

GÖTTINGER MISZELLEN

Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion

Heft 164

Göttingen 1998

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ISSN 0344-385 X

Herausgegeben
von Mitarbeitern des Seminars für Ägyptologie
und Koptologie der Universität Göttingen

Für dieses Heft presserechtlich verantwortlich:

Heike Behlmer

Druck: Alfa-Druck GmbH Göttingen

Einzelverkaufspreis dieses Heftes im Direktbezug:
DM 8,00 zuzüglich Versandkosten

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Slawomir Rzepka

Hidden Statues and Reliefs in Old Kingdom Tombs

Some remarks on the tombs of Mersyankh III (G 7520-7540) and Nebemakhet (LG 86)

Senenmut, who has supervised the works in the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari, has ordered to execute his representations behind almost all doors of chapels and niches in such a way that they were not visible when any ceremonies in the room were performed. Some scholars believed that carving of this reliefs was a secret known only to Senenmut himself and the sculptors to whom he entrusted the task.¹

Below we will see that already in the Old Kingdom mastabas we can find analogous „hidden“ representations.

Hidden statues

In the tomb of Mersyankh III, in the northern wall of the main room three niches were cut in the rock wall. Each of them contains rock-cut scribe statues - in the western and middle one we find single figures, in the eastern - a group of four scribes. All the figures are uninscribed, but according to Reisner the northern statue represents Khemetnu the elder (who supervised making of the chapel); the middle niche should contain the statue of Khemetnu the younger (the son of the latter). Four sons of Khemetnu the younger should be represented in

¹ H. Winlock, *Excavations at Deir el-Bahari*, New York 1942, 105; Werbrouck, *Le Temple d'Hatshepsut à Deir el Bahari*, Bruxelles 1949, 101-102.

the eastern niche. What draws the special attention, is the form of northern niche: it has a rebated edge all around. As W. K. Simpson stated: „The rebate suggest that the niche was originally closed with a slab plastered into the niche“.² The same author repeats the comments of W. S. Smith³ „on the possibility that Khemetnu hid his statue from his patroness, a situation similar to the supposed hidden reliefs of Senenmut at Deir el Bahari“.⁴

Did Khemetnu the elder really order to execute his statue without the allowance of Mersyankh III (or Hetepheres II, who probably prepared this tomb for her daughter) ? An analyse of some features of the tomb of Mersyankh's son - prince Nebemakhet (Giza, LG 86) will help us to answer this question.

The chapels of the tombs of Mersyankh III and Nebemakhet are rock-cut and their plans are quite similar (see fig. 1 and 2). In the walls of the outer chapel of LG 86 five niches were cut. Three of them - two on the south and one on the west wall - have rebate around the edge - similar to that of the niche in the tomb of Mersyankh III. S. Hassan, who published the tomb of Nebemakhet,⁵ did not mention the possibility, that niches with rebated edges could have been closed by stone slabs. He thought that they did not belong to the original plan of the chapel, because they seemed to destroy the already executed decoration (see fig. 3): „for some reason, probably connected with a religious innovation, the scheme of the tomb was changed, and the above-mentioned niche cut into the wall, with disastrous results as far as the decoration of the wall is concerned“.⁶ But already Lepsius, who has documented this tomb, believed that niches were blocked and decoration continued over them: „Die Nischen haben außen einen Rahmen, der offenbar einen Verschlussstein aufnahm; dieser Stein wurde als Wand betrachtet und mit Darstellungen bedeckt“.⁷ I agree with him absolutely, but the question

² D. Dunham, W. K. Simpson, *The Mastaba of Queen Mersyankh III, G 7530-40, Giza Mastabas I*, Boston 1974, 17.

³ W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, London 1946, 44.

⁴ Dunham, Simpson, op. cit., 17, n. 37.

⁵ S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza IV*, Cairo 1943, 125-150.

⁶ Hassan, op.cit., 134-35.

⁷ *LD Text*, I, 103.

remains: were these niches executed without the allowance of the tomb owner, for the statues of somebody who was overlooking the works in the chapel? We should consider the following factors:

1) The biggest of the rebated niches is placed *vis a vis* entrance - in one of the best enlightened places in the chapel. If somebody would really like to hide a niche, he should cut it in the darkest place. But even more important is the fact that in this niche - judging by its dimensions (2.25 m high, 1.55 m broad, 0.70 m deep) - originally a life-size (or even slightly over life-size) standing statue was placed. It is hard to believe that anybody except the tomb owner could be represented in this statue. So the rebated niche was just a kind of serdab with a tomb owner statue inside.

2) Two rebated niches in the south wall seem to be most suitable (with their dimensions 0.70 m high, 0.60 m broad, 0.60 m deep) for two scribe statues. We can not be sure whose representations these statues were, but most probably they were images of Nebemakhet himself. In the tomb of his grand father Kawab (G 7110-7120) the oldest known scribe figures were found; since that time we can find this type of sculpture quite often among the representations of tomb owners.

3) In the chapel were surely statues, which does not represent the tomb owner. In debris of the inner chapel a group statue of three squatting men was found, one of them inscribed „ka-servant Isha“.⁸ Dimensions of this group (0.90 m x 0.36 m) suggests that it was placed in one of the niches in the east wall of the outer chapel.⁹ These niches have no rebates - they were not blocked. So the statues of subsidiary figures *were not hidden*.

The conclusion is: in the tomb of Nebemakhet there were no hidden statues of any persons other than the tomb owner. Rebated niches were just a form of serdab, in which the figures of Nebemakhet were closed.

⁸ Hassan, *op.cit.*, 148, Pl. XXXIX A.

⁹ Their dimensions: the larger one - 0.70 m high, 1.75 m broad, 0.50 m deep; the smaller - 0.65 high, 1.05 broad, 0.35 deep.

Back to the chapel of Mersyankh III: if in the tomb of her son a rebated niche is just a serdab (and not a result of a conspiracy of artist working in the tomb), most probably in her own tomb we find the same situation. The statue in the rebated niche has not been hidden by Khemetnu the elder from his patroness - most probably it is not a statue of Khemetnu at all. In this tomb quite many rock-cut statues were carved; most of them represents Mersyankh III, but some most probably are images of her mother and her daughters. Why any male member of the family has not statues here? It is obvious that Mersyankh's husband could not be represented in the private tomb - his was a king. But among reliefs in the chapel we find representations of tomb owner's father Kawab,¹⁰ her son Nebemakhet and three other small boys,¹¹ who are not inscribed, but who are most probably her sons too.¹² I think that these persons, members of the closest family of Mersyankh were represented by the scribe statues, and not the family of Khemetnu. I think that in the rebated niche a statue of Kawab has been carved, while in the middle one - an image of Nebemakhet. These two persons are the only male members of Mersyankh's family represented in large scale in the relief decoration of the chapel - so the large scribe statues are probably also their representations. Four smaller scribe-figures in the third niche represent younger sons of Mersyankh.

There is no obvious explanation for the fact that only one statue-niche has been blocked and two others not. In the tomb of Nebemakhet the niches were blocked, because otherwise they would interrupt the relief decoration on the walls. In the tomb of Mersyankh III reliefs are on a higher part of the wall, above the niches. But maybe at the time when the rebated niche was cut, there was a project to decorate also the lower part of the wall. This plan has been changed and two other niches were cut already without rebate.

¹⁰ Dunham, Simpson, *op. cit.*, 9-10, Fig. 4.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 13-15, Fig. 7.

¹² On the pillars between the main and north room, two more representations of small boys, „royal sons“ Nyuserreankh and Duare were painted (not carved). They were apparently added much later (not earlier as during the reign of Nyuserre), so they rather can not represent sons of Mersyankh (maybe her grandsons ?) (cf. *ibid.* 12-13, Fig. 6).

There is still another possibility. As it was said above, „hidden“ statue represents Kawab. In the Kawab's own tomb his statues and reliefs were deliberately destroyed: „the statues were evidently smashed as a vindictive procedure instituted against Kawab or his memory personally, against the nobles of the house of Cheops as a group, or against the royal family of the Old Kingdom“.¹³ This destruction must have happened soon after Kawab's death and was a result of conflicts within the royal family. The period of *damnatio memoriae* was however short and Mersyankh could order to represent her father in her own tomb: in relief (what is sure) as well as in round sculpture (what seems to me highly probable). Being afraid that reprensions against her father memory could be repeated, she had ordered to hide Kawab's statue in the rebated niche closed by stone slab.

Hidden reliefs

It is quite unusual situation for the Old Kingdom (and actually for the whole Egyptian history) that an artist leaves his signature on the monument which he created. We find one of these rare examples in the tomb of Nebemakhet in Giza.¹⁴ A relief showing two men facing right was executed on the right outer thickness of the doorway between the outer and the inner chapel. Above the men's heads is an inscription, which can be translated:

„(1) His rewarded One, who inscribed for him (2) this tomb, (3) the Sculptor, Semerka (4) His rewarded One, who made for him (5) this, his tomb, with (6) the work Inkaf.“¹⁵

We have here a representation of two sculptors,¹⁶ proud of the work which they have done for the tomb owner. What is especially intriguing is the orientation and position of this relief in the chapel decoration. The figures are facing right - it means outward from the chapel

¹³ W.K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhuifu I and II, Giza Mastabas 3*, Boston 1978, 7.

¹⁴ For other examples see: H. Junker, *Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der ägyptischen Künstler im Alten Reich*, Wien 1959.

¹⁵ S. Hassan, *op. cit.*, 138.

¹⁶ The tomb of sculptor Inkaf (most probably the same person as in our inscription) was found by S. Hassan (*id. Excavations at Giza VI (III)*, Cairo 1950, 125-32).

toward the outside. Such orientation is typical for the tomb owners - they are „coming out“ of the chapel.¹⁷ Minor figures (e.g. offering bringers) normally „go“ inside the chapel.¹⁸ So the two sculptors showed themselves in such a way that their representation resembles an effigies of the tomb owner.

The place where this relief was executed is worth special attention. It is the right outer thickness of the doorway leading to the inner chapel. This doorway was surely closed by wooden door¹⁹ - the publication of S. Hassan does not explain where the socket holes were placed, in which direction the door was opened and if this was double or single door. It was, however, for sure similar to those ones, which were closing the doorways between the main chamber and the west and north chamber of the tomb G 7520-7540, which belonged to mother of Nebemakhet - Mersyankh III (see fig. 1). So in the tomb of Nebemakhet we deal with double door opening outside. It means, that by any ceremonies performed in the chapel, when the door was open, both outer thickness' were not visible. That is the reason why the left outer thickness was left without any decoration. But why the sculptors placed their representation in such a „secret“ part of the wall? The situation in the tomb of Nebemakhet brings to mind the famous representations of Senenmut „behind the door“, known from temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari. Senenmut's images were executed in places, where normally nobody could see them - because actually they had no right to be there, in the space which was suitable exclusively for the effigies of the king and the gods. We know however for sure that Hatshepsut knew about Senenmut's representations in her temple and accepted them: an inscriptions by one of the images „behind the door“ says clearly that these representations were made „in accordance with a favour of the king's bounty“.²⁰ Senenmut had an allowance of the

¹⁷ Y. Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom. Studies in orientation and scene content*, London, New York 1987, 53.

¹⁸ *ibid.* 55. According to Y. Harpur: „Exceptions are very uncommon“

¹⁹ „It was originally closed by a wooden door, as can be proved by the presence of a recess cut in its upper part, in which was fixed the slab of stone bearing the socket-holes of the door“ (S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza IV*, 137).

²⁰ W. C. Hayes, *MDAIK* 15 (1957), 83.

queen, but because he was doing something absolutely new, he had to do that in such a hidden, „hypocritical“ way.

I think, that the situation in tomb of Nebemakhet is similar, although there is one very important difference: all Senenmut's reliefs are executed behind doors opening inward. It means that the image was really not visible for a person opening the door and it was hidden as long as the door was open. In the mastaba of Nebemakhet the door was opening outward, so anybody who wanted to enter the inner chapel, before opening the door could see the relief. The sculptors were allowed to represent themselves in quite big scale and facing outward from the chapel (just like the tomb owner waiting for offerings), but they could do it only in such a place, where during the ceremonies nobody would see it.

Conclusion

Two tombs described above have some features, which could make us to suspect that people who were responsible for building and decorating tombs (i.e. overseers of the works or artists themselves) were not always loyal to their patrons and sometimes they tried to hide their own images in tomb which they were working in. As we have seen above we do not find such situation in the tombs of Mersyankh III and Nebemakhet. Actually, I know no Old Kingdom tomb which could prove that such incidents ever occurred in that period.

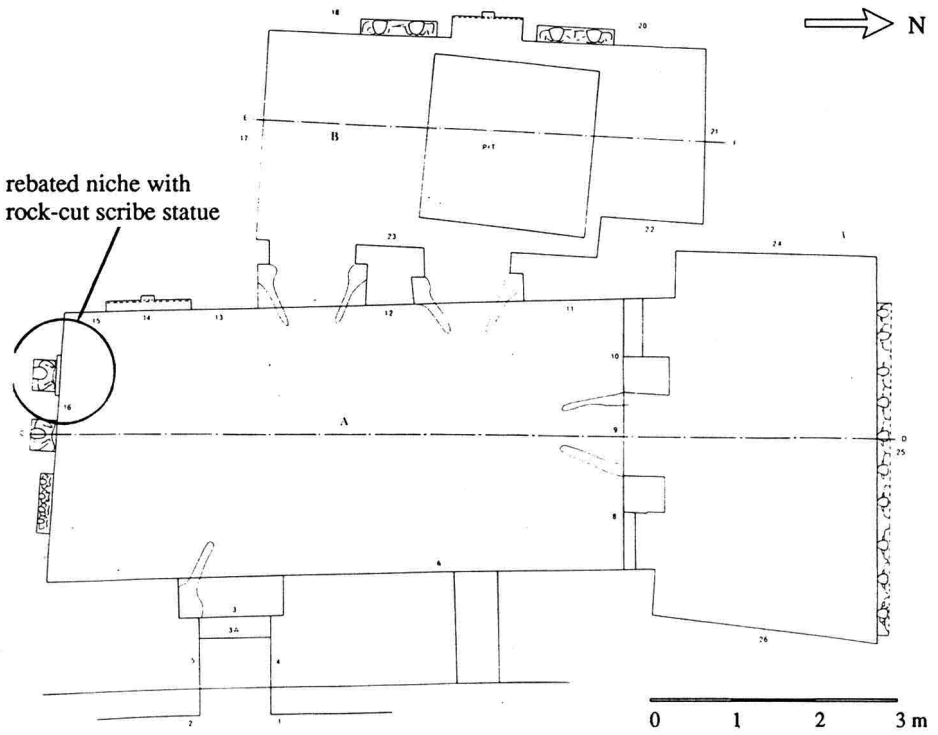


Fig.1. Plan of the chapel in the tomb of Mersyankh III. (Dunham, Simpson, op.cit, plan C)

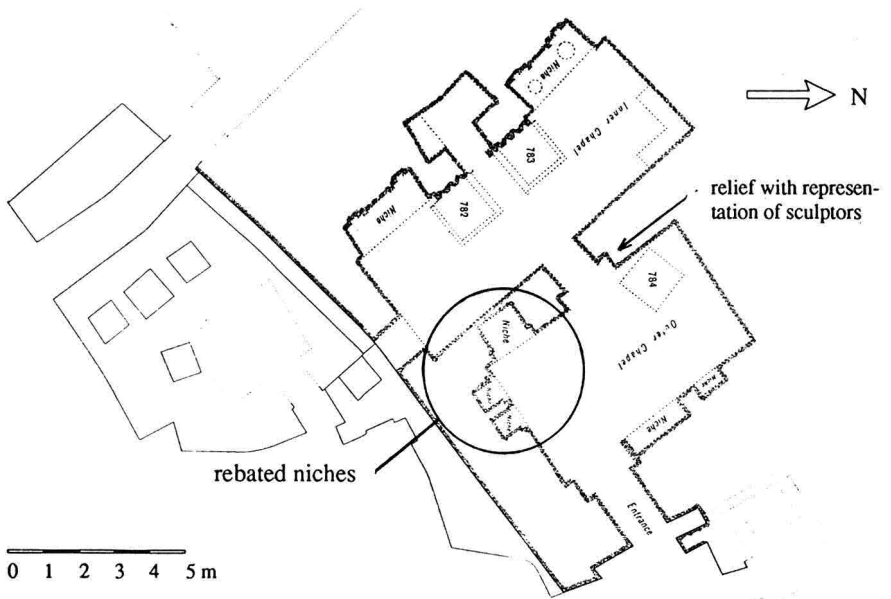


Fig. 2. Plan of the chapel in the tomb of Nebemakhet (Hassan, op.cit., 129, fig. 172).

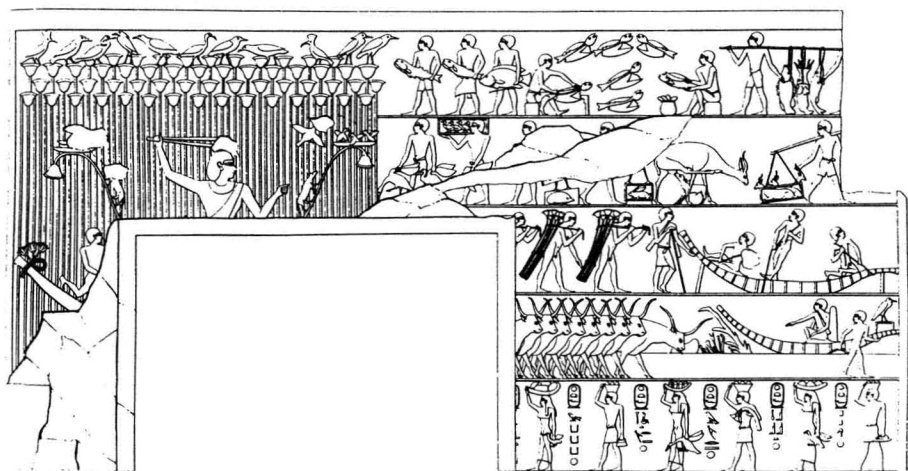


Fig. 3. Fragment of the west wall of the outer chapel in the tomb of Nebemakhet - relief decoration interrupted by a rebated niche (only upper part of the niche is visible). (Harpur, op.cit., 522, fig. 178)



Fig. 4. Relief on the outer thickness of the entrance from the the outer to the inner chapel of Nebemakhet (Hassan, op.cit., 137, fig. 78).