

Multiple Meanings in Carrying Chair Scenes

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Part I: Theoretical background

Chapel Decoration as Daily Life. Much of our evidence for Egypt in the Old Kingdom comes from the decorated tomb chapels of the period, with their evocative scenes of agricultural activities, fishing, crafts and other apparently mundane depictions of life in third-millennium Egypt. Early scholars, like many present-day visitors to the chapels, assumed that the scenes were true representations of the daily lives of ordinary people, accurately showing their everyday activities. Such scenes, they believed, were placed on the walls of the chapel to allow the tomb owner to continue to enjoy in his afterlife the pleasant pastime of watching the workers who supported his ordered existence in this one. The fact that so many of these activities involve food production was explained by the assumption that the tomb's owner would magically have the benefit of the food so produced in addition to the enjoyment of watching its production. The short conversations between the workers that were sometimes added to these scenes were understood as increasing the apparent realism of the depictions. This interpretation of such scenes thus forms much of the background for our modern understanding of how daily life in ancient Egypt was lived.

While this analysis is rather simplistic, it clearly contains some truth. In showing agricultural procedures, craftsmen at work, and musicians entertaining, the artists who decorated the chapels would have been constrained by the limits of Egyptian agricultural practices, crafts techniques, and available musical instruments. Such details are unlikely to represent pure fantasy, although the activities might have been represented on chapel walls in combinations and environments that would never occur in reality. So in the sense that the scenes are unlikely to be speculative imaginings of alternative ways that such activities might be carried out, the techniques and equipment shown probably in fact reflect the realities of Egyptian material culture.

Selections and Distortions. As with the aspective rendition of the human body in Egyptian art, however, the scenes shown in Old Kingdom tomb chapels are clearly highly selective.¹ Because we are accustomed to thinking of Old Kingdom daily life in terms of the scenes in these chapels, it is difficult for us to imagine the elements that were not represented; we do not consider them part of the Egyptian universe. Nonetheless, there are many activities that we know must have taken place despite the fact that they are never recorded on chapel walls. Houses, tombs, and temples were built and decorated, though these activities are never depicted in Old Kingdom tomb chapels. Texts tell of trading and quarrying excursions, but these processes are not depicted. Similarly, we know from archaeological and textual sources that clothing was sewn, children were taught to read and write, doctors tended the sick, and disputants brought lawsuits; none of these activities, however, were included in the scenes found in tomb chapels. More obviously, human beings are not depicted having sex, or eating, or giving birth, or dying, or defecating, despite the fact that these activities are universal. The activities that are shown are thus a subset of the total activities that took place.

Similarly, even within the manufacturing and food production activities that are shown, parts of the processes are omitted from the representations. Clapnets for birds and fish are shown open and waiting or closed, but never in manufacture or in the process of being laid out in the river or marsh. We have scenes of the heating and filling of bread molds, but we never see the removal of the bread from the molds or the slicing of the loaves, despite the fact that finished, sliced loaves appear on offering tables. Meat is shown being cooked on skewers, but the insertion of the skewers is not shown. Just as the pro-

¹ K. Weeks, "Art, Word, and the Egyptian World View," in: *Egyptology and the Social Sciences*, K. Weeks, ed. (Cairo: AUC Press, 1979), 59-81, discusses a number of misconceptions that have distorted Western interpretations of Old Kingdom tomb chapel decoration.

cesses and activities are a subset of those that actually took place, elements within them were also suppressed. Only selected, stereotypical scenes appear, although the contents of these stereotypical scenes show considerable variation and individualism.

Further limitations can be seen in the *dramatis personae* and the depiction of the tomb owner's social life. While it is perhaps not strange that the scenes never show the tomb owner with his superiors, who would put him in an inferior position, it is less understandable that his friends, co-workers, and equals are also consistently omitted. The scenes show only family members and subordinates. Nor are there depictions of the urban life or religious observances that must have occupied much of the wealthy tomb owner's life. Even the few scenes of professional life known from the New Kingdom chapels are absent in the Old Kingdom. Instead, the chapels show us only life on a country estate, with its agricultural fieldwork, fishing and animal husbandry, crafts establishments, and an occasional rural market. Entertainment consists of music, dancing, and perhaps the occasional board game, all enjoyed *en famille*.

The scenes are no more accurate than they are exhaustive. The clothing depicted is impractical and unlikely, given the Egyptian climate and the fact that women could not have walked in the tight sheaths they are shown wearing. It is conceivable that women of the upper classes wore such garments on formal occasions, but it is impossible that women working in the fields or making bread should have done so. Similarly, agricultural laborers performing winter tasks in the fields would never have done so in the minimal clothing that is shown in such scenes, and it seems likely that the wearing of some sort of footwear was significantly more widespread than chapel scenes indicate. Wool and perhaps animal skins would have been used for warmth in winter, and even the linen clothing recovered archaeologically is considerably more extensive and concealing than that depicted on tomb walls.

Another very common type of scene that is often somewhat fantastical is the procession of offering bearers. Here one often sees impossible quantities of offerings being carried. For example, a man in the tomb chapel of Ankhmahor holds in his right hand the wings of three geese as well as the leashes of two gazelles, while his left hand grasps a bouquet of

a blue lotus blossoms and surrounding buds and the hoof of the leg of a bull that is balanced across his shoulders. A bunch of green onions and the handle of a box containing five pigeons hang from his bent left elbow. The man behind him brings three more geese, a slab of ribs, more onions, a large two-handled jar (presumably full), a basket of fruit, and two calves on a leash.² Such burdens are hardly realistic.

Clearly, then, chapel scenes are not simple random snapshots of daily life in the Old Kingdom. There is good evidence that only selected real-life activities were represented and that they were in some cases distorted. The selection and distortion obviously resulted from the purpose that the scenes were meant to serve. Since that purpose is nowhere made explicit in the ancient evidence, it must be deduced from the scenes themselves, making for a rather circular argument. The only method by which the circularity can be broken is by proposing explicitly hypothetical functions for the chapel decoration, and then testing whether those functions can explain what is found in the tombs.

Chapel Decoration as a Mortuary Metaphor. One possible function of the scenes is that they magically helped the tomb owner achieve a successful afterlife. On this hypothesis, scenes are often read metaphorically, assuming that their mundane nature hides allusions to beliefs about resurrection and the afterlife described in the Pyramid Texts or later mortuary literature.³

Perhaps the most obvious examples of such metaphors allude to the rebirth of the tomb owner after death, or more frequently, the re-conception that leads to the rebirth.⁴ These scenes may include

2 N. Kanawati and A. Hassan, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara II: The Tomb of Ankhmahor*, Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports 9 (Warminster, 1997), pl. 50, upper register of offering bearers, fourth and third from the left end.

3 An interesting recent attempt to correlate the placement of chapel decoration and the placement of corresponding Pyramid Texts has been published by D. Vischak, "Common Ground between Pyramid Texts and Old Kingdom Tomb Design: The Case of Ankhmahor," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 40 (2003), 133-57.

4 See, for example, D. O'Connor, "Sexuality, Statuary and the Afterlife; Scenes in the Tomb-chapel of Pepyankh (Heny the Black). An Interpretive Essay," in: *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* (Boston, 1996), 621-33.

bed-making, as well as the more obscurely allusive rattling of papyrus umbels (an activity associated with Hathor).⁵

Another type of scene that may have a metaphorical meaning is that of the tomb owner playing *senet*, "passing," a board game. In the Book of the Dead, the game is clearly a metaphor for the difficult passage from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. It seems quite likely it also has such cosmological implications in the Old Kingdom.

Scenes may also be interpreted as metaphors for the creation of the universe, and by extension of recreation of the deceased owner. P. Bocchi has suggested that two scenes in private chapels near the Teti pyramid at Saqqara that depict the tomb owner painting the seasons of the year are intended to give him a kind of metaphorical control over time.⁶

Postulating such metaphorical meanings most often requires the collection of parallel examples from many different chapels, so their evolution can be traced and the constancies, variations, and contexts assessed in terms of the proposed meaning. It is also useful to examine the relative placement of different scenes, since consistent grouping of seemingly unrelated vignettes in several tombs can point to a metaphorical connection between them.

Chapel Decoration as a Message to Visitors. While recent studies of tomb scenes have often concentrated on the possible magical and metaphorical function of the wall decoration, its more obvious function as a form of communication with visitors to the chapel is often overlooked. One of the essential purposes of the funerary chapel was to elicit offerings, real or by invocation, from those who entered it, as is made clear by the various versions of the "call upon the living" that are preserved in numerous Old Kingdom chapels.⁷ In order to induce a visitor to make offerings, it was essential that the decoration of the chapel communicate important facts about the

tomb owner. These facts clearly included the name and image of the tomb owner, as well as his social role. It is for this reason that names, titles, and depictions of the tomb owner form the most essential elements of Old Kingdom chapel decoration. The name was necessary for the effective performance of the invocation offering, the image was required for the receipt of the offering, and the titles and tomb biographies allowed the visitor to gauge the power and influence the tomb owner was likely to have in the netherworld, and consequently what the rewards of making an offering might be.

Scenes of daily life on a country estate might complement the titles and tomb biography in conveying the social status of the tomb owner. Wealth was dependent to a large extent on the favor of the king, so titles and autobiographies stress the essential role of the tomb owner in the bureaucracy. However, decorum forbade the depiction of the king himself in this period, so the number of servants and employees shown is a marker of power for those who would not be able to read the inscriptions. Leisure was also an indicator of status, and the fact that the tomb owner is never depicted performing labor of any sort makes a sharp contrast with the workers who are depicted all around him. Most daily life scenes are full of activity and motion on the part of the lower ranks, while the tomb owner and his immediate family stand by frozen and observe. It is perhaps to enhance this emphasis on the contrast between the busy workers and the idle tomb owner that social equals are omitted from the tomb decoration, as are any depictions of the tomb owner performing even the slightest labor. (Statues of the tomb owner as a scribe may have had a different function; however, they were normally hidden inside the serdab.⁸)

In the later Old Kingdom, scenes of the funeral were sometimes included in the decoration of larger tomb chapels. A major theme of these scenes is mourning, and such depictions may have been intended to convey the fact that the deceased had been loved and mourned. Curiously, the elaborate displays of the goods to be buried with the deceased, which form such an effective indicator of the con-

5 P. Munro. *Der Unas-Friedhof Nord-West I: Topographisch-historische Einleitung – Das Doppelgrab der Königinnen Nebet und Khenut* (Mainz, 1993), Chapter 4 and Appendix 2.

6 P. Bocchi, "The Enigmatic Activity of Painting the Seasons at an Easel: Contemplative Leisure or Preventive Measure?" *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 40 (2003), 159-69.

7 Ch[rista] M[üller], "Anruf an Lebende," in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie I* (Wiesbaden, 1975), cols. 294-99, contains a good survey of the contents of such texts.

8 For a discussion of labor in serdab statues, both of the tomb owner as a scribe and the family and dependents as performers of more menial labors, see Roth, "The Meaning of Menial Labor," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 38 (2002), 103-121.

spicuous consumption of wealth in New Kingdom depictions, are absent from the Old Kingdom funerals. This may be a function of the fact that grave goods in Old Kingdom tombs seem generally to have been less extensive during the late Fifth and early Sixth Dynasties, when funerals are most often depicted, than they were at other periods of Egyptian history.⁹

Another manner in which chapel scenes might communicate with the visitor was as entertainment. The calls upon the living sometimes speak of the decoration of the chapels as beautiful; but it seems likely that visitors might also find some scenes amusing. The *Reden und Rufe* in some scenes were clearly meant to be humorous (those attached to the scenes of fighting boatmen or children at play are particularly likely to have been joking), and in others, the juxtaposition of scenes themselves may constitute ironic or amusing jokes, many of which would be incomprehensible to modern viewers. Such entertaining qualities must have increased the number of passersby who visited the tomb: one can easily imagine workmen or passing mortuary priests pointing out a chapel as one that had particularly beautiful or amusing scenes. Whatever the metaphorical or magical content of such scenes, the appreciation of visitors was most likely a consideration as well and affected their form and positioning.

Another type of visitor to the tomb chapel who may have been considered in its decoration was the family member or descendant of the deceased. Such close relatives were normally essential to the upkeep of the funerary cult, so the tomb decoration must have been made attractive to them as well. Such considerations perhaps explain the frequency with which children and other minor dependents are identified and given titles on the walls of the mortuary chapel. Such labeling would have allowed the descendants of the tomb owner and his children to identify with the owner of the tomb and feel a family connection with him, even if the decoration merely showed their great grandfather as a small child. In connection with the other images showing the power and status of the deceased, the chapel would have

9 Many middle level officials of the later Old Kingdom were buried with no grave goods at all. See, for example, the many intact burials excavated by Reisner at Giza, for example those published in Roth, *A Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, Giza Mastabas 6 (Boston, 1995).

strengthened family pride and encouraged the performance of the mortuary duties owed to one's ancestors.

An appeal might also have been made to one's descendants through objects. It is generally assumed that the objects depicted on the tomb walls were intended for the use of the deceased in his afterlife. However, it is possible that some of the objects depicted might have been valued as family heirlooms, treasured possessions left to future generations. If such objects were identifiable in the tomb reliefs, they might serve to allow their later owners to identify with deceased family members who had possessed them in previous generations. This method does not seem to have been used in the tomb chapels of the Memphite region in the Old Kingdom, however, where furniture and vessels shown on tomb walls seem to have been relentlessly generic, approaching the hieroglyphic in their anonymous regularity.¹⁰

A final category of visitors who were probably addressed in tomb chapel decoration was that of the artisans who decorated other tombs. Craftspeople are often included these craftspeople among those who are begged to enter and make offerings in the "calls upon the living," and although their status may have been inferior to aristocratic tourists or family members of the deceased, their offerings were equally welcome. Artisans might well have been attracted to a tomb chapel by the quality of its craftsmanship or the inventiveness of its decoration, or even by the fact that other artists were depicted, although such depictions are rare and invariably involve statue-making rather than wall decoration. Interestingly, it is a scene of the type that will be further discussed here that makes the most explicit appeal to such artisans: Scenes of a tomb owner in a carrying chair are in a few cases said explicitly to represent visits to the tomb itself to pay the artisans who

10 One possible exception to the general regularity of furnishings depicted in tombs, and one in keeping with the theme of this article, is the carrying chair with a lion depicted on the armrest. An ordinary chair of this type is depicted in the tomb chapel of Meresankh at Giza and a carrying chair with the same form is twice shown in the chapel of Watetkethor at Saqqara. Because both women were members of the royal family, it has been suggested that the lion motif is an indicator of royal status. But it is also possible that the scenes represented the same chair, transformed into a carrying chair when the legs became unstable.

worked on it, and the texts assure us that the artisans were very well satisfied with the “very large payment” they received, so that they “thanked every god for him.”¹¹

II. Carrying Chair Scenes

Metaphor and Message. These two approaches to understanding the selection of scenes for tomb chapels, considering symbolic, metaphorical, or mortuary significance and looking for what they communicated to visitors, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as can be illustrated by scenes in which the tomb owner (or more rarely, a family member) appears in a carrying chair. The interpretation of these scenes presented here is based on a larger and more general study, still unpublished.¹² I shall here merely summarize the conclusions of the larger study and then use the three tombs I was asked to discuss to illustrate the scene’s simultaneous fulfillment of different functions.

The carrying chair (or palanquin or sedan chair) was a luxury object, serving to indicate the status and economic power of the person being carried. However the journey in the carrying chair could also be seen as a metaphorical equivalent to the funeral procession, and its depiction may have magically ensured that a proper funeral would take place.

Until the introduction of the horse and chariot, the carrying chair was the only means of land transportation that avoided the labor of walking. The elite administrators who owned decorated tombs would have used this means of transportation regularly and to show them doing so might be seen as a case in which the artist represented reality. However, daily life scenes do not normally depict the tomb owner in motion. (There are a few obvious exceptions, such as the fishing and fowling scene, taken from or inspired by royal iconography.) In a carrying chair, the

tomb owner is not merely a static observer, but is moving across the landscape (although in another sense he is, to be sure, entirely passive). The activity depicted seems to have been one of enjoyment: he is often depicted twirling a short baton and carrying a fly whisk, accoutrements that are otherwise most common in scenes where he sits in an armchair and listens to music.

Another indication that carrying chair scenes had specific functions and were not merely passing depictions of a common fact of elite life is the chronological pattern of their occurrence. Aside from a single example in the chapel of Nefermaat, the scene showing the tomb owner seated in a carrying chair does not appear in tomb decoration until the reign of Niuserre. Thereafter it is quite popular. Such scenes are common in Memphite cemeteries through the early reigns of the Sixth Dynasty. Thereafter, they are enthusiastically copied and developed in provincial tombs. Such a pattern indicates the conscious use of a motif.

Carrying Chair scenes as a Marker of Status. The tomb owner carried in a carrying chair is literally raised above the people around him, and thus gives an impression of higher status in life and in iconography. Even in the New Kingdom, such chairs were used in the portable cult images of deified kings; and indeed the portable boats used to transport other deities in that period rest inside covered structures raised on carrying poles that have much in common with carrying chairs.

Already in the Old Kingdom, the carrying chair is used to transport the king in jubilee scenes and the chair used in this archaic ritual has a basket shown beneath the throne. This basket, the hieroglyphic sign for “lord,” may represent the earliest type of carrying chair, in which the rider would sit in a basket supported by poles threaded through its handles.¹³ Carrying chairs also seem to have been used to transport royal children in connection with the jubilee ritual. And in the very earliest period, votives suggest that the gods may have been carried in carrying chairs.¹⁴

11 Roth, “The Practical Economics of Tomb Building in the Old Kingdom: A Visit to the Necropolis in a Carrying Chair, in: *For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer*, D. P. Silverman, ed., *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 55 (Chicago, 1994), 227-40.

12 A general summary of this study was presented at the meetings of the American Research Center in Egypt in Philadelphia in 1989, and a more detailed presentation of a part of it was published as Roth, “The Practical Economics of Tomb Building in the Old Kingdom.”

13 W. von Bissing and H. Kees, *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-re*, Leipzig, 1905-1923, vols. 2 and 3.

14 See, for example, B. J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, 1989), 93, fig. 33.

In addition, a person who is carried in a chair clearly has the economic power to hire the men (and in one example, women) to carry it. Perhaps this is why the number of carriers shown in fact often greatly exceeds the number needed to carry the chair. Most commonly, between ten and fifteen bearers are depicted, although as many as twenty are attested. This economic power is further emphasized by the entourage that normally accompanies such a procession. Although the members of this entourage vary, common components are pets (dogs and monkeys most frequently), dwarves, and servants carrying bags, staffs, sandals, sunshades, boxes containing clothing or unguents, or (curiously) a headrest. No food is carried, although a jar with a spout-like protrusion is sometimes included, perhaps a kind of canteen.

One period and area in which the status value of the carrying chair scene seems to have been particularly important was the Teti Pyramid Cemetery. In these tombs, the scenes are almost invariably placed on a wall opposite the entrance to a room, drawing them to the attention of any visitor. (Interestingly, the scene is only rarely given that position in the other Memphite tombs.) The scene with the largest number of bearers – twenty – is also found there, in the chapel of Kagemni.¹⁵

Carrying Chair Scenes as a Mortuary Metaphor. Textual captions to a few early carrying chair scenes (Itsen and Niankhkhnum) indicate that the scene is meant to depict a visit to the fields, and other early scenes are placed on the wall in proximity to agricultural work, which may suggest the same purpose. Toward the end of the Fifth Dynasty, three scenes are described in captions as depicting the tomb owner's visit of inspection to his tomb and his acceptance of the gratitude of the craftsmen for the generous payment he has given them. The depiction of this journey towards the cemetery may have reinforced the mortuary connotations of the scene, since by the early Sixth Dynasty these were clearly established. In these scenes, the visit to the cemetery in a carrying chair is seen as a metaphor for the later journey in which the tomb owner is carried not in a chair but a coffin. The visit of inspection becomes a dress rehearsal of a sort for the funeral.

15 W. von Bissing, *Die Mastaba des Gem-ni-kai I* (Berlin, 1905), Taf. 22.

The source of the parallelism is obvious. Beyond the fact that the journey is into the desert, towards the tomb, both the carrying chair and the coffin are carried on poles by a group of men. Both are of wood, and are sometimes shown with vertical lines of paneling, and in both cases, the procession is accompanied by men bearing equipment.

Evidence of the metaphorical use of this scene includes the presence of sunshades, even in cases where the chair is covered by a roof. As in English, the shade occurs in Egyptian mortuary literature as a reference to the spirit of a dead person, and the association of such shades with a chair procession might imply that while the tomb owner's body occupied the chair (coffin), his spirit accompanied the procession as well. The depiction of retainers carrying headrests and boxes of linen and unguents may also be a reference to the funeral procession since it is unlikely that such equipment would be taken on a short excursion. Even the position and direction of movement of the chair on the chapel walls can be significant, with respect to the shaft of the tomb and to other scenes. Perhaps the most explicit mortuary reference occurs in the song of the bearers,¹⁶ in which they express their preference for a full chair over an empty one and invoke deities such as Sokar and Osiris.

The depiction of this metaphorical funeral procession may have functioned magically to ensure that it occurred, like the similar wish for "a burial in the desert of the western necropolis" that occurs in so many *htp-dj-nswt* formulas.

III. Three Examples

The three Old Kingdom tombs selected for analysis by the editors all contain scenes involving a carrying chair. Although there are some shared elements, each of these scenes is quite different from the others in both appearance and function. Discussion of these individual scenes illustrates some of the factors that should be considered to determine the meaning of the scene in each case. The chapels will be discus-

16 M. Heerma van Voss, "De Draggers zijn Tevreden," *Phoenix* 14 (1968) 128-132. This interpretation has not been universally accepted. E. Brunner-Traut in her discussion of the carrying chair song under the rubric, "Arbeitslieder," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, col. 384, called it "unwahrscheinlich."

sed in chronological order, although the facts that they derive from three different cemeteries and belong to men with very disparate responsibilities in society are at least as likely to explain their variety as their dates.

Seshat-hotep (Giza 5150). This tomb has been dated by Cherpion to as early as the reign of Khufu,¹⁷ but the dating in the early Fifth Dynasty Baer¹⁸ gives it on the basis of its architectural dependence on an adjacent mastaba seems more likely.

The scene that includes carrying chair occurs on the east wall of the chapel, south of the door (SH.Abb.5). This section of the wall has four registers on the left and, on the right, a scene of the tomb owner with his wife and son observing the activities depicted.¹⁹ The lowest of the four registers shows two groups of butchers removing the forelegs of a bull and an oryx, and in the register above, five offering bearers lead or carry live animals toward the family group. The two registers above this are only partially preserved, but they seem to depict men bringing a carrying chair and other non-food items, although the first man in the lower register, directly in front of the carrying chair, carries the spouted jar. He is identified as *smsw pr*, "the eldest of the house," a title that Fischer notes is associated with the storage and dispensing of grain.²⁰

The fact that the tomb owner is not depicted in the chair is not unexpected at this early date. The connection of the titled official in this part of the scene with agriculture might suggest that the scene depicted the chair being brought for a visit to agricultural areas. There is, however, no caption preserved stating such a purpose. It is perhaps unexpected that the entire entourage should have accompanied the empty chair, however, and that only one chair is shown, although there are three people apparently awaiting its approach.

These and other elements of the scene suggest that the bringing of the empty chair is in this case a reference to the funeral, despite the presence of the

tomb owner watching it. Behind these four registers and over the door is a scene of a boat with the head of a hedgehog crossing the river. Taken together with the upper two registers of the scene adjacent to it, this scene can be interpreted as an allegory of a funeral procession, crossing the water on a boat and then moving into the desert. The orientation and direction of movement of both is to the right, away from the entrance of the chapel.

The tomb owner is presumably to be identified with the large central figure in the boat. The short-handled sunshade in the chair may also be a reference to the dead tomb owner himself; as noted above, the shade is attested in later periods as the deceased person's spirit.²¹ The empty chair itself may be a reference to the song of the bearers, attested later in the Old Kingdom, in which they sing that they prefer to have the chair full rather than empty.

Another element of the scene that suggests mortuary connotations is the peculiar table shown below the chair itself. Resting on a semicircular form with a pedestal base are four high-shouldered jars. The position of these jars, stationary below a moving carrying chair, is peculiar. The similarity of the jars to contemporary canopic jars is, however, suggestive: the standard pairing of coffin and canopic container may be depicted here by analogy.

Finally, while on the one hand the chair can be seen as part of a funeral procession moving into the chapel, away from the river, it is also moving away from the shafts of the tomb. In the Sixth Dynasty tomb chapel of Watetkhethor (Mereruka's wife), an empty carrying chair is similarly placed: while a prominent scene of Watetkhethor in a carrying chair is oriented toward the shaft of the tomb, in an adjacent room an empty chair is oriented away from it.

Despite the everyday life connotation of the scene in this tomb, then, or perhaps in addition to it, the rider-less carrying chair in this scene seems to have had a number of mortuary implications.

17 N. Cherpion, *Mastabas et Hypogées d'Ancien Empire* (Brussels, 1989), 225.

18 K. Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago, 1960), 131.

19 H. Junker, *Giza II* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1934), Abb. 31.

20 H. Fischer, *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 51 (1972), 80 n. 26.

21 The association of a rider-less carrying chair with a shade is also attested in the contemporary tomb of Meresankh III (G 7530). (D. Dunham and W. K. Simpson, *The Mastaba of Queen Mersyankh III* (Boston, 1970), figure 8, lowest register.) There the shade has a handle of more realistic length, and leans against the back of the empty chair, which rests on the ground. As in the scene studied here, the empty chair in Meresankh's tomb chapel probably referred to the death of the tomb owner.

Conversely, the empty chair, except for its very existence, does little to enhance the status of the tomb owner or convince visitors to the chapel to make an offering. The chair is not occupied, so the tomb owner is not lifted above his companions, and the chair is carried by only two bearers. Moreover, the scene is placed on the entrance wall, and so would not be visible to visitors until their departure.

Before the death and burial of the tomb owner, the scene might have prompted visitors to perform a *ḥtp-dj-nswt* offering formula asking for a good burial in the cemetery of the western desert. Such a wish would seem to be extraneous after the burial had already taken place; nonetheless, it is a very common element in such formulas, and the scenes can have been no less important than the words. The pre-death offering ritual that wishes such as this imply may offer an explanation for other elements of chapel decoration.

Kai-em-nofret (Saqqara D 23). The tomb owner had a priesthood of Niuserre, and so cannot date earlier than that reign. Baer dated it to the middle of the reign of Pepi II,²² but this has not been generally accepted. Harpur's dating in the late Fifth Dynasty (Djedkare-Unis) was deemed more probable by Simpson.²³ Cherpion has dated it slightly earlier, to the reign of Niuserre.²⁴

On the south wall of the chapel is a depiction of the tomb owner in a carrying chair (KMN.Abb.7). The lower part of the scene is lost, so the number of bearers is unknown. However, the scene clearly depicts the tomb owner carried in a chair, since the accompanying attendants carry many of the usual items of equipment and stand on a ground line that is apparently somewhat above the base of Kai-em-nofret's chair. The chair has a high arm-rest and back, and it is covered by a triangular canopy resting on tent poles. Kai-em-nofret sits, or perhaps kneels, in the chair; the arm of the carrying chair obscures everything below his waist; the proportions seem to suggest that he was seated in an ordinary chair with its feet resting on the carrying chair platform, preserving a more dignified posture. His right hand twirls

a baton in front of his face and his left rests on the chair's armrest. In scale, he appears to be identical to his attendants. Peculiarly, the canopy covers a much greater area than would be required, even if he had his legs fully extended in front of him. One wonders whether a wife or child might not have been shown in the front part of the chair, although if so, the head at least should have been visible in front of Kai-em-nofret's knee.

In front of the canopy, large hieroglyphs identify the occupant of the chair as the tomb owner; behind him are a dwarf with a monkey and four additional attendants. The bearers of the chair and more attendants were undoubtedly depicted in the lost register below. Beneath that were three additional registers which are largely lost; blocks on the left suggest that the lowest two contained scenes of butchery and servants carrying meat towards the false door on the adjacent west wall.

Above the carrying chair scene, Kai-em-nofret is shown observing the recording of the produce of his funerary estates. The actual production is shown on the adjacent east wall, opposite these registers. Beneath those scenes, in the two east-wall registers that correspond to the two registers showing the carrying chair on the south wall, are scenes of threshing, winnowing, and grain storage. Below are three registers of offering bearers. As the two lower scenes on the east wall are connected to the grain harvest shown above them, one might assume that the carrying chair scene is also connected to the agricultural accounting scenes above, perhaps representing the return home afterwards.

This particular carrying-chair scene contains few if any mortuary references. The carrying chair is oriented toward the door of the chapel rather than toward the door of the tomb; and although the plan of the remainder of the mastaba is unknown, it is unlikely that the chair was moving in the direction of a shaft. One of the bearers behind the scene carries a rectangular sunshade with a flap, which one would think redundant, given the canopy; however, it may have been used to shade the tomb owner when he left the chair to inspect some aspect of his estates more closely. The paneled sides of the chair might be a reference to the paneled sides of a coffin, but they are probably not.

The status value of this scene also seems to be quite minimal beyond the depiction of the tomb

22 K. Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago, 1960), 294.

23 W. K. Simpson, *The Offering Chapel of Kayemnofret in the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston (Boston, 1992), 1.

24 Cherpion, *Mastabas et Hypogées*, 228.

owner enjoying the luxury of elite transportation. The small scale of the tomb owner, however, suggests that this purpose is quite incidental. The carrying chair is placed on the south wall, rather than the east, so it would be visible to a visitor who entered the room and turned to the south. However, the scale of the scene and of Kai-em-nofret himself is decidedly inferior to the much larger standing figure above it, and was clearly not intended to draw the eye.

In the case of Kai-em-nofret, then, the carrying chair scene seems to have functioned as a selected element of the depiction of the tomb owner's visit to his estates. No clear mortuary allusions can be observed, nor does the chair seem to have functioned as a prominent status marker.

Kai-hep/Teti-iqer (el-Hawawish H 26). The tomb of Kai-hep at el-Hawawish has been convincingly dated by Kanawati to the reign of Pepi II or slightly later.

The scene of the tomb owner in a carrying chair is extremely fragmentary (KH.Abb.5), although it can, to some extent, be restored from the comparable scene in tomb H 24, belonging to Shepsi-pu-Min/Kheni, who Kanawati believes is Kai-hep's son.²⁵

In Kai-hep's scene, five bearers can be seen, and since the fifth is directly beneath the arm of the tomb owner's wife, represented at a much larger scale in the scene to the right, he is probably the last bearer. One can probably assume that a like number of bearers carried the poles in the lost area in front of the chair. Two vertical panels of the chair are visible, the taller one at right clearly the back, and the lower one probably a panel of the arm-rest. The figure of the tomb owner is lost except for his right hand, which wears a bracelet and carries a fly whisk without a handle. To judge from the position of the whisk and the height of the armrest, his posture is probably identical to that of Shepsi-pu-Min (see fig. 1).

Kai-hep's chair was covered with a trapezoidal canopy supported by tent poles. Vaulted areas with djed-pillar and Isis-girdles probably represent open work vents at the front and rear. A monkey climbs on the front of canopy and rectangular sunshades float before and behind it. The canopy extends well beyond the poles that support it, and tucked under the overhang are two registers of attendants, including the artist, Seni.

²⁵ Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of el-Hawawish II* (Sydney, 1981), 15-16.

Beneath the lowest of these attendants and above the heads of the bearers, probably in front of the chair as well as behind it, were two horizontal lines of hieroglyphs containing parts of the carrying-chair bearers' song. Only parts of two hieroglyphs of this are preserved in the lines behind the chair: the back of the *mnk* hieroglyph and the head of the *w* quail-chick of *wḏ3*. In the Shepsipu-Min parallel, these same signs occur in front of the chair. The text more fully preserved here appears to be the refrain, which can come after or before the verse of the song. It may be that both of these scenes had only the refrain, written both in front of and behind the chair; it is also possible that the lost lines contain a part of the verse. The refrain normally reads *jh3 r mnk wḏ3/jh3 r mnk snb*, "Descend to the supporter whole/descend to the supporter healthy," but it appears to be somewhat garbled in this example.

The scene in Kai-hep's chapel, like its parallel in the chapel of Shepsipu-Min, is the central scene in on a north wall that lies to the west of a recess to the north. In both cases, the scene to the right of the carrying chair depicts at a large scale the tomb owner (and his family, in the case of Kai-hep) facing this recess. To the left of the carrying-chair scene, in both cases, are scenes of bird trapping with a clapnet, fishing with a net, musicians and dancers, and, in the lowest register, cattle crossing a canal. Although the chair seems to be moving toward these marsh pursuits, it is unlikely that it is related to them.

In both scenes, the funeral metaphor is clear. The chair is literally moving toward the west, and the tomb owners are seated in a paneled box. The canopy above is decorated with emblems of Isis and Osiris, representing the post-mortem sexual union that will bring about rebirth, a birth represented by the fly-whisk the tomb owner holds the hieroglyph *ms*, "birth." The song of the bearers also makes explicit reference to death.

That the carrying chair scenes in these two tomb chapels are the equivalent of a funeral procession is made particularly clear by a third tomb, M 8, which Kanawati convincingly dates to a slightly earlier period, the reign of Mernere or the early part of Pepi II's.²⁶ Its owner, Tjeti/Kai-hep, was also a nomarch and, to judge from his name, a member of the same family as the owners of the two later tombs. The chapel of

²⁶ Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of el-Hawawish III* (Sydney, 1982), 10-14.

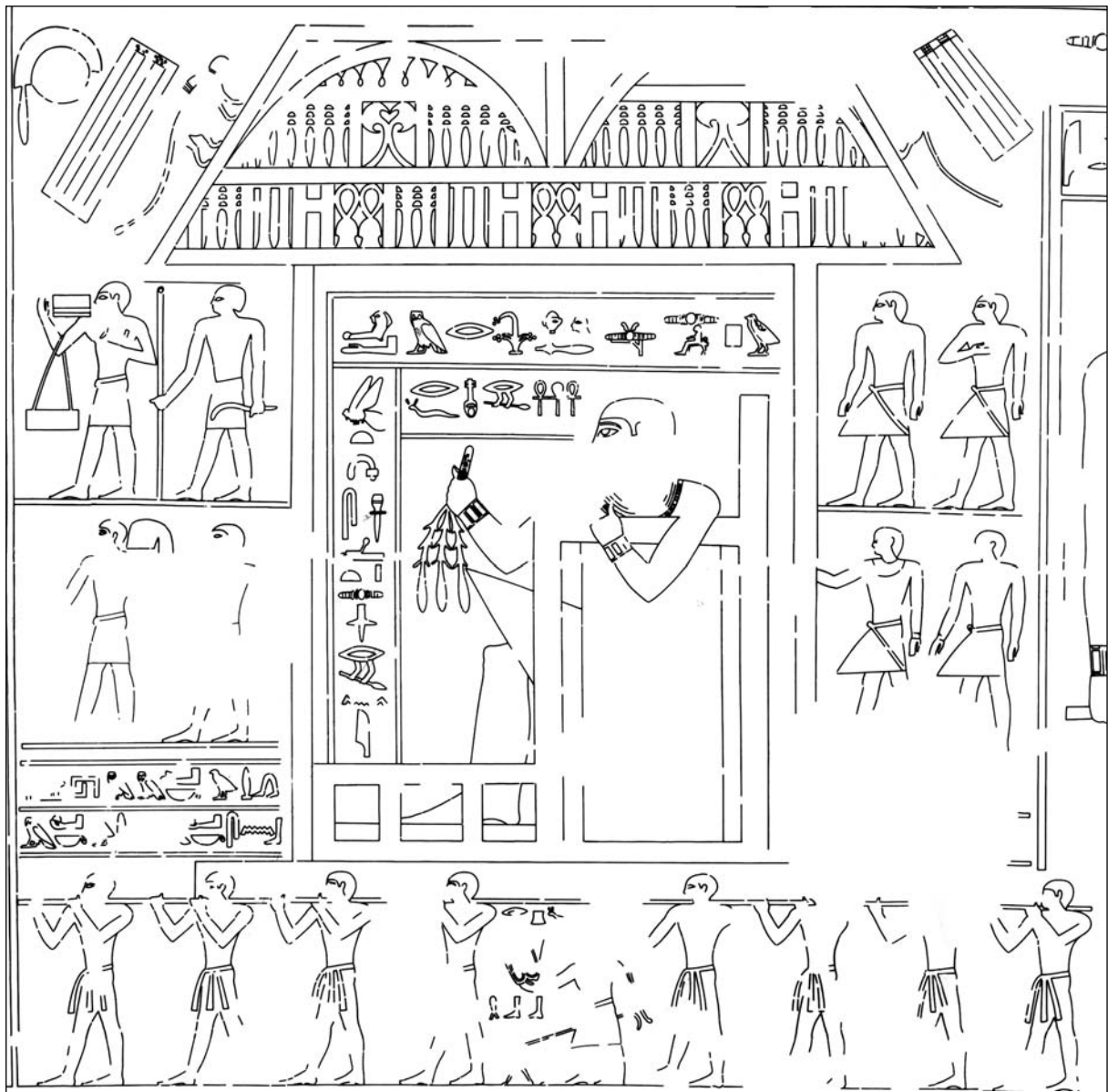


Figure 1: The carrying chair scene from the tomb of Shepsipu-Min/Kheni. (From Kanawati, el-Hawawish II, Fig. 21.

Tjeti's tomb also has a recess to the north, and west of it a northern wall that shows the tomb owner at a large scale, facing the recess. To his left, however, rather than a carrying-chair scene and a scene of musicians and marsh pursuits, the fragmentary remains show that a funeral was depicted. The upper register shows the procession to the cemetery, with the coffin in its shrine pulled by oxen, moving toward the west. The position and orientation of this procession is thus exactly the same as the position and orientation of the two carrying chair scenes in Kai-hep and Shepsipu-Min. Figure 2 illustrates the similarity of these positions.

The status-marking function of the carrying chair scenes in the chapels of Kai-hep and Shepsipu-Min

is equally clear. Both scenes are placed where they are ahead and slightly to the left as the visitor enters the chapel, a position that would have been particularly well-lit in late morning.²⁷ The tomb owner is depicted at more than twice the scale of his attendants, and he is placed in the very center of the scene, framed by the chair itself and by the horizontal and vertical lines of hieroglyphs in front of him giving his name and titles. His attendants literally surround him. It is not surprising, in fact, that the carrying chair scene should be so stressed in a provincial tomb. While for denizens of the capital city of Memphis like

²⁷ Interestingly, the doorway of the tomb of Tjeti is further to the south, so the funeral scene in that tomb would be less visible, perhaps because of the difference in content.

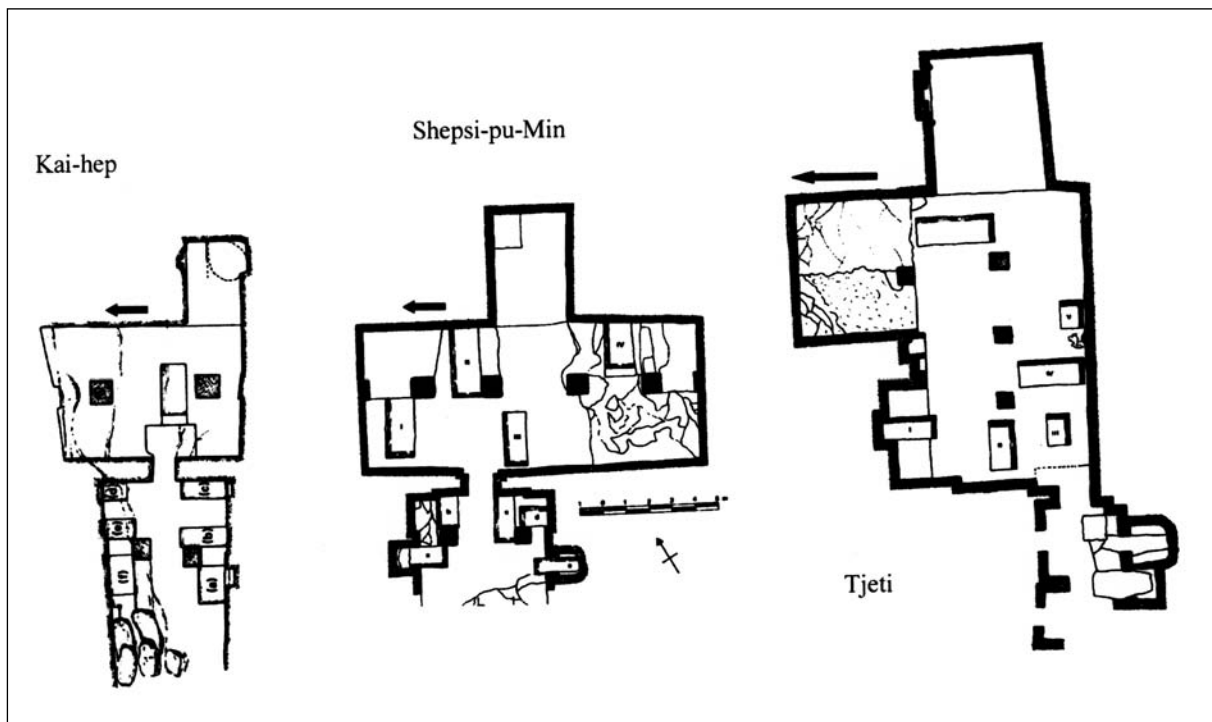


Figure 2: Three tombs at el-Hawawish, reduced to a similar scale and orientation, showing the position and orientation of the carrying chair scenes of Kai-hep and Shepsipu-Min and the funeral procession in the earlier chapel of Tjeti. The plans have been slightly simplified for clarity. (Sources: Kai-hep: Kanawati, *el-Hawawish I*, Fig. 5; Shepsipu-Min: *Ibid.*, II, Fig. 1; Tjeti: *Ibid.*, III, Fig. 1.)

Seshat-hotep and Kai-em-nofret a carrying chair would have been one among many that crowded the streets, for a provincial governor like Kai-hep the luxury of being carried as he went about his duties must have been an important marker of his status. He would have encountered no equals on the streets of his city, and probably few carrying chairs altogether.

IV. Conclusions

Although it is the latest of the three examples discussed that has both the clearest mortuary meaning as a metaphorical funeral and at the same time the strongest indication of the function of the scene as a marker of high status, there is no indication that the depiction of carrying chairs in tombs evolved simply from prosaic representation of a daily life object into a scene freighted with metaphorical and hierarchical meaning. The metaphorical meaning seems likely to have been present from a very early date; it presumably waxed and waned from time to time and place to place. Likewise, the use of the scene as an indicator of status was probably stronger in the provinces, as noted above, and perhaps in

periods surrounding a royal jubilee, which involved the presentation of the king in a carrying-chair. And the transporting of the king in a carrying chair as part of the jubilee may itself have had funerary overtones, given that a ritual death was an important part of the festival.

It is equally clear that the status-marking and metaphorical functions of the scene were not mutually exclusive. A scene could function as both, or as one, or as neither or perhaps better put: as something else.

This analysis of carrying-chair scenes in three tombs of different date and locale cannot, of course, fully explain the function of tomb decoration or even of carrying chair scenes. The variety of interpretations possible, even among only three examples depicting a single object, does indicate, however, the richness and variety of the decoration of meaning encoded in Old Kingdom tomb chapels. It seems unlikely that there exists a single "universal field theory" of tomb decoration to explain the iconography that has been preserved. A more fruitful approach is an open-ended investigation of the many reasons that the ancient Egyptians included in their tomb chapels such charming scenes of "daily life."

