

Agency in Old Kingdom elite tomb programs: traditions, locations, and variable meanings

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I. Method overview: agency and variation

My approach to the interpretation of Old Kingdom elite tomb programs grew from an interest in the significance of variation in Egyptian material culture, which led me early on to investigate the concept of agency. “Agency” does not define a specific analytic method, and a universally shared view on the specific meaning and use of agency remains elusive. In archaeological and art historical scholarship it denotes, in a general sense, a viewpoint that centers and amplifies the role of the people (i.e. agents), who created the objects of material culture we study. I will not reiterate here the origins and development of the concept of agency, as this topic is sufficiently discussed elsewhere.¹ Instead, I would like to begin with a brief overview of the concept based upon a recent volume investigating the use of agency-based methods in archaeology, edited by Marcia-Anne Dobres and John Robb, and then follow with a clarification of the points essential to my approach to the study of all types of ancient Egyptian material culture, including visual culture such as elite tomb programs.

1 For example, the introduction to the volume *Agency in Archaeology*, discussed below, provides an informative overview: Marcia-Anne Dobres and John Robb, “Agency in archaeology: paradigm or platitude?” in *Agency in Archaeology*, ed. Marcia-Anne Dobres and John E. Robb (London: Routledge, 2000), 3-17. Other relevant discussions include: Matthew H. Johnson, “Conceptions of Agency in Archaeological Interpretation,” *JAA* 8 (1989): 189-211; H. Martin Wobst, “Agency in (spite of) material culture,” in Dobres and Robb, *Agency in Archaeology*, 40-50; John C. Barrett, “A thesis on agency,” in Dobres and Robb, *Agency in Archaeology*, 61-68; idem, “Agency, the Duality of Structure, and the Problem of the Archaeological Record,” in *Archaeological Theory Today*, ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2001), 141-164; Bruno David, “Intentionality, Agency and an Archaeology of Choice,” *CAJ* 14/1 (2004): 67-71.

In the introduction to the volume *Agency in Archaeology*, authors Dobres and Robb assess the diversity of “agency” approaches, and they identify four “general principles” that most agency theorists tend to share:

the material conditions of social life; the simultaneously constraining and enabling influence of social, symbolic, and material structures and institutions, habituation, and beliefs; the importance of the motivations and actions of agents; and the dialectic of structure and agency.²

The first principle speaks to an understanding of the objects we study (including everything from utilitarian pieces such as tools and pottery to complex monuments comprising architecture, sculpture, and relief) as more than simply the residue of activity; the creation of material culture is a meaningful process, and the created objects are integral elements of the context inhabited by people, affecting their experiences, actions, and the creation and shape of other objects. This principle has important implications for the study of Old Kingdom elite tombs, and I will return to this issue below. The next three statements define the two main components of agency theory and the interdependent relationship they share. The second principle defines agency’s theoretical complement, structure, as “constraining and enabling influences” which include, for example, religious and political ideologies, patterns of social organization and interaction, and traditions, such as the building of certain types of monuments. The “agents” are the people who create the material culture we study; however, agency does not refer simply to the existence of agents, but rather to a particular quality they embody, a creative potential imbued with knowledge and thought. Lastly, of essential importance to agency-based methods of interpretation is a recognition of the dialectic relationship agency and

2 Marcia-Anne Dobres and John Robb, “Paradigm or platitude?”, 8.

structure share. Neither element exists without the other, and they continually constitute and transform one another. For example, (in a somewhat schematic illustration of this relationship) while religious ideologies (structure) have a profound impact on the behavior of people, including on their allocations of resources for the creation of objects and monuments, these people must learn the religious ideas, find value in them, and actively take part in the relevant traditions, otherwise these traditions and the ideas they express would disappear. An interpretation, then, of a religious monument should consider not only the structures of the religion and ritual practices, but also the different ways in which people engage, maintain, and transform those religious ideas.

At the core of most agency-based approaches to the interpretation of material culture is a desire to flesh out the role of the people who made and used the objects. Analyses concerned mainly with aspects of structure can tend to constrain or homogenize the role that people play, viewing them as largely passive and as behaving in predictable patterns. An agency-based approach argues that people are knowledgeable and thoughtful actors – they are more than simply the vehicle by which objects come into being. H. Martin Wobst clarifies this aspect of agency well, linking it to Giddens' theory of structuration, which, together with the work of Pierre Bourdieu on his concept of habitus, provides a fundamental source for much current agency theory:

humans are envisioned as entering contexts informed by experience and by their knowledge of history and social structure; they are taken to have a sense of what is or is not habitual, appropriate, opportune, painful, or rewarding in those contexts, and their actions are assumed to be informed by this sense.³

Recognizing the knowledgeable, thinking people responsible for not simply the existence but also the specific forms of material culture is central to my analysis of Old Kingdom elite tombs. Often, studies of Old Kingdom Egyptian culture focus on aspects of structure; for example, religious concepts, the ideology ordering society, and the power of the king are seen as determining much of what occurs, including the production of elite tombs, and the Egyptians themselves are viewed as having little sense of alternate

3 H. Martin Wobst, "Agency in (spite of) material culture", 40.

possibilities and little option for engaging them. The nature of a society like that of Old Kingdom Egypt, which was characterized by a dominant, consistent, and enduring worldview, can obscure the intrinsic reality of the numerous individuals constituting such a society; nonetheless, it is clear the Egyptian people were sensitive to the world they lived in, and they understood their monuments to be meaningful.

Most analyses of Old Kingdom text and image programs are primarily iconographic studies that seek to interpret the meaning of an image, (or a group of related images) based exclusively on the subject matter of the image. The arena of iconographic studies encompasses a wide range of sometimes conflicting ideas and viewpoints. In an incisive summary of the "state of the problem", with specific reference to the interpretation of "daily life" scenes, Rene van Walsem identifies the two main viewpoints present in current scholarship.⁴ One interprets the images more or less literally (*Sehbild*), while the other views the images as having primarily symbolic value (*Sinnbild*). Literal interpretations that read tomb program scenes as representations of actual activity shift the focus of program interpretation to the reasons for the images' presence in the tomb chapel and the manner by which the images fulfill a perceived function. From this perspective, scenes of farming, craft-making, or catching birds and fish (among many others) refer to those activities as conducted in life, and the purpose of these images in the funerary context is interpreted as evidence of the tomb owner's concept of the next world, or alternately as evidence of the manner in which his funerary cult is supported in this one, among other ideas. Symbolic interpretations, in contrast, see the symbolic value of the images as the reason for their presence in the funerary context, and give greater attention to interpreting what the symbolic meaning of a scene of farming, fishing, etc. might be. A classic example illustrating this split in viewpoint concerns interpretations of the scenes of the tomb owner fishing and fowling in the marshes: one may interpret the scene as an illustration of an activity conducted by the tomb

4 Rene van Walsem, "The Interpretation of Iconographic Programmes in Old Kingdom Elite Tombs of the Memphite Area. Methodological and Theoretical (Re)Considerations," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. by C. J. Eyre (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 1197-203.

owner in life that he wishes to continue to conduct in death, which the presence of the image somehow (via a suggested but not entirely understood mechanism that is related to a “magical” effectiveness of the image) ensures; or the scene may be a reference to more abstract ideas about the tomb owner’s control of chaotic forces that threaten him on his journey to or regeneration in the next world.⁵

Iconographic analysis is a fundamental element in the interpretation of Old Kingdom elite tomb programs, facilitating other kinds of interpretations that examine additional aspects of the programs, such as features that appear throughout a program or the way in which the layout of a program within a tomb chapel can reveal information about the function and purposes of the monument. Analyses that emphasize the role of context in the interpretation of images and full programs draw out additional layers of meaning present in these polyvalent monuments. An agency-based approach to the interpretation of Old Kingdom elite tomb programs similarly elicits additional layers of meaning without dismissing the value of iconography, by considering the role of the tomb owner and others in creating meaning that is present in the tomb program, including in the iconography of the images.

As stated above, an agency-based view of material culture prioritizes the influential role of the people who created the objects we study. Although groups of artisans executed the work in creating Old Kingdom elite tombs, the form of the tomb and its program related specifically to the tomb owner. The tomb existed for the sake of its owner, with significant ritual and expressive functions to fulfill, and the tomb owner, as a knowledgeable, informed, and thinking agent, responded to a wide range of influences, including religious ideas, cultural traditions and elite mores, among others, in the creation of his tomb program.

The role of agency is especially important in the interpretation of Old Kingdom tomb programs because of the nature of the data available for analysis. Only limited data survive from the Old Kingdom, especially in terms of texts and images from

5 For an overview of some of these ideas by an author who reads literal (Sehbild) meaning in the image, see Erika Feucht, “Fishing and fowling with the spear and throwstick reconsidered,” in *The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt*, ed. Ulrich Luft, *Studia Aegyptiaca XIV* (Budapest, 1992), 157-169.

contexts other than elite tombs, which means that in the project of interpreting the programs, including the iconography, we rely almost exclusively on examples in the tombs themselves. No books of images have been recovered from artists’ workshops, providing images separate from a context of use; instead we have only images that exist as they have been put into use by the tomb owners (or by the king in his monuments).⁶ Therefore, it is essential to consider how individual agents affected the form of the data – the selection of images, details of the images and texts, the program in its entirety – in analyses of the images and programs.

Each tomb owner was an individual with a particular status, who worked in a certain area of the administration (under a particular pharaoh), and who had a network of family and other social relationships. These and many other aspects of the tomb owner’s social situation would have influenced his decisions about the creation of his tomb, including, for example, its size and specific location in a cemetery, the resources available for its construction, and the workshop that was used, among others. Tomb owners could see the programs in other tombs, members of their community would have been building tombs as well, and the tomb owners would have been in contact with the workshop creating theirs and other programs. The tombs and their programs were not created in a vacuum; the production of an elite tomb played an integral and meaningful part in the experience of both the elite Egyptian and his community.

Agency’s effect on the form of objects and monuments can become more apparent in comparative analyses of material made over a long span of time. For example, a diachronic view of Old Kingdom elite tomb programs reveals an increase in the size of tomb chapels and in the number of different scene types present in the programs over the course of the Old Kingdom (with the exception of the elite tombs during the reign of Khufu). This expansion of chapel sizes and programs speaks perhaps to the flourishing bureaucracy and to fluctuations in royal prerogatives versus opportunities for the growing elite class. It also suggests there were changes in underlying religious ideas, as well as changes in wealth

6 Yvonne Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom : Studies in Orientation and Scene Content, Studies in Egyptology* (London: KPI, 1987).

and the development of workshops and methods for tomb decoration, among many other possible broad-based, structural conditions. But what pushed this expansion forward? Even when one can identify the transformation of social structures that may have facilitated the changes in the programs (i.e. increase in bureaucracy, concerns of the king, etc.), the cause of the physical changes themselves must be found in the actions of the real, specific tomb owners who responded to developments or chose to take advantage of new opportunities and to execute their programs differently.

On a smaller scale, the impact of agency can be more nuanced and difficult to discern. Iconographic interpretations, for example, that focus on clarifying a stable link between the meaning and the subject matter of an image, imply that the replication of a specific image necessarily indicates the replication of a specific meaning. This view tends to remove, or at least standardize, the tomb owners' involvement in the meaning present in an image or program. The iconographic meanings of an image probably remained relatively consistent, given both the stability of the Egyptian image system and the generally conservative and stable Egyptian worldview underlying the meaning of the images. Alterations of iconographic meaning would likely have been minor – variations on a theme. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that most tomb owners had a good sense of the generally accepted meaning of any given image in a tomb program; however, the use of a particular image would not necessarily have been driven only by its iconographic meaning, and different tomb owners may have been expressing different kinds of meaning in using the same image or group of images. In some cases, the use of the same image carried unavoidably different meanings: for example, the first person to use a new type of scene (or a scene, like farming, etc. that appeared early in the Old Kingdom but had vanished for the first half of the 4th Dynasty) expressed something different with the use of this scene, i.e. innovation, or even an innovative return to an older tradition, than that which was expressed by a tomb owner using the same scenes of farming 100 years later, when it had become traditional, accepted, even required, and no sense of innovation or difference was present.

Even during the same time period, the use of the same scenes may have resulted from different sets

of ideas or priorities. One tomb owner may have selected a scene for his program, (for example, the tomb owner fishing and fowling in the marshes) because of its iconographic meaning (a reference to his pleasure of the activity, to his high status, to his control of chaotic forces, etc.), to which he felt a particularly strong connection. Another tomb owner may have been aware of the value of the iconographic meaning, but his choice to use the scene may have been driven more by the fact that all of his colleagues used it in their programs, and he prioritized his association with his social group. The relationship between workshops and patrons may have played a part as well, if the employment of certain workshops was determined to some extent by status or was common practice for specific professional or other social groups, and the specific workshops were accomplished in the rendition of certain tomb designs or selected images. The tomb program of Ses-hathetep, to be discussed below, closely parallels the programs of several other tombs, suggesting a purposeful copying among the tomb owners, which implies that these tomb owners found inspiration in sources other than strictly the iconography of the images. Most likely, iconographic meaning as well as factors of social significance, status, etc. played a role in the details of scenes and programs; yet, the particular needs or desires of the tomb owner determined the particular form of the image and its context in a program. Thus, in one case the scene is constructed and placed to communicate an iconographic meaning, while in another its existence (details, placement, etc.) resulted from a desire to communicate a social association and tomb owner's status. In the first instance, the specific nature of the image's details, the texts, and the location of the scene in the program relate primarily to the iconography, while in the second, the scene may need only the minimum qualities to signify (to return to the previous example) "fishing and fowling", and the context may be less important than its simple existence in the program.

In some cases tomb owners may have manipulated certain types of images or their programs overall in order to tailor the expression of their programs without straying from traditional iconography. For example, in a previous article, I argued that a group of elite tomb owners who built tombs in Saqqara in the later phase of the Old Kingdom reconfigured their

programs in an effort to take part in a changing relationship between religious ideology and material culture, which had been first exhibited by the pharaoh Unas in the inscription of the pyramid texts in his burial chambers.⁷ I suggested that in order to address this apparent evolution in ideas, the tomb owners used the same set of images used by many previous tomb owners, but reconfigured them in their chapels in a systematic way to create a sort of “map” of the cosmos, in the same way the pyramid texts had done this for the king. These tomb owners created their programs with scenes that had at this stage become traditional, i.e. signs of participation in an elite custom. Their “traditional” status did not erase their iconographic significance, but it may have allowed the tomb owners a greater flexibility in using the scenes for other purposes, in this case to create their own version of their journey through the next world.

A similar, although more visually dramatic, example of this kind of manipulation of traditional programs can be found in the provincial cemetery at Qubbet el Hawa, (also to be discussed below). By utilizing some traditional images and omitting many others, the Qubbet el Hawa tomb owners created programs that expressed an identity particular to them and their local community. The tomb owners also manipulated smaller details, taking long-standard images of offering figures and altering them by depicting them in unusual groupings and using identifying inscriptions, which allowed the elite tomb owners to satisfy their unique needs without fully leaving the traditional iconography of elite tomb programs.

The Qubbet el Hawa tomb programs also reveal the tomb owners’ attention to the communicative power of style and of the formal quality of the programs overall, a quality that can be linked to subject matter (as different subjects used different images), but one that is principally a distinct aspect of the program. The overall consistency of style in Old Kingdom tomb relief speaks to the importance of the visual appearance of the program to the elite owner. Examples throughout the history of Egyptian art show style being used to communicate meaning. For example, in her study of New Kingdom Theban tombs, Melinda Hartwig showed that different sty-

⁷ “Common Ground between Pyramid Texts and Old Kingdom Tomb Design: The Case of Ankhmahor,” *JARCE* 60 (2003): 133-157.

les were used by tomb owners to communicate their affiliation with different institutions of the administration of the state.⁸ The Old Kingdom Egyptian tomb owners’ awareness of the significance and communicative power of the formal aspects of their programs is apparent in the tombs of Kayemnofret and Kahep/Tjetji-iker, as well as at Qubbet el Hawa, all of which will be examined below.

Agency-based perspectives unavoidably elicit questions regarding the existence and impact of subjective experience, i.e. the varied ways that human beings see and experience the world, and scholars deal with this issue in many different ways. The possibility of projecting a western model of “individualism” onto ancient cultures with significantly different concepts of personhood can inhibit investigations into the Egyptians’ subjective experiences; yet, we cannot erase the fundamental humanity of the Egyptians.⁹ It is not unreasonable to suppose that some tomb owners felt more passionately about their religion, that others were especially driven by their social standing, that some individuals were more comfortable with change or innovation, while others stayed truer to tradition. The relevant question for the interpretation of tomb programs is not if these varied personalities existed, but rather if they would have found expression in the material culture. Given the nature of an Egyptian elite culture that prioritized the community over the individual, it seems unlikely that individual personalities would play a dominant role in the specific form of a monument such as an elite tomb – more likely, the individual’s role within the overall community was far more influential, especially as it related to his status and social connections. Acknowledging thoughtful people requires acknowledging the complicated reality of subjective experience, even when it cannot be seen with clarity in the material culture, but the interpretation of subjective experience is not my primary interest with regard to the concept of agency. Viewing the tomb owners as thinking actors who

⁸ Melinda Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes (1419-1372 BCE)* (Brussels: Fondation Egyptologique Reine Elisabeth, 2004)

⁹ Herman Te Velde, “Some Remarks on the Concept ‘Person’ in the Ancient Egyptian Culture,” in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Yme B. Kuiper and Andy F. Sanders, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 83-101.

function in complex, dynamic contexts provides a solid foundation for seeking varied layers of meaning in the monuments they created, including in the images of their tomb programs.

Interest in agency leads scholars down a number of paths of inquiry in their interpretations of material culture, because the people who created the objects were members of complex societies that had numerous and diverse ways of shaping human experience. Among the many themes of agency-based analyses (gender, social inequality, individual narrative, etc.), the consideration of agency in relationship to space and time is typically integral, because agency is embodied by people who necessarily exist in both space and time, a theme expounded by John Barrett.

And actions are embodied; they are the work of agents whose knowledgeability of their place in the world, and whose abilities in occupying the world, are expressed in actions which work both upon the world and upon the agent.¹⁰

Barrett further examines the “making of the agent”, which he notes, “takes place in the passing of time as the practices of agency both recognize something of the world as it is and also formulate their desires upon it.”¹¹ The examination of space and time as they relate to the social situation of the agents is fundamental to my interpretation of Old Kingdom elite tomb programs: the location in which a tomb owner created his tomb and the time period in which he did so are significant to the meanings of the program of texts and images.

Agents exist in the world with the knowledge that they exist in time, with an awareness of the past, and with an understanding of their own and others’ transformation over time. The Egyptians’ sense of time is evident in many aspects of their culture including tombs and tomb programs especially, which exist largely in response to the tomb owner’s awareness of a future in which he will no longer be part of the same world he has come to know. The many elements of the burial, from the establishment of the cult with resources and personnel, to the construction of a

10 John Barrett, “A thesis on agency,” in Dobres and Robb, *Agency in Archaeology*, 61.

11 *Ibid.*, 66.

stone (or mud brick) monument and warnings to passersby against damaging it, to the creation of numerous statues and the mummification of the body, all reveal the elite Egyptian’s effort to manage what he seems to perceive as an unstable future.

Evolving religious ideas and changing political circumstances must be seen as factors in the shape a particular tomb and program will take. In addition, in the creation of his tomb and program, each tomb owner relied on the form of earlier tombs. We know that tomb chapels were visited by priests and family members, and that they were accessible to visitors, including an elite Egyptian seeking to create his own program of texts and images.¹² Earlier monuments illustrated to a new tomb owner how previous agents had responded to some of the same needs he faced. By viewing these tomb programs, a tomb owner knew which aspects had a long tradition, and which aspects were less common or more recent transformations. In addition, once his tomb was built, it changed the context in which every future tomb was built, providing an additional model for future tomb builders to emulate or alter as they desired.

As time passes, the meaning in the use of specific images, or even of full programs, changes. As discussed above, the accretion of scene types to elite tomb programs reveals more than the transformation of structural elements; specific tomb owners made choices and took action in order to push this progressive development forward, and time necessarily factored into this process. The first tomb owners who incorporated a new scene made a definitive statement with their programs, regardless of the specific iconographic meaning of the new scene: the first tomb owners to use a scene of themselves fishing and fowling broke from the tradition of tomb decoration and employed something previously deemed unnecessary for a successful tomb. Whatever their reasons, they created programs that, in their distinct difference from what came before, necessarily communicated meanings beyond the iconographic value of the scene. A tomb owner using a fishing and fowling scene in a tomb built 100 years later may have comprehended a

12 Ann Macy Roth, “The Social Aspects of Death,” in *Mummies and Magic: the Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Sue D’Auria, Peter Lacovara, and Catherine H. Roehrig (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1998), 52-59.

similar iconographic value of the scene, but his use of the scene no longer communicated the same meanings that the first tomb owners' use of it did – at this point the scene was traditional, part of the standard repertoire.

The proposal, noted above, regarding the reconfiguring of some tomb programs during the later Old Kingdom in response to changing ideas about funerary ideology and material culture, also concerns a temporal factor in the evolving meanings of tomb programs. These tomb owners used in their programs images familiar to them and to all elite tomb owners from many other, earlier programs, and although they presumably comprehended the traditional iconographic value of the images, they then used them in a novel way to communicate a meaning that had not existed, or at least was not an option, in earlier phases of tomb building. These examples reflect the dialectic of agency and structure that necessarily occurs over the passage of time, as the actions of the tomb owners inevitably transformed the tradition of tomb building, as well as other aspects of structure.

The embodiment of the agent also requires space, as people necessarily exist in real, specific places. Environment determines many aspects of structure, and agency develops in response to environment and functions within and upon it. The role of space is essential to the culture of ancient Egypt. The unique geography of the country determined many fundamental, structural aspects of the society, providing clear constraints on some behaviors and ideas while facilitating others. The Egyptians' concept of the creation and maintenance of the cosmos, which determined much of the religious and political ideology of the country, emerged in direct response to their landscape and environment. As Barrett succinctly states, "Agents make themselves with reference to a world."¹³ Concepts of their world, as well as the physical realities of the environment, created the context in which the agency of the Egyptians took shape and functioned.

Egyptians were especially conscious of space, both the nature of their landscape and the distribution of themselves and their monuments throughout it. Egyptians usually designed monuments for specific areas, and carefully related the monuments to

their environment and to other monuments. In the study of Old Kingdom elite tombs, space and especially landscape emerge as important themes in the analysis of elite tombs in provincial cemeteries. These tombs, simply by virtue of their location, carry functions and meanings different than those in the capital, as they represent the transformation of old traditions and the establishment of new ones in ways that continued building in the Memphite cemeteries does not. This issue will be addressed again below, with regard to the tomb of Kahep/Tjetji-iker and the tombs at Qubbet el Hawa.

The issues of time and space lead back to the first "principle" stated by Dobres and Robb, regarding the "material conditions of social life". This principle asserts that objects are not simply the result or residue of actions; rather, both in their creation and in their existence, they are intimately integrated into aspects of structure and agency. The process of creating monuments helped shape structure: for example, in Egypt, the process of building the king's pyramid was significant not only because of the finished product. The organization of labor, collection and allocation of resources, and long process of building not only contributed to the religious and political ideologies of the country, but established many aspects of the economy and social structure as well. For a tomb owner, the building of a tomb meant more than simply the finished monument. In allocating resources to his tomb, being allowed space to build it (whether directly by the king, or other system), and taking part in the design and construction of it, the tomb owner expressed part of his identity as an elite member of Egyptian society, engaging in actions that expressed his high status as well as fulfilled part of his role in the maintenance of social order.

Once built, the tomb monuments themselves became part of the environment, in which the development of agency and its transformation of structure occurred. As noted above, earlier tombs provided models for new tomb builders; these monuments were visible, they were part of the tradition of tomb building and part of the landscape in which a new tomb would rise.

Time, space, and the "material conditions of social life" all anchor the analysis of material culture in a context (albeit constantly changing) that is culturally specific. Matthew Johnson argues for an "historically specific" view of agency, as opposed to essen-

13 Barrett, "A thesis on agency," 66.

tialist or cross-cultural interpretations. As he succinctly states:

we cannot talk about the individual social agent without at the same time talking about the cultural background from which that agent came and against which that agent operates.¹⁴

Despite an underlying sense of universality to the “knowledgeable agent”, (i.e. that all people, in infinitely varying ways, live and experience an environment that affects them), the interdependence of structure and agency determines the extent to which agency must be seen as culturally/structurally specific. I agree with Johnson’s view in my own approach to Egyptian material, including the elite tomb programs. Ancient Egyptian civilization had a unique worldview and culture that was profoundly rooted in their place and time in the world, and the defining characteristics of the society must be acknowledged in any analysis of their material culture. This view requires careful attention to the formal qualities of the material being analyzed and consideration of all different kinds of contextual data – art historical, archaeological, textual, etc. – when available. Ultimately it is possible to view the tomb owner’s creation of his program as a metaphor for the processes of speech/ language: the words and basic forms of communication exist in the cultural environment, but it is in their use by a speaker that meaning is created, and to interpret certain aspects of the meaning of these spoken words, we must first acknowledge the specific context of the speaker.¹⁵

II. Program analyses

In the discussion of the tomb programs that follows, I do not focus on a specific scene or feature shared by all three tomb programs. Rather, this section is meant to be a general discussion that illustrates the kinds of questions and perspectives brought out by an agency-based approach, and to suggest possible paths of

14 Matthew Johnson, “Self-made men and the staging of agency,” in Dobres and Robb, eds., *Agency in Archaeology*, 213.

15 Roman Jakobson, “Quest for the essence of language (1965),” in *On Language: Roman Jakobson*, ed. Linda Waugh, Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1990), 407-421; idem, “Shifters and Verbal Categories (1957),” in ed. Waugh and Monville-Burston, *On Language*, 386-392.

inquiry to follow in more detailed analyses. Because we understand each tomb to be an integrated monument that is connected to an individual, we see all the components, from architecture to text and image programs, working together toward a shared goal that is both functional and expressive, therefore, I generally begin by examining the monument and program as a whole, prior to addressing specific details. Then, by comparing a whole program or details of a program with corresponding elements from other programs, patterns of similarity and difference emerge, which provide bases for interpretation.

A. Seshathetep

The tomb of Seshathetep, number G5150, stands in the cemetery en échelon, in the West Field at Giza, among a group of mastabas east of the standardized mastaba cores erected in carefully organized rows during the reign of Khufu.¹⁶ The original core mastaba built for Seshathetep followed the proportions of the earlier 4th Dynasty mastaba cores, but it was later extended on the east side by approximately 4 meters, and an L-shaped chapel, measuring 5 meters by 1.57 meters, was built into this secondarily built section (SH.Abb.1). In front of the chapel entrance, mudbrick walls created a forecourt-like area, perhaps in part to block the chapel’s visibility. The proportions of the original core suggest the construction of the tomb began in the 4th Dynasty, but the mudbrick walls of the forecourt adjoin the exterior wall of an adjacent tomb, which is likely from the early 5th Dynasty, indicating that at least this latter phase of his tomb construction occurred then.¹⁷

Junker identifies this period of the Old Kingdom, after the reign of Khufu into the early 5th Dynasty, as a phase of change in the construction of Old Kingdom elite tombs. Seshathetep’s tomb is one of a group built in the West Field at Giza that share similar characteristics, including the alteration of the original core mastaba in order to incorporate a stone chapel into the body of the mastaba.¹⁸ Although the

16 Hermann Junker, “Die Mastaba des Šš3.t-ḥtp,” in Giza, Bd. 3. *Die Mastabas der vorgeschrittenen V. Dynastie auf dem Westfriedhof* (Wien:Leipzig Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky A.G., 1955), 172-195.

17 Ibid., 176-177.

18 Peter Janosi, “The Tombs of Officials: Houses of Eternity,” in *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*, ed. Dorothea Arnold and Christiane Ziegler (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 30-31.

form of alteration to the different tombs of this group varied, in all cases the alteration was designed to accommodate an interior chapel, indicating that this was a primary interest of the tomb owners. Janosi notes that in the earlier part of the 4th Dynasty, during the reign of Khufu, some tomb owners replaced original, external mudbrick chapels with stone chapels, which he states, “clearly indicate that the tomb as it was previously constituted did not embody the form of the funerary monument the owner desired.”¹⁹ The replacement of mud-brick with stone, and the subsequent efforts to incorporate stone chapels within the bodies of the mastabas, seems to indicate the desire of these tomb owners to have sturdier monuments that were less subject to wear than the mud-brick monuments would have been. That such changes occurred even during the reign of Khufu, when the form of elite monuments seems to have been largely controlled by the king, suggests this desire among the tomb owners was particularly strong. The changes evident in Seshathetep’s tomb and those of his contemporaries indicate that the king no longer felt a need to control the form of elite tombs to such an extent, and perhaps relented in some degree due to the strong desires of the elite officials on whom he relied.

Although the structural changes to these elite tombs indicate practical considerations on the part of the tomb owners, by examining the nature of these changes and the relationship of these tombs to both earlier and later tombs, it is possible to interpret additional layers of meaning present in these monuments, which then provides a context in which to examine Seshathetep’s chapel and program. The interior stone chapels (like that of Seshathetep) are not significantly different from earlier mud-brick (or even other stone) external chapels in terms of size and plan, and the large, stone mastabas remain the dominant element of each overall monument. As such, the chapel retains a close connection to the “offering niche” of the earliest mastabas, (which had been revived by Khufu, to some extent), indicating that the chapel’s primary function remained strongly connected to the offering ritual – the chapel, at this stage, appears to be primarily a place for ritual to occur. Changes directed at creating a more stable and more enduring place for the ritual may be interpreted as a material manifestation of the tomb

19 Ibid., 30.

owners’ desire to have a stable and enduring mortuary ritual. Perhaps having seen the damage to or even loss of earlier mudbrick chapels and subsequent loss of ritual activity, the tomb owners felt that creating a more permanent place would facilitate the continuation of their own offering ritual. Yet, even if these tomb owners continued to prioritize the ritual, and saw the chapel as largely a tool for that purpose, in their focus on the chapel itself (i.e. as the reason for the alterations to their tombs), they set the stage for the development of the tomb monument that followed, which was characterized primarily by the spatial expansion of the chapel. Eventually, the chapel itself became the focus of the elite tomb monument, literally taking much of the place once filled by the core of the mastaba. In elite tombs of the early Old Kingdom, the mastaba embodied and fulfilled much of the monument’s meaning by marking the place of burial and for ritual, and marking its owner’s place near the king and near other members of the elite. The size and composition of the mastaba reflected the wealth of the owner (his access to such resources), and its form was linked to funerary and cosmological ideas reaching back to the earliest funerary monuments. As the mastaba gave way to larger chapels, the chapels became a more significant aspect of the funerary monument, and consequently assumed a larger portion of the monument’s meaning. The chapel evolved from being only (or at least primarily) a place for ritual to being a significant monument in and of itself, and the space of the chapel took on greater importance in the ideology of the tomb monument as a whole. With the increasing size of the chapel came the increasing complexity of the programs, which can be interpreted as not only a practical response to the need to cover more wall space, but also as a way for the tomb owners to shape the meaning of this increasingly important and polyvalent space.²⁰

Seshathetep’s chapel belongs to the early phase of this proposed framework, during which the chapel was perceived still as primarily a place for ritual. The program of texts and images in his chapel supports this interpretation. Other than one small scene above the doorway (to be discussed below), the entire program consists of images of the tomb owner,

20 Janosi identifies the shift as one from the tomb as a “house for the dead” to the tomb as a “temple for the veneration of the deceased”. Ibid., 36.

his family, and priests and other offering figures bringing offerings and conducting ritual (SH.Abb.3-8). The thematic unity of this program further links the chapel to the offering niche and associated offering stele of both Early Dynastic tombs and, I think more importantly, to the elite tombs built during the reign of Khufu, when the image and text “programs” were reduced to a single slab stele.²¹ To Seshathetep and other tomb owners of the later 4th and early 5th Dynasties, the tombs built during the reign of Khufu represented the standard for the cemetery, the primary and most obvious model for the later tomb owners to follow. Therefore, chapels like Seshathetep’s may be interpreted as, in essence, a continuation of the ideas underlying funerary monuments of the earlier 4th Dynasty, in which representations of the tomb owner with his name, titles, and offerings sufficiently fulfilled the needs of the monument. The increase in the amount of imagery and texts occurs in response to the tomb owners’ efforts to create more lasting chapels, which resulted in more stone wall surfaces to inscribe. An element of choice does remain; the tomb owners could have left the walls of the stone chapels blank and created only a false door and/or slab stele, but this choice would seem out of step with most Egyptian monuments, including the pre-Khufu elite chapels, the king’s funerary monument, and possibly temples as well, in which the flat surfaces of stone walls are covered with relief.

The program of texts and images in Seshathetep’s chapel closely parallels the programs of several other tomb chapels from this period (of the later 4th and early 5th Dynasties). Harpur identifies such strong formal links between Seshathetep’s program and those of Kaininswt, Mr-ib, and Nswt-nfr that she suggests they were decorated by the, “same group of craftsmen or by artists who had received very similar training in sculpture and chapel design.”²² Sever-

al other tombs, including those of Whm-kai and Seshemnefer I, also have very similar programs, which consist primarily of images of the tomb owner, his family, cult officials, and offerings. All of these programs share an additional distinctive element, a “journey to the west” scene located above the entrance doorway on the east wall. The close relationship among these chapel programs indicates a strong social element in the use of the program by the tomb owners; it is clear that these tomb owners wanted to have similar programs, and thus were necessarily aware of each other’s programs in the creation of their own. The similarity among the programs may be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps one of the older tomb owners in the group used the program design, and then later tomb owners followed his design in their desire to be associated with him (or an early small group) in particular, due to reasons of status or other social connections. A relative chronology of the tombs, which is difficult to achieve, might help clarify this sequence.

An alternate interpretation related to the social aspect of the shared programs would not require certainty regarding the sequence of the tombs, and it links the use of the similarly designed program by all of these tomb owners to the architectural similarities among the tombs. As noted above, the elite tombs constructed during the reign of Khufu established this cemetery as the primary site for elite burial, and these tombs provided an important model for the later generation of tomb builders such as Seshathetep. Seshathetep’s tomb, like the others of this later generation, is located in the area between the original western core cemetery and Khufu’s pyramid, which, together with the physical character of their original mastabas, indicates the desire of Seshathetep and the other tomb owners to be closely associated with the earlier, Khufu-era group of elite owners. They likely saw themselves as continuing the established tradition in the cemetery. One distinctive aspect of the tombs built during Khufu’s reign was their physical uniformity, not only in the size and shape of the mastabas, but also in the use of texts and images in the form of the slab stele. Seshathetep and the later tomb owners may have sought uniformity, or at least a strong similarity, among their tomb programs in an effort to maintain the tradition of uniformity that had been established in the cemetery. If so, the images in Seshathetep’s

21 For discussions of these stele, see especially Janosi, *op. cit.*, and Peter Manuelian, “Excavating the Old Kingdom: The Giza Necropolis and other mastaba fields” in ed. Arnold and Ziegler, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*, 139-154, and *idem*, *Slab Stele of the Giza Necropolis, Publications of the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition to Egypt, no. 7*, eds. William Kelly Simpson and David O’Connor, (New Haven and Philadelphia: The Peabody Museum of Natural History and the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2003)

22 Harpur, *Decoration in Old Kingdom Tombs*, 64-65.

program should be interpreted at one level as signifiers of Seshathetep's participation in a shared elite expression founded not only in religious ideas (focus on offering ritual), but also on a perception of behavior appropriate to a social status and role.

A view of Seshathetep's program as being influenced by both the offering ritual and the programs of other elite tombs of the time period creates a context for the interpretation of specific elements of the program, such as individual scenes like the "journey to the west" scene located above the doorway on the east wall (SH.Abb.5). In Seshathetep's chapel only part of the scene survives. A boat with a hedgehog-head, sitting on a band of water, carries an eleven-man crew along with the tomb owner, of whom only the lower portion is visible, standing at the center, wearing a short kilt and leaning on a long staff. Based on comparisons to scenes from other tombs, this scene is typically described as depicting a "journey to the west", a reference to an element of Egyptian religious ideology that conceives of the deceased individual crossing to the next world. With reference to this particular interpretation of the image, Harpur notes that the "overt symbolism...sets it apart from most other subjects," in private tomb programs at this time.²³ While in later tomb programs, the symbolic value of this kind of scene may be more prominent, within the context of Seshathetep's program, it may be more appropriate to see in this scene primarily a reference to the funeral, a theme with which the "journey to the west" is typically associated.²⁴

If the primary inspiration for the overall program of Seshathetep's chapel (and the related chapels) lies in its connection to, or even support of, the mortuary ritual, then the incorporation of a reference to the funeral does not seem especially unusual. The scene does expand the realm of ritual to which the monument had more explicitly referred in the offering stela during Khufu's era, but this expansion can be interpreted as a logical choice. The ritual of the funeral itself is the "starting point" for the mortuary offering ritual that follows. A reference to this seminal ritual, one that also required use of the chapel space, falls well in line with the program's apparent prioritizing of the chapel's function as ritual space.

²³ Ibid., 84.

²⁴ John A. Wilson, "Funeral Services of the Egyptian Old Kingdom," *JNES* 3/4 (October 1944): 201-218.

Harpur identifies this "journey to the west" scene as a "Giza innovation"²⁵; one not present in the 3rd and early 4th Dynasty elite tombs, which included a more diverse array of subject matter such as farming and bird-catching. This choice by Seshathetep and the other tomb owners further supports an interpretation of the programs as not only emphasizing the ritual activity, but also as being strongly linked to the form and ideology of the Khufu-era tombs. The addition of a reference to the funeral, rather than references to other types of activities, suggests the tomb owners were not looking to revive the pre-Khufu model of elite tombs, but rather that they remained tied to the ideology of the earlier 4th Dynasty's narrow focus on ritual themes.

Another development in the structure of elite tombs during the later 4th Dynasty was the creation of rock-cut tombs. These tombs represented a clearer break from earlier tradition, in the type of tomb, in the size of the chapel, and in the size and composition of the chapel program. The presence of these more distinctive tombs provides good evidence that, in the years following Khufu's reign, the changes in elite tomb construction occurred at least in part in response to changes in the socio-political structure that had once presumably limited the options of elite tomb owners in the construction of their tombs. In this context, the relatively conservative nature of Seshathetep's chapel and the others could be interpreted as evidence of the generally conservative nature of this group of the elite at this time, as they seemed to strive for a continuation of earlier tradition. It is likely significant that the earliest rock-cut tombs belonged to queens of Khafre who, despite their high status, must have occupied a different role in the social structure of the community, separate from tomb owners like Seshathetep.

B. Kayemnofret

Kayemnofret built his tomb chapel at Saqqara during the second half of the 5th Dynasty, when the tradition of tomb building had broadened to include more elite burial sites and more diverse forms.²⁶ The pharaohs of the 5th Dynasty had returned to Saqqara to

²⁵ Harpur, *Decoration in Old Kingdom Tombs*, 84.

²⁶ The chapel of Kayemnofret was published by William Kelly Simpson, *The Offering Chapel of Kayemnofret in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art, Museum of Fine Arts, 1992).

build their own funerary monuments, leading the return of the elite officials to Saqqara as well, and with this movement south across the desert, the conventions of tomb building continued to evolve. By the later 5th Dynasty, when Kayemnofret built his tomb, Saqqara was well (re-)established as an elite burial site, even while Giza remained in use for elite burials; thus unlike the pattern for much of the earlier Old Kingdom, by the late 5th Dynasty, elite tombs spread across a wider area with less fixed boundaries. In returning to Saqqara, the elite tomb owners reconnected to 3rd and early 4th Dynasty tomb monuments, which included programs with a variety of scene types not common to 4th Dynasty Giza tombs. During the later 5th Dynasty, the form of tombs chapels and programs changed as well, as the plans and arrangements of different chapels took on more individual forms, and the tomb programs contained a more diverse group of images.

The chapels of 5th Dynasty tombs reveal an increased sensitivity to the expressive value of the space of the chapel, beyond only its role as a site for ritual, as in the earlier tombs discussed above. Forms that in some cases existed in earlier tombs in mud brick were now built in stone. Elite officials such as Ti, Ptahshepses, and Akhetotep and Ptahhotep, all from the later 5th Dynasty, incorporated not only multiple chambers in their mastabas, but courtyards as well, an architectural form likely adapted from royal monuments (and temples) and, as a new addition during this period, apparently previously unnecessary for the mortuary ritual. The plan of Kayemnofret's tomb, though smaller and less complex than these contemporaries, also shapes the space for effective purposes. Along with the main offering chamber, his tomb chapel includes a long entrance corridor and an antechamber with a niche for a statue, thus creating space for passage to and anticipation of the ritual that occurs in the main offering chamber (KMN.Abb.1). Also, the traces of preparatory drawings of sailing boats on the walls of the long corridor suggest the tomb owner's and artists' exploitation of the expressive power of the architecture as well, marrying a scene with a wall that adds to the visual effect of the scene.

The somewhat experimental quality to tombs of this period, demonstrated by chapels such as Ptahshepses that were expanded in phases, and the varied state of completion of elements of Kayemnofret's

program suggest that the programs in Kayemnofret's (and other 5th Dynasty tombs) could have been designed, like the chapels themselves, in phases. If the programs were designed in phases, this would have affected the choice of scenes, their location within the chapel, and the context of the scenes among others. In the example of Kayemnofret's tomb, perhaps the original design included only the main offering chamber and the antechamber, and the corridor was fully completed in stone later. If so, the program then, in the offering chamber would have been designed as a complete tomb program, incorporating everything the artists and tomb owner felt was necessary. Later, when the corridor became available, additional scenes would have been added to the overall program. If this were the case, this suggests that some type of hierarchy existed among the repertory of scenes used in elite programs of the time, with certain scenes chosen first, and other scenes utilized if the opportunity arose.

Even if the original design for Kayemnofret's tomb chapel included all three spaces, the incomplete state of the relief carving allows for the possibility of a scene-hierarchy in the program. Unfinished programs are not uncommon, a result, we assume, of the tomb owner's dying unexpectedly, and it seems likely that other complicating factors occasionally arose regarding the successful execution of the program based upon, for example, the tomb owner's continued access to the workers, artisans, and sufficient resources. The tomb owners must have been aware of the possibility of the program, as something that was created over time, not being finished in time for burial. In contrast to the 6th Dynasty, when multi-roomed tomb chapels with more extensive programs had become the norm, at this early stage of the escalation in the expansion of the chapel space and expansion of programs, it is possible, given the "newness" of multi-roomed chapels, that tomb owners such as Kayemnofret maintained the focus of their programs on the offering chamber, as the perceived "most important" room. If programs were designed in stages, with some scenes selected first and others added later when possible, then some scenes would have been (to the tomb owner or the artisans) more desirable than others; yet all of the final scenes appear in the program, and thus must be "important" or valuable to some degree.

The question of the importance of a scene (or group of scenes, or other feature of a program) is often part of the interpretation of elite programs, as it relates directly to the larger question of the purpose of the program to the function of the tomb. Ultimately, because an elite tomb functions conceptually, the locus of importance is the people who made and used the monuments, and because the social situation of these people varies, the importance of a scene or other feature of the program would vary as well. Some scenes, in particular the scene of the tomb owner at an offering table, appear in a high percentage of tomb programs, implying that they were considered important by a wide scope of elite tomb owners, while other scenes appear more sporadically. Yet even a scene or program element that does not appear consistently among tomb programs could have had significance for those tomb owners who chose to use it. A scene's importance to a tomb owner would be based upon his perception of some aspect of its meaning, whether iconographic, as a social indicator, as a tradition, etc. At a given time, perhaps all elite officials had a shared sense of which scenes or features of tomb programs were most valuable. Smaller groups of officials connected by profession or family could have shared ideas about certain details or themes, or individuals may have had some opportunity to decide for themselves which scenes or elements to prioritize.

Kayemnofret's tomb program incorporates many familiar scenes, related to farming, offerings, and activities in the marshes (among others). It is not the use of a rare scene that stands out, rather it is the absence of a common elite program element—identified subsidiary figures—that differentiates his program (KMN.Abb.2-7). Figures identified in a program typically include the family of the tomb owner as well as other officials, particularly officials with responsibilities in the owner's *ka*-cult. Given both the prevalence of identified *ka*-cult figures in elite tomb programs, and additional evidence regarding the program's role relative to the tomb owner's cult, this common aspect of an elite tomb program is generally understood to be integral to the tomb monument's purpose. Yet, Kayemnofret had a tomb built and decorated and used it for his burial, which indicates that he did not find the absence of these figures to be any hindrance to the successful functioning of his tomb.

Simpson suggests that Kayemnofret died young, prior to being married, and thus lacked heirs to name in his program.²⁷ While this seems a reasonable, and probably accurate, hypothesis, it remains somewhat odd, nonetheless, that Kayemnofret would invest resources in the construction of the tomb without devoting attention to setting up his cult; at the least, it is unusual that he had the foresight to build and at least partially decorate his tomb but failed to include this very common feature of identified cult officiants. Simpson argues that Kayemnofret's program focuses instead solely on the "self-thematization" of the owner (an aspect identified by Jan Assmann as equally ingrained in the program's purpose). The lack of identified family members and cult officiants in Kayemnofret's tomb does not diminish the importance of identified figures in other elite tomb programs, and his creation of a tomb program without them provides evidence that elite tomb owners had options in the creation of their programs for fulfilling their own needs shaped by circumstance and context.

The needs or desires of the tomb owner extended beyond the specific details of the subject matter of the scenes, as indicated in Kayemnofret's program. The upper section of the north wall has scenes depicting activities in the marshes, including a large scene of Kayemnofret fowling in a raft with a throwstick (KMN.Abb.5). The scene was recarved. In the original version, the figure of Kayemnofret was placed against the wide clump of papyrus, in a design similar to a scene in the tomb of Ti. In the altered version, the tomb owner is disengaged from the papyrus and significantly enlarged to nearly 2/3 the size of the first figure. Although a few minor details are also altered, including the addition of animals and more birds in the papyrus and a subsidiary figure in a small raft in front of the tomb owner, as well as a change to the orientation and stance of Kayemnofret, now facing west with his rear heel raised from the boat, it seems that the primary purpose of the alteration was to increase the size of the figure of the tomb owner. In the original version, Kayemnofret's figure was larger, though not substantially, than the other figures on the wall, and he was clearly identifiable set against the backdrop of papyrus. It seems the subject matter of the scene did not change, only the look of it, to create a more visually dominant image of the tomb owner.

²⁷ Ibid., 1.

The incomplete state of the relief carving, even in the offering chamber, provides another opportunity to consider the role of a program's visual qualities. The upper sections of all four walls were carefully and beautifully carved, but the lower sections are incomplete, only painted in many areas (with the exception of the large false door occupying most of the west wall). The antechamber has a niche on its south wall, but no indications of decoration. The long corridor walls were not carved, but Mariette described traces of preparatory drawings depicting sailing boats. Simpson identifies the likely reason for the state of the carving in the offering chamber as the practical result of artists working from the top to bottom of the walls, work that was interrupted by the unexpected death of the tomb owner. The stark contrast between the finely carved relief and the hastily painted images below alludes to the issue of the style of elite tomb programs. If the subject matter of the images represented the priority of the tomb owner's interest in his program, one imagines he could have had the program executed in quickly carved relief, in order to assure its completion, and then perhaps had sections more finely carved if time allowed. Yet, as this and other programs illustrate, the use of fine, low-raised relief was desirable because a significant aspect of an elite tomb was the *look* of it, the visual proof of an investment of resources and access to well-trained artisans that only a small percentage of the population had. Although among Memphite tomb programs, the relative homogeneity of style suppresses discussion of style's significance, the attention paid to the appearance of individual scenes and programs as a whole indicates the tomb owners' interest in the visual qualities of their programs, beyond the iconography of the images used. The style of a tomb program equally communicates meaning. As described by Baines and Yoffee:

The style...incorporates fundamental values. In the case of Egypt, this fusion of style and values is central to a system of decorum circumscribing and sustaining high-cultural artifacts and activities. The values may often be submerged or tacit, but they are no less powerful for not being expressed in verbal form.²⁸

28 John Baines and Norman Yoffee, "Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia," in *Archaic States*, ed. Gary M. Feinman and Joyce Marcus (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1998), 237.

To expand on the last statement, the style of the tomb program communicates no less powerfully than the iconography of the images. The question of style's communicative power will be investigated in more detail below, in the discussions of the tomb program of Kahep/Tjetji-iker and the tombs at Qubbet el Hawa.

C. Kahep/Tjetji-iker

The third tomb of our selected group, of Kahep/Tjetji-iker, is located in a provincial cemetery in northern Upper Egypt. Interpretations of provincial tomb programs that view provincial monuments as only variously successful efforts to copy Memphite examples tend to suppress the agency of the tomb builders even more so than interpretations of Memphite programs. The contexts in which provincial tomb owners created their monuments differ in important ways from those of Memphite tomb owners, and many additional and distinguishing factors must be considered when interpreting their tomb programs.

When the practice of creating elite tomb monuments expanded to provincial sites during the second half of the Old Kingdom, the highest-level officials of the administration continued to build their tombs near the pyramid complexes of the king they served, thus implying that a Memphite tomb was, in general, of higher status than a provincial tomb. Nonetheless, the provincial elite had much in common with the elite based in Memphis, and thus the monuments they created shared many layers of meaning with the tombs located in Memphite cemeteries. All elite tomb owners took part in the administration of the country (or were part of the royal family), and they all held a high status that separated them from the majority of their fellow Egyptians. In their rarefied and powerful positions, they were collectively invested in the socio-political structure of the country and in the religious ideology, including mortuary ideology, that not only brought reason and structure to their own life experiences, but also validated their elevated positions. In creating their tombs in provincial cemeteries, the provincial elite indicated their knowledge of the socio-political and religious structures of their culture, and they communicated their understanding and valuing of the tradition of tomb building, clearly expressing in the maintenance of this tradition their desire to be associated with the other elite members of their society.

Despite the strong links between the contexts in which the provincial elite and the Memphite elite created their tombs, important differences existed as well. From the beginning of the Old Kingdom in the 3rd Dynasty, a salient aspect of an elite burial was the location of the tomb with respect to the funerary monument of the king. Although the specific physical relationship between elite tomb and royal monument changed over the course of the Old Kingdom, from a general proximity to the king's pyramid and other elite tombs during the 3rd and early 4th Dynasties, to the carefully determined locations allotted during the reign of Khufu, to the more widely distributed monuments of the later 5th and 6th Dynasties, in all cases an elite tomb occupied space in a cemetery defined by the ascendant presence of a royal pyramid. The physical relationship between elite monument and royal tomb had important implications with regard to the ideology of the funerary monument, as it reflected materially a relationship shared by the tomb owner and king in life, that both hoped to continue in the next world – the tomb owner providing service and support to the king, and the king assisting the tomb owner in his successful progress to the next world. Elite Egyptians building tombs in provincial cemeteries lost this feature of their monument, yet the ideology concerning the importance of the relationship between elite tomb owners and the king surely remained.

In the first part of the Old Kingdom, the boundaries of the Memphite cemeteries had united the elite community. With the movement to provincial cemeteries, the provincial elite became disconnected, not only from the king and the traditions of elite burial, but from each other, grouped in much smaller cemeteries in sites throughout the Nile Valley and the Delta. In their local cemeteries, as they left behind some traditions long associated with elite burial, they also actively created new traditions, establishing cemeteries in new areas of the landscape not previously used for elite monuments. As generations passed and provincial cemeteries lost their novelty, the impact of their existence remained: the tradition of elite burial was now enacted in a wider arena, which unavoidably influenced the meaning of building any elite tomb, whether in a provincial or Memphite cemetery.

The creation of provincial tombs altered, most likely intensifying, the relationship between the pro-

vincial elite and their local communities. The local community inhabited by the elite always would have played an important role in the development of agency and identity, as an individual's learning of and response to structural conditions occurred mainly where he or she lived – where he grew up, learned the language, practiced religion, fulfilled professional responsibilities and played a part in the community. The establishment of elite cemeteries near the provincial towns transformed the landscape inhabited by the elite and non-elite alike, and the now locally conducted funerary cults would have affected the organization and functioning of local economic and social structures. With the loss of the traditional and stabilizing elements of burial in Memphite cemeteries, together with these new, locally-based transformations, the provincial elite likely would have felt tied more closely to their local community, including to each other, as crucial sources of stability and tradition. On this basis, the interpretation of provincial tomb programs is well served by examining the relationships among programs in the same cemetery, all of which were created by elite tomb owners who shared many more points of similarity in their social situation than they did with the elite in other cemetery sites, including Giza and Saqqara.

The tomb of Kahep/Tjetji-iker is located in the provincial cemetery at Hawawish, the primary burial site for the elite of the ancient town of Akhmim. Hawawish is a large cemetery of rock-cut tombs cut into a dramatic rise of the escarpment on the east bank of the Nile. Naguib Kanawati, who excavated the site over 10 years, dates the earliest decorated tombs to the middle of the 5th Dynasty; thus when Kahep constructed his tomb (or when his son finished constructing his tomb) during the reign of Pepy II, the cemetery was well established.²⁹

One of the most distinctive aspects of the program in Kahep's tomb is the image and inscription of the artist Seni on the south wall, part of the focal scene of the tomb owner fishing in the marshes (KH.Abb.3). Seni's figure stands behind Kahep, just under Kahep's hand, which holds the end of the fishing spear. Seni's inscription, organized in three columns and framed, is larger than the figure of Seni

²⁹ Naguib Kanawati, *The rock tombs of el Hawawish, the cemetery of Akhmim*. vol. 1 (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1990-), 13-14.

himself, and it fills a prominent space behind the tomb owner. In the inscription Seni is identified as the “*sh3 kdw*”, and he states that he painted not only this tomb, but also the nearby tomb of Kheni, and that he conducted this work alone.³⁰ Kanawati identifies Kheni as the eldest son of Kahep, and further notes that the fragmentary inscription on the façade of Kahep’s tomb strongly implies that Kheni built, or at least finished, this tomb for his father Kahep. The same Seni, along with his brother Izzi, appears in Kheni’s program in a very similar position behind the tomb owner fishing in the marshes.

Artists, both painters and sculptors, appear not infrequently in tomb programs both in the capital and in other provinces, identified with their names and titles. Yet in most cases, the artists appear as do other retainers or other officials who provide service to the tomb owner, being present in scenes of “daily life” or in rows of identified offering figures. A number of examples show artists at work, in scenes depicting the creation of funerary goods, including statues of the tomb owner.³¹ Even when identified artists are incorporated into these types of scenes, however, the artist is not linked to a specific work of art; no examples show an artist carving or painting a tomb program. These images of artists do not function as “signatures” in the way that Seni’s inscription does. Seni has depicted himself not in the act of creating art, i.e. in the service of Kahep or Kheni, rather, he has attached his image and name to the work of art itself (the program), in distinct contrast to the anonymity typical of Egyptian art works.³²

30 Ibid., 19. “*zš kdw Šni dd.fink zš is n h3ty-^c Hni ink gr zš is pn w^c.k(wi)*”

31 For a general discussion relevant to the depictions of artists at work in Old Kingdom tomb programs, see Marianne Eaton-Krauss, *The representations of statuary in private tombs of the Old Kingdom*, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 39 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984). For a more interpretive discussion of artists depicted in a provincial tomb, see David 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*. vol. 2., ed. Peter Der Manuelian, Rita E. Freed (Boston: Department of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art. Museum of Fine Arts, 1996), 621-633.

32 For further discussions of artists in the Old Kingdom, see O’Connor, op. cit., William Stevenson Smith, *A history of Egyptian painting and sculpture in the Old Kingdom* (London: Oxford university Press, 1946), and John A. Wilson, “The Artist of the Egyptian Old Kingdom,” *JNES* 6/4 (1947): 231-249.

A second distinctive and clearly related aspect of Kahep’s program is its style, especially the use of color. When depicting groups of subsidiary figures, such as in the scenes of fishing with nets, the figures carrying the palanquin, and the bull-fight and funerary procession scenes, Seni favored painting adjacent figures in alternating colors, using both a red-brown, typical for male figures, and yellow, which is typically reserved for female figures. In most examples of the yellow male figures, he appears to have added some small areas of red as well, in order perhaps to differentiate the male yellow figures from female figures. In one instance, on the north section of the west wall, in the scene of raft-making and fighting boatmen, he experimented with another color closer to a grey-brown, which he used also in the tomb program of Kheni.

As Kanawati notes, only sections of Kahep’s program display this unusual coloring system; the entire east wall, including scenes of butchery and many offering figures, comprises male figures painted with the same red-brown skin color. Most of the small figures sailing the boats on the south wall share the same red-brown color, with the notable exception of the two small figures on the prow of the rear boat (KH.Abb.3). These small figures are located just below two larger, titled figures who stand on their own register above. In this pair, the front figure is red-brown and the second figure is yellow; the small figures on the boat below mimic this color scheme but in reverse, balancing out the alternating colors above. In addition, in the top register of the north section of the west wall, the fighting boatmen all have red-brown skin (in contrast to the boatmen on the lower registers), as do both Seni and his brother Izzi, standing behind Kahep on the south wall. In contrast to this inconsistent use of color in Kahep’s program, in Kheni’s program all the scenes (that have survived) use the technique of alternating color, although in this case Seni avoids the complication of painting male figures yellow by relying on a darker grey-brown to alternate with the standard red-brown.

The artist did not restrict the technique of alternating color to the skin of subsidiary figures. Seni’s exploitation of the visual possibilities of this method is well illustrated by the pairs of female estates depicted in Kheni’s tomb. Here he uses a wider range of colors and details in the clothing of the women, alternating light and dark colors both for the dresses of

adjacent figures as well as for the unique low-slung belts contrasting with the color of the long halter dresses. A similar, although more subdued, pattern appears on the south wall of Kahep's program, where Seni gives the central female figure in the group of three, behind the image of Kahep, a dark dress to contrast the more common light-colored dresses of the women who flank her. Alternating colors appear in other details of Kahep's program: the oxen in the butchery scene and the bulls head-to-head on the south part of the west wall have alternating colors of spots, and in the scene on the north section of the west wall that includes three registers of men on rafts, two rafts to a register, in each pair one raft is yellow and the other is green.

Other elements of the program, beyond color, seem to reflect the artist's style as well. In several scenes, Seni uses paired figures or alternates between two small, grouped images, for example, in a register showing the relatively common scene of goats feeding from trees (KH.Abb.4). Seni uses two images, one with two goats flanking a tree, their front legs raised to the branches; the other, two goats in a similar raised posture but head to head, rather than around a tree. He pairs these two images and places one group at the front and one group at the back of the register. On the west part of the north wall, the register of musicians and dancers also uses pairs – two girls with long braids bending backwards, two men face to face grasping hands, two women with arms raised (KH.Abb.5). The use of pairs and alternating groups has a visual effect similar to that of alternating colors, creating a kind of visual rhythm in a scene. These examples illustrate the way in which an artist's aesthetic concerns can impact the subject matter of the images, in terms of how details are composed and arranged.

A comparison of the two programs claimed by Seni, of Kahep and of Kheni, reveals many similarities, which could be interpreted as resulting from the artist's role in their creation. The two programs have many scenes in common, and many are located in the corresponding parts of the chapel. Although the tomb owners surely had a say in which scenes should be used, Seni's inscription and distinctive painting style implies he may have had some influence on these choices as well.

Seni and the tomb owners would have drawn upon some of the same contextual aspects in making

the decisions about the program's contents, taking into account, for example, what was traditional for programs at this time, and what they were familiar with based upon what other tomb owners in their cemetery and in the broader region used. An example of this kind of contextual influence may be present in the scene depicting Kahep fishing in the marshes, and in the similar version in Kheni's program. In the tomb of Hem-Min, the largest tomb in the cemetery and one of the earliest, the program contains a large painting of the tomb owner fishing in the marshes, without the common complement of the tomb owner fowling as well.³³ It is reasonable to suppose that this similar scene in Kahep and Kheni's programs was inspired by this early and visually dramatic example, whether the choice was the tomb owner's specifically, the artist's, or a combination of both. In either case, the use of this scene in Kahep's chapel likely communicates as much about the tomb owner's connection to his local community and local cemetery as it does about the specific iconographic value of the scene.

The artistry of Kahep's program illustrates even more dramatically than does Kayemnofret's the potential of a program's appearance to communicate meaning separate from the iconography of the scenes (as discussed in section 1). Most likely Seni's use of color in Kahep's program was driven primarily by aesthetic concerns, rather than a desire to express meaning linked to certain colors, yet the visually distinctive technique gives the program, as Seni's work, a unique and identifiable character that is linked to Seni via the prominent inscription claiming credit. As noted above, other elite tomb programs included figures of identified artists, and the role of these artists in the creation of the programs may be inferred, but in no case is that relationship made explicit in the same manner as in Kahep's (and Kheni's) program. The unusual nature of both the style and the inscription are significant aspects of Kahep's program, which deserve consideration in its interpretation.

Because the use of a distinctive style and an artist's "signature" in a tomb program (or any work of art) deviates from Egyptian tradition, and because the tradition was, during this period, largely defi-

³³Naguib Kanawati, *The rock tombs of el Hawawish, the cemetery of Akhmim*. vol. 5 (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1990-), fig. 6.

ned by the monuments of the Memphite cemeteries, the presence of these unusual aspects in a provincial tomb suggests that the separation from Memphis influenced what these provincial tomb owners deemed appropriate (or even what was an option) for their programs. The apparent sense of freedom that Kahep and Kheni felt with regard to the use of a distinctive style in their programs corresponds generally to the overall variability of Old Kingdom tomb owners' adherence to set models or forms, as discussed above. Yet, among Memphite tombs, the style of relief shows more consistency than other aspects of the chapel and program (such as layout, choice of scenes, details of images, etc.). The heavy weight of tradition in the Memphite cemeteries may have effected closer adherence by the tomb owners to the community's shared style (as discussed above re: the program of Kayemnofret), while the provincial elite, creating tombs in smaller cemeteries with significantly fewer "models" and relieved from immediate comparison to Memphite tombs, could follow the distant Memphite models less rigorously, signifying "elite tomb" with fewer exact details.

Although the locational circumstances of Kahep and Kheni's tombs may have facilitated the use of a distinctive style and artist's signature, the presence of these elements necessarily indicates specific choices on the part of the tomb owners, made to communicate meaning they felt was valuable. Within the tradition of elite programs, the inclusion of named figures indicates a personal relationship between the tomb owner and the depicted individual; thus Seni's prominent position in Kahep's (and Kheni's) program naturally suggests an important relationship between them. It is likely that throughout Egypt, including especially Memphis, individual artists were known for their abilities or even particular details of style and were employed on that basis, and that both the patron and the artist viewed the resulting relationship as important. In Memphis, once again, custom may have suppressed an individual tomb owner's ability or even desire to express the nature of the relationship, while in a provincial tomb, which was unavoidably disconnected from Memphite tradition, deviation from the norm would have been more acceptable.

In Memphite tombs, an image of an artist could be incorporated into the program, but a depiction of the artist as a worker or offering figure maintained

the status relationship between the (higher status) tomb owner and (lower status) artist, by presenting the artist with respect to the tomb owner, giving him no real identity beyond that. Seni's inscription and individual style identify him with respect not only to the tomb owner but also to the tomb program, revealing his abilities and accomplishments. Furthermore, an artist's signature emphasizes the creation of the program and thus its aspect as an object made by people, which distracts from its purely functional purpose as a finished monument. By the 6th Dynasty, the creation of tombs and tomb programs was no doubt an established industry in Memphis, and an elite tomb owner's participation in this industry may have been simply one aspect of the overall process of creating his tomb. In the provinces, the process of creating a tomb may have been more personal. With smaller groups of artists to draw upon and less established systems of construction in place, the creation of an elite tomb may have required a more active and personal investment of time and effort on the part of the tomb owner. The tomb owner's access to, or even patronage of, an artist may therefore have had more significance, especially with respect to his identity as it related to his status and position in his local community, than in the capital.

If Seni was a Memphite-based artist, his prominent position in Kahep and Kheni's programs may have been inspired by their desire to suggest their parity with Memphite-based elite officials, who also utilized his services. Yet the overt expression of this access via Seni's inscription nonetheless reveals Kahep and Kheni's inherent sense of difference from those Memphite officials, who did not (or could not) express their access to this artist as something special and worth indicating in their tomb program. Alternately, Seni could have been a local artist, based in Akhmim or the nearby area.³⁴ Provincial officials like Kheni and Kahep may have sought to establish relationships with certain artists, especially ones perceived to be the "best", following the model of the king, who surely had the best artists in Memphis working for him. Kahep, or Kheni or both, may have seen his connection to this artist, Seni, as such an important indicator of high status and identity as to be an

34 Kanawati discusses the possibility that Seni and his brother Izzi appear in other provincial tombs, at Deir el-Gebrawi and possibly Meir. Kanawati, *The rock tombs of el Hawawish*, vol. 2, 13-14.

essential element of his (their) tomb program. In either case, the inclusion of Seni's inscription in Kahep's program reveals the tomb owner's (or son's) sense of the difference between a provincial context and a Memphite one, including his options for expressing certain issues in his program.

In some ways, the distinctive style acts as a secondary signature of Seni, thus it can be interpreted as communicating much of the same meaning that Seni's image and inscription does. Yet, because distinctive styles are unusual among Old Kingdom tombs, it implies additional factors at work. The development of special styles does occur in Egyptian history, but typically these identifiable styles are associated with rulers; for example, the "Pre-Theban" style of the early 11th Dynasty, and the Amarna style of Akhenaten. As discussed in section one, New Kingdom Theban tomb owners utilized identifiable styles to indicate their social and professional association. Thus it is possible that Kahep and Kheni encouraged Seni to develop his individual style (and from Kahep's program to Kheni's, the style appears to evolve), in order for them to associate themselves with the artist and the style as an expression of their status and patronage. It is also possible that artistic accomplishment had special meaning to the local community. Perhaps Akhmim was an important artistic center for Upper Egypt during the 6th Dynasty, and part of the local community's identity was linked to artistic production. The titles of Kahep and Kheni provide no indication of a role in such production, and any investigation of this hypothesis would require more extensive examination of other tombs in the area, and objects recovered from the area and from the town.

D. Qubbet el Hawa

A provincial site for which there is more information about the character of the town, including the specific responsibilities of the tomb owners, is Elephantine, modern Aswan, at the southern border of Egypt. The elite cemetery associated with Elephantine, at Qubbet el Hawa, consists of rock-cut tombs that show, like the tombs at Hawawish, formal deviation from Memphite models.³⁵ As at Hawawish, Qub-

35 The cemetery at Qubbet el Hawa was excavated by Professor Elmar Edel and teams from the Bonner Ägyptologische Institut over many years. Professor Edel published his studies of the pottery inscriptions from these excavations (see

bet el Hawa's distance from the Memphite cemeteries and disconnection from surrounding elite tomb models affected the development of the elite tomb programs. And, as in Kahep and Kheni's tomb programs, this development included the use of distinctive styles, in a manner that suggests (even more strongly than at Hawawish) that the tomb owners viewed the use of unusual styles as a valuable mode of expressing their status and identity. At Qubbet el Hawa, however, the use of unusual styles is only one aspect of an overall system of tomb embellishment that is considerably different from Memphite and most other provincial models.³⁶

The examination of a single Qubbet el Hawa tomb program might suggest an individual aberration resulting from circumstances beyond the direct control of the tomb owner, but as a group, the Old Kingdom programs demonstrate a formal consistency that clearly indicates the shared use among the local tomb owners of a unique program system. The three characteristic elements of this local program system are 1) the use of small, independent areas of images and texts, ("panels"), rather than fully covered walls; 2) the use of diverse styles, including several distinctly non-Memphite styles, in the programs of individual tombs, and 3) the thematic focus of the programs on identified offering figures, with a near total absence of the active, "daily-life" and other scene types typical in 6th Dynasty elite tomb programs. Due to the limitations of this essay, I will provide here only a brief summary of these characteristics of the programs and their possible implications, based upon my previous analysis of 12 programs from the cemetery.

In contrast to the widespread standard of program design that covered chapel walls with registers of relief or painting, in the tombs at Qubbet el Hawa the programs were composed of independent sce-

nt. 37). The remainder of the excavation materials will soon be published by Dr. Karl-Joachim Seyfried. Dr. Seyfried has discussed some aspects of the Qubbet el Hawa programs in an article: "Dienstpflicht mit Selbstversorgung: die Diener des Verstorbenen im Alten Reich," in *Grab und Totenkult im alten Ägypten*, ed. by Heike Guksch, Eva Hoffmann, Martin Bommas (Munich:Beck, 2003).

36 The following discussion is a summary of sections of my dissertation analyzing 12 Old Kingdom tomb programs in the cemetery at Qubbet el Hawa: "Locality and Community in Old Kingdom Provincial Tombs: the Cemetery at Qubbet el Hawa," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2006.

nes or figures carved or painted onto a section of a wall or pillar. The workmen dressed the walls and pillars to create relatively flat surfaces that remained rough, and the great percentage of these surfaces were left in this state. Only the area intended to receive an image was finished to a smooth surface, and the prepared area was filled with the scene. The result is a program consisting of a series of "panels", separate and independent scenes distributed within the tomb and surrounded by the rough, untreated surface of the wall. This panel system allowed the owners and artisans to locate the images and texts only in well-lit areas of the tombs – only two panels in the 12 programs were located in dark areas of a chapel. The location of the panels in brightly-lit areas, facing the entrance, and at eye-level all indicate that visibility to a living audience was a primary concern in the design and distribution of the programs. The use of panels for the programs also worked well with the thematic content of identified offering figures arranged in groups.

The Qubbet el Hawa programs incorporate 11 distinct styles of relief carving and one purely painted style, and many of these styles differ dramatically from typical Memphite styles. Often, such unusual styles are interpreted as the product of relatively unskilled artists who have little or no training, struggling to create images without any Memphite-style models to follow, but these criteria do not apply to the Qubbet el Hawa programs. Many Memphite-style images appear among the programs, and evidence of the training of artisans is clear, as is evidence of skill; some of the most visually unusual styles also appear to reveal some of the highest levels of relief-carving skill. In particular, two large-scale images of the tomb owner Pepynakht Heqaib (QH35d) have an unconventional design, but also clearly reveal the artist's exceptional skill in stone-carving. The evidence (including nearby images carved in a very Memphite-like style) strongly suggests that Pepynakht Heqaib was, at a minimum, comfortable with the peculiar and original form; most likely, he encouraged it.

As previously noted, in some instances in the history of Egypt, identifiable styles of art were linked to specific individuals or groups. At Qubbet el Hawa, set relationships between a style and a specific person or group do not fully explain the overall use of the various styles, as the identity or status of a depic-

ted figure did not seem to determine the style used for his image, and most of the tomb owners used several different styles in their programs; thus, there is no overall, systematic relationship between a style and a tomb owner or a group of tomb owners. In the later phases of the cemetery, however, it appears that certain tomb owners did develop (or have developed for them) unique styles that were largely limited to their programs. In general, it appears that over the history of the cemetery, new styles were added to the repertory available to tomb owners while older styles were maintained, and the use of several styles in the program of a single tomb became a goal in itself. Assuming that different styles were the products of different groups of artists, it may have been appropriate, even desirable, for a tomb owner to show his support or patronage of several different groups of artists. This interpretation follows a pattern related to that indicated by the content of the programs, which appears to be connected to the depiction of personal and economic relationships between the elite tomb owners and other members of their community.

The third distinctive element of the Qubbet el Hawa programs is the thematic focus on identified offering figures. Large-scale figures of the tomb owners and their families anchor the programs, and a handful of panels depict other types of scenes: among the 12 programs there are three fishing and fowling panels, two "bull-fighting" panels, and a partial agricultural scene.³⁷ Beyond these few exceptions, the programs comprise panels depicting offering figures, usually shown in groups, most of which are families, and nearly all of the figures are identified with their names and titles. Anonymous figures typical in most elite programs are almost entirely absent from these programs. Most of the figures have titles connected to the *ka*-cult of the owner of the tomb in which they appear, and almost all of the figures are depicted making offerings to the tomb owner's cult. This specific reference to individual

37 One tomb, of Khunes (QH34h) has two walls covered with relief of a more Memphite style. One of the "fishing and fowling" scenes and one of the "bull-fighting" scenes noted here are from this tomb. In addition, the south wall has a variety of other "daily-life" type scenes such as bird-catching, beer and bread-making, and sailing ships. This tomb provides this only exception to the cemetery's pattern, and the tomb program was later adapted to the local system.

identity in the context of support for the *ka*-cults is also found in the unique local tradition of offering pottery inscribed with the offerer's name, as discussed by Professor Edel.³⁸ Visually, these subsidiary figures share a similar status, being depicted all at roughly the same scale, and the tomb owners and their family members form a visually distinct group depicted at a larger scale. This visual impression mirrors the structure of a provincial community; thus, the tomb programs essentially reproduce the community of which the tomb owners were a part and in which they held a leadership role during the lifetimes and also after their deaths. The emphasis on this specific community (and the removal of anonymous figures or references to Egyptians more generally) suggests that these tomb owners felt their role as leaders in the local community and their relationships with a wide range of people within that community were integral parts of their identity. While all provincial elite presumably functioned in a similar role in their local communities, no other elite tomb owners emphasized this role to the same extent in their tomb programs. This emphasis on this particular aspect of their identities is unique to the tomb owners at Qubbet el Hawa.

Apparently these elite tomb owners at Elephantine felt they had some flexibility in shaping the programs used in their tomb chapels, despite the ubiquity of the standard elite tomb program model. Elephantine's distance from the capital cemeteries may have contributed to this sense of flexibility, as the Qubbet el Hawa tombs were not surrounded by examples of standard models that would define them as "wrong"; in fact, following the first elite tomb that was cut into the cliff, each subsequent Qubbet el Hawa tomb program connected to a tradition, albeit new, rather than existing as disconnected and different. Their sense of flexibility does not necessarily imply, however, that all elite tomb owners throughout the country had this same sense of freedom with regard to their tomb programs. The fact that most other provincial elite used

more typical tomb programs in their chapels indicates that simply being away from the Memphite cemeteries was not cause enough for transforming the type of program. Yet just because distance (and disconnection) did not result in change in one provincial site does not mean that the same reality of distance (and disconnection) could not have effected change in another provincial site. All of the tombs were created by knowledgeable and aware people who experienced their world in independent and varying ways.

The impetus for the development of these unique programs may be sought in the nature and context of the local community. Due to Elephantine's proximity to Nubia, during the Old Kingdom it became Egypt's base for trade with and expeditions into Nubia, and by the 6th Dynasty the local elite were largely occupied with these activities, which had become keen interests of the king. The valuable function of the local town combined with the relatively limited local agriculture created a unique set of circumstances in which the local citizens, elite and non-elite alike, lived and worked. The titles and autobiographies of the Qubbet el Hawa tomb owners describe their experiences, which clearly distinguished them from the rest of the elite (and non-elite) in Egypt during this time.

Given the important role of Elephantine, it is reasonable to hypothesize that many of the local citizens were involved in the trade and expedition industries that concerned their local leaders, and thus they came into contact with Nubian people on a regular basis. The presence of Nubian material culture in the region provides the most visible evidence of Elephantine's location in a "zone of contact" between Egypt and Nubia.³⁹ This evidence also intimates the possible presence of Nubian people in the region, perhaps including local settlements of the "Egyptianized Nubians/*i'3w*" for whom the local elite were responsible. These factors combined with Elephantine's location only miles from the Nubian people who reoccupied Lower Nubia in the later Old Kingdom meant that even those citizens not directly involved in expedition or trade lived with the reality of the Nubian people in a way Egyptians living

38 Elmar Edel, *Die Felsengräber der Qubbet el Hawa bei Assuan*, 2. Abt.: Die althieratischen Topfaufrschriften. 1. Bd. Die Topfaufrschriften aus den Grabungsjahren 1960-1963 und 1965. 1. Teil: Zeichnungen und hieroglyphische Umschriften (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), 2. Teil: Text (1970), 2. Bd. Die Topfaufrschriften aus den Grabungsjahren 1968-1970 (1971).

39 Stephen Seidlmayer, "Town and State in the Early Old Kingdom: A View from Elephantine," in *Aspects of Early Egypt*, ed. Jeffrey Spencer (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 109.

hundreds of miles to the north did not. The “Egyptian-ness” of the Elephantine citizens existed in opposition to a real set of alternate cultural traditions that may have been more abstract in much of the rest of the country. Based upon their unusual cultural environment, their local industries, their distance from the capital, and their proximity to the Nubian “others”, the people of Elephantine inhabited an environment in which they likely bonded closely to each other, via their sense of commonality and shared experience.

Within this environment, the owners of the elite tombs at Qubbet el Hawa held important leadership roles. Elite forms of material culture, including tomb programs, helped connect local communities to the overall “Egyptian” cultural identity, and provincial cemeteries like the one at Qubbet el Hawa offered an important opportunity to create and display elite culture. We can perceive that the provincial leadership role held by the Elephantine elite was similar to that held by other provincial elite; yet, at Elephantine the significance of being a local leader seems to have been different. The difference may have emerged in part from the role of the local elite as expedition leaders, probably taking with them into Nubia many members of the Elephantine community. A professional relationship between expedition leader and member of the expedition team may have been more intense than one based in agriculture, being more akin to the military in organization and function. In contrast to the agricultural work taking place within the stable Egyptian social and political context, the work of the expedition occurred in a less stable, less familiar context not controlled by the Egyptians. As such, they may have relied on each other not only to do their jobs effectively but to be allies in an environment dominated by foreigners. In a similar vein, at home the potentially destabilizing or even threatening presence of the nearby Nubians could have given the elite of Elephantine not only an economic leadership role but one related to security and safety as well, that certainly would be less essential at provincial sites deeper within the Egyptian interior.

These many circumstances created the unique Elephantine environment from which the unique Qubbet el Hawa programs emerged. In images and texts, they depicted a specific community of people who were closely connected to each other in relationships of mutual support. The growing use of diver-

se styles may have signified what the content of the programs reflected: the tomb owners’ patronage of many different, identifiable members of their local community. Within the framework of their cultural and social structure, the local elite and artisans expressed in their unique tomb programs at Qubbet el Hawa their particular and distinctive experiences in Elephantine during the concluding generations of the Old Kingdom.

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