

DIVERSIFICATION AND VARIATION IN OLD KINGDOM FUNERARY ICONOGRAPHY AS THE EXPRESSION OF A NEED FOR ‘INDIVIDUALITY’*

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Abstract

Comparing egyptological statements on the ancient Egyptian ‘individual’, ‘personality’, and ‘identity’ it becomes obvious that, partly, they are not only internally contradictory, but also in respect of the actual material culture. The latter’s wide range of diversification and variation is demonstrated by zooming in, by varying degree, on the Giza necropolis. Examining some striking examples reveals that several deviations from an (alleged) collective norm, as well as other innovations, unambiguously exposes an uninterrupted urge to express individuality throughout the Old Kingdom. Parallel to this individuality and intertwined with it, runs an obvious agonistic trait of culture, not only in autobiographical texts and in the range of quality of the decoration of elite tombs, but also in the first maxim of Ptahhotep’s wisdom text. It shows that the ‘Erweiterung des Bestehenden’, elaborated by Hornung for the New Kingdom royal tombs, actually lies at the foundation of the entire Egyptian culture.

The study of iconography programmes in the elite tombs of the Memphite area in the Old Kingdom reveals an astounding variation, which inevitably raises the question of the *individual* ‘pluriformity’ behind and in relation to the *collective* ‘uniformity’ of existing tombs in those residential necropoleis.¹ Therefore, I was struck by a quotation used as a motto for a dissertation by a member of the Department of Psychology at Leiden University:²

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. ‘But which is the stone that supports the bridge?’ Kublai Khan asks. ‘The bridge is not made by one stone or another’, Marco answers, ‘but by the line of the arch that they form.’ Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: ‘Why do you speak of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me’. Polo answers: ‘Without stones there is no arch.’

I would like to contrast this with Helck’s dictum in his lemma ‘Individuum’ in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*:³ ‘...aber es fehlt ihm zunächst Wille und Fähigkeit der selbständigen Bestimmung seines Handelns. Er fühlt sich weitgehend als Gefäß einer alles umfassenden

* The present text is a result of a seminar *Religion in Context. Imaginary Concepts and Social Reality in Pharaonic Egypt*, held in Berlin in 1998. Since, after many years, the acts never saw the light, it was transferred to a “Festschrift” which, again, was haunted by postponements, which made me decide to withdraw it a second time and offer it for publication to *JEOL*. Notwithstanding the fact that 15 years have passed since it was written, there has not been published – to the author’s knowledge – crucial recent literature that made a revision necessary.

I would like to thank Dr Julia van Dijk-Harvey and Mr Sasha Verma for correcting my English.

¹ Although there are several provincial tombs (cf. Y. Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom. Studies in Orientation and Scene Content* (London, 1987), 5-12), those in the residential cemeteries, logically, are the basic models for the former, cf. o.c., 10-11.

² J. Jansz, *Person, Self, and Moral Demands. Individualism Contested by Collectivism* (Leiden, 1991), v, quoted from Italo Calvo, *Invisible Cities*, 1972.

³ W. Helck, W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, III (Wiesbaden, 1980), col. 152.

Macht, die ihn in Bewegung setzt: des Königs.' Because of the metaphor used in the Marco Polo story, the following quotation from Assmann⁴ is interesting as well: 'In der Identitätspräsentation der 'Idealbiographie' erscheint der einzelne nicht als Individuum, sondern als vollkommener *Baustein* (italics RvW; cf. Jansz's word 'building block' in the quotation on p. 133 here, sub 1) in jenem Ordnungsgefüge, das mit dem Begriff Maat gemeint ist'.

Before commenting on these passages, it may be instructive to compare a series of maps and plans of the Giza necropolis. For instance, the over-all impression of fig. 1⁵ is that, apart from some exceptionally large and small ones, the Western and Eastern Fields with the royal tomb at the centre show two rather homogeneous collections of tombs, differing only in size:

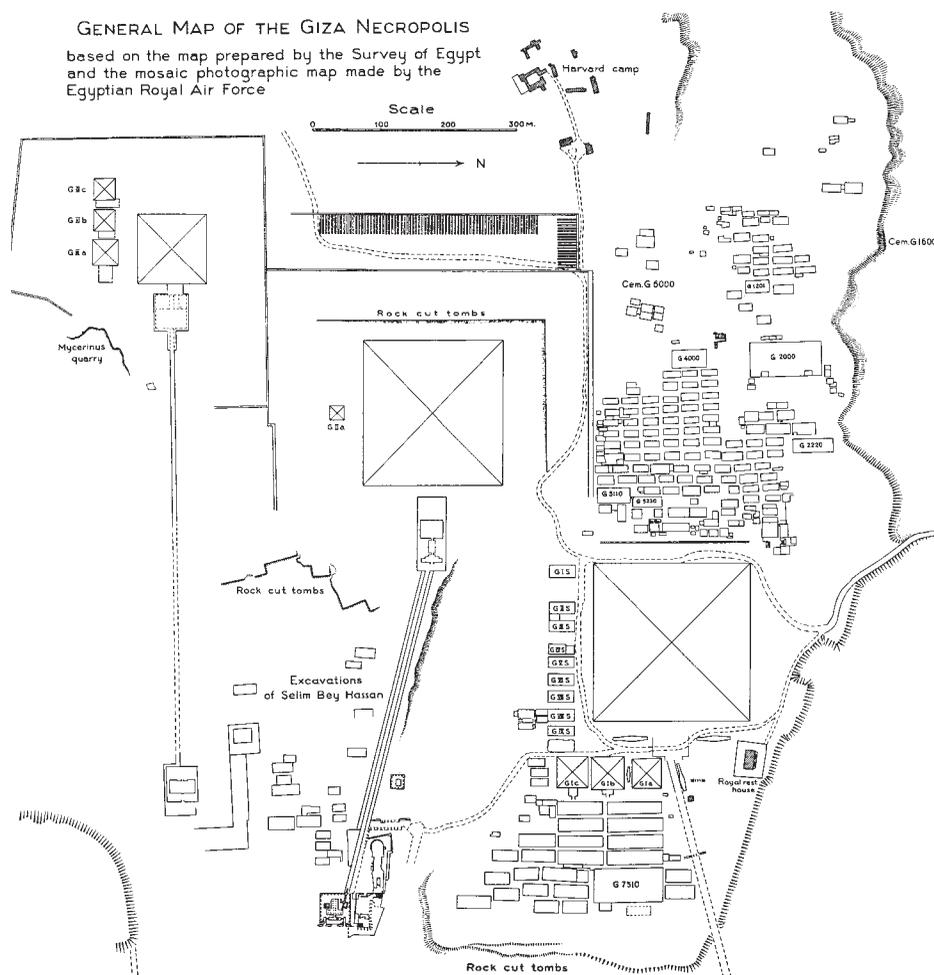


Fig. 1. General map of the Giza necropolis (after G.A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis* (Cambridge, 1942), first folding plan)

⁴ J. Assmann, *Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten* (München, 1991), from ch. 7: 'Schrift, Tod und Identität. Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur', pp. 169-199, especially p.182.

⁵ After G.A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis* (Cambridge, 1942), first folding plan.

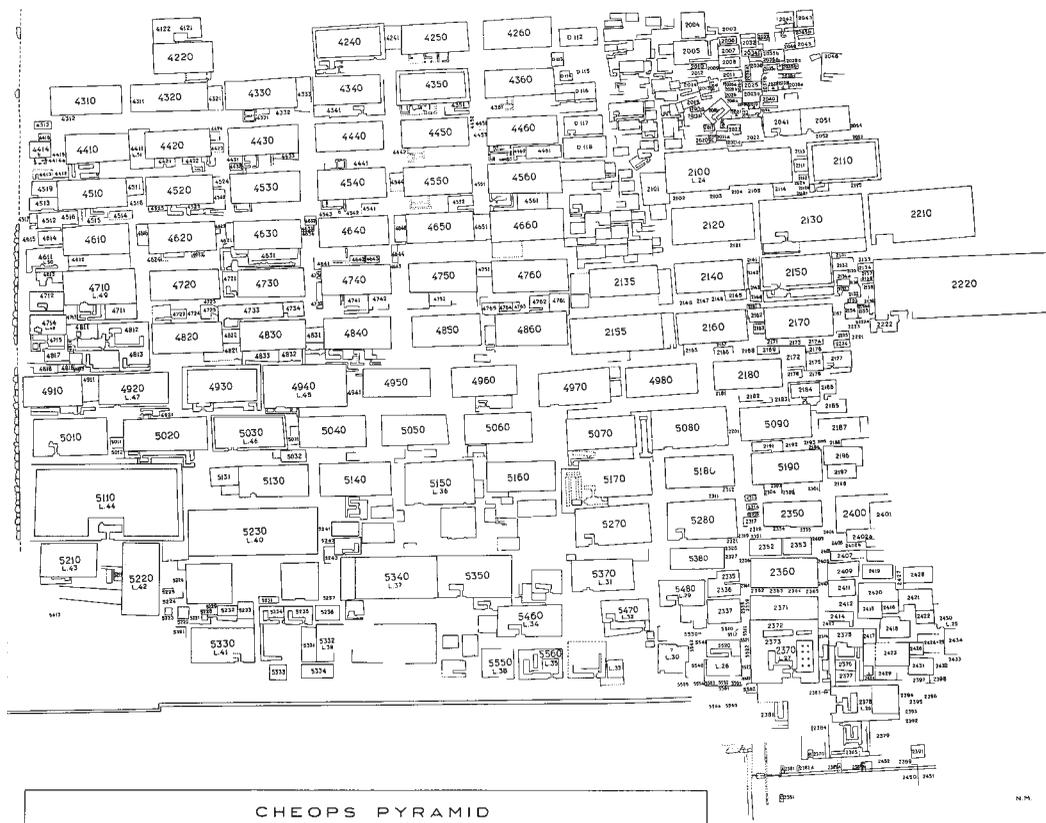


Fig. 2. Eastern section of the West Field of the Giza necropolis (after G.A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis* (Cambridge, 1942), second folding plan)

the smaller ones in the West, the larger in the East. Helck's statement seems confirmed. However, on a smaller scale, figs. 2-3⁶ show more variation than just size: some internal and external features have become discernable. Further reduction of the scale of, for instance, the first row of tombs to the East of Kheops's queens' pyramids (fig. 4)⁷ shows the internal and external diversity of the two double mastabas of Khafkhufu I and Kawab even more clearly. A final enlargement reveals that the former originally consisted of two buildings, each of a different internal structure, while the external extensions also differ in material: limestone versus mud brick (fig. 5).⁸ Often, variation in the scale of representation is not needed to reveal differentiation both in external size and shape, and internal structure. For instance, the tombs of Hesyre (Third Dynasty), Nefermaat (Fourth Dynasty), Rauer (Fifth Dynasty), Ti (Fifth Dynasty), Ptahhotep II (Fifth Dynasty), Mereruka (Sixth Dynasty), and Mehu (Sixth Dynasty) are non-interchangeable entities, irrespective of scale.⁹ These examples also demonstrate that the observed differentiation of the funeral complexes has a multi-dimensional

⁶ After Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis*, second and third folding plans.

⁷ After W.K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II* (Boston, 1978), fig. 3.

⁸ After, Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II*, fig. 19.

⁹ J. Leclant, *Le Temps des Pyramides* (Paris, 1978), 312-313, figs. 398-408.

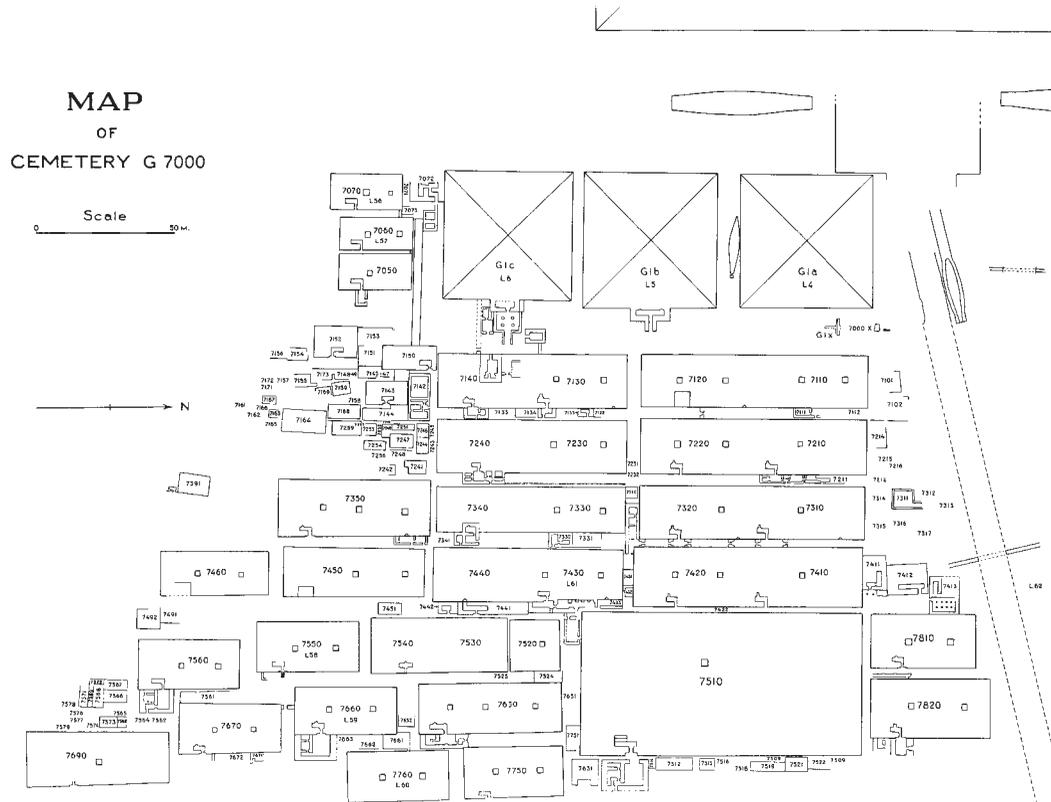


Fig. 3. The East Field of the Giza necropolis (after G.A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis* (Cambridge, 1942), third folding plan)

character, namely: cubic size, shape, internal structure, and materials used. The first, cubic size, represents a purely quantitative feature, while the other three are primarily qualitative properties, although quantitative aspects are present as well: size of internal rooms and corridors and the connected variations in the wall surface available for decoration, or the quantity of mud brick versus stone.

Turning to *schemes* of the wall decoration of tomb chapels is the next step in scale reduction. A look at a selection from Yvonne Harpur's book (fig. 6),¹⁰ shows that the schemes of Seshathetep and Nesutnefer, respectively, are very similar in general layout on this level, except for the location of the entrance in the east wall. On the lowest rung of the scale ladder, i.e., the executed reliefs (figs. 7-8),¹¹ this is maintained to a certain degree, not only in some themes and sub themes (especially in the central registers), but also in the contents of the concomitant texts, and even in the composition of some groups of hieroglyphs, particularly the columns framing the central registers. At the same time, however, close scrutiny of the

¹⁰ After Y. Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom. Studies in Orientation and Scene Content*, 396-397, plans 43-47.

¹¹ After H. Junker, *Giza*, II (Wien, 1934), 182, fig. 28; id., *Giza*, III (Wien 1938), fig. 27.

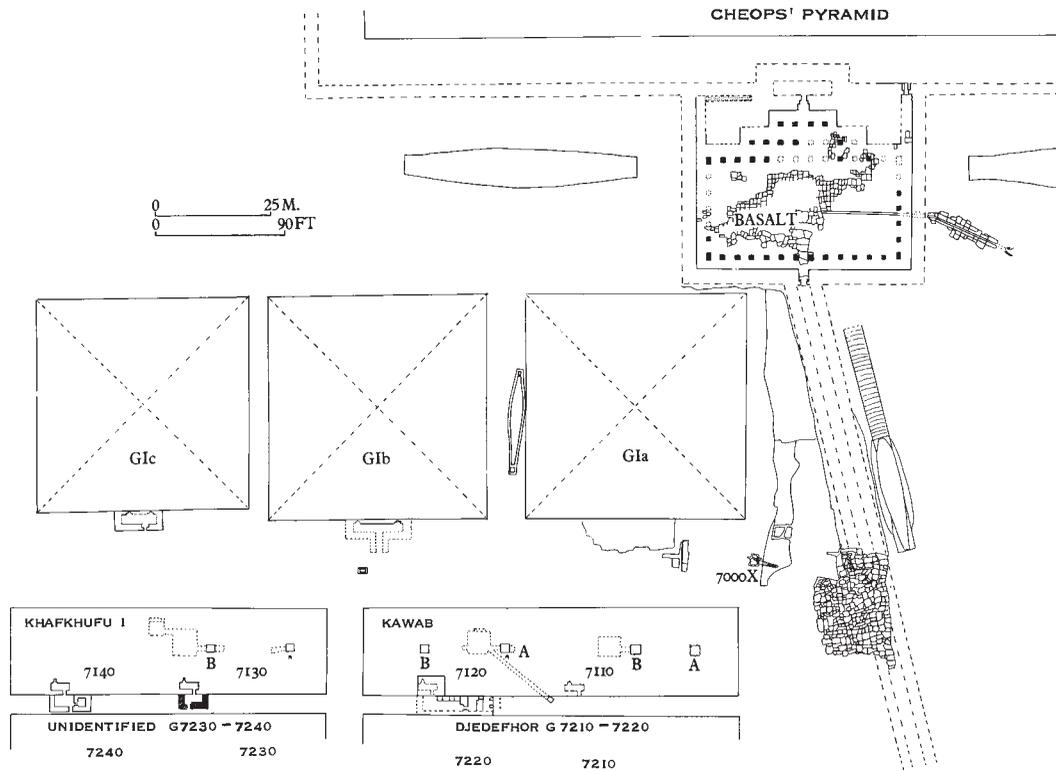


Fig. 4. Detail of the East Field of the Giza necropolis (after W.K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II* (Boston, 1978), fig. 3)

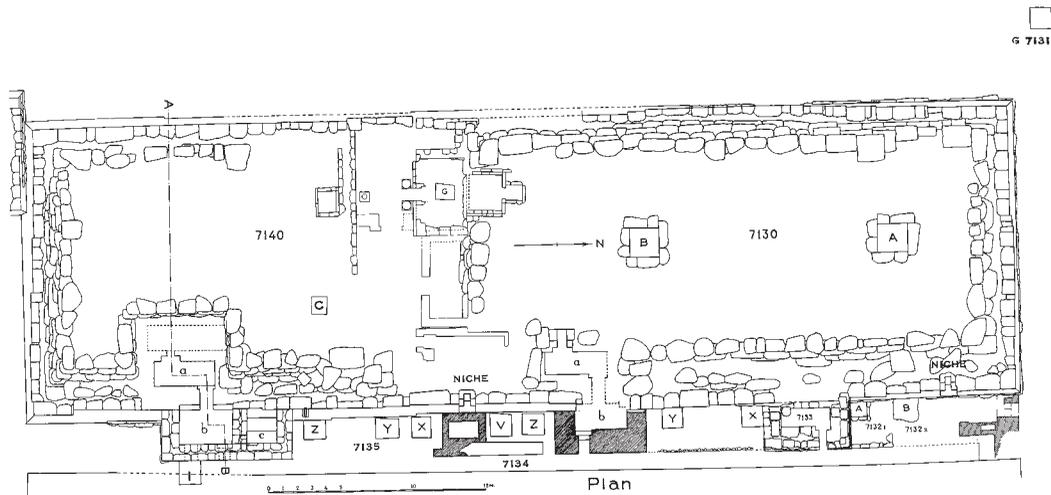
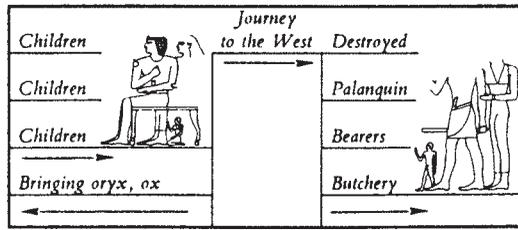
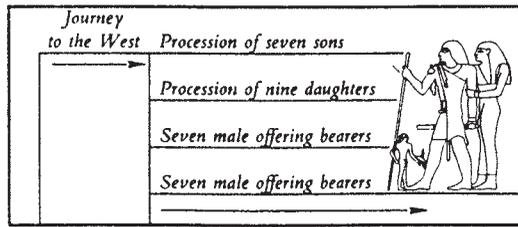
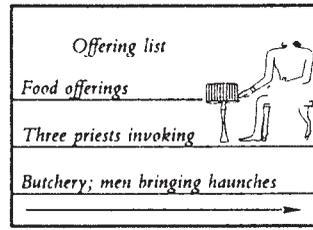


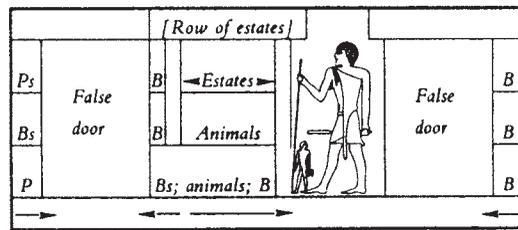
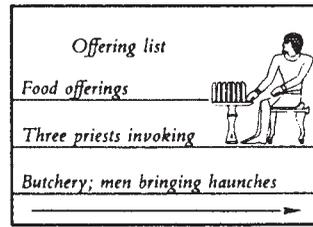
Fig. 5. The tomb of Khafkhufu I (after W.K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II* (Boston, 1978), fig. 19)



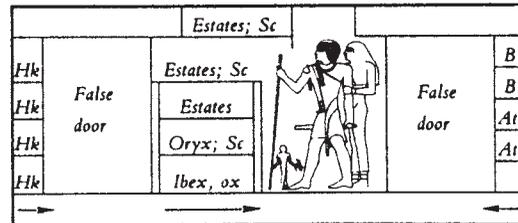
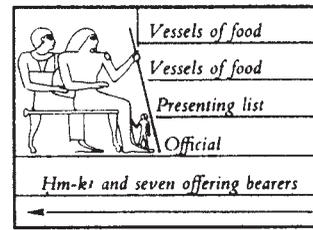
Ssh-t-htp: Htj, WF (PM 149-50), V.1-2



Nswt-nfr, WF (PM 143-4), V.1-2



Ssh-t-htp: Htj, WF (PM 149-50), V.1-2



Nswt-nfr, WF (PM 143-4), V.1-2

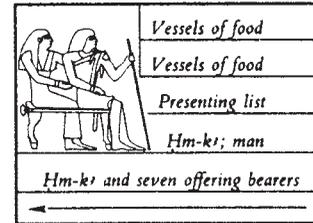


Fig. 6. Decoration schemes of the tomb chapels of Seshathetep and Nesutnefer (after Y. Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom. Studies in Orientation and Scene Content* (London, 1987), 396-397, plans 43-47)

two walls reveals that for the main part there is much more heterogeneity and differentiation than uniformity. Besides the striking similarities in the last-mentioned columns, there are equally striking differences: although both representations are found on west walls, Nesutnefer has switched the geographical order — the settlements of the south are on the right=north column (a mistake?); Seshathotep's left column ends at a different level than the right one and its reading direction is symmetrical to the right one, while in Nesutnefer's tomb they are both oriented to the right. How should this be considered or interpreted, especially with regard to Helck's statement quoted above?

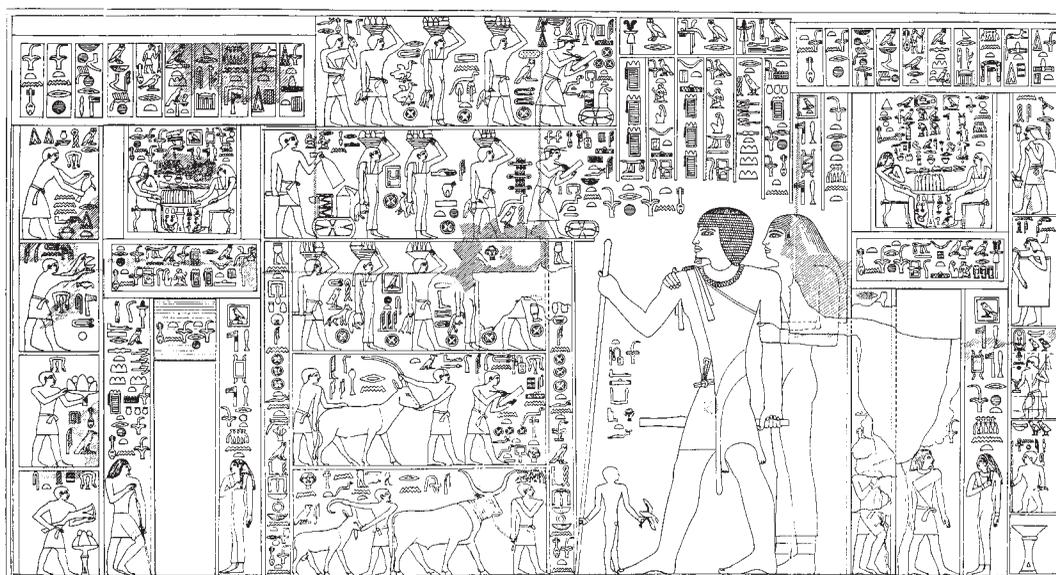


Fig. 7. The west wall of the tomb-chapel of Nesutnefer (after H. Junker, *Giza*, II (Wien, 1934), 182, fig. 28)

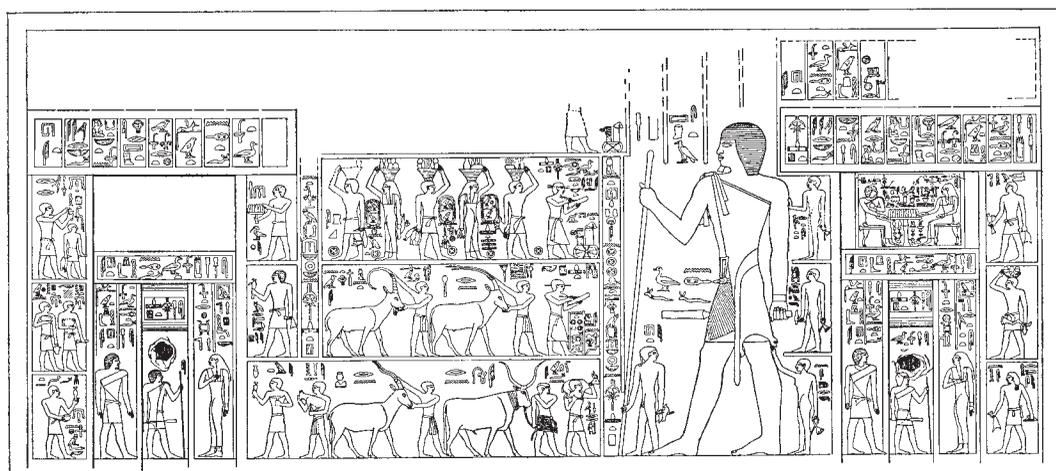


Fig. 8. The west wall of the tomb-chapel of Seshathetep (after H. Junker, *Giza*, III (Wien, 1938), fig. 27)

A first step might be to rephrase the Marco Polo story, for instance: ‘A student describes the Giza necropolis tomb by tomb. ‘But which is the tomb that makes it a necropolis?’ his professor asks. ‘The necropolis is not made by one tomb or another’, the student answers, ‘but by their collective’. The professor remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: ‘Why do you speak of the tombs? It is only the necropolis that matters to me’. The student answers: ‘Without tombs there is no necropolis’.

In other words, the question that comes to mind is whether, and if so, how far a single elite tomb, specified as a series of *various* steps in realization, namely establishing its location, its

external cubic size, its construction as a building, the design of its internal structure — i.e., the place, sequence, size and shape of the various rooms and connecting doorways and/or corridors — together with the external and/or internal decoration, reflects the *tomb owner's*, i.e., an *individual's* 'Wille und Fähigkeit der selbständigen Bestimmung seines Handelns'. Or is it an 'alles umfassende Macht, die ihn in Bewegung setzt', resulting in an almost absolute opposition of the king versus the individual, the latter incapable of acting without the former's implied consent, as Helck would have it, with the tacitly logical consequence that one might expect to find (only) prescribed, stereotype tomb programmes? A different contrast is formulated by Assmann in his *Lexikon* entry 'Persönlichkeitsbegriff und -bewußtsein':¹² 'Grundsätzlich gilt nicht das sich Hervortun vor anderen, sondern das sich Einfügen-können in die Gemeinschaft als oberste Tugend'.

Here we are confronted with another sharply contrasting pair of concepts, namely the *individual* versus the *collective*, i.e. *society*, or in other words, the *differentiated* versus the *undifferentiated*, and their relationship, as characteristics of the ancient Egyptian culture. The issue was acknowledged long ago. In 1929 De Buck published his *Het typische en het individueele bij de Egyptenaren* (*The typical and the individual of the Egyptians*).¹³ This was followed in 1935 by Wolf's *Individuum und Gemeinschaft in der ägyptischen Kultur*,¹⁴ without any reference to De Buck's study incidentally. In 1966, Zandee delivered an inaugural lecture entitled *Het ongedifferentieerde denken der oude Egyptenaren* (*The undifferentiated thinking of the ancient Egyptians*).¹⁵ These studies and the aforementioned *Lexikon* entries may best be summarized by the following statements by De Buck: '...the typical triumphs over the imperfect reality.', and 'The super-individual overshadows the individual',¹⁶ which adequately sums up a still generally accepted viewpoint on this matter in present-day Egyptology, particularly as far as the Old Kingdom is concerned, witnessed not only by the above quotations by Assmann and Helck, but also subscribed to by Bianchi in 1997.¹⁷

In 1991, however, Assmann touched on the subject again in his *Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten*,¹⁸ where he states in chapter 6, section 5, entitled 'Individualismus der Unsterblichkeit': 'In Wirklichkeit ist die ägyptische Kultur von enormen individualisierenden Kräften geprägt'.¹⁹ This conclusion is based on the study of 'portrait sculpture', including Old Kingdom products, and seems to flatly contradict the other judgements, particularly Bianchi's,²⁰ ending in a stalemate on the problem of the individual/individualism versus society/collectivism in ancient Egyptian culture. The situation, I think, mainly reveals that different things are being talked about, and on different levels, due to the fact that the individual scholars have failed to sharply define or specify, either beforehand or in their

¹² *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, IV (Wiesbaden, 1982), col. 974.

¹³ Leiden; his inaugural lecture as reader in Egyptology at Leiden University.

¹⁴ *Leipziger Ägyptologische Studien*, I, Glückstadt, 1935.

¹⁵ Leiden.

¹⁶ De Buck, *Het typische en het individueele bij de Egyptenaren*, 27, 28 respectively.

¹⁷ R.S. Bianchi, 'An Elite Image', in E. Göring (*et al.*, eds.), *Chief of Seers. Egyptian Studies in Memory of Cyril Aldred* (London, 1997), 40-41.

¹⁸ München, ch. 6: 'Das Bildnis in der ägyptischen Kunst. Stile und Funktionen bildlicher Selbstdarstellung' (138-168), and ch. 7: 'Schrift, Tod und Identität. Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur' (169-199).

¹⁹ Assmann, *o.c.*, p. 159.

²⁰ Cf. n. 17, 34-37 and 40-41.

conclusions, their concept of an ‘individual’, of ‘individualism’, ‘collectivism’,²¹ or of any related aspects they may have focussed on.²²

For instance, in his *Lexikon* entry ‘Menschenbild’, Helck states: ‘Das Ende des AR ist gekennzeichnet durch die Erkenntnis von der *Individualität²³ des einzelnen Menschen und der Verneinung aller Bindungen’.²⁴ The *social* aspects of this ‘individuality’, namely ‘denying all bonds’, are obvious. However, it is unclear to the reader whether the deeper implication, namely that of a person’s possible (social) *autonomy*, is completely disregarded or taken for granted. It should also be noted that we are dealing here with something *abstract*, i.e., visually unobservable individuality based on Helck’s evaluation of *textual* data. Conversely, in his discussion of the three-dimensional private sculpture of the Fourth and early Fifth Dynasties, for instance, the ‘reserve heads’, the statues of Hemiunu, Ankhhaf, and Kai (better known as the Louvre scribe),²⁵ where Assmann uses terms as ‘individual physiognomic features’, ‘realism’, ‘non-interchangeability’ and ‘naturalism’,²⁶ he is dealing with a *concrete*, immediately observable, *physical* individuality, resulting from a biological differentiation influenced in real life by all kinds of variables, such as ageing and excessive food in the case of Ankhhaf, and maybe even an endocrine disease in the case of Hemiunu,²⁷ which are *artistically* expressed in stone. Even if Bianchi’s assertion in n. 27 is true, it still does not explain the undeniable differences between Rahotep’s statue and Hemiunu’s, although the latter could have ordered an ‘idealized’ statue. Both, indeed, belong to the same formal and semantic type of seated tomb statues but stress different accents.

It is also worth realizing that in ‘autobiographical’ texts the individuality of only *one* class of agents is involved, since the author and the person described are self-referring. In the case of visual representations, irrespective of who takes the initiative to add individualizing features, *two* classes of agents are engaged, the *patron(s) directly*, concretely and individually represented in stone or wood, and *indirectly the sculptors*, who, notwithstanding their usual anonymity, are nevertheless abstractly individualized by the *way* they executed their commission. In short, although individuality is concerned in both cases, on the one hand it involves a *vertical* diversification, between two social strata: commissioner versus commissioned, as well as a *horizontal* one, of individual members of an elite together, and of individual sculptors together. After this preliminary theoretical interlude, sketching the complexity of the issue, we may again turn to the tomb and its decoration programme, which, in my view, may be considered as another kind of ‘portraiture’ of its owner, expressing his individuality by other means than three-dimensional statuary.

I will start with some purely architectural features, such as the orientation of the entrance, the relationship of the entrance to the false door(s), the distribution of the false door(s) on the

²¹ Incidentally, there is no entry on this in the *Lexikon*, in contrast to ‘Individuum’.

²² The situation recalls the discussion concerning the ‘town problem’: M. Bietak, ‘Urban Archaeology and the “Town Problem” in K.R. Weeks (ed.) *Egypt and the Social Sciences* (Cairo, 1979), 97-144.

²³ Here, too, it is interesting to note that, although the word ‘Individualität’ is marked by an asterisk, referring to a separate entry, only ‘Individuum’ has been included in the *Lexikon*.

²⁴ *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, IV, col. 55-64, in particular, col. 56.

²⁵ Assmann, ‘Das Bildnis in der ägyptischen Kunst. Stile und Funktionen bildlicher Selbstdarstellung’ in J. Assmann, *Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten* (München, 1991), 162,10a-165,21.

²⁶ Assmann, *o.c.*, 142.

²⁷ This is vehemently denied by Bianchi, 1997, 37-39, summarized in his dictum ‘The resulting image is, accordingly, the depiction of a type, not the representation of a specific individual’.

west wall, the shape of the entrance corridor, the overall plans of the separate tombs, and the masonry.

As a rule of thumb, the entrance is in the east side, for instance, in the early Fourth Dynasty tomb of Metjen at Sakkara,²⁸ which is generally interpreted as reflecting the religious idea of enabling the rising sun to send its regenerating rays into the cult chapel and on the false door where the *ka* could re-enter the world of the living.²⁹ Since the religious concept of regeneration was of vital importance to the Egyptians,³⁰ and since one would expect religious rules to be rather strict and static, one would assume *all* entrances to be in the east, yet there are instances of the entrance in the north side, as in the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Kaimankh in Giza (West Field).³¹ This might be explained by referring to ideas concerning the circumpolar stars in the Pyramid Texts. Then, however, one is transferring strictly royal funerary ideas to the private sphere, which is methodologically highly disputable, to say the least. But even so, how may we explain cases such as the late Fifth Dynasty tombs of Ihy at Sakkara³² and of Senedjemib: Mehi at Giza,³³ both with their entrances in the south side, for which, as far as I know, no religious explanation in geographically symbolic terms has been proposed.³⁴ Whatever the reasons, it is obvious that the placement of the door does not reflect a *fixed* or *homogeneous* religious-symbolic concept, and nor do the extremely varied plans.³⁵

This is further confirmed by instances of the L-shaped cult chapel, the most frequent 'standard' plan. In cases with the entrance in the north of the east wall and a single false door in the west wall, one finds the latter either in the south of that side, i.e. not only invisible from the outside, but also entirely inaccessible to the sun's rays, or opposite the door, usually slightly off-centre however.³⁶ In cases with two false doors, of course, only one in the north of that side is visible.³⁷ If, in the majority of tombs, the placement of the door in the east wall is not due to strictly personal freedom, but rather to (some) religious symbolism,³⁸ their placement in the north or south walls may suggest a more 'individual' choice, as would the varying locations of the false doors in the west side. As far as I can see there is no fixed rule. A comparison of two plans of an identical type, a narrow, east-west orientated chapel, shows that in the tomb of Hetepherakhty at Leiden³⁹ the narrow entrance corridor leads to a slightly wider part before entering the chapel proper. In the tomb of Ptahhotep: Ijnankh it is exactly the

²⁸ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 387, plan 2.

²⁹ We should realize, however, that part of the West Field in Giza was in the shadow of Kheops's pyramid at sunrise (!) as is impressively visible on pl. 1 in Junker, *Giza*, I.

³⁰ See *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, VII, general index, sub 'Auferstehung', 'Regeneration', 'Verjüngung', 'Wiedergeburt'.

³¹ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 419, pl. 96.

³² Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 442, pl. 137.

³³ Harpur, *o.c.*, 441, pl. 136.

³⁴ Of course, one could suggest that it may refer to the south whence the life-giving flood reaches Egypt, but there is no (contemporary) textual evidence to support such a view.

³⁵ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 440-443, figs. 135-138.

³⁶ Harpur, *o.c.*, 413, pls. 84-85.

³⁷ Harpur, *o.c.*, 412, pl. 82.

³⁸ Of course, this is, strictly speaking, only valid for tombs on the West bank of the Nile, where a door in the West, indeed, has only once been found, namely in the tomb of Merefnebef. (K. Myśliwiec, *The Tomb of Merefnebef, Saqqara I* (Warszawa, 2004), pls. 2, 6, 9, 18, 23, 49-50, 72-73). Although this is almost certainly dictated by religious ideas about the West as the place of the dead, the rather banal fact that there are no settlements to the West of the cemeteries, so that relatives or funerary priests could never come from that direction, may also have played a role.

³⁹ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 420, pl. 97.

opposite: a wide entrance corridor becomes narrower before entering the chapel.⁴⁰ To me this strongly suggests a personal desire for subtle variation within a single type which itself represents a ‘collective’.

The same conscious attention to variation is found in the masonry of the facades of the tomb of Hetepherakhty,⁴¹ and that of Akhethetep in Paris.⁴² The first has only its *lintel* symmetrically placed above the entrance, whereas *all* masonry framing the entrance of the latter is symmetrically constructed.⁴³ Apparently its owner, respectively his architect, had a conscious wish to demonstrate his/their concern for this particular aesthetic aspect of the tomb in contrast to others. To summarize, these examples concern a number of variables of a purely architectural nature and the apparently increasing degrees of freedom to manipulate and/or combine them: only the absence of an entrance in the west wall was a fixed central idea, the other possibilities were less rigid, such as the placement and number of false doors in the west wall.

Scrutinizing the decoration programmes in the widest sense of their meaning, i.e., including the texts, immediately reveals the complexity and subtleties of the variables on which decisions had to be made. As the previous plans show, the inner parts of a mastaba may vary considerably in both the structure and size of the rooms, which obviously has a direct influence on the wall surface available for decoration. Since there is no direct relationship between the outer size of a tomb and its inner structure, this reflects a degree of freedom on the part of the owner. Once the choice for a certain number and size of rooms and corridors had been made, and, directly related to this, the available wall surface determined, the next step was to establish the number and combination of *main themes*, for instance, agriculture, the *sub themes*, for instance, harvesting, and the *scenes*, for instance, winnowing or transport by donkeys, and their composition together with their distribution over the walls. Their location involves two aspects, namely the *orientation*: east, west, north and south walls — related to a possible religious or purely geographical symbolism — and *placement* on a particular wall in a vertical and a horizontal direction: a high, middle or low position, respectively one on the right, middle, or left part of the wall. Other variables concern the height of the registers, influencing their number on a particular wall. Also, the space dedicated to the various themes, sub themes and scenes per register may vary considerably: even a long register may be occupied in one tomb by a single (sub)theme, while in another instance several subjects may occur on the same or even a shorter stretch of wall. The differences in height and length influence in their turn the composition of the scenes, namely the number of figures included. Finally, the height of a register may make the difference between inserting or omitting caption texts above the scenes.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Harpur, *o.c.*, 421, pl. 98.

⁴¹ A.E.J. Holwerda, et al., *Beschreibung der Aegyptischen Sammlung des Niederländischen Reichsmuseums der Altertümer in Leiden. Die Altertümer des Alten Reiches* (Den Haag, 1908), pl. 5.

⁴² C. Ziegler, *Le mastaba d'Akhetetep. Une chapelle funéraire de l'Ancien Empire* (Paris, 1993), 23, 25, and idem, *Le Mastaba d'Akhetetep. Fouilles du Louvre à Saqqara, I* (Paris, 2007), 76, fig. 19.

⁴³ Note that on the interior of the entrance the symmetry is less strict, Ziegler, *Le mastaba d'Akhetetep. Une chapelle funéraire de l'Ancien Empire*, 29.

⁴⁴ Leafing through Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 452-546, illustrates all these aspects, compare, for instance, the fishing with the dragnet scene in the tomb of the Two Brothers and in Mereruka: a single large oblong register rather differently organized, Harpur, *o.c.*, 484, fig. 83 (with text), 489, fig. 100 (no text).

As far as texts are concerned, various options played a role here, too. You could choose between *no texts*⁴⁵ whatsoever, purely *descriptive texts*⁴⁶ in a one-to-one relationship to what was represented, *dialogues*⁴⁷ among the participants, *identifications*⁴⁸ by titles and/or names of individuals, and, finally, possibly *combining* some or all of these options.⁴⁹

Last but not least, you could choose the *quality of the execution* of the decoration: painted only, or in relief. Choosing for the former could be based on a lack of economic resources and/or a wish for speedy work. Compare, for instance, the painted crocodile in the tomb of Sankhuptah⁵⁰ with the finely sculpted one in Ti's tomb.⁵¹ But even relief could vary in quality, i.e. detail: the scales of the crocodile and the waves on the water in a scene in Mereruka's tomb were only painted.⁵² Before continuing, we must inevitably conclude that any elite tomb, as a purely architectonic as well as an iconographic entity, is the result of a very complex and subtle concatenation of flexibly interrelating decisions on many levels and concerning different contexts, which, in my view, cannot but reflect a considerable *personal freedom of choice* on the part of the tomb owner, which enabled him to put his very *individuality* to the fore.⁵³

We may now return to other issues of execution by examining the development of, for instance, the catching of waterfowl with the hexagonal clap-net, starting with its oldest representations in the chapels of Nefermaat and Atet at Medum (fig. 9).⁵⁴ Here we see the highly unusual scene of Nefermaat *personally* engaged in pulling the rope, while his sons offer the catch to his wife Atet. In the usual configuration, people other than the tomb owner do the job. In this tomb there are three more clap-net scenes where his named sons,⁵⁵ respectively anonymous people⁵⁶ are engaged in pulling the ropes. Although the subject is 'stereotypical' and schematic, the transition from a *general*, i.e. anonymous, to a *more* specific, i.e. the named sons, to a *most* specific content, viz. Nefermaat himself, reflects an increasing degree of individualization. These three degrees together in a *single* tomb set it apart from all others. It should also be noted how, in the scene of the complete family, the difference between more and most specific, or for that matter more and most important, i.e., difference in *status*, is subtly underscored not only by the difference in size of the participants, but also by the size

⁴⁵ For instance, Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 482, figs. 80, 81 (lower two registers), 525, 182 (register with hexagonal net).

⁴⁶ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 478, figs. 74-75,

⁴⁷ Harpur, *o.c.*, 480, figs. 77 (first reg.), 494, 117 (id.).

⁴⁸ Harpur, *o.c.*, 481, figs. 78, 517, fig. 170.

⁴⁹ Harpur, *o.c.*, 479, figs. 76, 498, fig. 123 etc.

⁵⁰ A. Eggebrecht, *Das Alte Ägypten. 3000 Jahre Geschichte und Kultur des Pharaonenreiches* (München, 1984), 27.

⁵¹ H. Wild, *Le tombeau de Ti*, I (Le Caire, 1953), pl. 93B=Leclant, *Le temps des Pyramides*, pl. 152.

⁵² Leclant, *Le temps des Pyramides*, pl. 154.

⁵³ For details, cf. R. van Walsem, *Iconography of Old Kingdom Elite Tombs. Analysis & Interpretation, Theoretical and Methodological Aspects* (Leiden, Leuven, 2005), 51-61; idem, 'Sense and Sensibility. On the Analysis and Interpretation of the Iconography Programmes of Four Old Kingdom Elite Tombs' in M. Fitzenreiter, M. Herb (eds.), *Dekorierete Grabanlagen im Alten Reich. Methodik und Interpretation*, Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie (IBAES), VI, (London, 2006), 277-332, especially 283-297.

⁵⁴ After Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 517, fig. 170; idem, *The Tombs of Nefermaat and Rahotep* (Oxford, 2001), 81-82, fig. 82; 195-196; 222, fig. 156.

⁵⁵ Harpur, *o.c.*, 517, figs. 171; 516, fig. 168; idem, *The Tombs of Nefermaat and Rahotep*, 80, fig. 82; 86, fig. 86.

⁵⁶ Harpur, *o.c.*, 516, fig. 169; idem, *The Tombs of Nefermaat and Rahotep*, 63, fig. 75.

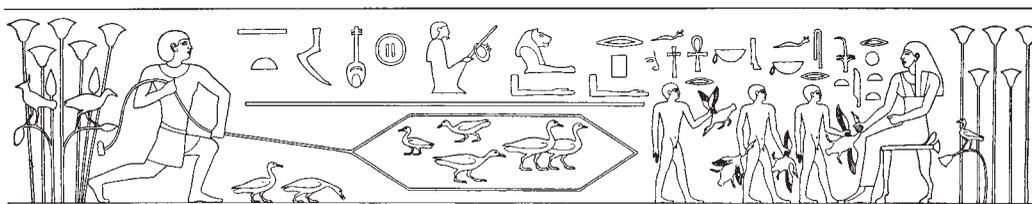


Fig. 9. Nefermaat catching waterfowl for his wife Atet [Medum] (after Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 517, fig. 170)

of the hieroglyphs, as well as by the number of birds caught in the net in the case of Nefermaat himself (fig. 9).⁵⁷ Subsequent tombs, for instance, those of the ‘Two Brothers’ or Werirenphtah,⁵⁸ differ in the location of the scenes on the wall, the size of the scene surface in respect to the other scenes and the total wall surface, the number of persons involved, the number of birds, the scenic details, etc. Common to *all* cases are, firstly, the variety, which simultaneously reflects an enhanced complexity and, secondly, the fact that the tomb owner is never personally involved.

The first aspect of this trend, complexity, culminates in the tomb of Ti (fig. 10).⁵⁹ Here we observe three different stages of the operation — installing the net, the quiet gathering of fowl, unconscious of the danger ahead and the waiting pullers, and, finally, the closing of the net and the resulting turmoil. Unique, however, is the towering figure of Ti who embraces the two registers of the last stages and who, in contrast to Nefermaat, does not pull the rope himself but is in charge of the operation. Essential is the fact that Ti both *associates* himself with Nefermaat by his participation in the action but *dissociates* himself by the way the scene is represented. By referring to an older model, and by simultaneously diversifying and complexifying it, he both *continues* tradition as well is *transforming* the latter by overriding its ‘rules’. In doing so, he actually manages, in a most effective way, not only to *surpass* the older example artistically, but also, implicitly, to *beat* its commissioner! (This competitive aspect will be further discussed below, p. 134 here). Whether Ti and/or his sculptor really had this specific scene in mind is irrelevant, the point is that when comparing Ti’s scene with this one or any other, the message of its unicity remains unaffected. Ti further violates conventions in a shipyard scene where he is supervising the building of ships. This time he is the same size as the craftsmen, which is against the tradition showing important people on a larger scale.⁶⁰ Only persons of considerable autonomy, i.e., who are in a position to express individualistic characteristics and opportunities, are able to do this.

The same mechanism to distinguish oneself through a sophisticated tomb iconography can be found in scenes that contain what I would call ‘emotional’ aspects, missing in the ‘typical’ or ‘standard’ variants. For instance, the man pushing apart the tourniquets of the sack winepress

⁵⁷ Cf. n. 54.

⁵⁸ Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 484, fig. 83, 525, fig. 182.

⁵⁹ After Harpur, *o.c.*, 479, fig. 76.

⁶⁰ G. Rühlmann, ‘Zur sozialen Funktion der Beamtendarstellungen im ägyptischen Leben’ in: *Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 3 (1981), 32-33=H. Wild, *Le tombeau de Ti*, II (Le Caire, 1953), pl. 139.

in the conventional scene in the tomb of the 'Two Brothers'⁶¹ is replaced by a baboon in Nefer and Kahai's tomb.⁶² Since baboons are not suitable for such a job, it is likely that some sort of 'humour' is being expressed, the more so since in the same tomb a baboon is represented in an even more unlikely situation, namely supervising shipbuilding, just like Ti.⁶³ In the same tomb of the 'Two Brothers', the market scene⁶⁴ where a monkey is being provoked by his owner with the words 'Catch, catch!' while the animal is biting the upper leg of a desperately yelling thief, who is pushing it away, cannot be denied to contain a considerable degree of humour. In contrast, not far away in the same tomb, one finds bread-baking scenes⁶⁵ showing a mother nursing her child, respectively being hugged by a child, while she is saying '(I am) here, (I am) here, (my) love'. I think it is hard to deny that the emotion of maternal love is being most effectively and originally expressed, notwithstanding the stereotypical elements, of course, such as the grinding of the grain in a mortar, and even the angle of the nursing mother's arm before the heat of the fire, features which also occur in the Leiden chapel.⁶⁶ In my view, this reveals a *conscious* wish on the part of its owners to distinguish themselves from others. Even if it was the artist who, in order to distinguish himself from his colleagues, took the initiative for such designs, they still had to be accepted by the patron(s), as 'he who pays the piper, calls the tune'.⁶⁷

On the subject of the artist, a comparison of a wall in the tomb of Ptahhotep at Saqqara (fig. 11)⁶⁸ with the medieval painting of 'Arnolfini and his bride' (pl. A),⁶⁹ 3800 years later, may seem unjustified at first sight. However, if one magnifies the scale (fig. 12; pl. B),⁷⁰ both appear to incorporate a representation of the artist who either painted the picture himself, namely Van Eyck, or who, at the very least, was in charge of the artists who sculpted the reliefs, i.e., Niankhptah (left below, sitting in a papyrus skiff). Both are identified by captions which remove any possible doubt about the people involved. Although the uniqueness of the examples in no way negates the usual anonymity of artists in both periods — most medieval artists are known from accounts, not by their signatures — we are dealing here with strong statements of personal distinction from standard repertoires together with an implicit personal freedom of choice, but, of course, without necessarily trespassing on what was generally acceptable.

⁶¹ A.M. Moussa, H. Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep*, *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen* 21 (Mainz am Rhein, 1977), fig. 16.

⁶² A.M. Moussa, H. Altenmüller, *The Tomb of Nefer and Ka-hay*, *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen* 5 (Mainz am Rhein, 1971), pl. 12.

⁶³ *O.c.*, pls. 19, 23.

⁶⁴ Moussa, Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep*, pl. 27b, fig. 10. For the most recent study on the theme of the market, see S.I. Hodjash, O.D. Berlev, 'A Market-scene in the Mastaba of *D3D3-m-nh* (*Tp-m-nh*)', *Altorientalische Forschungen*, 7 (1980), 31-49.

⁶⁵ Moussa, Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep*, pls. 23, 26b (detail).

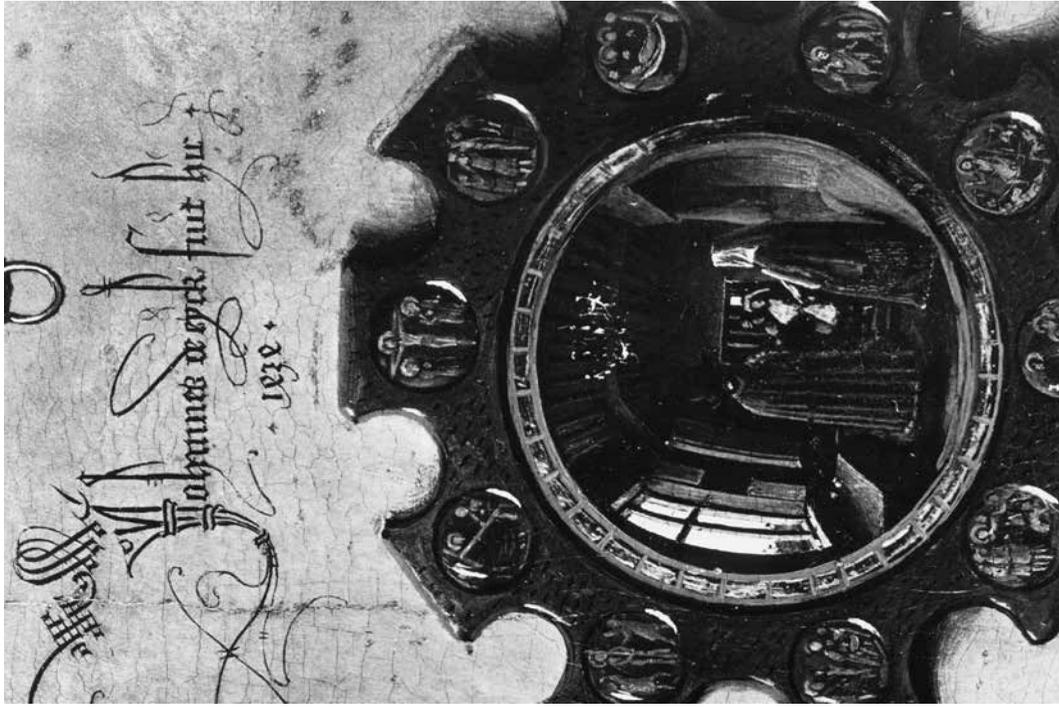
⁶⁶ Holwerda, et al., *Beschreibung der Aegyptischen Sammlung des Niederländischen Reichsmuseums der Altertümer in Leiden. Die Altertümer des Alten Reiches*, pl. 10.

⁶⁷ This point has also been stressed by Rühlmann, 'Zur sozialen Funktion der Beamtenarstellungen im ägyptischen Leben', 38.

⁶⁸ After Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 483, fig. 82.

⁶⁹ National Gallery, London.

⁷⁰ After J.E. Quibell, *The Ramesseum and the Tomb of Ptah-hotep*, *BSAE* 2, (London, 1898), pl. 32.



Pl. B – Detail of pl. A here



Pl. A – Arnolfini and his bride by Jan van Eyck 1424 AD
(National Gallery, London)

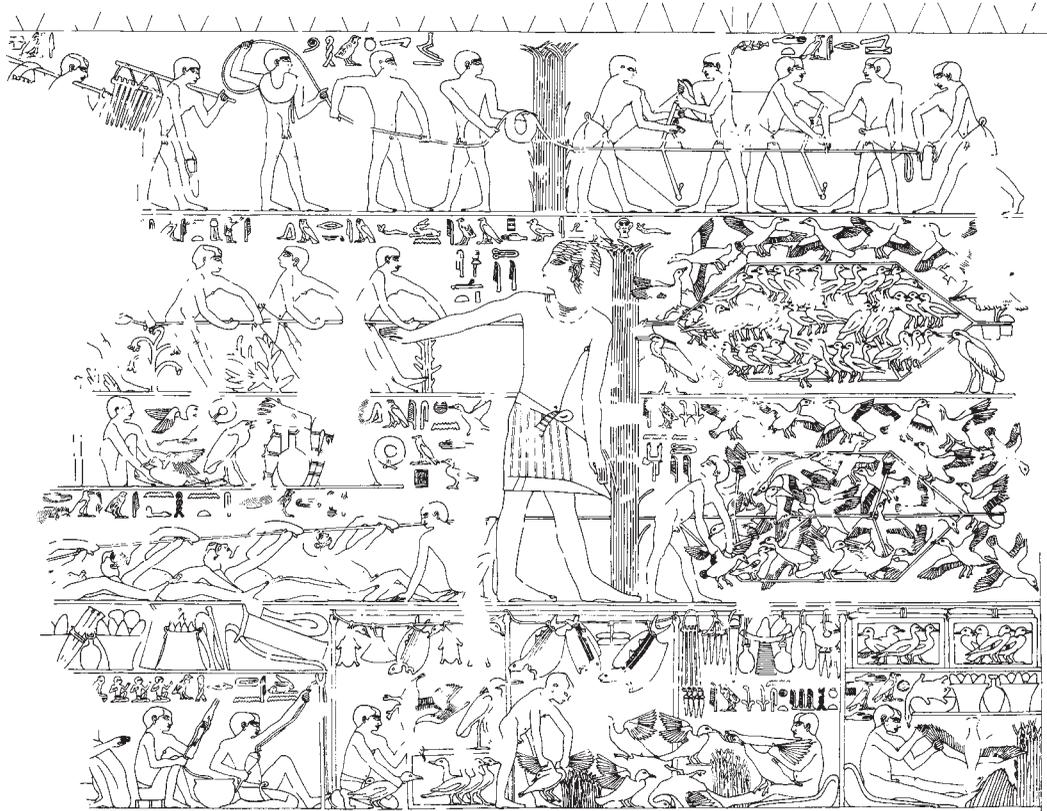


Fig. 10. Ty catching water fowl [Saqqara] (after Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 479, fig. 76)

The end of this series of examples — which are only the tip of the iceberg — seems a suitable point to return to theory by giving definitions of two key words in the title which I still owe the reader, and which best meet the discussed phenomena, namely the terms ‘diversification’ and ‘individuality’. Since Webster’s Third New International Dictionary⁷¹ gives for the former as (obsolete) meaning: ‘to differentiate’, I quote one of the definitions given under that heading:⁷² ‘The process whereby a social organization or culture or any of its parts becomes more complex through the growth of distinct societal functions, the development of privileged roles appropriate to individual capacity, the separation of social groups into class strata, and the establishment of political and religious structure; also the result of such process’. The definition of ‘individuality’ that best complies with the present issue is:⁷³ “...the complex of characteristics serving to individualize or set off a person or a thing from others”. In my view, these definitions fit the different phenomena observed in the examples perfectly.

The term ‘individualism’, however, is in my view too complex for an indiscriminate use as an adequate label for the phenomena under discussion, because it has some complicating

⁷¹ Chicago, 1976, I, 662,2.

⁷² *O.c.*, 630, sub 2.

⁷³ *O.c.*, II, 1152,1a.

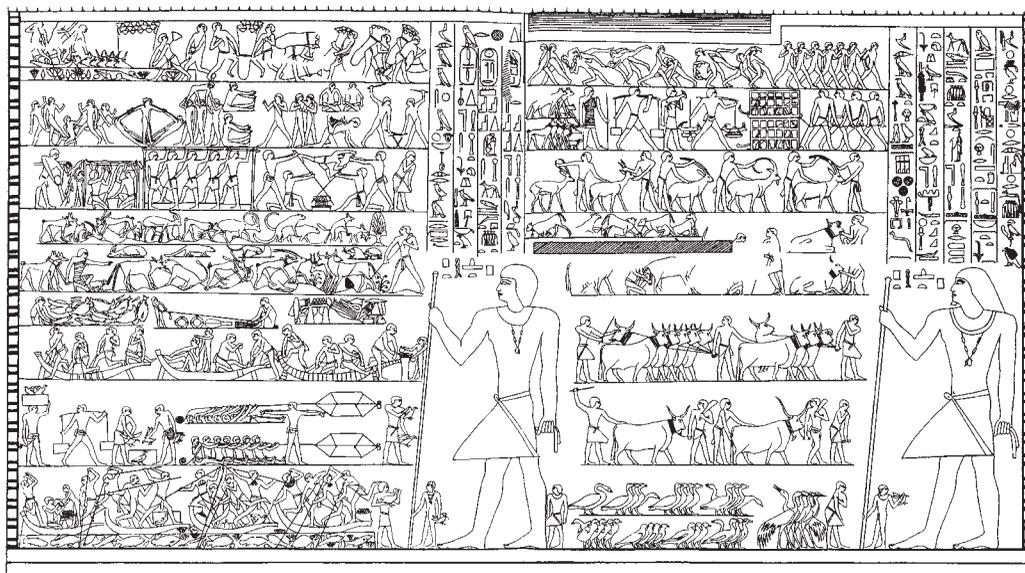


Fig. 11. Wall in the tomb of Ptahhotep [Saqqara] (after Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 483, fig. 82)

modern connotations, which make it less homogeneous than it at first sight might seem. For instance, Jansz,⁷⁴ lists five features of individualism (italics RvW): **1** ...individualism focuses on the individual human being as the fundamental *building block* (cf. 'Baustein' in Assmann's quotation of n. 4!) of society, or any other human group...; **2** ...the *dignity* of the individual human being is central...The individual being is the primary source of value, and collective goals are subsumed under personal ones...; **3** ... individualism takes the individual human being and its (social) context as two distinct entities and assumes a clear distinction between these entities...; **4** The fourth feature brings in the egalitarian element. Individualism assumes all individuals to be *equal*, at least in principle...based on human respect...; **5** ... Western individualism assumes equal individuals to be *free from* interference of others, as well as *free to* develop one's own life course, according to one's personal plans.

Collectivism is defined by the negation of these points:⁷⁵ **1**...collectivism shifts the emphasis from the individual human being to the group or *community*...taken to be the primary human reality...; **2**...The interests of the group take precedence over those of the individual...; **3**...The individual is not 'self-contained', but he or she is part of a network of other individuals...; **4**...Collectivism is non-egalitarian in its consequences, because it emphasizes the role played by the individual in the group...; **5**...the individual is not free from interference by others; his or her freedom is invaded, and will be *restricted* by the (in)group.

Although presented as a dichotomous list of virtually absolute opposites, reminiscent of the essence of the earlier quotations from Egyptology on pp. 117-118; 124-125, it is possible to find examples from ancient Egypt that illustrate (almost) any point in either list. Apart from

⁷⁴ *Person, Self, and Moral Demands. Individualism Contested by Collectivism*, 48-50.

⁷⁵ *O.c.*, 50-52.

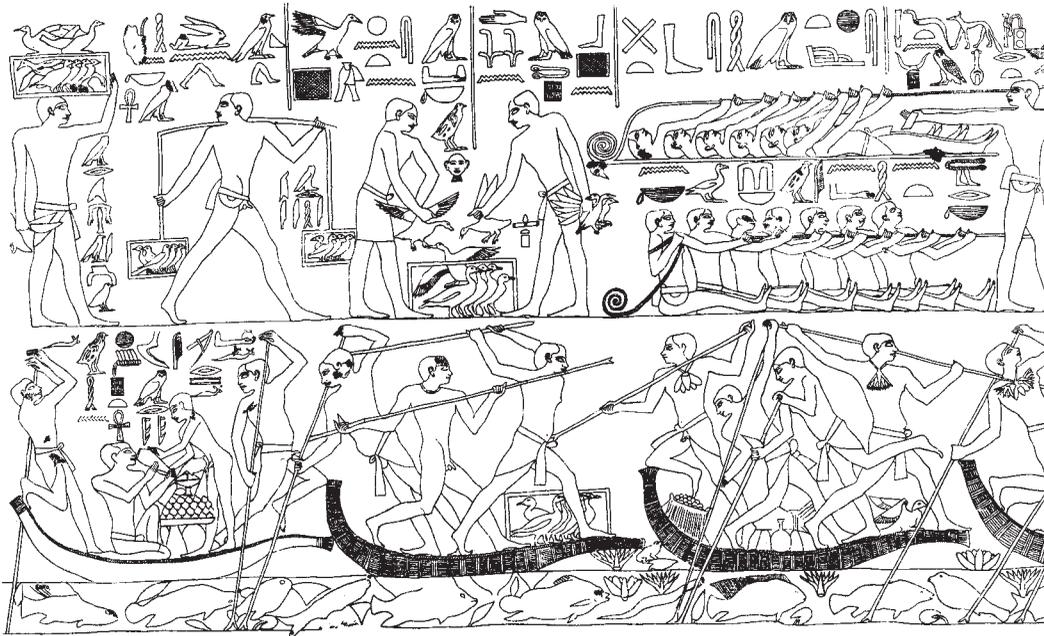


Fig. 12. Ptahhotep's chief sculptor in a papyrus boat [cf. fig. 11] (after E. Quibell, *The Ramesseum and the Tomb of Ptah-hetep*, BSAE 2, (London, 1898), pl. 32)

the fact that this falls outside the scope of the present paper, a preliminary problem has first to be settled, that is, whether the *types* of society defined by these sets of attributes are monothetic or polythetic, i.e. whether *all* or a *selection* of features need to be fulfilled before a community/society can be identified as being one of the two possibilities.⁷⁶ This must be delayed now until a later time in favour of another point not yet mentioned but unmistakably related to individuality.

Common to the preceding cases of individuality is an aspect which is nowhere explicitly put into words, namely *competition*, which is a pre-eminent means to distinguish and stress individual qualities, already alluded to in the discussion of Ti's and Nefermaat's clapnet scenes. Most, if not all, elite tombs can be interpreted in my view as reflecting their owners' efforts towards 'das sich Hervortun vor anderen' (see p. 124), in various guises: in size, complexity of architecture, choice of subjects, quality of execution, texts, etc. This is best summarized as 'social competition'. On the other hand, we should not forget the popular scene of jousting servants⁷⁷ and all kinds of other 'sportive' competitive activities⁷⁸ performed

⁷⁶ Cf. D. Clarke, *Analytical Archaeology* (London, 1978), 35-37.

⁷⁷ A.O. Bolshakov, 'The Scene of the Boatmen Jousting in Old Kingdom Representations', *Bulletin Société d'Égyptologie Genève*, 17 (1993), 19-39; cf. e.g. also Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, 492-494, figs. 113-117; M. Herb, *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen. Quellenkritische, naturkundliche und sporthistorische Untersuchungen zu einem altägyptischen Szenentyp* (Hildesheim, 2001).

⁷⁸ See now W. Decker, M. Herb, *Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Ägypten. Corpus der bildlichen Quellen zu Leibesübungen, Spiel, Jagd, Tanz und verwandten Themen* (Leiden, 1994), for the most complete collection of material on the subject. The problem of a possible symbolic meaning for (certain) activities is irrelevant to the present topic, but cf. E. Feucht, 'Fishing and Fowling with the Spear and the Throw-stick reconsidered' in U. Luft (ed.)

by both lower class as well as upper class people, all reflecting an appreciation and enjoyment of contests.

Although, as correctly noted by Assmann, Huizinga in his famous book *Homo Ludens* (1938), hardly gives any Egyptian examples of the ‘agonistic’ aspect of culture,⁷⁹ I think the Egyptian elite was much more competitive than is generally realized by Egyptology, simply because of its subtle disguise. In my view, one of the most convincing and very early examples is Nefermaat’s statement about the paste technique of the decoration of his tomb:⁸⁰ ‘He was the one who made (note the emphasizing ‘participial statement’⁸¹ in the original) his gods in a writing which cannot be obliterated’.⁸² The implicit message is undeniable: He, i.e., I, did a better job in this respect than his/my fellow men. Note that through the use of the third person, Nefermaat dissociates himself from the reader, thus stressing distance, that is, his individuality⁸³.

With this example we find ourselves in the domain of the ‘autobiography’ which, of course, cannot be treated here either. Suffice it to mention the extreme focus on individual qualities strengthened by an abundant use of comparative constructions. For instance, the autobiography of Debeheni from the reign of Mycerinus is the oldest one in which a son stresses the fact that his tomb is larger than his father could have made in his own lifetime.⁸⁴ Debeheni’s tomb is not only distinct because of this autobiography, but also because of its unique representation of a mastaba superstructure during the funerary ceremonies (fig. 13).⁸⁵ Further, seemingly contradictory statements about (parts of) the equipment of the tomb being a royal favour (Weni), or as being taken care of by the owner himself (Hetepherakhty etc.),⁸⁶ are both means of stressing the excellence of that particular owner above others. On the one hand, the person involved apparently had such excellent characteristics that the king favoured him, and on the other, his ‘neighbour’ had such outstanding qualities that he did not need the king, while still having an impressive tomb. Apparently individuality can have it both ways, demonstrating that the king was not apparently the only ‘...alles umfassenden Macht, die ihn in Bewegung setzt’⁸⁷ for every (high ranking) person.

The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt. Studies presented to László Kákósy by Friends and Colleagues in the Occasion of his 60th Birthday, Studia Aegyptiaca 14 (Budapest, 1992), 157-169 and Van Walsem, *Iconography of Old Kingdom Elite Tombs. Analysis & Interpretation, Theoretical and Methodological Aspects*, 70-83.

⁷⁹ ‘Persönlichkeitsbegriff und –bewußtsein’, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, IV, col. 973 and n. 118. To my knowledge, the only explicit use of the term ‘agonistic’, in German ‘agonal’, is found in F. Junge, *Die Lehre Ptahhoteps und die Tugenden der ägyptischen Welt*, *OBO* 193 (Freiburg, Göttingen, 2003), 135-137: ‘7.1.1 Die agonale Rede’.

⁸⁰ Excellent photograph in A. Mekhitarian, *La Peinture Égyptienne* (Genève, 1954), 23.

⁸¹ E. Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik, An.Or.* 34/39 (Roma, 1955/1964), §632.

⁸² W. Wolf, *Die Kunst Ägyptens, Gestalt und Geschichte* (Stuttgart, 1957), 204-205; H. Oster, *Der Bedeutungswandel des ägyptischen Privatgrabes bis zum Ende des Alten Reiches* (Münster, 1963), 100-101.

⁸³ On the effect of changing person in autobiographies cf. also A.M. Gnirs, ‘Die ägyptische Autobiographie’ in A. Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature, History and Forms*, *Probleme der Ägyptologie* 10 (Leiden, 1996), 230, n. 208. For the origin of individuality already in the Old Kingdom instead of since the Middle Kingdom, see also M. Marée’s very convincing review of D. Wildung (ed.), *Ägypten 2000 v. Chr.* (München, 2000), in *BiOr* 59 (2002), 277-294.

⁸⁴ A. Roccati, *La littérature historique sous l’Ancien Empire Égyptien* (Paris, 1982), 93.

⁸⁵ After S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza, IV, 1932-1933* (Cairo, 1943), 176, fig. 122. The most recent, excellent treatment of this scene in relation to still extant archaeological material is N. Alexanian, ‘Ritualrelikte an Mastaba-Gräbern des Alten Reiches’ in H. Guksch, D. Polz (eds.) *Stationen. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Ägyptens* (Mainz am Rhein, 1998), 3-22.

⁸⁶ N. Kanawati, *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom* (Warminster), 1977, 1-2.

⁸⁷ Cf. Helck’s quotation on p. 117. The problem lies in the definition of ‘alles’.

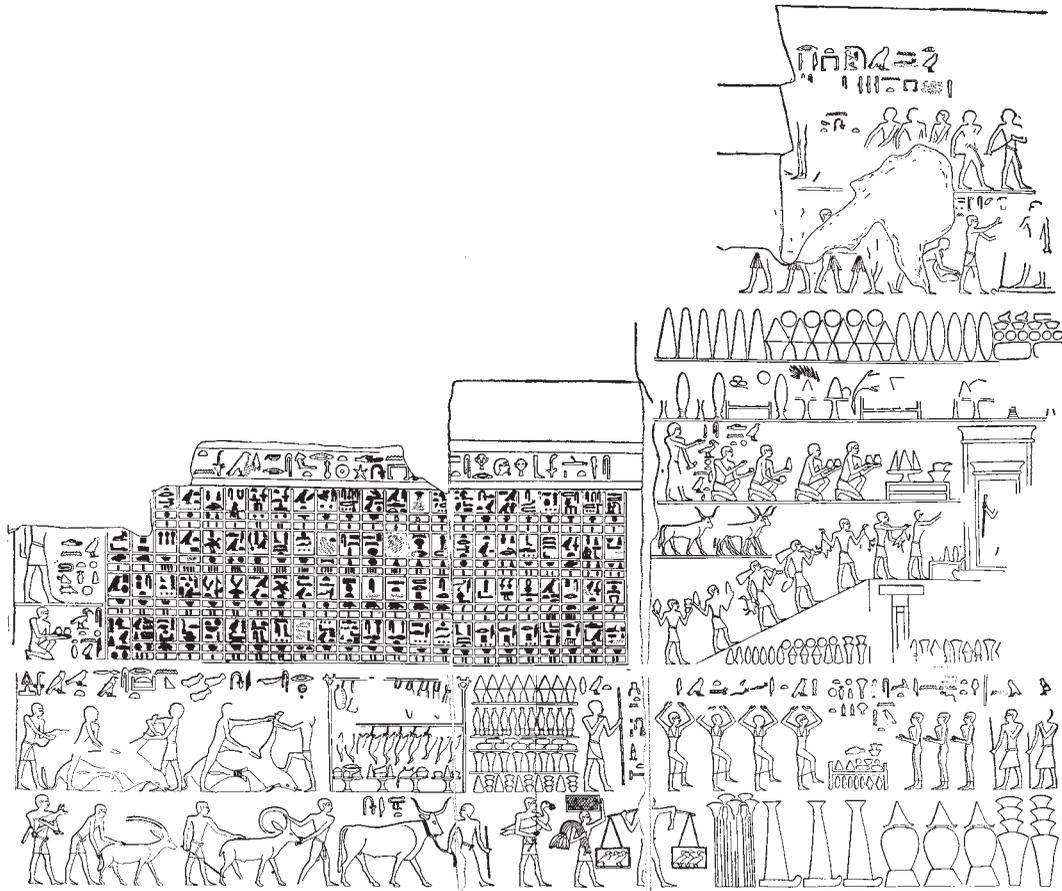


Fig. 13. Funerary ceremonies as depicted in the tomb of Debeheni [Giza] (after S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza, IV, 1932-1933* (Cairo, 1943), 176, fig. 122)

The presence of strictly individual reasons for deviating from convention, especially in relation to the tomb as a demonstration of personal wealth, is convincingly demonstrated by, for instance, the texts of Djau at Deir el-Gebrawi and of Hesi at the Teti pyramid cemetery at Saqqara. The former states that he buried his father with him in his own tomb because he wished to be together with him in one place, and ‘not, indeed, because of the lack of wealth for making a second tomb’.⁸⁸ The latter states: ‘I caused one room to be built in this tomb in order that invocation offerings may come forth for me in it; (although) I was empowered to build it of numerous rooms’. A little further on, another symptom of his individuality is revealed when he says: ‘As for any man who will enter into this tomb, having eaten abominations which a spirit detests, (or) having copulated with women, I will enter into judgement with him in the council of the great god’. The reference to sexual intercourse is unusual in

⁸⁸ Kanawati, *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom*, 2.

such statements.⁸⁹ Later, the tomb was taken over by a certain Seshemnefer who left two identical texts on the two facade pillars: ‘The sole companion, the lector priest, Seshemnefer. A royal offering of a tomb’. It is quite plausible that the message not only emphasizes the great favour offered to Seshemnefer, but also, or rather, is meant as a kind of legitimation for having taken over the tomb, substantially changing it, even removing parts of its original decoration. Although this seems to confirm the central role of the king, it is, of course, Seshemnefer’s achievements and nobody else’s which provided him with this tomb.

In this light, there is yet another term in the title of this paper that calls for some comment: the term ‘need’ needs *some* justification at least. The question is, indeed, whether the phenomena we have been observing reflect a conscious or unconscious ‘need’. It would be nice to have an explanation for the endless variation among tombs, although it would have been very easy to prescribe identical internal structure, wall layout and/or subject matter *if* the building and decoration of tombs had been as centralized as is often assumed.

Recently, Dina Faltings, who has also been struck by this variation, has drawn the conclusion (in the context of model books): ‘Daraus läßt sich eine Regel dieser Künstlerschulen ableiten: Es war offenbar verboten, Kopien herzustellen’, apparently because one asked for ‘...die Intuition einer Künstlerpersönlichkeit...’.⁹⁰ If, indeed, there was a ban on copying, this implies a ‘need’ to follow it. But the *reason* for such a restriction still remains an open question.

However, irrespective of the reality of this inferred prohibition, the origin of the lack of copies may be rather found in a well-known text which, indeed, needed to be followed, being a maxim in an ‘Instruction’ or ‘wisdom text’, and which, I think, strikes to the heart of the competitive aspect discovered above. I mean, of course, maxim 1 of Ptahhotep:

‘Don’t be proud of your knowledge,
Consult the ignorant and the wise:

(Note, incidentally, the implicit appreciation of the individual as such, even if he/she represents the negative aspect of ignorance!).

The limits of art are not reached,
No artist’s skills are perfect;
Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,
Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones’.⁹¹

These words imply and encapsulate a *general* rejection of being satisfied with or accepting a *static* state of affairs in a masterly way, and thus explain and sanction the *dynamism* of the ‘widening of borders’⁹² in both a literal and metaphorical sense, which is fundamental to the Egyptian culture. All the diversification we see and read in the elite tombs is essentially the

⁸⁹ N. Kanawati, M. Abder-Raziq, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, Volume V. The Tomb of Hesi* (Warminster, 1999), 37-38, pls. 33, 59. Cf. Oster, *Der Bedeutungswandel des ägyptischen Privatgrabes bis zum Ende des Alten Reiches*, 105-109.

⁹⁰ D. Faltings, *Die Keramik der Lebensmittelproduktion im Alten Reich. Ikonografie und Archäologie eines Gebrauchsartikels*, SAGA 14 (Heidelberg, 1998), 288.

⁹¹ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings* (Berkeley, 1973), 63.

⁹² A. Erman, H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, V (Leipzig, 1931), 236,2.

principle of the 'Erweiterung des Bestehenden', so convincingly elaborated by Hornung⁹³ for New Kingdom royal tombs, but actually already valid for the Old Kingdom, for both royal and private funerary complexes.⁹⁴

It is essential to realize that all, even minute, differentiation and variation is the result of a freedom that once existed to make individual choices which both reflect and shape cultural phenomena. This links up seamlessly with a quotation from Ian Hodder's book *Reading the Past. Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*:⁹⁵ 'Material culture does not just exist. It is made by someone. It is produced to do something. Therefore it does not passively reflect society — rather, it creates society through the actions of *individuals* (italics RvW)'.

Although the degrees of consciousness and the intensity of individuality, its forms, and the various segments of culture in which it is manifest may vary, its presence is *universal* and anchored in mankind's *psychological* make-up. The fact that the individual could not be entirely eradicated, not even by the most collective regimes of the twentieth century, proves that its expression is a *basic need* for any human being. This explains why in chapter nine, 'The explanation of diversity', of his stimulating monograph, *A History of Archaeological Thought*.⁹⁶ Bruce Trigger quotes Alison Wylie who once wrote: '...there is a strong case to be made that [idiosyncratic variability at a societal or individual level] is the distinctively human and cultural feature of the archaeological subject; hence, it should be the special interest of an anthropological archaeology', and I would add: Egyptology.

For a proper understanding, the above is not meant to be a complete rejection of the traditional interpretation of the typical versus the individual in Ancient Egypt by Egyptology. It is meant rather as a modification, showing that the 'typical' or rather 'collective' and the 'individual' are polarities in a *continuum*, they are not absolute alternatives or exclusive opposites.⁹⁷ Both aspects or tendencies are present in a single person, in varying degrees, dependent on the limits set on the various levels and the positions he occupies, and thus in certain, not necessarily all, segments of the collective of his (material) culture.⁹⁸ It appears that in the Old Kingdom elite tombs already, these *continuous* polarities are a reality which is more prominent *and* in dynamic evolution than is often acknowledged, an insight which has been obtained by refining and extending our line(s) of approach. For our discipline, too, this may be regarded as a manifestation of the principle of the 'Erweiterung des Bestehenden', which thus appears to be as equally fundamental for the dynamics of Ancient Egyptian culture as for our own, and even for space and time, the stuff that makes up our ever-expanding universe. In this ontological light, the diversifying, complexifying and individualizing phenomena expressed in the elite tombs may actually reflect the act of creation itself, when 'the sole lord'

⁹³ E. Hornung, 'Struktur und Entwicklung der Gräber im Tal der Könige', *ZÄS*, 105 (1978), 57-66.

⁹⁴ This is noticed also in Hornung, *Idea into Image. Essays on Egyptian Thought* (New York, 1992), 84 but he does not elaborate the point.

⁹⁵ Cambridge, 1991, 6.

⁹⁶ Cambridge, 1989, 330.

⁹⁷ One should try to abandon hampering, strictly dichotomous lists of (interpretative) concepts. The problem is explicitly discussed in M. Shanks, C. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology. Theory and Practice* (London, 1992), 119-122, and I. Hodder, *Reading the Past. Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 188-209.

⁹⁸ Cf. Shanks, Tilley, *o.c.*, 122-125. For the psychologically embedding of the individual and collective aspects in culture, see Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology. People around the World* (Stamford, 2000), chapters 2-3, especially 41-50.

put an end to the state 'before two things had come into being in this world'.⁹⁹ It is possible that the ancient Egyptian theologian could only phrase this deep insight so aptly because he was conscious of his own individuality and religious context. I think there is more than a fair chance that he would have appreciated Marco Polo's story, too.

⁹⁹ E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt. The One and the Many* (London, 1983), 172, translation of A. de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts, III. Texts of Spells* 164-267 (Chicago, 1947), 382e, 383a.

