

The First Intermediate Period Tombs at Asyut Revisited

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(Pl. 13-14)

„Even in their decay they are grand monuments.“
(V. Stuart, Nile Gleanings concerning the Ethnology,
History and Art of Ancient Egypt as revealed by
Egyptian Paintings and Bas-Reliefs, 1879, 94)

Abstract

Three inscribed rock-cut tombs at Asyut (tombs III-V, belonging to Iti-ibi and two men called Khety) are a main source of information for the history of the First Intermediate Period as well as for the cultural memory of Ancient Egypt. In September 2003, a joint German-Egyptian mission surveyed these tombs in order to prepare the way for future epigraphic and architectural studies there. A first result of this survey was the realization that the existing plans and descriptions of the tombs are incomplete and faulty. Some current opinions concerning the decoration and architecture of the tombs can now be modified.

Three inscribed rock-cut tombs at Asyut (tombs III-V, belonging to *Iti-ib=i* and two men called *Hty*) are a main source of information for the history of the First Intermediate Period, as well as for the cultural memory² of Ancient Egypt.

They are historically important because they contain the autobiographical texts of *Iti-ib=i* and *Hty* (tombs III and IV) that report the great struggle of the Siutian and Herakleopolitan troops against the Theban troops. Asyut, the ancient capital of the 13th Upper Egyptian nome, had great strategic importance both by water and by land, and this may well have been why it was so hotly contested. On the one hand the town was the alpha and the omega of the most difficult Nile passage to the north of the first cataract, because it is situated to the south of the Gebel Abu el-Foda. On the other hand Asyut was the point of departure for a major caravan route, today called Darb al-Arbain („forty days' road“),³ which connected the town with the oasis Kharga as well as with Darfur Province in Sudan.

The cultural importance of these First Intermediate Period Tombs lies in the transmission of their autobiographies and their „addresses to visitors“ („Sicherungsformeln“).⁴ These texts were transferred from a Siutian library to a Theban library sometime during the

¹ We would like to thank Barbara Emmel for her advice regarding English.

² Basic introduction into the cultural memory is J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 1997; cf. id., *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, 2002, 20-21.

³ Cf. M. Asher, *In Search of the 40 Day Road*, 1984; C. Vivian, *The Western Desert of Egypt: an explorer's handbook*, 2000, 343-357. E. Edel, in: O. Firchow (ed.), *Ägyptologische Studien (Fs Grapow)*, VIO 29, 1955, 59-73 considered the possibility that Harkhuef undertook his third expedition from Abydos to Yam on the Darb al-Arbain.

⁴ Cf. K. Jansen-Winkel, in: *SAK* 21, 1994, 107-129.

beginning of the 12th Dynasty and the beginning of the New Kingdom.⁵ From the reign of Psametik I. to the Roman Period, these texts were repeatedly referred to as part of the cultural memory in Thebes and other parts of the country.⁶

Situated in the cliffs of the Western Desert, the architecture and the decoration of the tombs were documented for the first time in 1799 by the French Expedition to Egypt and published in 1817.⁷ This scientific work has provided an invaluable source for the study of these tombs even up to today, especially because the façades and the entrance passages of the tombs were destroyed by quarrying for stone shortly after the visit of the French scholars.⁸ In addition, graffiti were often cut into the surface of the tombs by knife, presumably by visiting tourists. And climatic conditions also did damage to the tombs.⁹ But even in ancient times, damage was begun when the tombs were rearranged as dwellings by Copts.¹⁰

Throughout the 19th century several scholars visited the tombs for short periods of time, made copies of their inscriptions and sometimes even made drawings of the tombs' layout. These scholars included, for example, Charles Barry, Robert Hay, Nestor L'Hôte, John Gardner Wilkinson, Karl Richard Lepsius, Jean Jacques Antoine Ampère, Heinrich Brugsch, Auguste Mariette and Peter Le Page Renouf.¹¹

Furthermore, systematic work was done by Francis Llewellyn Griffith, who copied the inscriptions of the three tombs while drawing on the earlier publications. The final publication of his hand-copies *The Inscriptions of Siût and Der Rifeh*, published in 1889, remains the standard work on these tombs up until now. Another important source are the copies made by hand by Pierre Montet in 1911, which were published in 1930-35.

Since that time, i.e. for more than 90 years now, no major Egyptological work has been carried out on site at these tombs with the exception of short visits made by Diana Magee in 1986 and by Donald Spanel in 1987, who has contributed some palaeographical observations on the tomb inscriptions. However, many scholars dealt with the already existing copies of the inscriptions, using these older copies to better our understanding of them:

⁵ J. Kahl, *Siut – Theben: zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im alten Ägypten*, PÄ 13, 1999, 302-317.

⁶ Excerpts from the Tomb of Djefaihapi I. (Siut I) were already used during Dynasty 18 in Thebes. Cf. Kahl, *op.cit.*, 330-335 and J. Osing, in: J. Osing/G. Rosati (eds.), *Papiri geroglifici e ieratici da Tebtynis*, 1998, 55-100.

⁷ Commission des monuments d'Égypte, *Description de l'Égypte ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française. Tome Quatrième. Antiquités: planches*, 1817, pls. 43-49; *Antiquités – Descriptions*, 1818, 125-157.

⁸ Cf. F.L. Griffith, in: *The Babylonian and Oriental Record*, 3, 1889, 177.

⁹ *Id.*, *ibid.* 177.

¹⁰ For the re-use of the pharaonic necropolis as Coptic dwellings cf. J. Clédat, in: *ASAE* 9, 1908, 213-223; É. Chassinat/Ch. Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d'Assiout*, *MIFAO* 24, 1911, 2-3.

¹¹ Cf. Griffith, *op.cit.*, 248-250 and D. Magee, *Asyut to the end of the Middle Kingdom: a historical and cultural study*, 1988 (microfilmed thesis), 1, 5-6.

these included Hellmut Brunner¹² in 1937, Wolfgang Schenkel¹³ in 1965 and 1978 and Elmar Edel¹⁴ in 1970 and 1984.

Nevertheless, as yet no fully comprehensive basic documentation of these tombs has ever been carried out: no facsimiles have been made, no exact architectural plans have been drawn up and no thorough photographic documentation has yet been undertaken. Moreover, the exact position of the tombs has never been mapped.

After the French Expedition, the tombs began to deteriorate and to lose a great deal of their physical material and make-up. It is this condition, more than anything else, that has contributed to a lack of interest and further study of them. The greater majority of current scholarship on these tombs still refers back to the descriptions of the tombs from Bonaparte's times. The fact that large parts of the tombs still exist without further documentation has either been overlooked or forgotten. These tombs are still in need of a full and complete documentation, and work now begun in this direction is the basis of the report.

In September 2003, a joint German-Egyptian mission, directed by Associated Prof. Dr. Mahmoud El-Khadragy (South Valley University, Faculty of Arts, Sohag) and Hochschuldozent Dr. Jochem Kahl (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster), surveyed the First Intermediate Period tombs for one week in order to prepare the way for future epigraphic and architectural studies there.¹⁵ The tombs, which are situated about two-thirds of the way up to summit of the cliffs, are located at the same level as Tomb II from the 12th Dynasty and another decorated First Intermediate Period or Early Middle Kingdom tomb¹⁶ (fig. 1). They are situated higher in the mountains than Tomb I, the tomb of Djefaihapi I., which has been accessible again for some years now.

A first result of this survey was the realization that the existing plans and descriptions of the tombs are incomplete and faulty. This is not surprising, considering the scientific standard of the birth of Egyptology, that is, the French Expedition. However, it was surprising to realize how rigidly generations of Egyptologists have adhered to this publication. Some current opinions concerning the decoration and architecture of the tombs can now be modified, as will be shown in the following description of remains of the tombs that are still visible today.

¹² H. Brunner, *Die Texte aus den Gräbern der Herakleopolitenzeit von Siut*, ÄF 5, 1937.

¹³ W. Schenkel, *Memphis – Herakleopolis – Theben: die epigraphischen Zeugnisse der 7.-11. Dynastie Ägyptens*, ÄA 12, 1965, 68-89; id., *Die Bewässerungsrevolution im Alten Ägypten*, 1978, 29-35.

¹⁴ E. Edel, *Die Inschriften am Eingang des Grabes des „Tef-ib“ (Siut Grab III) nach der Description de l’Égypte: ein Wiederherstellungsversuch*, AKM 29/1, 1970; id., *Die Inschriften der Grabfronten der Siut-Gräber in Mittelägypten aus der Herakleopolitenzeit*, ARWAW 71, 1984.

¹⁵ The mission was supported by Dr. Eva-Maria Engel, German Institute of Archaeology, Cairo, and Mr. Emad Bostan Ata, Inspector from Asyut, under the supervision of the Director General of Asyut Mr. Mohamed Abd el-Aziz.

¹⁶ This tomb is unpublished. It still has remains of inscriptions and fragmentary painted scenes of soldiers and boys wrestling. The tomb is numbered 13 by Magee, *op.cit.*, II, 36-38, pl. 1.

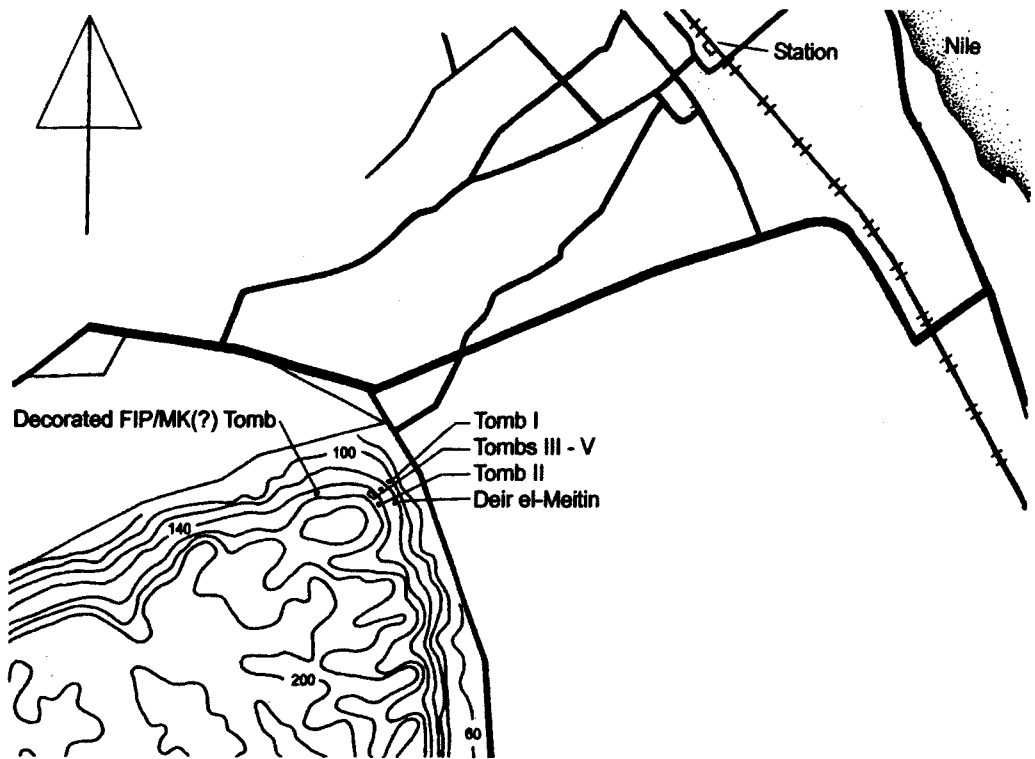


Fig. 1: map of the ancient necropolis and the modern town of Asyut

Tomb III (owner: Tti-ib=t)

Bibliography

Description Ant., IV, pl. 48.9-11, 49.8-9; F. Ll. Griffith, in: The Babylonian and Oriental Record 3, 1889, 122-129; F. Ll. Griffith, The Inscriptions of Siût and Dêr Rîfeh, 1889, 11, Taf. 11-12; P. Montet, in: Kêmi 3, 1930-35, 89-98; PM IV, 1934, 260, 263; H. Brunner, Die Anlagen der ägyptischen Felsgräber bis zum Mittleren Reich, ÄF 3, 1936, 63; id., Die Texte aus den Gräbern der Herakleopolitenzeit von Siut, ÄF 5, 1937, 17-26, 42-51; W. Schenkel, Memphis – Herakleopolis – Theben: die epigraphischen Zeugnisse der 7.-11. Dynastie Ägyptens, ÄA 12, 1965, 74-82; E. Edel, Die Inschriften am Eingang des Grabes des „Tef-ib“ (Siut Grab III) nach der Description de l’Égypte: ein Wiederherstellungsversuch, AKM 29/1, 1970; id., Die Inschriften der Grabfronten der Siut-Gräber in Mittelägypten aus der Herakleopolitenzeit, ARWAW 71, 1984, 20-66; D. Magee, Asyut to the End of the Middle Kingdom: a historical and cultural study, 1988 (microfilmed thesis), II, 14-17; D.B. Spanel, in: Or 58, 1989, 305-306; W.J. de Jong, in: De Ibis 22, no. 4, 1997, 68-74; J. Osing, in: J. Osing/G. Rosati (eds.), Papiri geroglifici e ieratici da Tebtynis, 1998, 67-68, 85-86; J. Kahl, Siut – Theben: zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im alten Ägypten, PÄ 13, 1999, passim.

State of Research before the Survey

Egyptological *opinio communis* was that the hall of the tomb still in existence has two pillars, according to the architectural plan of the Description de l'Égypte. Furthermore, inscriptions and decoration were attested only for a doorway that no longer exists, and for the thicknesses of the entrance as well as for the northern wall of the large hall (including the historical relevant autobiographical inscription).¹⁷ Griffith remarked that the fore part of the hall (i.e. the eastern part) was formerly covered with painted plaster.¹⁸

Results of the Survey

As a result of the work that was undertaken, it became obvious that the large hall of the tomb had once had four pillars and that the walls were once completely or at least nearly completely decorated.¹⁹ The pedestals of two pillars in the entrance part of the hall could be detected. They were covered by a thin layer of sand and have been overlooked by virtually every other visitor to the tomb since the French Expedition. The only exception was the Scottish traveller Robert Hay, who gave a sketch of the four-pillared hall in his unpublished manuscripts.²⁰ However, his observations have gone unremarked by generations of scholars.²¹ The pillars in the rear part of the hall have been destroyed, for the most part (cf. pl. 13).

The walls of the large hall were once covered with plaster and were painted, not only in the entrance part but also at the rear of the hall. Small fragments of this decoration could be traced, including an offering list, among others. There is no reason to suppose that these traces are part of a later decoration, i.e. from a possible re-use of the tomb. Instead, all the parts that could be detected fit in very well with the style of the First Intermediate Period. For example, a painted *hkr*-frieze runs along the walls under the ceiling that is comparable to the incised *hkr*-frieze in Tomb IV.

A preliminary plan now provides a better understanding of the tomb's architecture and decoration (fig. 2):

- (1) A long autobiographical inscription in sunk relief; partly incomplete and covered with plaster on which a second inscription and the representation of the standing tomb owner were painted.²² The well known autobiographical text reports on the military activities of the nomarch *Itt-ib=t* against the Theban aggressors. Before the text was chiselled completely, it was covered with plaster and a politically neutral inscription was painted on it. Today, parts of both inscriptions are visible.

¹⁷ Cf. PM IV, 260, 263 and Magee, *op.cit.*, II, 14-17.

¹⁸ Griffith, *op.cit.*, 127-128.

¹⁹ It remains to be clarified, whether the rear parts of the northern and southern walls were decorated, too.

²⁰ Hay, *manuscripts*, 52008. We would like to thank Wolfgang Schenkel for giving us insight into his copy of the manuscript.

²¹ Cf. recently Magee, *op.cit.*, II, 15, pl. 12.

²² Cf. Griffith, *op.cit.*, 128; Brunner, *Texte aus Siut*, 24.

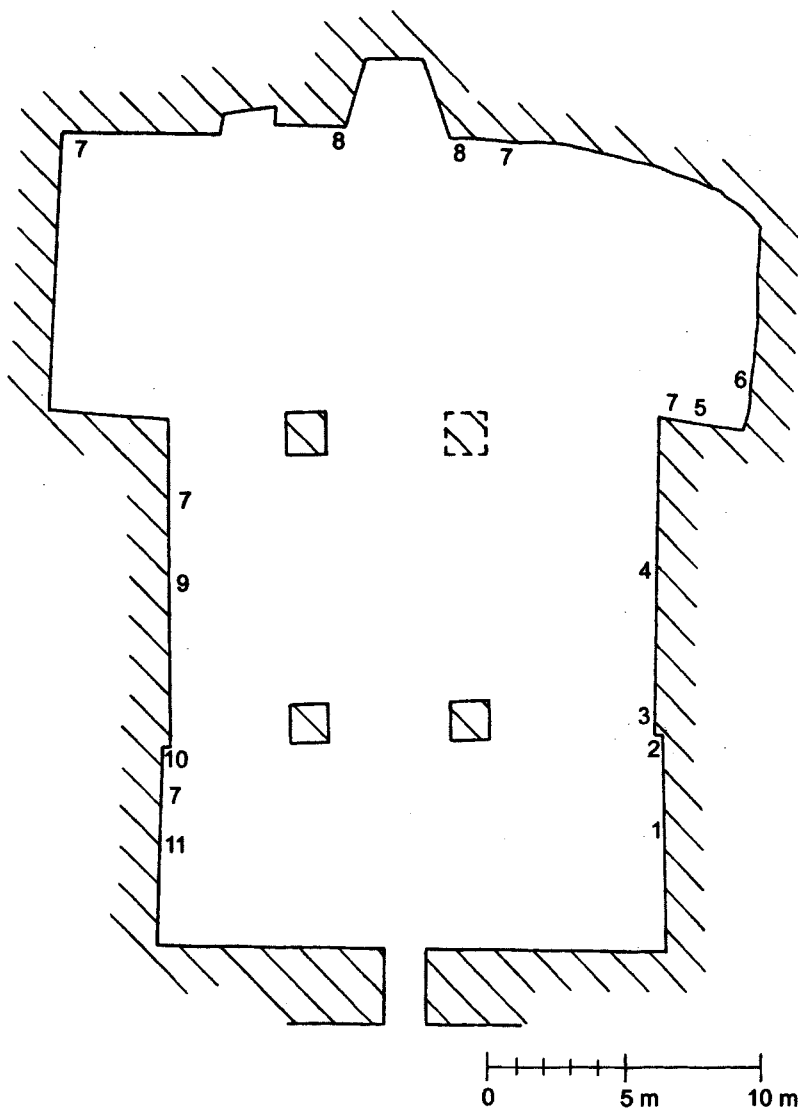


Fig. 2: plan of Tomb III

- (2) Inscription, painted on plaster
- (3) Fragments of a painted inscription
- (4) Fragments of painted decoration
- (5) Fragments of a painted inscription giving, among other titles, the titles *tm.i-r' hm.w ntr* [...], *tm.i-r' sh3.w* [...], *htm.w* [...].
- (6) Fragments of painted decoration
- (7) Painted *hkr*-frieze
- (8) Fragments of an offering list and painted decoration
- (9) Fragments of painted decoration

(10) Fragments of painted decoration

(11) Fragments of painted decoration showing, among other designs, a man holding a hyena/calf (?) with a rope.

Tomb IV (owner: Hty)

Bibliography

Description Ant., IV, pls. 46.1-5, 48.3-5, 49.1-4; F. Ll. Griffith, in: *The Babylonian and Oriental Record* 3, 1889, 122-127, 164-165; id., *The Inscriptions of Siût and Dêr Rîfeh*, 1889, 11, Taf. 13, 14, 20; P. Montet, in: *Kêmi* 3, 1930-35, 98-106; PMIV, 1934, 260, 263-264 (cf. D. Magee, in: C. Eyre (ed.), *Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists, Cambridge 3-9 September 1995. Abstracts of Papers, 1995*, 115); H. Brunner, *Die Anlagen der ägyptischen Felsgräber bis zum Mittleren Reich*, ÄF 3, 1936, 63; id., *Die Texte aus den Gräbern der Herakleopolitenzeit von Siut*, ÄF 5, 1937, 27-35, 52-63; W. Schenkel, *Memphis – Herakleopolis – Theben: die epigraphischen Zeugnisse der 7.-11. Dynastie Ägyptens*, ÄA 12, 1965, 82-89; E. Edel, *Die Inschriften der Grabfronten der Siut-Gräber in Mittelägypten aus der Herakleopolitenzeit*, ARWAW 71, 1984, 67-156, 178-187; D. Franke, in: SAK 14, 1987, 51-60; D. Magee, *Asyut to the End of the Middle Kingdom: a historical and cultural study*, 1988 (microfilmed thesis), II, 18-21; D.B. Spanel, in: Or 58, 1989, 306-309; W.J. de Jong, in: De Ibis 22, no. 4, 1997, 71-82; J. Osing, in: J. Osing/G. Rosati (eds.), *Papiri geroglifici e ieratici da Tebtynis*, 1998, 68-79, 86-87; J. Kahl, *Siut – Theben: zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im alten Ägypten*, PÄ 13, 1999, *passim*.

*State of Research before the Survey*²³

The façade and entrance of the tomb were destroyed after the documentation made by the French Expedition. A still-preserved large hall with two pairs of rectangular pillars is decorated at the eastern end of the northern wall with a representation of the tomb owner and a female relative, as well as with an autobiographical text in sunk relief. On the southern wall of the middle part of the large hall there is a scene of soldiers in sunk relief. According to Griffith, the scene is unfinished and consists of two rows of soldiers;²⁴ according to Magee there are three registers of fourteen soldiers;²⁵ according to Spanel the composition consists of three rows of soldiers, the third row being very fragmentary.²⁶ The decoration of the walls as well as that of the pillars was surmounted by a *hkr*-frieze.

Results of the Survey

The survey confirmed Spanel's observations concerning the scene of the soldiers. There are three rows of soldiers in sunk relief, although the third row is unfinished. It seems to consist of only 5 soldiers. The unfinished third row of soldiers suggests that the tomb was

²³ Cf. Magee, *op.cit.*, II, 18-21.

²⁴ Cf. F.Ll. Griffith, *The Inscriptions of Siût and Dêr Rîfeh*, 1889, 11.

²⁵ Magee, *op.cit.*, II, 20.

²⁶ D.B. Spanel, in: Or 58, 1989, 308-309.

left unfinished, as does the red preliminary drawing of a horizontal line above the first row of soldiers (pl. 14). Also the second row of pillars, in the rear part of the hall, is only very roughly executed and was not finished. In addition, the floor is only roughly executed in the north western part of the hall.

These observations and the absence of further decoration on the other tomb walls would seem to indicate a sudden suspension of the work in the tomb. It is tempting to assume that political reasons were responsible for this unfinished state of the tomb.

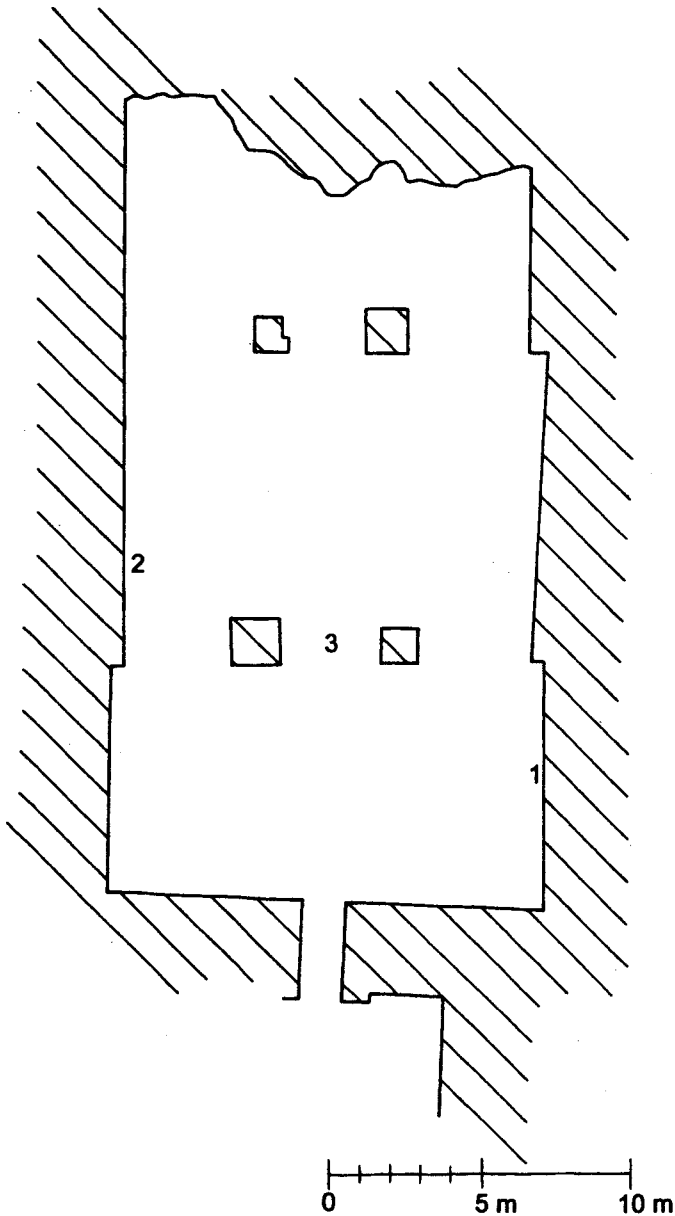


Fig. 3: plan of Tomb IV

In the entrance area, the ceiling shows traces of a coloured decoration, perhaps from later times.

Again, a preliminary plan of those still-existing decorations of the tomb would better our current understanding (fig. 3):

(1) An autobiographical text in sunk relief gives cartouches of king Mery-ka-re. It is followed by a representation of the tomb owner and a female relative (his wife?). The proportions of both figures are not canonically executed. They seem to reflect a regional style.²⁷

The decoration is surmounted by an incised *hkr*-frieze.

(2) A scene of three registers of soldiers holding shields and axes. The third register was left unfinished. The decoration is surmounted by an incised *hkr*-frieze, too.

(3) The today preserved upper part of the pillars in the fore part of the hall shows incised hieroglyphs surmounted by a *hkr*-frieze.

Tomb V (owner: Hty)

Bibliography

Description Ant., IV, pl. 47.8-9, 49.6-7; F. Ll. Griffith, in: The Babylonian and Oriental Record 3, 1889, 122-127, 165-166; id., The Inscriptions of Siût and Dêr Rîfeh, 1889, 11, Taf. 15; P. Montet, in: Kêmi 3, 1930-35, 107-111; PM IV, 1934, 264; H. Brunner, Die Anlagen der ägyptischen Felsgräber bis zum Mittleren Reich, ÄF 3, 1936, 62-63; id., Die Texte aus den Gräbern der Herakleopolitenzeit von Siut, ÄF 5, 1937, 11-16, 64-69; W. Schenkel, Memphis – Herakleopolis – Theben: die epigraphischen Zeugnisse der 7.-11. Dynastie Ägyptens, ÄA 12, 1965, 69-74; id., Die Bewässerungsrevolution im Alten Ägypten, 1978, 29-35; E. Edel, Die Inschriften der Grabfronten der Siut-Gräber in Mittelägypten aus der Herakleopolitenzeit, ARWAW 71, 1984, 157-177; D. Magee, Asyut to the End of the Middle Kingdom: a historical and cultural study, 1988 (microfilmed thesis), II, 22-24; D.B. Spanel, in: Or 58, 1989, 304-305; W.J. de Jong, in: De Ibis 22, no. 4, 1997, 64-68; J. Osing, in: J. Osing/G. Rosati (eds.), Papiri geroglifici e ieratici da Tebtynis, 1998, 79, 87-89; J. Kahl, Siut – Theben: zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im Alten Ägypten, PÄ 13, 1999, passim.

*State of Research before the Survey*²⁸

The façade, the entrance way and the large hall's roof were destroyed after the visit of the French Expedition. The hall is irregularly shaped and was originally equipped with two pillars, which were already destroyed during Bonaparte's times. An autobiographical inscription on the south wall of the rear part of the hall was recorded, as well as a false door

²⁷ For regional tendencies in Middle Kingdom private statuary at Asyut cf. B. Kneißler, „Provinzialkunst“ in Mittelägypten zur Zeit des Mittleren Reiches: Theoretische Grundlagen zu ihrer Entstehung und Erkennung sowie ausgewählte Belege am Beispiel der Privatplastik (unpublished M.A. thesis, Münster 2003).

²⁸ Cf. Magee, op.cit., II, 18-21.

with an autobiographical text, a painted scene on the west wall of the hall and a scene of offering bearers on the northern wall.²⁹

Results of the Survey

The interior of the hall is filled with the debris of the collapsed roof and façade. As a result, the ground floor and the lowest parts of the walls are not visible. As with Tomb III, at least the western and northern walls were similarly surmounted by a painted *hkr*-frieze, parts of which are still preserved. In addition to the autobiographical texts incised in relief, there are also traces of paintings on the walls.

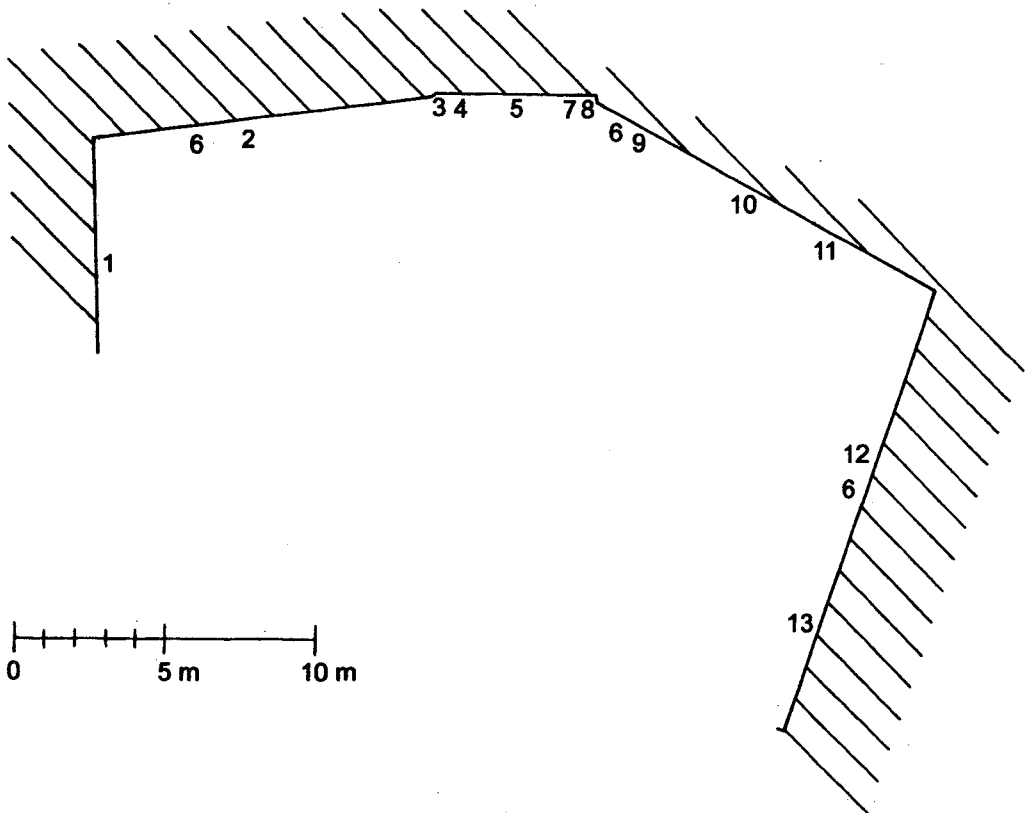


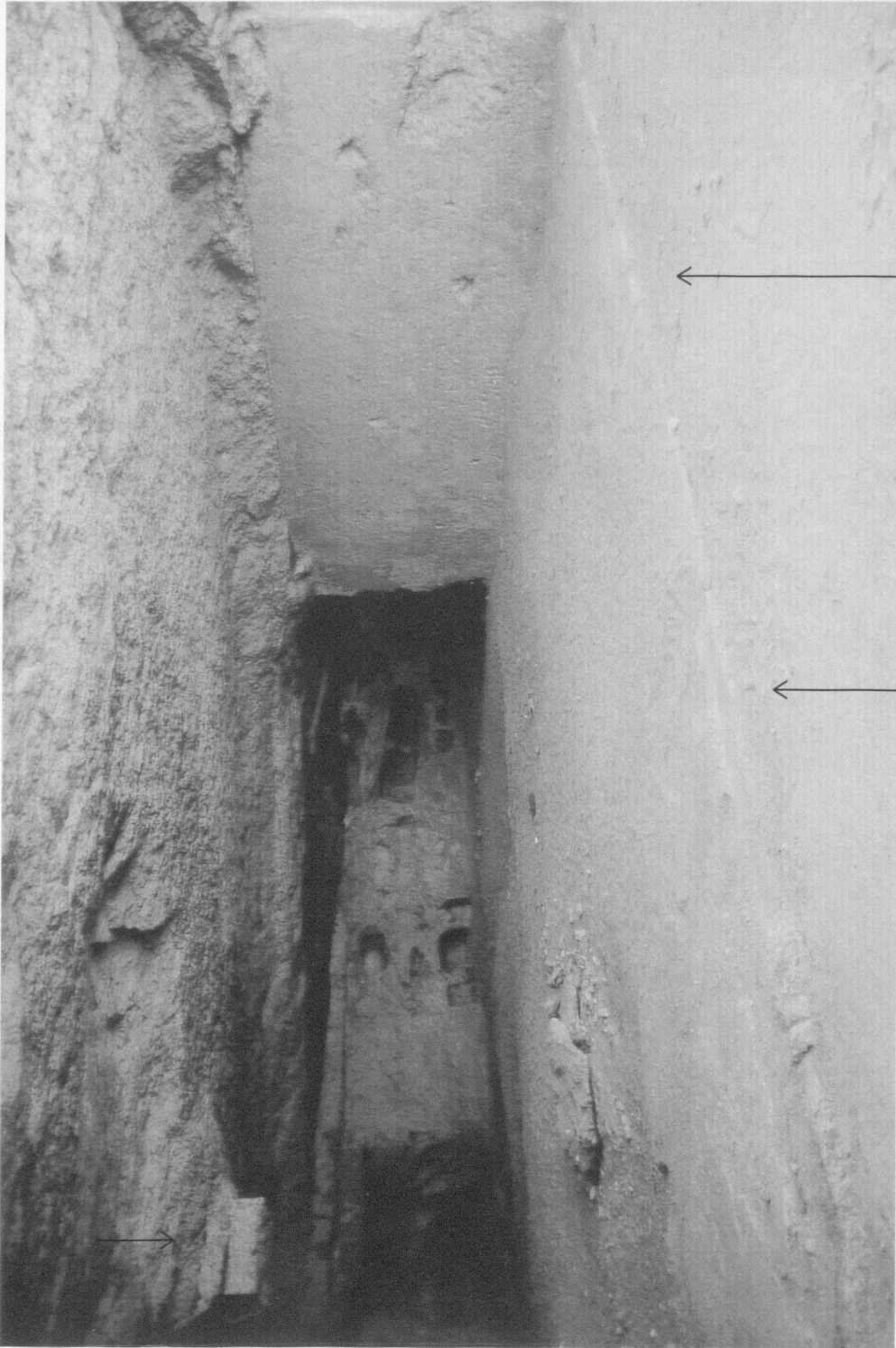
Fig. 4: plan of Tomb V

Fig. 4 gives an overview of those parts of the tomb still visible today:

- (1) Autobiographical inscription incised in relief
- (2) Fragments of painted decoration
- (3) Fragments of painted decoration
- (4) Fragments of painted decoration

²⁹ Ead., *ibid.*, 23-24; Spänel, *op.cit.* 304-305, figs. 4-7.

- (5) False-door with an autobiographical inscription incised in relief mentioning irrigation methods. Also there is a painted decoration on the false-door.
- (6) Fragments of a painted *hkr*-frieze
- (7) Fragments of painted decoration
- (8) Fragments of painted decoration
- (9) Fragments of painted decoration
- (10) Fragments of painted decoration
- (11) Fragments of painted decoration, among others a desert scene
- (12) Fragments of painted decoration
- (13) Fragments of painted decoration: Tomb owner(?), standing, and offering bearers(?).



Asyut Tomb III: four pillared hall (Arrows mark the remains of the pillars)



Asyut Tomb IV: southern wall: some soldiers and a preliminary drawing of a horizontal line above them (The arrow marks the preliminary drawing)