

Loaves, Beds, Plants and Osiris

Considerations about the emergence
of the Cult of Osiris

Leo Roeten



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78491-966-5

ISBN 978-1-78491-967-2 (e-Pdf)

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..... but that the dread of something after death,
the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns.....

(W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 1)

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Printed in England by Oxuniprint, Oxford

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For Marga, as always

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Introduction

I. The tomb

The main and completely prosaic purpose of a tomb has always been to get rid of the decomposable remains of a deceased human being. The oldest tombs that have been found are oval pit-graves of small dimensions situated in the desert for the burial of the deceased, whether rich or poor.¹ In most cases the deceased was lying in a foetal posture, which might be interpreted as proof of a belief in rebirth,² but, more prosaic, it can also be seen as proof of the fact that it was desirable to bury a person with the least possible investment of labour. It is the presence in the grave of gifts for the deceased that leads to the conclusion that ideas of life after death were present. During the development of the Badari and Nagada culture this type of grave was replaced by a rectangular pit, while in the richer tombs the sides of the pit were strengthened with a kind of supporting wall made of branches or mud thus breaking the contact between the body of the deceased and the desert sand.

Whatever its form, the elite tomb has also been a multifunctional monument:³

- It marked the place where a deceased person had been buried.
- It enabled the deceased to remain part of the society in which he/she once lived, because, in order to continue living after death, it was important that the body of the deceased could be secured, and although titles were

I would like to thank Mr. D. Sexton (London) for going over my English; of course remaining errors are my own responsibility.

¹ Reisner, *Tomb development*, 1 states that the pit graves of the poor were oval while the pit graves of the richer tended to be somewhat rectangular. Tamorri, *Predynastic corpses*, 203.

² Hays, *Democratisation*, 130, states that the foetal posture indicates a belief in the rebirth in an afterlife.

³ LÄ, II, 827-37, s.v. 'Grab'.

important, it was also of the utmost concern that at least the name of the deceased was remembered.⁴

- It ensured that a place would be present in which the cult for the deceased could be performed.
- If the deceased had done things that he/she considered remarkable, a biography was placed in the vicinity of the chapel (usually on one of the door jambs).
- The monument not only demonstrated the social status and personal wealth of the deceased, but also that of his/her family.
- In the early dynastic period and the earlier part of the Old Kingdom the deceased was thought to live in and around the tomb (the body in the burial chamber and his/her *k3* in the tomb or in its vicinity) and in that way was actually still near the living.⁵ The Nagada III tomb *U-j* at Abydos is possibly an early example of a tomb with a substructure in the form of a palace, and is certainly of royal dimensions. In the inner-walls there are door-like openings that connect all rooms of the substructure (Figure 1).⁶
- The monument enabled contact between the *k3* of the deceased and the living (family, passers-by and persons performing rituals for the

⁴ As early as the 1st dynasty stelae bearing the name and sometimes a (crude) depiction of the tomb owner were placed next to the superstructure of the tomb (Bolshakov, *Double*, 31; Petrie, *Royal tombs I*, Plate XXXI; O'Connor, *Abydos*, Figure 83). In the entrance decoration the tomb owner sometimes asks, in addition to the 'normal' request for offerings given by the king and/or one or more gods (W. Bárta, *Opferformel*), if offerings can be brought to the chapel on specifically mentioned religious feasts. In this way too the deceased could stay part of the society of the living (O'Neill, *Setting scene*, 19, 39), because of the mention of his/her name and titles in the offering formula and because of the presence of people bringing offerings. The continued presence of the body of the deceased was a necessity, but because experience taught that grave robbery was a bitter reality, statues that could replace the body of the deceased in case of loss were placed in a separate part of the tomb (Clark, *Tomb security I and II*). One of the acts of *damnatio memoriae* was to remove the name and the depiction(s) of the deceased from the tomb (examples are the tomb of *hsj* in the Teti Cemetery (Kanawati, *Hesi*), the tomb of *R^c- wr* (El - Fikey, *Re'-wer*, 47) and the tomb of *s^cnḥwy-Pth* (Kanawati, *S'ankhuptah*).

⁵ Kees, *Totenglauben*, 120-1. Bárta, *Journey*, 81. Junker, *Giza II*, 105. LÄ, VI, 759-77, s.v. 'Totenkult, Totenglauben'. The consequence of this was that the substructure of the private tombs of the 2nd dynasty was increasingly constructed as a complex subterranean structure that can be interpreted a facsimile of a house with rooms (Figure 1). The same is true for the two royal tombs of the 2nd dynasty that were constructed in Saqqara. Of the combination deceased / *k3* the latter was the mobile part that could have contact with the world of the living.

⁶ Dreyer, *U-j*, 34-5 states that these are doors that connect the rooms of a palace (although this is rather early in the overall development of this feature leading to the claim that it was introduced in the period II.E). It has also been proposed that these were doors to give the *k3* of the deceased the possibility to roam through the house and reach the adjacent warehouses in order to obtain its sustenance. This argument would mean that apparently in that period the *k3* was supposed to be unable to penetrate walls, while later the *k3* could obtain the essence of the offerings deposited in front of the false door by going through this, for the living, impenetrable passage.

deceased). In the chapel a living person could utter recitations and/or bring offerings, thus sustaining the *k3* of the deceased, because the *k3* could go from the burial chamber to the chapel and take the essence of the offerings.

For this last and extremely important function a specially marked place was created against the southern part of the eastern wall of the monument. Later on this 'meeting' place was protected by a building that could be interpreted as a chapel, but that was probably at first meant to provide some privacy (Figure 7), and later not only to protect the sign that marked the offering place but also the decoration that probably had been placed on the walls of the exterior chapel.⁷

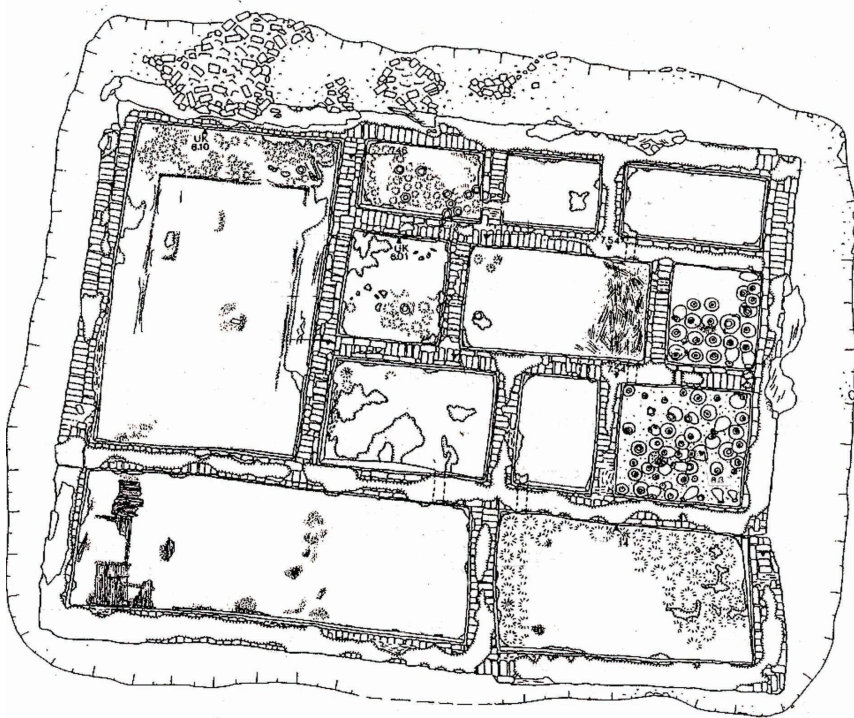


Figure 1. The tomb *U-j* at Abydos (after Dreyer, *U-j*, Figure 4).

⁷ If, in the case of a mastaba tomb, the chapel was constructed outside the body of the tomb, it was normally placed against its eastern wall; an interior chapel in the same type of tomb was constructed with its entrance at the southern end of this wall.

Due to lack of financial means these functions were less present for the tombs of members of the lowest social layers; these individuals were nearly always buried in a pit dug in the sand of the desert with some grave gifts next to them and a small tumulus over the pit (Figure 2).⁸

II. The form of the tombs

The most important features of a tomb are its burial chamber and its offering place, but over the course of time the architecture of the tombs further developed by the addition of new items and/or change in already existing ones.⁹ During the 1st and 2nd dynasty the tombs of the highest social strata resembled each other, understandably not in dimensions, but in architectural design. There was a further development based on the consideration that both royal and non-royal persons lived in the tomb (this enabled the non-royals to be close to the god (= the king). During the 3rd dynasty a dichotomy developed and the king was no longer considered to live in the tomb, while the non-royal persons continued to do so; this led to a change in the cemetery lay-out. The non-royal tombs were built closer to the royal tomb and the cemeteries were laid out in a strictly organised form.¹⁰

Members of the lower social strata of the Egyptian society were buried at first in oval pit graves, and later in rectangular ones which also had, like the oval pit graves, a small tumulus against which in the 2nd dynasty an offering place was constructed. Because these tumuli were prone to disappear due to the wind and the decay of the buried body, members of the richer social strata started to construct increasingly complicated structures not only to prevent that, but also to increase the overall protection of the grave.



Figure 2. Badarian pit grave 7021 (from Brunton, *Badarian*, Plate IX).

⁸ The position of the deceased was most commonly with the head to the south and the face to the west (Brunton, *Badarian*, 18-9).

⁹ Hassan, *Giza V*, 41-5.

¹⁰ Roeten, *Economic decline*, 12-5.

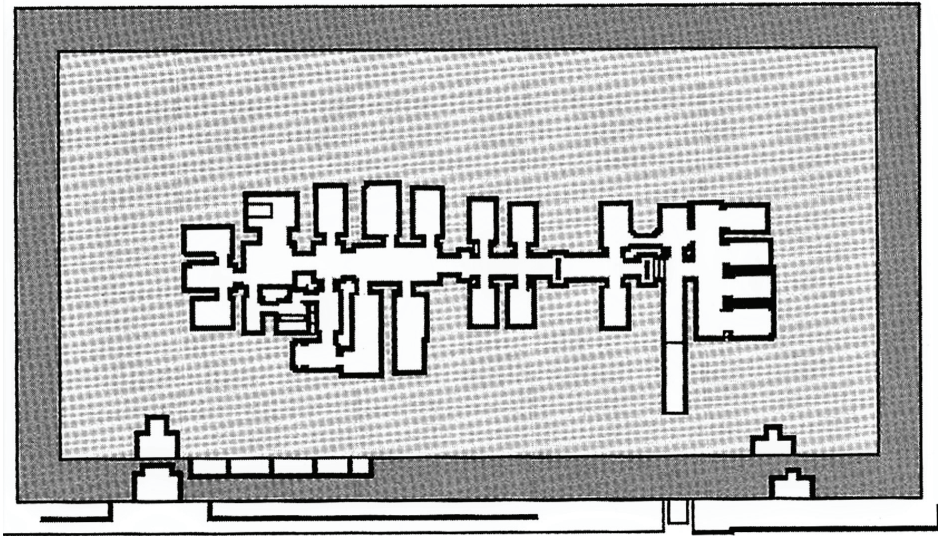


Figure 3. Super- and substructure of tomb S 2302 (*Rw-3b.n*; PM, III/2, 404; II.E, temp. Ninetjer (II.3)).



Figure 4. A cemetery of mastabas (Junker, *Giza I*, Plate IVa).

For the higher social layers there were two basic forms of tombs (elite tombs):

- The mastaba (Figure 4).
- The rock-cut tomb (Figure 5).

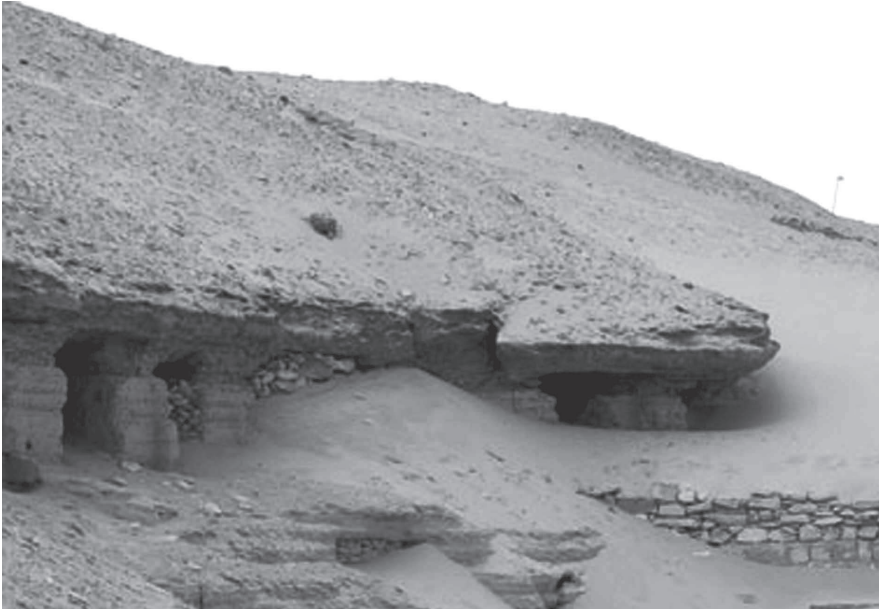


Figure 5. Rock-cut tombs at Saqqara.

A mixture of these two forms was also possible (e.g. the partly mastaba, partly rock-cut tomb of *Nj-ḥnh-ḥnmw* and *ḥnmw-ḥtp* (PM, III/2, 741-4)).

The architecture of both forms of elite tombs can be divided in two main parts, which can be further subdivided. For the mastaba this is:¹¹

- The superstructure → The body of the mastaba.
 - The interior or exterior chapel
 - The jambs and lintel of the entrance.
 - ...The entrance thicknesses.
 - ...The walls of the chapel itself.¹²
- The substructure → The shaft or staircase to the burial chamber (or a mixture of both). The burial chamber, which from the early 2nd dynasty on started to change from a

¹¹ For an overview of the development of the tomb: Reisner, *Giza I*, Reisner, *Tomb development* and Reisner, *History mastabas*.

¹² The walls of some of these chapels bore decoration as early as in pharaonic period (*Hsjj-Ra*, S 2405, early dynasty III, PM, III/2, 437-9 (Quibell, *Hesy*). A second example is mastaba G 7510, early dynasty IV, PM, III/1, 197, East Field of the necropolis of Giza (Reisner, *Giza I*, 308).

simple room often with one or more storerooms next to it to a facsimile of a house (Figure 3).¹³

The architecture of the rock-cut tomb during the Old Kingdom consisted of a chapel cut into a vertical rock wall.¹⁴

Archaeological evidence has been found proving that over the entrance of the rock-cut chapel a (small) monument was constructed, often in the form of a mastaba (over the rock-cut tomb of *Mr.f-nb.f* at Saqqara-west the monument is probably rectangular).¹⁵ The architecture of this type of tomb can be subdivided as follows (see Figure 6):

- A court in front of the (nearly) vertical rock wall (tomb of *Dbḥn* (PM, III/1, 235 – 6); Alexanian, *Social status*, 4 – 5, Figure 6).
- The (interior) chapel → The jambs and lintel of the entrance.
The entrance thicknesses.
The walls of the chapel itself.
- A mastaba over the chapel entrance (which is the case in the funerary complex of *Mr.f-nb.f*, Figure 6).¹⁶
- The substructure → The shaft or staircase (or a mixture of both).
The burial chamber.

Various aspects of funerary architecture altered during the course of the Old Kingdom, but not every modification can be interpreted as the direct result of changing religious ideas about the after-life. There are changes that might have been provoked by more mundane considerations such as ease of construction, economic acceptability, protection against damage, etc.. Some examples of these changes are:

- During the 1st and 2nd dynasty the external open-air chapel was (nearly always) constructed against the eastern wall of the small mastaba like tombs in the cemeteries of Tarkhan (Figure 7) and Naga-ed-Dêr. In the 3rd dynasty the roofed exterior chapel was introduced, which became

¹³ The feature of a descending staircase with side chambers is already present in the tomb of king Qa'a (I.8) at Abydos (Petrie, *Royal tombs I*, Plate LX, upper).

¹⁴ This rock-wall could be natural like the eastern cliff of the Giza Plateau, or the result of quarrying, like the Khufu-Rakhaef quarry, which was created during the construction of the pyramids of Khufu (IV.2) and Khephren (IV.4) and the rock-wall south of the causeway of Unas (V.9), which was the result of the quarrying of stone for the pyramid of Djoser (III.2).

¹⁵ www.osirisnet.net. Merefnebef (page 1). Jánosi, *Giza 4th dynasty*, 313 – 4 gives some rock-cut chapels that also have a mastaba like structure over the entrance.

¹⁶ Other examples can be found in Simpson, *Gmast 2*, 1; Jánosi, *Giza 4th dynasty*, 313 – 4.

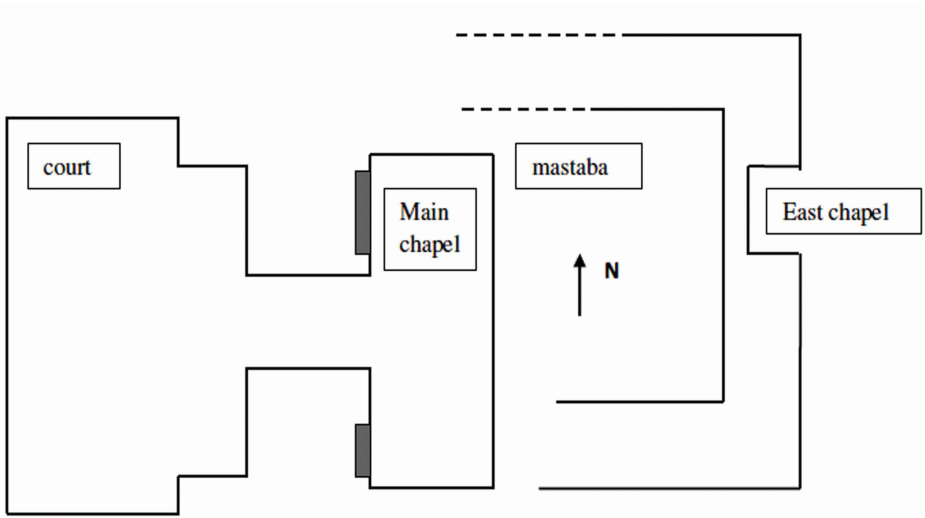


Figure 6. The plan of the rock-cut tomb of *Mr.f-nb.f* (Saqqara, west of the funerary complex of Djoser (III.2); schematically after www.osirisnet.net; the tomb of Merefnebef).

prevalent on the Giza Plateau during the reign of Khufu (IV.2).¹⁷ The construction of the open-air chapel might at first have been caused simply by the wish to have some privacy while performing rites in front of the offering place, but the construction of the roof-covered chapel indicates that probably decoration in need of protection was present on its walls.¹⁸

- In the course of time the grave pits became deeper and were provided with small walls to keep the sand out; eventually burial chambers were dug out in the rock underneath the desert sand.
- Initially the access to the burial chamber in this way was a crude staircase which changed, with a few intermediary forms, into a shaft. This change might have been caused either by a growing need to construct tombs in a more economical way,¹⁹ or by the need to make it more secure against tomb robbers.²⁰

¹⁷ Reisner, *Giza I*, 4.

¹⁸ Reisner, *Tomb development*, 239, 242; *Ibidem* 258 states that during the 1st dynasty the offering place (Reisner's *k3-door*) bore decoration, but, due to the small degree of inclination of the eastern wall of these mastabas, this was shielded by the roof of its niche and needed no further protection. This changed when decoration appeared on the walls of the exterior chapel, thus making the necessity of protection clear. As a consequence the southern offering place was turned into a cruciform chapel with decoration around its entrance.

¹⁹ The staircase to the burial chamber necessitated the preliminary construction of a large open pit while the staircase was being carved.

²⁰ Clark, *Tomb security II*, 312.

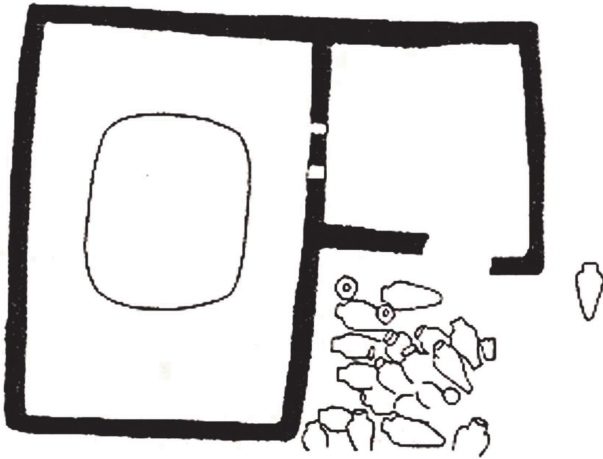


Figure 7. Tarkhan tomb 740 (Petrie, *Tarkhan II*, Plate XIV).

The introduction of the interior chapel can still be interpreted as a product of the desire for better protection of the decoration of the walls and the offering place. On the other hand, the change in certain aspects of the chapel must have been mainly caused by changes in the religious funerary conceptions.²¹

These sort of changes can be seen in:

- The form of the chapel.²²
- The dimensions of the chapel.²³
- The choice of decoration themes on the walls.
- The cultic meaning of the themes on the walls.²⁴

III. The decoration of the tomb

During the Old Kingdom a god was never depicted on the decorated walls of the tomb. Gods were only mentioned in the offering formulas that were written at

²¹ Petrie, *Royal tombs II*, Plate LXII shows the plan of the tomb of Udimu (I.5) which has a subterranean chapel (?) built against the southern end of the eastern wall. The room could also have been a serdab, while the chapel was built against it.

²² Harpur, *DETOK*, tables 5.1 to 5.13 (pages 315 – 22).

²³ A previous study by the author has shown that during the course of the Old Kingdom in the necropolis of Giza the chapels hardly change both in dimensions and in surface, while in the necropolis of Saqqara the width of the chapel increased markedly, due to the introduction of a narrow east/west oriented chapel (Roeten, *Economic decline*, Figure 108 (page 97)).

²⁴ Roeten, *Decoration*.

first on the architrave of the false door and, from period V.M on, also on its door jambs (apart from the king, the gods Anubis, the Great God and later mainly Osiris).²⁵ This offering formula could also be placed over the entrance of the tomb.²⁶

In the course of the Old Kingdom the decoration of the walls of the chapel changed markedly, examples being:

- The introduction of the depiction of agricultural activities on the eastern wall.²⁷
- The introduction of piles of food offerings on the western wall.²⁸
- The introduction of the offering formula on the jambs of the false door.²⁹
- The non-ideographic offering list moves from the panel of the false door to the western wall.³⁰



Figure 8. The entrance of the tomb of *W38-Pth*
(PM, III/1, 273; Hassan, *Giza II*, Plate 4)

²⁵ Roeten, *Decoration*, diagram VIII.14.Ann. (page 405) shows that the offering formula has always been present on the architrave of the false door, and diagram VIII.4.Ann. (page 402) that the formula was placed on the door jambs from V.M on, a development that can be traced back to the change in sustenance of the *k3* of the deceased.

²⁶ The lower register of the architrave of *W38-pth* reads: 'a boon which the king gives and Anubis who presides...' (Hassan, *Giza II*, 10) (Figure 8).

²⁷ Roeten, *Decoration*, diagram XV.12.Ann. (page 419).

²⁸ Roeten, *Decoration*, diagram IV.10.Ann. (page 400).

²⁹ Roeten, *Decoration*, diagram VIII.4.Ann. (page 402).

³⁰ Roeten, *Decoration*, Figure VIII.9b (page 487).

- The disappearance of the depiction of personified estates bringing goods into the chapel and to the western wall with its false door(s).³¹

The conclusion, based on the arguments given above, is that the sustenance of the *k3* of the deceased became more dependant on magic and less on the actual bringing of offerings.

IV. Chronology

The chronology of the Old Kingdom that will be employed in this study is given in Figure 9 and is identical with the chronology used by the author in previous publications.³²

Dynasty	Number	Name	Kings per period	Period
IV	IV.1	Sneferu	IV.1 – IV.3	IV.E
	IV.2	Khufu		
	IV.3	Radjedef		
	IV.4	Rakhaef	IV.4 – IV.6	IV.L
		(Baka)		
	IV.5	Menkaure		
	IV.6	Shepseskaf		
		(Thamphthis)		
V	V.1	Userkaf	V.1 – V.3	V.E
	V.2	Sahure		
	V.3	Neferirkare		
	V.4	Shepseskare	V.4 – V.6	V.M
	V.5	Raneferef		
	V.6	Niuserre		
	V.7	Menkauhor	V.7 – V.9	V.L
	V.8	Djedkare		
	V.9	Unas		
VI	VI.1	Teti	VI.1 – VI.2	VI.E
	VI.2	Pepy I		
	VI.3	Merenre	VI.3 – VI.4E	VI.M
	VI.4	Pepy II		
		VI.4M – VI.4L	VI.L	

Figure 9. The chronology of the Old Kingdom employed in this study.

³¹ Roeten, *Decoration*, diagram IV.7. Ann. (page 399).

³² The names of the kings are written according to Verner, *Chronology*. The dynasty is given in roman numerals, and in the designation of the period the abbreviations E, M and L resp. mean 'Early', 'Middle' and 'Late'.

In this figure the king list given in Harpur's 1987 study has been followed.³³ The extreme length of the reign of Pepy II is difficult to fit into the scheme of dating. Harpur takes 85 years as the total length of the reign,³⁴ and she divides the reign into three periods designated VI.4, VI.5 and VI.7. In Figure 9 this is included as VI.4E, VI.4M and VI.4L.

V. The purpose of this study

In existing studies of the subject has been concluded that the main theme in the chapel is the offering table, a theme that from very early on in the history of Egyptian culture has been placed

- In the chapel
 - On the panel(s) of the false door(s).
 - On the southern wall.
 - On the western wall.
- On the entrance thicknesses until the period V.M.³⁵

An offering table scene on the eastern wall was unusual,³⁶ and so was an offering table scene on the northern wall.³⁷

Small chronological changes can be discerned in the appearance of the offerings table scene, notably:

- The form of the tray on which the offerings were placed.
- The type of offerings that were placed on the table.
- The leg of the offering table
 - The form.
 - The length.
- The number of loaves on the table.
- The form of the loaves
 - The presence /absence of the baking rim.
 - The length of the loaves.
 - The indentation of the loaves.
 - The final form of the loaves (loaves or reed plumes).

³³ Harpur, *DETOK*, 34.

³⁴ LÄ, IV, 927-9, s.v. 'Pepi II' gives 74 years as a corrupted hieratic reading of 94.

³⁵ Roeten, *Decoration*, Diagram XII.4. Ann. (page 407).

³⁶ Roth, *Gmast* 7, Figure 147.

³⁷ Hassan, *Giza V*, Figure 125.

Because certain scholars claim that some of these chronological developments are directly connected to the emergence of the cult of Osiris,³⁸ for each of the changes that might be connected with this introduction the relevant tombs have been gathered into catalogues. If a certain development needs a special methodology, this will be discussed in the chapter or section pertaining to it.

The criteria showing a chronological development are compared and an eventual connection with the emergence of the Osiris cult is discussed. These developments are also used to determine whether the cult emerged over a relatively short period, as some scholars claim, or whether the cult was already from earlier on latently present and thus developed over a longer period of time.

³⁸ Bárta, *Bread moulds*.