

Part One

Research and Analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 Preamble

“Perhaps it is because they (i.e. Old Kingdom reliefs and paintings) have already given us so much information that there is a tendency to look upon these reliefs as an exhausted source that has few other types of data to contribute. Perhaps too because we have been so heavily dependent upon them and so often taken them for granted, there have been few rigorous assessments of the kind of data these reliefs provide, the character and biases those data may possess”.

Kent R. Weeks¹

1.2 Literature Review

The tomb paintings and reliefs of ancient Egypt, while occurring in a specific funerary context and reflecting a specific religious intent, constitute a major source of evidence for the historical and cultural reconstruction of the civilisation to which they pertain, hence it is surprising that the compilation and detailed analysis of the iconographic and textual data present in such material, within a thematic, chronological and geographical framework, remains largely neglected.

This is particularly true of Old Kingdom tomb decoration, despite the value of such an approach being recognised by scholars for over 80 years. Most notable among these are Weeks, as articulated above in the opening quote published in 1979;² Bolshakov³ and van Walsem,⁴ together with contemporary academics such as Fitzenreiter,⁵ Roeten⁶ and Staring;⁷ Frankfort, who as long ago as 1932 called for a more systematic, formal deconstruction of *all* ancient Egyptian art as a preliminary stage in its interpretation and understanding;⁸ Kanawati, who has frequently argued for greater emphasis on the observation of scene detail in tomb art, predicated on the argument that “*no two scenes are identical*”;⁹ Harpur, who provided an early template for scene analysis with her seminal study of marsh and agricultural activities in *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom: Studies in Orientation and Scene Content*;¹⁰ and Müller, who as recently as 2013 stated that “*the study of iconography based on minute analysis of data is probably the most important art historical method today*”.¹¹

In terms of the current literature, fewer than 60 published studies relating specifically to tomb decoration of the Old Kingdom could be accounted for at the time of writing,¹² excluding Porter and Moss¹³ and the standard but now arguably outdated catalogues by Montet,¹⁴ Vandier¹⁵ and Klebs.¹⁶ A majority of these references, moreover, were found to be surveys or discussions of single motifs or particular scene types associated with broader repertory subjects, and none could be classified as comprehensive

thematic analyses of the type envisaged by the present work.¹⁷

1.3 Selection of Theme

The theme chosen for this monograph, that of scenes of workshop activity, cited by Harpur in 1987 as an aspect of the Old Kingdom artistic repertory “..... *yet to be studied within a chronological framework*”,¹⁸ is among those which have frequently suffered from a lack of attention in this regard. Although a proliferation of technical studies pertinent to many of the major industries illustrated may be referenced from the literature, in a significant number of cases only brief mention is made of the extant artistic evidence, and few have been published within the last 10 years.¹⁹ Both general surveys, such as those by Petrie,²⁰ Lucas and Harris²¹ and Nicholson and Shaw,²² together with various industry-specific monographs may be cited. In the latter category, the most current include studies of scenes of Metalwork by Jungst,²³ Scheel²⁴ and Davey²⁵ and commentaries on particular aspects of production by Davey,²⁶ Altenmüller,²⁷ Bamberger,²⁸ Garenne-Marot²⁹ and Kuhlmann;³⁰ studies of scenes of Carpentry and Boat Building by Killen,³¹ Haldane,³² Vinson,³³ Jones,³⁴ Rogers³⁵ and Müller-Römer;³⁶ and, to a lesser extent, scenes of Sculpture, Jewellery Making, Leatherwork and Stone Vessel Making by Grunert,³⁷ Brovarski,³⁸ Hasanien,³⁹ Veldmeijer,⁴⁰ Hester and Heizer⁴¹ and Stocks⁴² respectively.

While all are invaluable from a scientific point of view, it is to be noted that, in most instances, these works are applicable only in part to the Old Kingdom, draw principally on archaeological, experimental and ethnographical evidence and have as their primary concern the composition, use and development of materials, changes in manufacturing methods and the translation and interpretation of industry-related texts.

1.4 Review of Current Scholarship

To date, only two published studies have attempted an analysis of workshop representations which may be regarded as germane to the current investigation, but these, too, are subject to a number of limitations.

For over four decades, the standard study of craftsmen in workshop settings has been Rosemarie Drenkhahn’s *Die Handwerker und ihre Tätigkeiten im alten Ägypten*,⁴³ however the objective of her research was not to determine how craftsmen figures were depicted, nor to provide a stylistic or chronological deconstruction of workshop scenes, but to inform on the professional status and social position of the various occupational groups illustrated, as well as their work practices, designations and organisation. Much of her corpus, moreover, has since been superseded by the availability of over 60 supplementary scenes, derived from both the discovery and publication of up to 20 new tombs relevant to the study and the inclusion of scenes of Boat Building, which were not considered thematically compatible with her original analysis. Similarly, *The Representations of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old*

Kingdom by Marianne Eaton-Krauss,⁴⁴ while detailing the content of many additional workshop scenes, focuses on a discrete body of evidence, that of scenes of statue making, confining the analysis to nomenclature, methods of processing and statue types.

In short, given that both studies are now in excess of 30 years old and, for the reasons stated, are less comprehensive in scope, the need for a more substantial treatment of the topic from a predominantly iconographic perspective, utilising the most current corpus of material and applying a micro-analytical approach, is considered long overdue. The development of a classification system which appropriately complements the theme is also desirable.

1.5 The Case for a Micro-Analytical Approach

Although criticised by Davis as “*obscuring the coherence of a system of representation*”⁴⁵ and, more recently, by Müller, who discusses at length the potential for fragmentation of the evidence and other problems associated with the attempted deconstruction and classification of scenes,⁴⁶ the present study will demonstrate that the micro-analysis of scene iconography is still of undeniable benefit to our continued understanding and appreciation of tomb decoration. As it applies to the chosen theme, such a process helps to quantify scenes of workshop activity relative to other scene types in the Old Kingdom repertory and enables a hierarchy of procedures and actions from most to least commonly illustrated to be established. While subject to artistic convention and often stylised in nature, scene details, when scrutinised, nonetheless can and do provide a valuable reference point for our knowledge of ancient Egyptian methods of manufacture, organisation of labour and design and use of tools, subtle variations to which over time might otherwise remain unobserved in the absence of this approach, particularly when unable to be corroborated in the archaeological record.

Thorough collation and documentation of all scene attributes makes it possible to determine the core or conventional elements of a particular scene type and discern where an atypical or experimental interpretation has occurred. Close comparison of such details enables patterns to be detected and repetitive elements to be tracked which may reflect a geographical, chronological or individual style. Expansion of the current pool of potential dating criteria for unprovenanced scenes and fragments is an important result. Moreover, the development of a workable database of iconographic material can act as an aid to the identification and possible reconstruction of poorly preserved or partially documented scenes, thus improving the accuracy and completeness of the evidence from which much of our information pertaining to the Old Kingdom is derived. In only the last two decades has this method of compilation of material been recognised as a critical research tool by the Universities of Oxford and Leiden and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the introduction of such leading online searchable platforms as *The Oxford Expedition to Egypt Scene Details Database*,⁴⁷ *MastaBase*⁴⁸ and *The*

*Giza Archives*⁴⁹ respectively, all of which, however, post-date the commencement of the original research for this monograph and omit up to 80 new or significantly revised identifications proposed throughout the study applying the methodology devised.

Above all, because of its focus on the most minor of details, micro-analysis of scene content fosters a deep insight into and admiration for the skill of the ancient Egyptian artist, who, despite working in a relatively confined area and limited to a two-dimensional surface, was able to achieve such variety.⁵⁰ Testament to this is the illustration in the current work of over 200 scenes featuring more than 100 diverse tasks and procedures, over 1000 figures depicted in approximately 400 different postures and up to 1200 micro-features, all occurring in a comparatively small corpus of less than 100 provenanced and unprovenanced tombs.

1.6 Scope of the Investigation

In keeping with the arguments presented favouring a micro-analytical approach to the study of scene iconography, the current research has, in short, the following aims:

1. To systematically identify and record all component attributes of scenes of workshop activity in private tombs of the Old Kingdom
2. To establish a classification system which enables these attributes to be compared contextually and across chronological periods and geographical sites
3. To analyse these attributes within the framework set in order to determine the key conventions and patterns of their representation, with procedures relative to industry, figure postures relative to action and internal scene details forming the principal focus areas.

1.7 Indicative Results of the Investigation

The analysis will show that the workshop theme in the Old Kingdom was comprised of seven industries, excluding Textile Production, Pottery Manufacture and Stone Engraving for which the evidence is either too limited or to which the definition ‘workshop activity’ does not apply. On the basis of statistical comparison, it will be demonstrated that scenes were dominated by a small core of repetitive actions and images which acted as iconographic abbreviations for each of these industry types, supplemented by a number of secondary and often sequentially related depictions, and that defined criteria pertaining to both placement and content were applied. Expansion of these core motifs with discretionary scenes and procedures continued to be a common practice, however, with significant examples of experimentation attempted. This experimentation, it will be submitted, was not confined to the capital cemeteries of Giza and Saqqara, as might be expected, but was often initiated in the Provinces. Further, it will be shown that it included the regular use of artistic devices designed to convey a sense of ‘process’ or a continuum, in contrast to the view of scholars such as Eyre and Müller, who describe the scenes as lacking

“*narrative continuity*”⁵¹ and “*causal sequence*”,⁵² and that it entered the repertory somewhat earlier than is generally assumed.⁵³

1.8 Research Methodology

The study is divided into two parts, presenting an original methodology by which other major repertory themes depicted in Old Kingdom tomb decoration could potentially be explored. It introduces the format proposed by the author for a future multi-volume iconographic reference work entitled *Henu Box: A Visual Dictionary of Micro-Features in Ancient Egyptian Tombs*.

Part One comprises the research component of the work, beginning with a chapter in which the context, distribution and tomb position of the scenes under discussion are examined. This is followed by the detailed analysis of the content of the scenes, organised according to the seven major industries identified in the corpus in alphabetical order. For each industry, all procedures observed in the scenes are listed and sub-categorised into a suggested sequence of operations, this being necessary in order to facilitate the comparative aspect of the work, even though the arrangement of procedures in linear or chronological progression, such as would mirror the order of manufacture in reality, may not always be the form presented. These procedures are further quantified by recording the number of examples documented in the corpus and their attribution. A summary of posture types for each procedure is also featured, with sub-divisions based on fixed lower body positions and upper body variables shown in illustration. All postures are arranged in chronological order within their sub-division and according to earliest recording, site and date, this format having the advantage of enabling the origin of the posture in relation to a particular industry to be immediately identifiable and its frequency, regional occurrence and possible copying to be ascertained. A further chapter is devoted to the analysis of all inscriptions pertaining to the scenes and includes a summary of their transcription, application and distribution.

Part Two comprises an extensive catalogue in which all research data applicable to the study is centralised for the purpose of cross-referencing. For ease of consultation, a format has been devised whereby the listed scenes are deconstructed in the context of their original setting using a systematic micro-analytical approach, this method contrasting with the often partial, cursory or absent identification of scene components in older tomb reports and the usual separation of scene from tomb and text from image characteristic of other art studies of this kind. Comparison of selected dating estimates and the assignment of a generally agreed date or range of dates, converted to the system devised by Harpur⁵⁴ in the Dating Conversions and Abbreviations table and applied throughout, is also found here.

Another key advancement of the catalogue is the inclusion of a number of previously undocumented scenes whose

review has significantly enhanced the results of the study. Foremost among these are the scenes from the East Wall of Room I in the chapel of *Hwn-R* [Cat.9] at Giza, dated Dynasty IV, published only in part up until 1984⁵⁵ and unseen *in situ* for over 90 years. Although now accessible via the online collection of George Reisner’s original 1913 Harvard-Boston Expedition photographs held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the lower registers of the wall, containing distinct representations of Carpentry, Staff Making and Leatherwork and traces of Jewellery Making and Metalwork, have remained largely unobserved or misinterpreted to date.⁵⁶ These newly accounted for scenes, described and analysed at length throughout the study, have been pivotal in helping to establish a more accurate chronology of scene types and in providing revised dating criteria for many aspects of the operations shown.

Finally, complementing the main sections of the monograph are a number of detailed appendices. Chief among these are the illustrated tables summarising the complete range of micro-features contained in the corpus, categorised according to industry and type and plotted across broad chronological and stylistic divisions. A compilation table of all scene texts is also included. Other appendices pertain to some of the more unique or atypical elements of scene content, many of which have been previously unidentified or are without current classification.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

As frequently acknowledged by scholars such as Harpur⁵⁷ and O’Connor,⁵⁸ all studies of ancient Egyptian tomb decoration, irrespective of type, face a number of inescapable problems which may impact and distort the conclusions reached. These include the irregular preservation of the evidence, the under-representation of evidence from particular periods and the fact that art, to quote Robins, “..... *may be created to work at more than one level*”.⁵⁹

As applied to the present study, it is recognised that a disproportionate concentration of extant material from late Dynasty V to early Dynasty VI has been collated, with only 38% of scenes recorded outside this range. It is also the case that crucial sections of these scenes which would assist in accurate identification are regularly absent. Within these limitations, however, the analysis has attempted to be as comprehensive as possible, relying on intensive observation of the currently accessible evidence in order to achieve the stated aims. In the words of the scholar who articulates the value of this process best:

“While the tombs and their decoration provide us with a wealth of concrete information for a detailed study of various aspects of Egyptian life and death, it is much more difficult to penetrate the minds of ancient people and to understand their logic and symbolism..... but with scholarly analysis and interpretation our understanding of the true beliefs of the ancient Egyptian is constantly enhanced and we draw closer to a more complete picture of his civilisation”.

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