the depiction only. Any interpretation will thus be highly subjective.

³⁷ For a schematised reproduction of these aspects and their inter-relationship, see Staring, in Gashe and Finch (eds), *Current Research in Egyptology 2008*, fig. 2.

³⁸ It should be understood that the selection of tombs on which this study is based does not represent the total range of existing tomb types or sizes. Those tombs that do not contain any of the themes under consideration have been left out of this overview. Therefore, possible deviating tomb types have not been considered.

cruciform,³⁹ single room; L-shaped,⁴⁰ double roomed,⁴¹ and multiple roomed.⁴² The purpose of this division is twofold: to pursue an analysis of the relation between tomb size and incidence of a certain scene, and to analyse the scene's exact position within the architectural context through its arrangement over different architectural elements.⁴³

Architectural features

Following the division of tombs according to their relative size, measured by means of the number of internal rooms, the next step is to establish the possible locations for the application of decoration in order to examine the complex correspondence between architectural elements and tomb decoration. A further refinement of these features, such as ascribing functions to the rooms, is possible, but has not been pursued here.⁴⁴ The present research mainly

³⁹ The type includes Reisner's type (6), the *mastaba chapels of the cruciform type* (G.A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis I* (Cambridge 1942), 247–249), and corresponds to the *modified cruciform chapel* of Harpur (Harpur, *Decoration*, 99). The majority of cruciform chapels are encountered in Saqqara. The Saqqara cruciform chapels predate the L-shaped chapels characteristic of Giza. These therefore play a prominent part in view of the development of tomb chapel decoration, with a possible differentiation between Giza and Saqqara.

⁴⁰ The type is described by Reisner as the *two niched chapels of type (4a)* (Reisner, *Giza Necropolis I*, 214–218). Its present use also includes Reisner types (2), (3) and (5), differentiating, for example, between interior and exterior stone chapels. Harpur in her classification divided the L-shaped tombs according to the number of false doors in each (Harpur, *Decoration*, 63).

⁴¹ Including Reisner type (5) *Rock-cut chapels at Giza*, with some sub-divisions (Reisner, *Giza Necropolis I*, 219–247). Harpur makes no distinction between double-room and multi-room, although she includes 'rock-cut chapels decorated in more than one room' with the latter (Harpur, *Decoration*, 104). Some tombs present a secondary reformation from L-shaped into double roomed, where one finds an artificial dividing wall between the entrance room and the chapel proper, built up of limestone blocks. The reorientation and alteration of the original plan of mastaba chapels is commonly observed in the Giza West Field Cemetery. See for example A. M. Roth, *Palace Attendants*, 13–15.

⁴² Corresponding to, for example, Reisner's complex chapels of type (12) (Reisner, *Giza Necropolis I*, 288–291).

⁴³ Only the superstructures of tombs have been taken into consideration. The subterranean structure, which initially consisted of the plain burial chamber, received decoration only in the course of the later Old Kingdom (sixth dynasty). The subject matter of the decoration is very distinct from that in the superstructure. The superstructure presents the accessible part of the chapel, not only for priests carrying out rituals for the cult of the deceased, but also for family members and other visitors. The burial chamber, on the other hand, was at no point accessible. Since the superstructure thus exclusively had a communicative function, only this part is taken into consideration for the present research.

⁴⁴ There is still debate on the functions of different rooms within the larger tomb complexes. On the pillared court, Bolshakov (A. O.

differentiates between cult chapel (the room where the false door is located) and other rooms. Since the cult chapel is the focus for offerings made for the deceased tomb owner, and is where the false door served as a means to communicate directly to the burial chamber,⁴⁵ the room served as the structure's most important spatial unit. The dispensability of all rooms except for the cult chapel has already been demonstrated in the example of Hesi. Thus, one could presume that this restricted space was reserved for a core group of scenes, displaying the most important iconographic themes. The architectural elements selected for this research furthermore include the facade, entrance portico, long corridor, pillared court and doorway(s).

Internal aspects

The internal aspects relate to the dynamics within the scene's representation⁴⁶ (Fig. 1). The aim of the analysis is to arrive at an indication as to what extent the compositional execution of iconographic themes was susceptible to fixed rules. The analysis focuses on what is represented, how it is represented, how many times and in what combinations. In order to answer these questions objectively, the available data are analysed quantitatively.

The representational content of scenes appears to have been well defined during the period under consideration. Scenes of daily life were not attestations of unique events. These could rather be characterised as displaying generic actions.⁴⁷ According to Müller, generic actions could be ordered into thematic cycles.⁴⁸ The composition of thematic cycles is awkward, since these have hardly been attested

Bolshakov, *Man and his Double in Egyptian ideology of the Old Kingdom* (ÄAT 37; Wiesbaden 1997), 25), notes that its purpose has not been explained for certain. It has tentatively been interpreted as an area where relatives of the deceased could assemble for festive ritual meals. Müller (M. Müller, 'Iconography: basic problems of the classification of scenes', in G. M. Zaccane and T. R. di Netro (eds), *Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia Atti II* (Torino 1992), 338), also discusses the supposed connection between thematic cycle and location within a building, assuming a direct relationship between depicted activity (scene) and function (room). Slaughtering areas are identified in some Old Kingdom royal funerary temples, cf M. Verner, 'A Slaughterhouse from the Old Kingdom', *MDAIK* 42 (1986), 181–189. For a further discussion of their identification in archaeological and architectural remains, see e.g. Do. Arnold, 'The Architecture of Meketre's Slaughterhouse and Other Early Twelfth Dynasty Wooden Models', in P. Jánosi (ed.), *Structure and Significance. Thoughts on Ancient Egyptian Architecture* (DGÖAW 33; Wien 2005), 8–16.

⁴⁵ A. M. Roth, 'The Social Aspects of Death', in S. D'Auria, P. Lacovara and C. H. Roehrig (eds), *Mummies & Magic. The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt* (Boston 1988), 54.

⁴⁶ As already stated above, only the *Sebbild* character of a scene's representation has been considered.

⁴⁷ Müller, in Zaccane G. M., and T. R. di Netro (eds), *Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia Atti II*, 337–345.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 338.

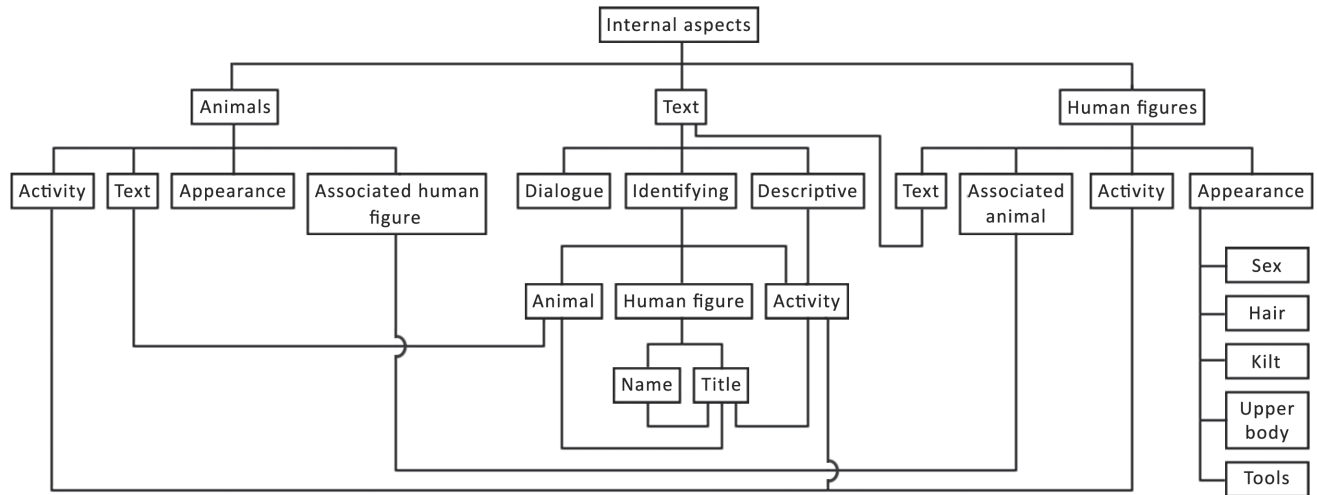


Fig. 1: Relational structure of the internal aspects analysed within a scene's representation

in their entirety.⁴⁹ Furthermore, they do not appear in a canonical sequence: their distribution is rather free. The fact that we are dealing with generic representations, implying restricted possibilities for variation, contrasts sharply with the actual data at our disposal. Indeed no two scenes are exactly identical, suggesting room for (personal) variation. Were there, nevertheless, basic requirements and/or possible 'obligatory' or indispensable features to which a scene of a certain theme had to conform? And to what extent could the artist or tomb owner personalise the theme, distinguish his or her representations from other examples without losing the (ascribed) value of the generic theme? Despite belonging to the same sub-theme, scenes can differ widely in their representational content. One is confronted with the choices made by the artist when executing a scene. This area of research is thus concerned with the (in)consistency in the depiction of scenes, analysed systematically in their representational content. The outcome might be indicative of the degree of standardisation regarding the representations of certain activities or themes. Furthermore, one could question whether there is a development (enlargement vs reduction) observable through time. These questions all relate to the awareness of the complexity of these internal features. A study of their (in)(ter)dependency and (in)consistency of inclusion/exclusion is being pursued.

Contextualising tomb decoration: the architectural setting

The study of the relationship between iconographic programme and tomb architecture reveals preferences for

the placement of themes within this architectural unity.⁵⁰ This preference is significant considering the fact that scenes were distributed over several tomb types, all differing considerably with regard to their architectural form, complexity and size. This result is furthermore endorsed by the long time span and geographical distribution of the studied data. Some scenes, as has been observed for the slaughtering of desert cattle, were only included in a confined area of the chapel (Table 2). Thus if a tomb owner decided to include the slaughtering of desert animals into his tomb's iconographic programme, these apparently should be depicted in the cult chapel. This confined area implies a location nearest the false door and offering table. It seems rather logical that this specific example fits best in the context of the cult chapel, since this is the place where offerings were made and priestly services were carried out. With the design of the decorative programme, the tomb owner had to reckon with the available wall space. Since this is restricted in cult chapels and since there is (normally) only one such chapel containing a false door, a decision should be made on which theme to include and, as a result, also which theme to exclude. With only 7.41% of all recorded tombs displaying the subject of the slaughtering of desert cattle,⁵¹ it indicates that it was not highly prioritised. Nevertheless, it did occur already in some of the smallest tombs (those designated single room chapels) and remained to be included in the larger versions. It is striking that when the theme was not included in the cult chapel of the larger

⁴⁹ Müller even wonders whether the Egyptians (patrons and artists) conceived of canonically established sequences of actions at all (in Zaccane G. M., and T. R. di Netro (eds), *Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia Atti II*, 339).

⁵⁰ For a more comprehensive discussion of the analysis, see Staring, in Gashe and Finch (eds), *Current Research in Egyptology 2008*, 132–137, and N. Staring, 'Contextualizing Old Kingdom Elite Tomb Decoration: Fixed Rules Versus Personal Choice', in P. Kousoulis (ed.), *Proceedings Tenth International Congress of Egyptologists Rhodes* (in press).

⁵¹ Van Walsem, *MastaBase*.

Table 2: Relation tomb type : architectural elements for 'slaughtering of desert cattle

	Cruciform	L-shaped	Double room	Multi room	Other	Total
Cult chapel	26.7%	13.3%	13.3%	40%	6.7%	100%

Table 3: Distribution of all themes over architectural elements

	Desert hunt	Offering procession	Care for desert cattle	Slaughtering desert cattle
Facade	–	–	–	–
Entrance portico	–	2.02%	20%	–
Doorway	12.5%	16.89%	–	–
Long corridor	–	2.70%	–	–
Columned court	–	2.70%	40%	–
Cult chapel	43.75%	57.43%	–	91.67%
Other room	43.75%	17.56%	40%	8.33%
Unknown	–	0.70%	–	–
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

complexes, it would also not be included outside the cult chapel, even though wall surface would have been largely available. Both this preference and the scene's exclusiveness indicate that the theme could only be represented within a limited architectural setting, in this case only in a single specific spatial unit.

Based on four themes only (Table 3) it is difficult to decide whether the restricted choice of location of these themes is due to certain connotations of the theme relating it exclusively to this spatial unit (as in the case of slaughtering of desert cattle restricted to the cult chapel). It is even more difficult to determine whether this close correlation is attributable to the existence of certain 'rules'. It does seem, however, that when one theme was included in the decorative programme, other themes were necessarily excluded. This is certainly true for the slaughtering of desert cattle; occurrences of this theme outside the cult chapel are almost nil.⁵² When other themes were chosen to decorate the cult chapel, the theme 'slaughtering of desert cattle' initially had to be excluded, since there was simply no more available

wall space. This necessarily resulted in its exclusion from the complete tomb, perhaps because the theme would lose its cultic or symbolic meaning when applied elsewhere. The tomb owner's personal choice is thus evidenced in the selection of themes included into the overall tomb programme. This choice is less evident in the location he allocated for that particular theme. Some themes seem to have had (a) specific location(s) where they could be applied. The selection of one particular theme, therefore, could result in the necessary exclusion of another, not only from that locality, but indeed from the complete iconographic programme. There are however also themes that were applicable over a multitude of locations, such as 'offering procession of desert cattle' (Table 3). Such themes appear not to have been confined to one particular spatial unit, although Table 3 indicates the existence of preferences. It should be noted that the themes under consideration already present an indication of personal choice, since only a limited number of tomb owners included these themes in their iconographic programmes in the first place. Second, no two tombs exhibit the same architectural form or construction, which also suggests there were no allusions to a strict, well defined, and eventually predetermined concoction and distribution of this programme.

The same conclusions are arrived at in relation to the distribution of themes over walls and their orientation. The slaughtering of desert cattle, for example, in 92% of all cases had been placed on the lower part of a wall.⁵³ Such a high number clearly indicates a strong preference for its use at this location. When addressing the same theme's

⁵² Only in one tomb is the 'slaughtering of desert cattle' scene found outside the cult chapel. In the tomb of Mehu (Saqqara, sixth dynasty), two such scenes are found in the antechamber ('Mittelraum') to the cult chapel; H. Altenmüller, *Die Wanddarstellungen im Grab des Mehu in Saqqara* (AV 42; Mainz am Rhein 1998), 156–162, fig. 12, pl. 48–51. Moreover, the chapel actually contains three separate scenes of the slaughtering of desert cattle; Altenmüller, *Grab des Mehu*, 193–198, fig. 19, pl. 72–74. Thus, the tomb of Mehu is not completely deviant. If the scene was selected to be part of a tomb's iconographic programme, it was at least applied in the cult chapel. Mehu opted for a more elaborate execution of the scene and, perhaps due to the restricted availability of wall surface, he chose the room next door for a further two scenes.

⁵³ Staring, in Gashe and Finch (eds), *Current Research in Egyptology 2008*, fig. 6.

Table 4: Occupations distinguished of human figures attested in 'slaughtering of desert cattle' scenes

	Maidum	Giza	Saqqara	Total
Bringing animal to slaughtering area	-	1	6	7
Sharpening knife	-	-	9	9
Bringing vessel/bowl	-	1	5	6
Tying animal's legs	-	-	3	3
Grasping animal's leg	-	6	18	24
Cutting off (fore)leg	-	6	26	32
Decapitating animal	3	-	-	3
Removing animal's heart	-	-	8	8
Carrying away choice cuts	1	4	14	19
Supervising activities	-	1	1	2
Total	4	20	90	114

orientation, there is a much less obvious preference. 33% of the scenes are located on the south wall, while 29% of scenes could be found on an east wall, 13% on a west wall and 21% have a northern orientation.⁵⁴ This again substantiates the existence of preferences, but certainly refutes the existence of peremptory rules.

Variation versus uniformity: an analysis of internal aspects

Since Giza and Saqqara contributed the majority of data to the present research, the forthcoming analysis mainly concentrates on both these two cemetery sites. It is also between these sites that prolific (diachronic) differences emerge regarding the level of detail in the execution of the scenes. The geographical aspect will be touched upon first. Several results from the analysis of the sub-theme 'slaughtering of desert cattle' will illustrate the results of the research.

Animal species

The 24 slaughtering scenes studied yielded a total number of 47 depicted animals. These could be ascribed to five different species on the basis of visual examination: 27 oryx (*Oryx gazella dammah*), two addax (*Addax nasomaculatus*), five dorcas gazelle (*Gazella dorcas dorcas*), one hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus buselaphus*), and nine Nubian ibex (*Capra ibex nubiana*).⁵⁵ The majority of scenes (17) are of

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, fig. 7.

⁵⁵ Oryx is included in all desert cattle slaughtering scenes, except for the tombs of Seankhuptah (dorcax gazelle; sixth dynasty, Saqqara; N. Kanawati and M. Abder-Raziq, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, Volume III: The tombs of Neferseshemre and Seankhuptah* (ACE Reports 11; Warminster 1998), pl. 70) and Mehu (dorcax gazelle; sixth dynasty, Saqqara; Altenmüller, *Grab des Mehu*, pl. 49). Animals in slaughtering scenes comprise only 5% of all (desert) animals depicted in the scenes

only one animal. Scenes with two animals are encountered in seven tombs, while only three scenes are composed of more than two animals (*viz.* four, five, and six animals).⁵⁶ When considering the geographical distribution of species, the difference between Giza and Saqqara is striking (Fig. 2). Scenes from Giza include only oryx, while five different species are observed in scenes from Saqqara. Such a contrast of variation versus uniformity appears not to be coincidental.

Representation of human figures

The slaughtering scenes studied accounted for 110 representations of human figures.⁵⁷ The majority of scenes depict three men, with a maximum number of sixteen human figures observed in the tomb of Ti.⁵⁸ Human figures are represented while participating in various stages of the slaughtering process. Eleven such occupations are distinguished. In Table 4 their geographical distribution is illustrated. Again, the dissimilarity between Giza and Saqqara is noteworthy. Human figures in scenes from Saqqara present ten different occupations. Those from Giza yielded only six. Although modestly represented, Maidum deserves special attention. The butchers depicted in the

studied (975 animals, constituting 30 species). The number per theme is as follows: desert hunt, 354 animals, 31 species; offering procession, 528 animals, 20 species; care for desert cattle, 58 animals, 10 species.

⁵⁶ Six animals were noted in the tomb of Ti (Saqqara, fifth dynasty; H. Wild, *Le Tombeau de Ti III* (MIFAO 65; Le Caire 1966), pl. CLXIII); south wall of the offering chapel (room with false door): two oryx, two ibex, one addax, and one hartebeest. Another slaughtering scene, comprising two animals, is located on the west wall of the same room.

⁵⁷ Slaughtering of desert cattle scenes comprise 17% of all human figures observed in the desert animal-related themes. The desert hunt yielded 37 human figures, care for desert cattle 36, and the offering processions 463.

⁵⁸ It concerns the already mentioned slaughtering scene on the south wall of the offering chapel of Ti. Wild, *Tombeau de Ti*, pl. CLXIII.

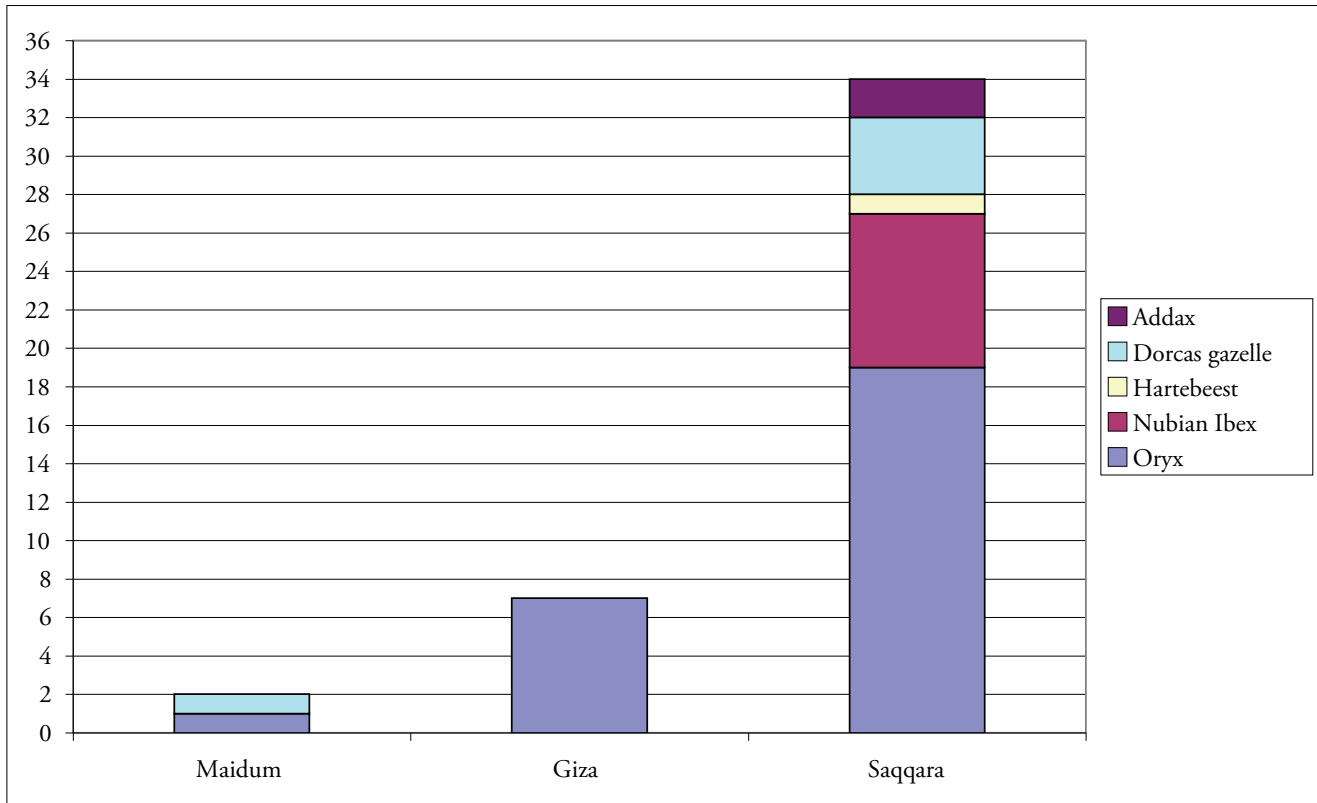


Fig. 2: Geographical distribution of animal species in 'slaughtering of desert cattle' scenes

tombs of Nefermaat⁵⁹ and Atet⁶⁰ are unique in beheading their animals.⁶¹ The 'model' composition involving a butcher cutting off the foreleg of a recumbent animal is first observed in the tomb of Kaemsekhem in Giza.⁶² This presents a fundamental change in the development of the iconographic theme 'slaughtering of desert cattle'.

Textual additions: dialogues

Let us finally consider the textual additions to the scenes. 52% of slaughtering scenes have text. Scenes from Saqqara (82%) appear to have included text more frequently than those derived from Giza (24%).⁶³ Three text types are discerned, classified as identifying, descriptive, and

⁵⁹ W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Medum* (London 1892), pl. XVIII [right].

⁶⁰ A. Mariette, *Monuments divers recueillis en Égypte et en Nubie* (Paris 1872), 117.

⁶¹ For a discussion on these scenes, see: S. Ikram, *Choice Cuts: meat production in Ancient Egypt* (OLA 69; Leuven 1995), 53–54.

⁶² LD II, 32. This first attestation applies only to desert cattle studied for the present research. The first attestation for domestic cattle is in the tomb of Rahotep (A. Eggebrecht, *Schlachtungsbräuche im alten Ägypten und ihre Wiedergabe im Flachbild bis zum Ende des mittleren Reiches* (München 1973), pl. IB).

⁶³ When considering all desert animal-related scenes analysed in the present research, 59% include text. This figure might be somewhat different to the 'real' ratio, since not all scenes considered here were completely preserved. It may be that text was originally included in a

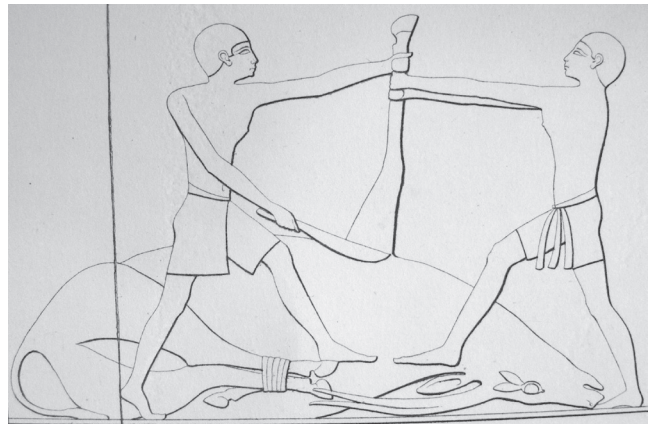


Fig. 3: Slaughtering of an Oryx; scene in the tomb of Ka-em-sekhem (fourth dynasty; Giza). After LD II, pl. 32 [bottom right]

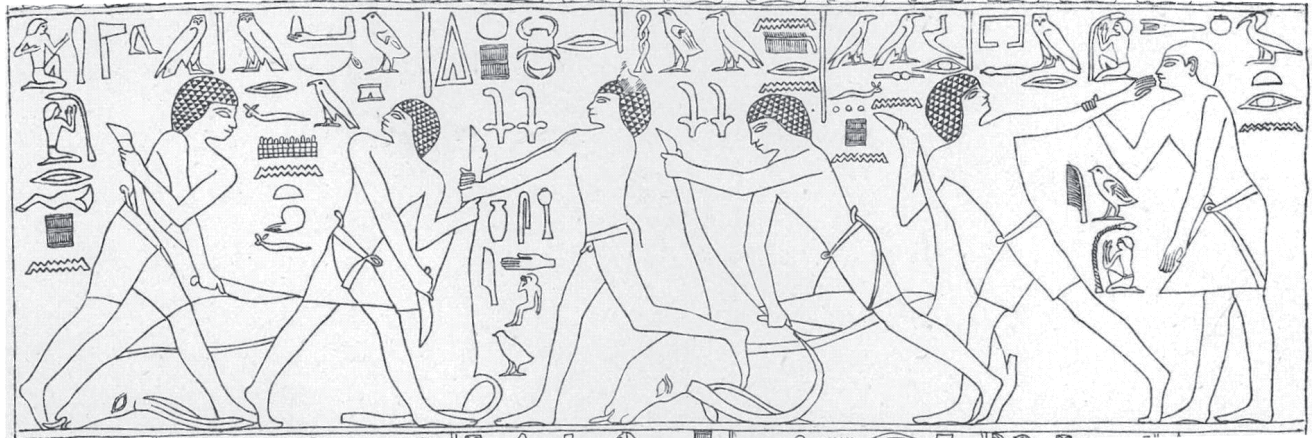


Fig. 4: Slaughtering of an Oryx and a Nubian ibex. Scene in the tomb of Ptahhetep II : Tefi (fifth dynasty; Saqqara). After Quibell, *Ramesseum*, pl. XXXVI [lower part]

dialogue. Identifying text phrases are typically associated with animals (identifying the species) and human figures (including names and titles). Descriptive or explanatory texts elucidate the activity represented. The third textual category is generally considered as resembling the ‘language of the people’ or colloquial,⁶⁴ as opposed to the more formal language employed in, for example, official documents and religious contexts. The human figures encountered in desert animal-related scenes often hold priestly titles, the majority of which involve the most common priestly office of *ka* servant, implying those responsible for the daily services for the cult of the deceased tomb owner.⁶⁵

Within the framework of the present research, 33 colloquial phrases have been identified. The restricted application of these phrases is emphasised by the fact that only 5% of all represented human figures are provided with such utterances (33 out of 651 represented human figures). Its application is confined almost exclusively to Saqqara. In 32 examples in this study, the majority is attested at that site. In Giza only one such example is known.⁶⁶

The addition of text characterises scenes from Saqqara as dynamic, while scenes from Giza are more static. Saqqara scenes not only exhibit a higher proportion of textual

additions, but the choice of text type (dialogues) creates a more lively result.⁶⁷ These additions complete scenes and indeed are a reflection of the originality of an individual’s tomb, enhancing a tomb’s unique appearance. It thus is an important contrivance to personalise the iconographic programme of an otherwise well known, and often repeated, set of themes.

The attested difference in the complexity of execution of scenes observed when comparing Giza and Saqqara is well illustrated by Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. Both slaughtering scenes are included in the decoration programme of the cult chapel. Fig. 3 depicts a scene from the L-shaped tomb chapel of Kaemsekhem in Giza, dated to the fourth dynasty, around the reign of Khafre. Fig. 4 depicts the same sub-theme in the multi-room chapel of Ptahhetep II from Saqqara, dated around the reign of Djedkare Izezi of the fifth dynasty. The scene from the chapel of Kaemsekhem depicts the abbreviated, most basic implementation of the theme: one animal (oryx) and two human figures: the butcher and his assistant. While the latter person grasps the animal’s foreleg, the butcher cuts it off.⁶⁸ As such, the scene contains the most elementary features of which a slaughtering scene involving desert cattle should be composed. The scene in Fig. 4 was much more ornately executed. The scene not only displays the slaughtering of two different species (oryx and Nubian ibex), it also depicts an additional number of functions and variations as exemplified by the human

larger number of cases. This drawback obviously applies to all aspects studied, whether internal or external.

⁶⁴ My translation of Erman’s phrase ‘Sprache des niedrigen Volkes’ (A. Erman, *Reden, Rufe und Lieder auf Gräberbilder des Alten Reiches* (Berlin 1919), 4). A more comprehensive study of these phrases is presented by W. Guglielmi, *Reden, Rufe und Lieder auf altägyptische Darstellungen der Landwirtschaft, Viehzucht, des Fisch- und Vogelfangs vom Mittleren Reichs bis zur Spätzeit* (TÄB 1; Bonn 1973).

⁶⁵ cf D. Jones, *An index of Ancient Egyptian titles, epithets and phrases of the Old Kingdom II* (BAR 866/2; Oxford 2000), 591 [2167]; variants: 591–594 [2168–2176]; P. Kaplony, ‘Ka-Diener’, in W. Helck and E. Otto, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie III* (Wiesbaden 1980), 282–284.

⁶⁶ Tomb of Senedjem-ib : Mehi (fifth dynasty; Giza): offering procession scene (east side of south wall of antechamber). LD II, pl. 74b.

⁶⁷ Within the collection of desert animal-related scenes studied, only the ‘slaughtering of desert cattle’ contains a substantial number of conversations between represented human figures. No fewer than 27 phrases of this type are attested in scenes of this sub-theme.

⁶⁸ We know of 24 scenes in which a butcher is observed cutting off a leg. In 23 cases this concerns the foreleg, while only two scenes depict the hind leg being cut off: Ptahhetep II (Fig. 4) and in the tomb of Idut (R. Macramallah, *Le Mastaba d’Idout* (Cairo 1925), pl. XX). In the latter scene the butcher is occupied with the hind leg only: the foreleg of the oryx has already been cut off.

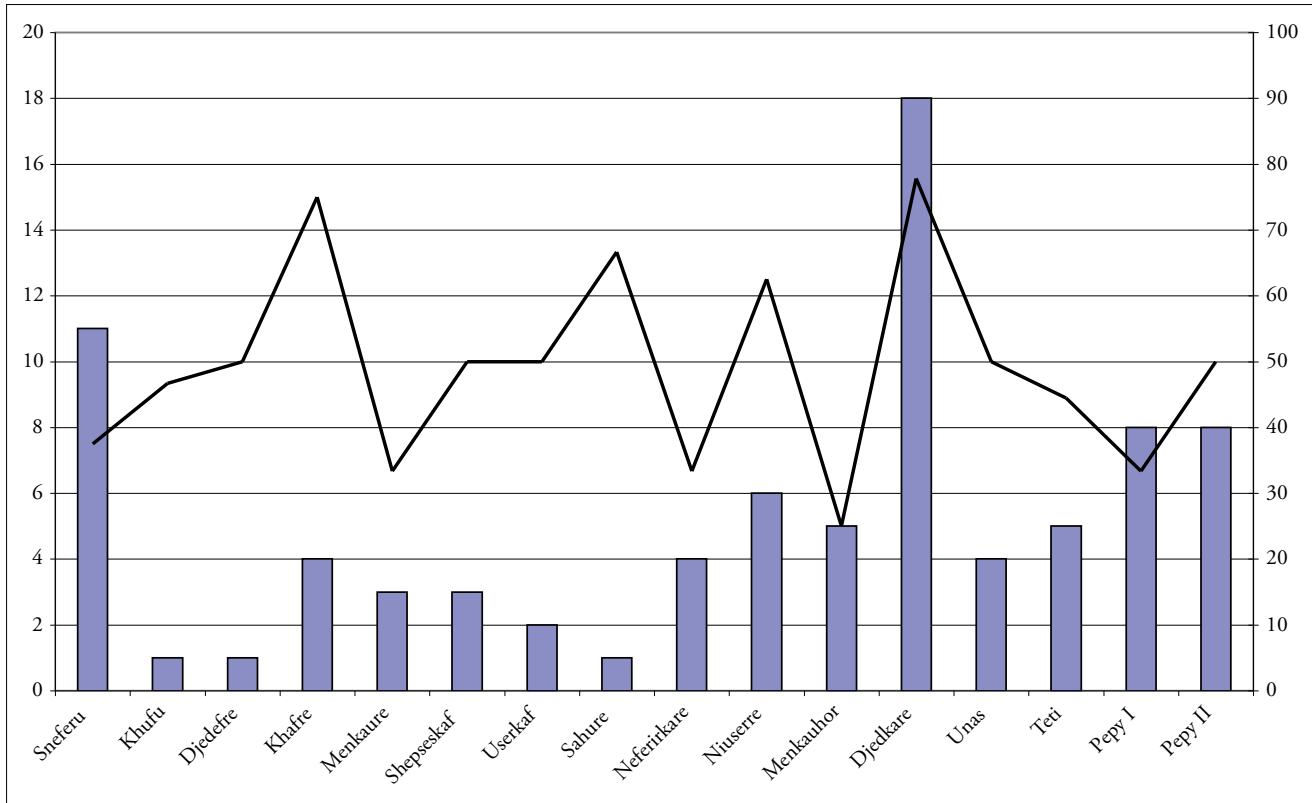


Fig. 5: Variety of animal species in 'desert animal offering procession' scenes: diachronic distribution. The line represents the percentage of tombs per reign that include this offering scene; the percentage is given on the right-hand axis

figures. Apart from those figures participating actively in the scene, there is also one figure depicted standing passively, while inspecting the blood offered to him by the person to his left (*m33 snf pn*; 'see this blood'). The scene has also been provided with a considerable amount of text. Eight short phrases can be subdivided into three different types: identifying, descriptive and dialogue.

These two scenes illustrate the different choices made by those responsible for the execution of scenes. Each displays its own interpretation of this iconographic daily-life sub-theme. However highly individualistic (since no exact similar example (copy) exists), both scenes demonstrate the same basic form. Every scene contains at least two human figures (a butcher and his assistant) engaged in the act of butchering a recumbent desert animal. At a guess it seems that this basic composition was judged sufficient for Kaemsekhem. It is however clear that the L-shaped single-room chapel offered limited wall surface, which delimits the degree to which a scene could be expanded. The more richly executed scene of Ptahhetep however also derives from a chapel consisting of one single chamber. Wall surface should therefore not simply be considered the deciding factor. The degree of complexity moreover is dependent on the wishes, and choices made by the tomb owner. These wishes and choices are not led by prescribed rules, but rather appear to be led by common principles. These

common principles furthermore appear to be embedded in a site-specific tradition. Scenes from Saqqara generally, although not necessarily, incline towards variation, while those from Giza generally, but again not necessarily, remain rather austere and conservative. What has caused these two distinct traditions is difficult to ascertain. An analysis on the diachronic development of the elaboration of execution might provide us with an indication.

Diachronic development

A comparably balanced result is arrived at when analysing the development of scenes in the Memphite region diachronically. Roughly five demarcated developmental stages could be discerned in relation to the alternation of variation and conservatism. Fig. 5 illustrates the attested variety of animal species depicted in the desert cattle offering procession scenes. The few scenes from Maidum display a surprisingly large number of different species. This variety is all the more striking when compared to the results from the remaining length of the fourth dynasty and the first half of the fifth. With some minor exceptions, the variety of scene content is initially low. The situation starts changing towards the end of the fifth dynasty, culminating around the time of Niuserre to Djedkare Izezi. For the remaining length of the Old Kingdom variation diminishes somewhat, although not returning to the situation attested before.

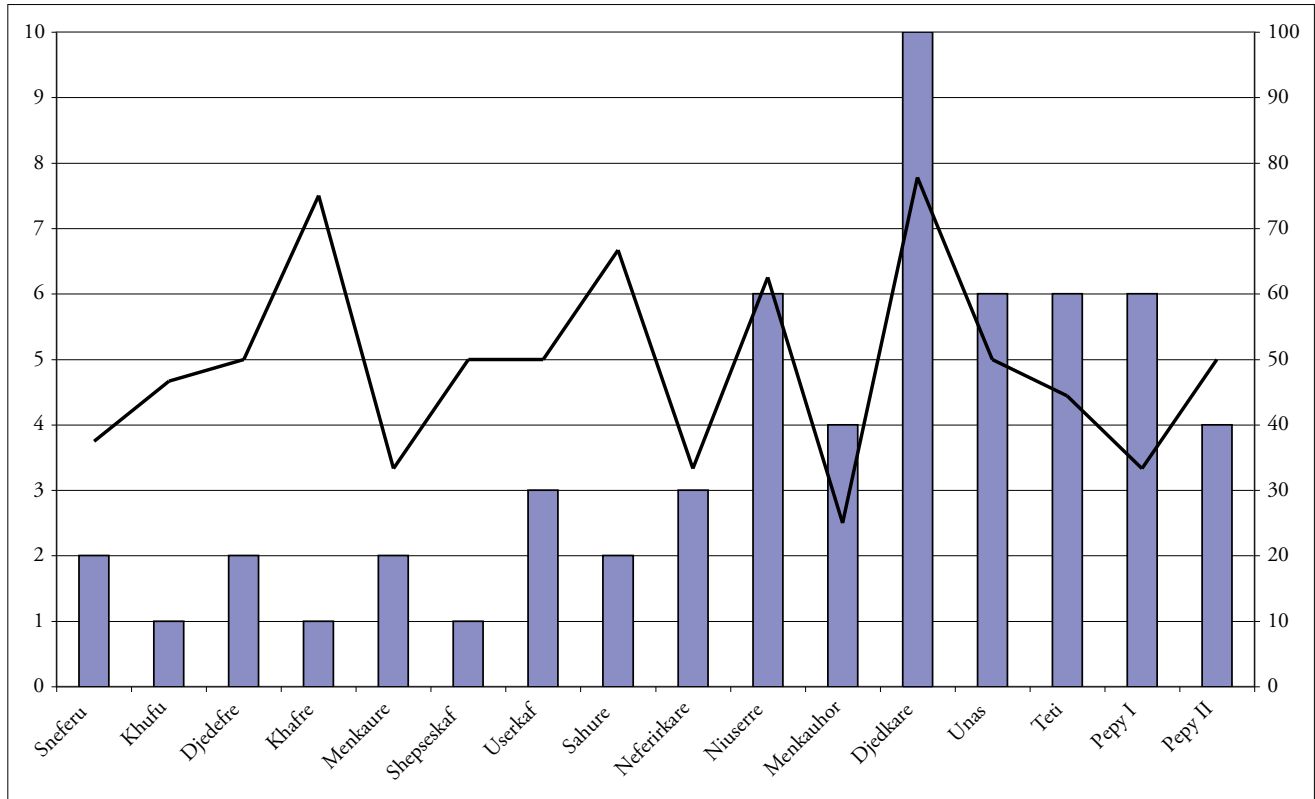


Fig. 6: Variety of occupations held by human figures in 'desert animal offering procession' scenes: diachronic distribution. The line represents the percentage of tombs per reign that include this offering scene; the percentage is given on the right-hand axis

A similar development is observed when analysing the variation of occupations exhibited by the human figures included in desert cattle offering procession scenes (Fig. 6). Again there is an obvious contrast between early and late Old Kingdom. The trend illustrated by these two graphs is recurrent throughout the research conducted.

The variety of aspects attested within the internal dynamics of scenes, such as different animal species, functions of the human figures, and so forth, proved to be relatively high at the beginning of the fourth dynasty. Tombs from Maidum represent the initial stage in the emergence of a tradition, already entrenched before the fourth dynasty of tomb decoration with an iconographic programme that evolved over the next few centuries of the Old Kingdom. Three chapels from the otherwise modest elite necropolis contained any of the four themes under consideration. The variety of aspects attested within the representational content is however surprisingly high. As we observed in Fig. 5, the variety of animal species in desert cattle offering procession scenes is only superseded in tombs dating towards the end of the Old Kingdom, around the reign of Djedkare Izezi. The reason for this deviating result might be due to the fact that these scenes present the initial stage of tomb decoration. It seems that the composition of scenes had yet to be defined and formalised.

With the royal move to Giza, private tomb construction

began at this previously unused plateau.⁶⁹ The organisation of the mastaba fields into a grid-like pattern is without precedent.⁷⁰ This break with tradition might well have had consequences for the decoration of tomb chapels. The layout of these mastaba fields, governed by 'strict hierarchy' and 'uniform geometry',⁷¹ finds its equal in the decoration of individual tombs. The elaboration of tomb scenes during the remaining length of the fourth dynasty, notably in Giza, is characterised by uniformity rather than by singularity. The relatively homogeneous nature of tomb construction at the site, furthermore characterised by small,

⁶⁹ The Giza plateau had, however, already been employed as a necropolis during the early dynastic period (G.T. Martin, 'Covington's Tomb' and Related Early Monuments at Giza', in C. Berger and B. Mathieu (eds), *Etudes sur l'Ancien Empire et la necropole de Saqqâra dédiées à Jean-Philippe Lauer* (Montpellier 1997), 279–288), including a presumably royal tomb from the third dynasty, the so-called Covington's tomb (P. Jánosi, *Die Gräberwelt der Pyramidenzeit* (Mainz am Rhein 2006), 19–21).

⁷⁰ The onset of a systematically organised private necropolis in the vicinity of the royal funerary complex is, however, already observed in fourth dynasty Dahshur (N. Alexanian and S.J. Seidlmayer, 'Die Nekropole von Dahschur. Forschungsgeschichte und Perspektiven', in M. Bárta (ed.), *Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2000* (Prague 2000), 292).

⁷¹ M.J. Raven, *Architectural principles in theory and practice: the New Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara (Egypt)* (Amsterdam 2005), 34.

single-room tomb chapels, might well have been a factor in the inclination towards less elaboration. The restricted wall surface placed limitations on the potential quantity of scenes to be included, and/or had a restraining effect on the extent of these scenes.

Around the time of the reign of Userkaf, who commissioned his pyramid at Saqqara, scenes began to display more variation, although on an unassuming scale. One might have expected that the royal abandonment of Giza would have provided an impulse towards innovation for those who persisted in constructing elite tombs at that site. However, their decoration remained conventional. Data from Saqqara reveal a deviant trend, although the inclination towards variation was still at a low level at this point. Subsequent kings left Saqqara to erect their funerary complexes at Abusir. Irrespective of this royal move, the majority of elite tombs featuring in the present dataset derive from near-by Saqqara and Giza. The increased physical distance between royal and private tombs does not seem to have had a profound impact on the dynamics within the tombs' decoration.

The situation changed significantly around the time of the reigns of Neferirkare to Niuserre⁷² continuing until that of Djedkare Izezi. No previous period of the Old Kingdom had witnessed such a level of variation. The move towards increasing self-representation through one's tomb and its decoration is evident. This trend is not confined to tombs that were built at a distance from the royal monuments. The tomb of Ptahshepses, almost literally built up against the pyramid of his father-in-law Niuserre, was not only the largest private tomb built during the entire Old Kingdom, but it also rivalled the royal funerary monuments of the period in terms of size and complexity. During that same period, tombs continued to be constructed at Giza. Increasing diversity was, however, confined remarkably primarily to Saqqara tombs. Unique features within the representations of scenes (internal aspects) are for example most often attested at Saqqara. With the return to the nucleus area of Saqqara by king Unas, the first king to include pyramid texts in his funerary monument, the trend subsides. Every king of the remainder of the Old Kingdom continued to construct his pyramid on the (larger) Saqqara plateau. Tombs of those belonging to the highest levels of society were once again built in close proximity

to the monuments of their monarch, as had been observed during the reigns of Unas and Teti. Although the variation in the different representational aspects of scenes reverted somewhat to earlier levels, it did not return to the restricted level witnessed before the time of Niuserre.

Conclusion

Regarding the opposition of 'fixed rules' and 'personal choice', the analysis of the scene's internal and external aspects revealed a rather equivocal view. The selected themes indeed indicate a certain degree of homogeneity regarding their inclusion and disposition over the tomb chapel. None of the indicators, however, 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, subject to certain conventions, instead of one definite choice. Strict rules could not be observed. It remains the tomb owner who decided in the first place what theme(s) to include. It is especially the less common themes that offered an excellent tool to personalise one's tomb superstructure.

The analysis of the internal aspects of scenes has acknowledged that there is no such thing as strict standardisation. Scenes of similar sub-themes can differ considerably with regard to their representational content. In addition, the compositional development through time is not linear. Aspects within the internal dynamics of scenes, whether they are animals, human figures or text, are added continuously throughout the Old Kingdom. At the same time, other aspects are abandoned, some to re-appear again at later stages. The scenes do not unequivocally increase or decrease in elaborateness of execution. The dependence of scenes on the available wall surface is also not self-evident.

The study has revealed a clear dichotomy between Giza and Saqqara. Scenes from Saqqara tombs can be characterized as dynamic, displaying variation, whereas those from Giza can generally be characterised as static, conformist, displaying a lower degree of variation. When set in a diachronic perspective, a similar development can be detected. A uniform interplay of variation and austerity surfaced when studying the internal features of the scenes' representations. This trend has tentatively been related to the (changing) political situation and the (changing choice of) location for the royal funerary complexes. The exact rationale behind these trends, that is, the antithesis of Giza and Saqqara and the observed chronological development, is however another question. What exactly has caused these results should still be investigated further.

⁷² The same applies for the architectural development of tombs during these kings' reigns, cf. M. Bárta, 'Architectural Innovations in the Development of the Non-Royal Tomb during the Reign of Niuserra', in Jánosi (ed.), *Structure and Significance*, 105–130.