



# BULLETIN DE L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

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BIFAO 126 (2026), p. 379-442

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A Visit to Hesy-ra's Mastaba (c. 2700 BCE): Self-Presentation, Funerary Space and Royal Festival at the Dawn of the Old Kingdom

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# A Visit to Hesy-ra's Mastaba (c. 2700 BCE) Self-Presentation, Funerary Space and Royal Festival at the Dawn of the Old Kingdom

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CHLOÉ RAGAZZOLI, HASSAN SELIM  
WITH THE COLLABORATION OF ANITA QUILES  
AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF PAUL FRANÇOIS  
(AXONOMETRY AND 3D RESTITUTIONS)

## ABSTRACT

The conservation and new display of the wooden panels of Hesy-ra (Room 27, Egyptian Museum, Cairo), led by IFAO and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, offered fresh insights into these unique artifacts. Previously unnoticed details reveal how these images functioned within a broader architectural and ritual context. The writing set worn by Hesy-ra—unique among elite tombs—suggests a symbolic link to royal power and ceremonies like the *sed* festival. The article reviews the mastaba (Saqqara 2405), the panels and their niches, Hesy-ra's titles, and the original layout. It argues that the tomb served not only as a celebration of Hesy-ra's identity and cult focus but also as a ritual space where he, bearing royal insignia, was symbolically tied to the king's body and rites.

**Keywords:** Hesy-ra, mastaba, scribe, Saqqara, Djoser, funerary rites, self-presentation.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le projet de conservation et de nouvelle présentation des panneaux de bois du Maître Scribe du Roi Hesy-ré (salle 27, Musée égyptien du Caire), mené par l'Ifao et le CSA, a permis une relecture fine de ces artefacts majeurs. Des détails inédits éclairent leur rôle dans un espace architectural, sensoriel et rituel complexe. L'image d'Hesy-ré portant du matériel d'écriture, unique dans les tombes de hauts fonctionnaires, suggère un lien étroit avec le pouvoir royal et des rites tels que la fête-*sed*. Après un état des lieux du mastaba (Saqqara 2405), l'article

analyse les panneaux, les titres d'Hesy-rê et la disposition des reliefs, montrant comment le monument, au-delà de son rôle funéraire, devient une scène rituelle où le scribe est connecté au corps du roi.

**Mots-clés :** Hesy-rê, mastaba, scribe, Saqqara, Djeser, rites funéraires, auto-présentation.



THE WOODEN PANELS OF HESY-RA, Master Scribe of the King, are a highlight in the history of ancient Egyptian art and architecture,<sup>1</sup> and their photographs have a prominent place in most Egyptian art books.<sup>2</sup> The finesse of the relief, the delicate sculpturing of Hesy-ra's mature or youthful features, the virtuosity with which the hieroglyphs are treated, all invite the fascinated viewer to treat them as individual statements about Hesy-ra's identity, often misrepresented as the first dentist in history or as an icon of the power of scribes in ancient Egypt.

The project for the conservation and new display of the panels in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Fig. 39), carried out jointly by IFAO and the Supreme Council of Antiquities under the direction of Dr. Anita Quiles, provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at the panels, for which we are also publishing new photographs taken after restoration, along detailed facsimiles (see final catalogue).<sup>3</sup> The question of the order in which they should be displayed in a room that would restore as much as possible of their original architectural context created conditions of enquiry akin to that of experimental archaeology. These working conditions brought to light details that had gone unnoticed in James E. Quibell's excavation report. It brought new keys to understanding images that, from their intellectual construction to their impact, can only be understood as part of the architectural, sensory, political and ritual space of which they are but one element. In this context, Hesy-ra's writing set—often interpreted as proof of the power of scribes in Ancient Egypt, whereas such a detail in a dignitary relief is utterly unique—is an important key to understanding how the monument to Hesy-ra, a great state official linked to the administration of mining resources, relates to the aura of the royal persona and possibly royal rituals such as the *sed* festival.

<sup>1</sup> Publication of the monument and panels: QUIBELL 1913; see also MARIETTE 1872, pl. 12; BORCHARDT 1937, pp. 108–111, pl. 25–27; MARIETTE 1882, p. 80; PM III/1, pp. 437–439; WOOD 1978; DAVIS 2003; DAVIS 2017; BAINES 1999; MORENZ 2020; KAHL et al. 1995, pp. 88–111.

<sup>2</sup> For example: GOMBRICH 1968, p. 37; LECLANT et al. 1978, p. 124; MICHALOWSKI 1994, p. 205, figs. 8, 33, 239, 241; PRITCHARD 1954, p. 268; SCHÄFER 1974, pp. 12, 282–297.

<sup>3</sup> Project members: Anita Quiles (lead), Islam Ezzat, Ebeid Mahmoud, Ashraf Mahmoud, Nadine Mounir, Chloé Ragazzoli, Hassan Selim, Abdelrahman Medhat, Mohamed Abdelrahman, Mohamed Ismail, Sabah Abdel-Razzeq, Ali Abdelhalim. The project was jointly led by IFAO, the Egyptian Museum and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, with support from the Institut français d'Égypte and the Schiff-Georgini Foundation.

We begin with a general consideration of what is known about the mastaba of Hesy-ra (Saqqara 2405) and a general description of the panels and their niches. We then move on to consider what can be learned about Hesy-ra's identity from a close study of his titles. Finally, based on both the spatial setting and Hesy-ra's identity, we consider the order of the panels and the ritual arrangement from which they derive. The latter illustrate the dual nature of the tomb, a celebration of Hesy-ra's identity and the focus of the funerary cult. Beyond this expected functional duality of the Egyptian tomb, the monument here is also a ritual arena in which Hesy-ra, through the royal insignia he carries—the writing set—is linked to the person of the king, whom he accompanies in the celebration of royal rites and to whom he makes a final offering.

## I. THE ANCIENT LIVES OF HESY-RA'S MASTABA: ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE MONUMENT

To understand the sequence of the wooden panels and their function in the chapel, it is necessary to consider the history of the monument, its architectural development and its place in the sacred landscape of Saqqara. For this reason, we present a summary of what is known about the mastaba before moving on to a general description of the panels and their probable arrangement within the niches.

### I.1. Architectural description

The Mastaba of Hesy-ra (Saqqara 2405)<sup>4</sup> was first discovered by Auguste Mariette in the second half of the nineteenth century in the northern cemetery of Saqqara, which contains elite tombs dating to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Dynasties. It is located 260m north-east of the funerary complex of King Djoser (Fig. 1). The mastaba was thoroughly re-excavated by Quibell in the winter of 1911-1912 as part of his exploration of "archaic mastabas".<sup>5</sup> An additional archaeological project appears to have been carried out there in the early 2010s.<sup>6</sup>

The available information on the architecture of the mastaba is based on Quibell's limited report and plans. These indicate that the mastaba, first erected to the south-west of a mastaba from the time of Peribsen<sup>7</sup> (S2406), underwent three main phases, eventually merging with S2406 (Figs. 2–3). Indeed, Hesy-ra's tomb is part of a dense and evolving architectural and funerary fabric (Fig. 2). The principal phase of Hesy-ra's funerary monuments probably underwent successive modifications; adding extra rooms and resulting in new enclosing walls. As Whitney Davis notes, "the mastaba of Hesy [...] was not the product of a unified project in which the building can be treated as a single design assigned to one period."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> MARIETTE 1882, pp. 57, 80–82; PM III/2, pp. 437–439.

<sup>5</sup> QUIBELL 1913.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastaba\\_of\\_Hesy-Re](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastaba_of_Hesy-Re).

<sup>7</sup> LACHER-RASCHDORFF 2014, p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> DAVIS 2003, p. 39.

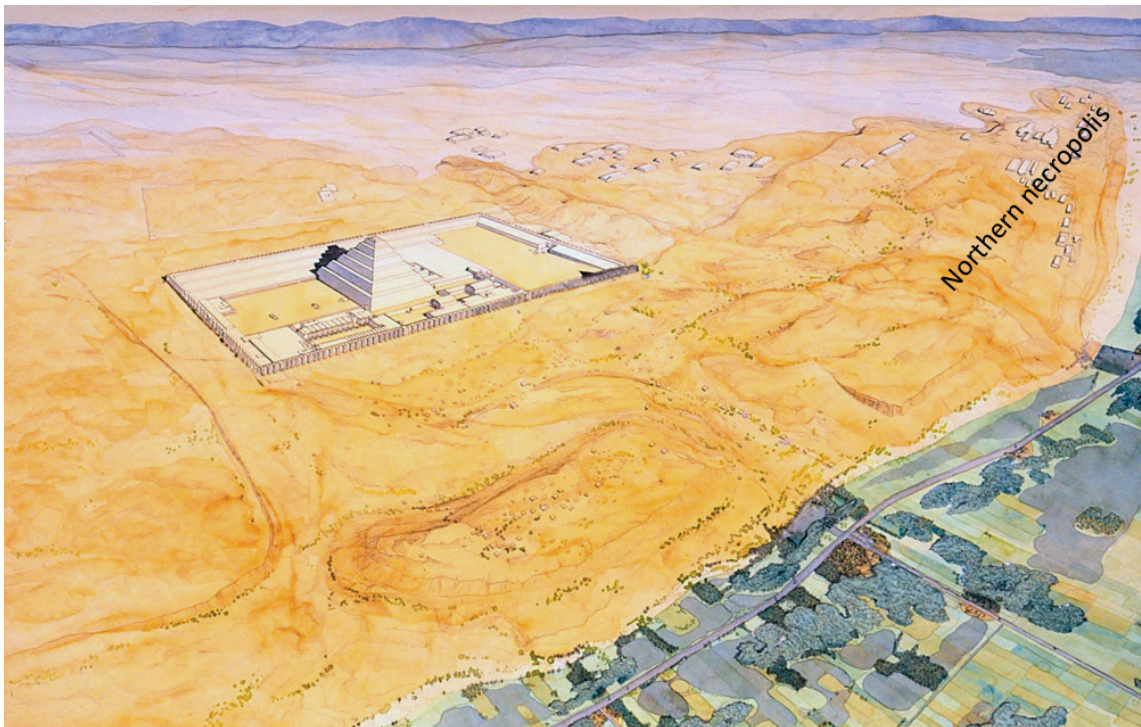


FIG. 1. Location of the northern (Archaic) necropolis in the time of Djoser (image adapted from J.-Cl. Golvin, with his very kind permission © jeanclaudegolvin.com).

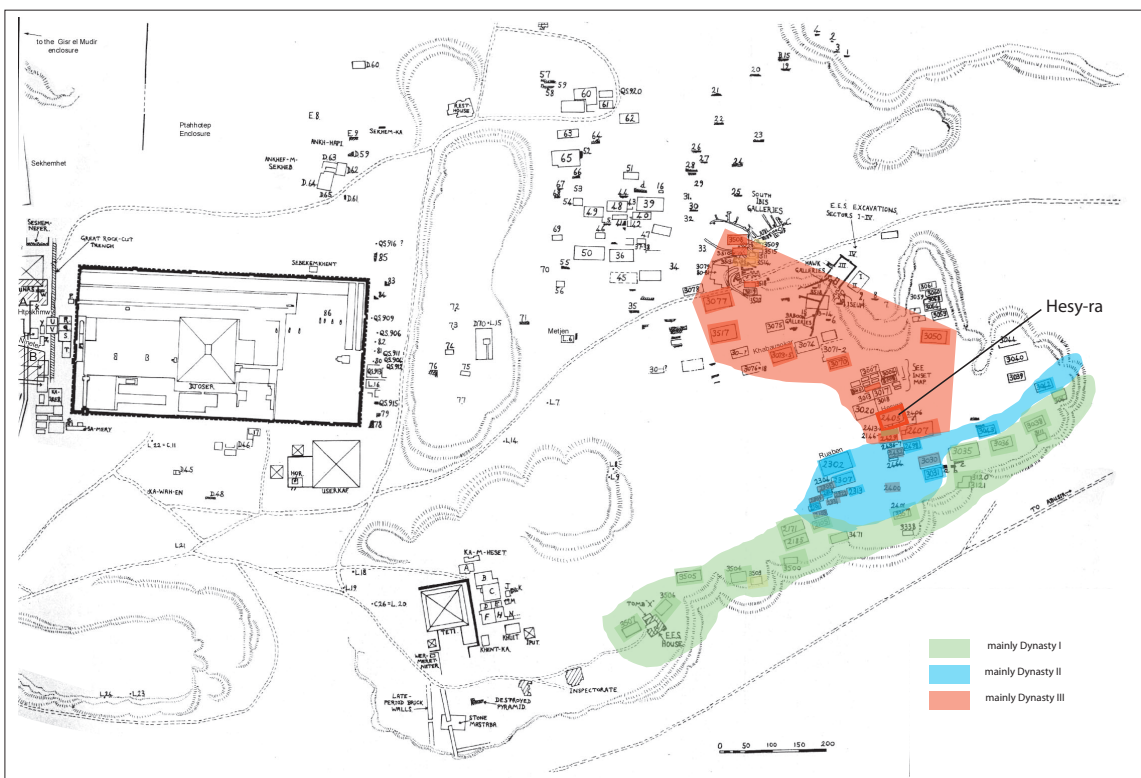


FIG. 2. North Saqqara "archaic necropolis" showing the grouping of tombs by date (adapted from Spencer 1974).

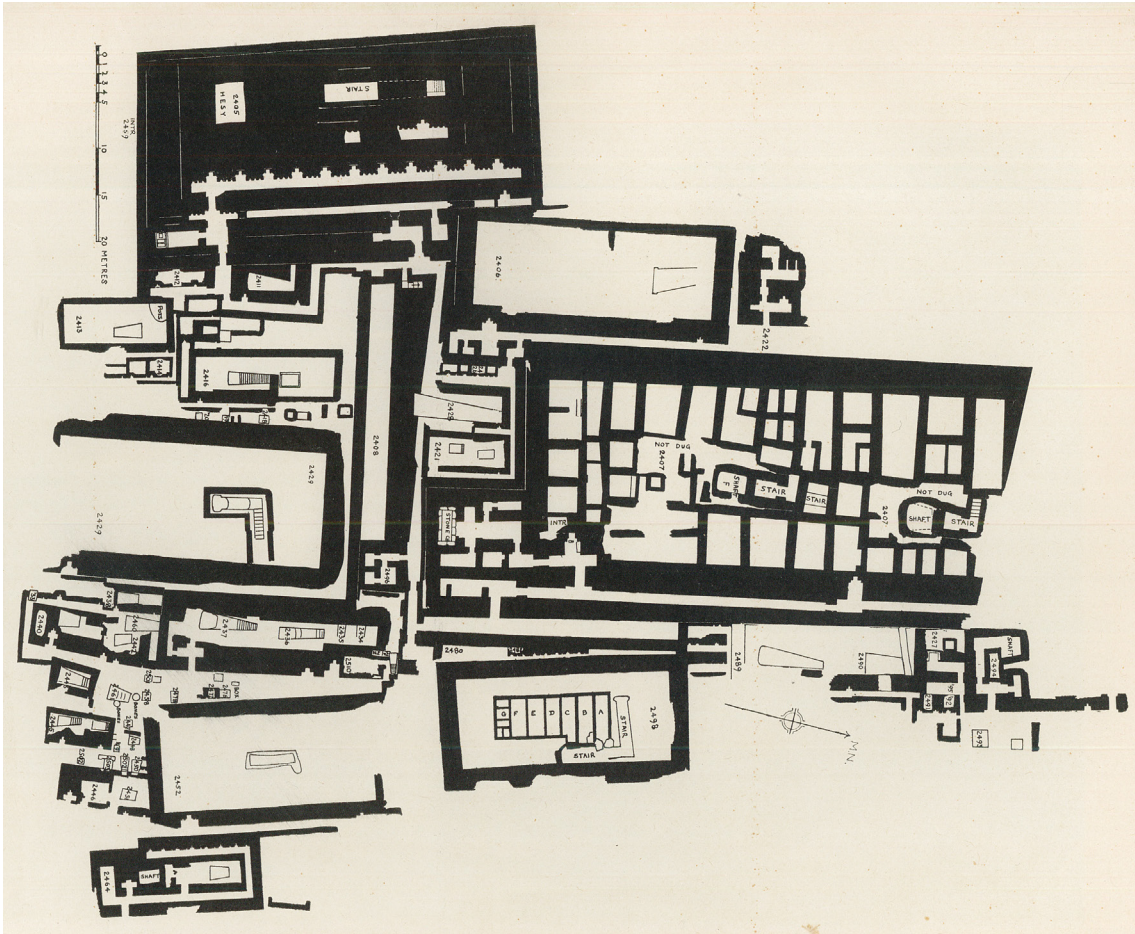


FIG. 3. Hesy-ra's mastaba (2405) in relation to the surrounding monuments (Quibell 1923, pl. II.)

The mastaba of Hesy-ra in what we consider its main phase measured approximately 43m in length and at least 5m in height, built of black mud brick, with its outer being covered with a layer of white plaster.<sup>9</sup> According to Quibell's report, the architectural evolution of the site can be divided into three distinct phases (Fig. 4). Phase I may represent an initial project for Hesy-ra's tomb, which itself was later expanded to the actual tomb of Hesy-ra (phase II) that housed the eleven wooden panels, itself undergoing further additions and alterations. Phase III appears to post-date Hesy-ra's lifetime and include new mastaba structures, possibly for members of his family.

<sup>9</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 3.

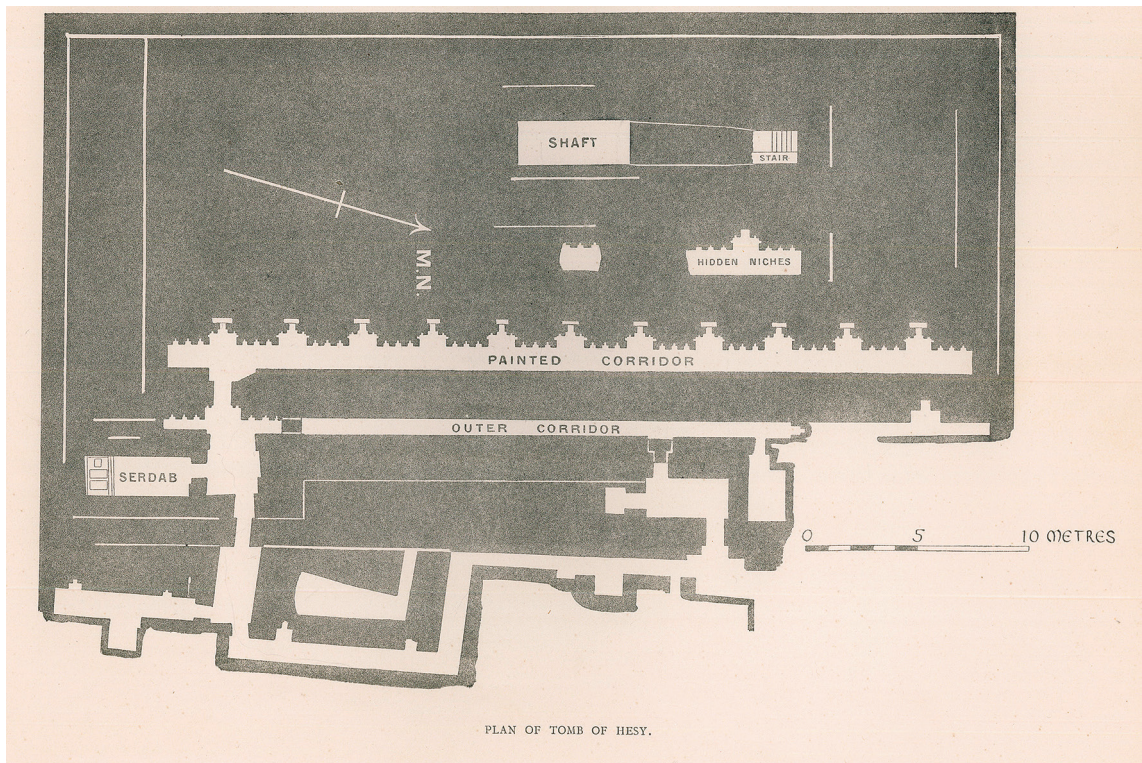


FIG. 4. Layout plan of the mastaba showing its successive extensions (Quibell 1913, pl. I).

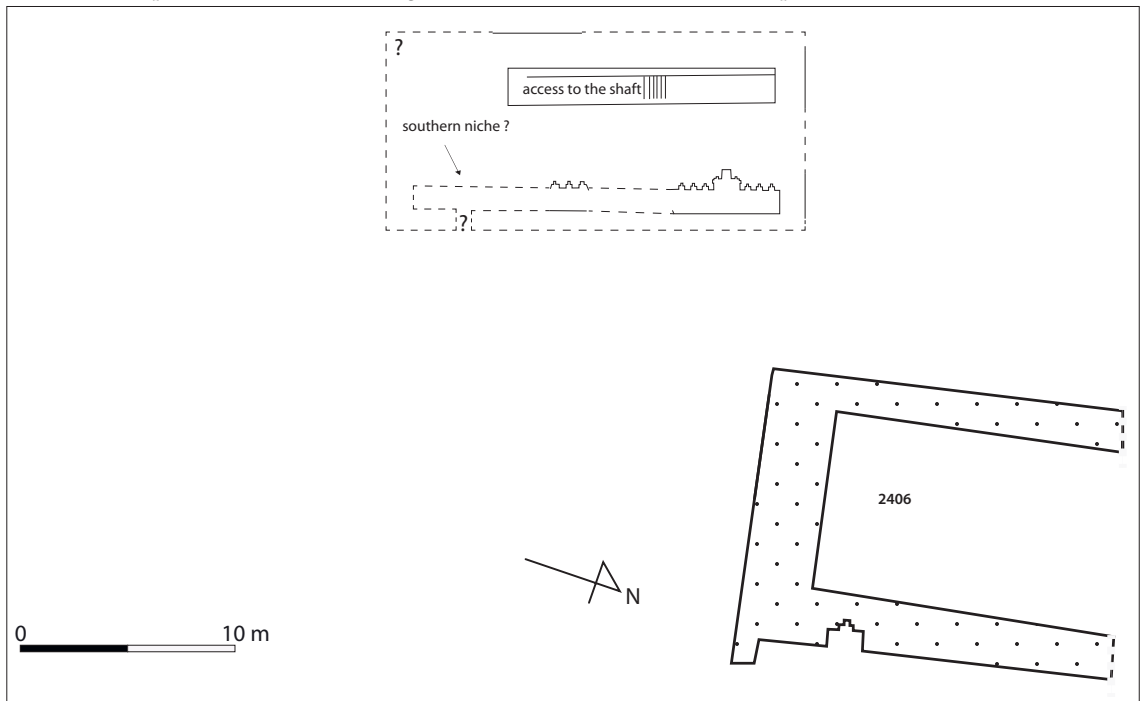


FIG. 5. The original so-called “nucleus mastaba,” later extended (above), west of mastaba S2406 dated to Peribsen (drawing based on Quibell’s drawings).

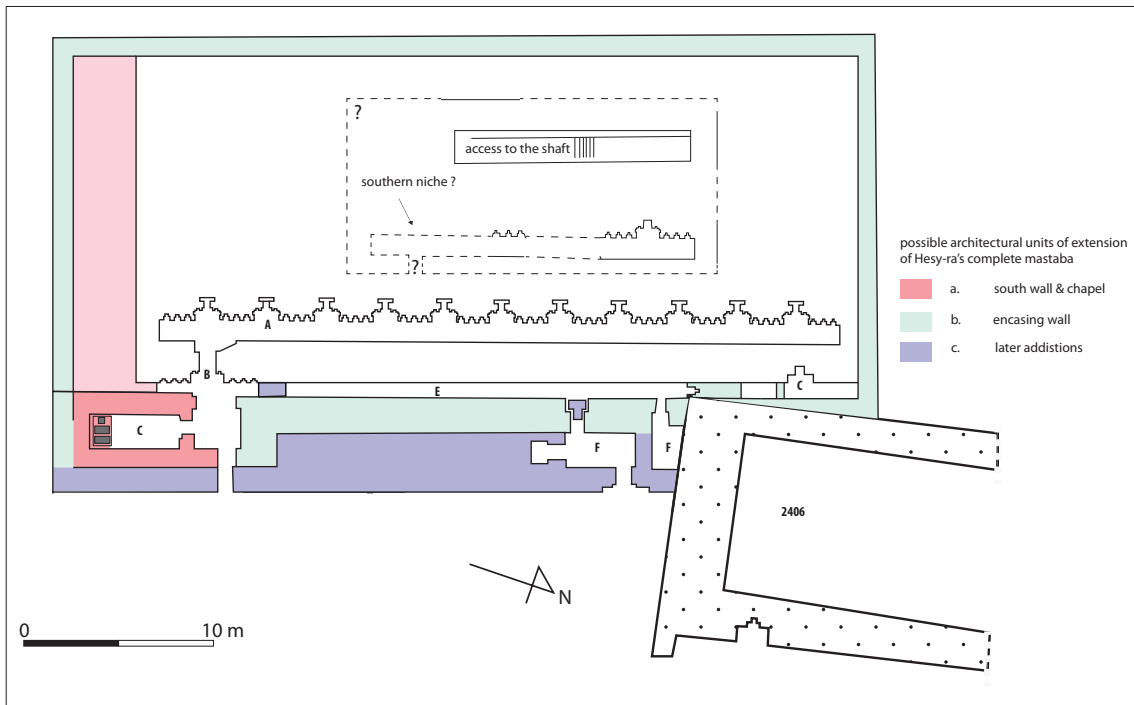


FIG. 6. Hesy-ra's complete mastaba (Phase II), showing divisions that may have been added over time.

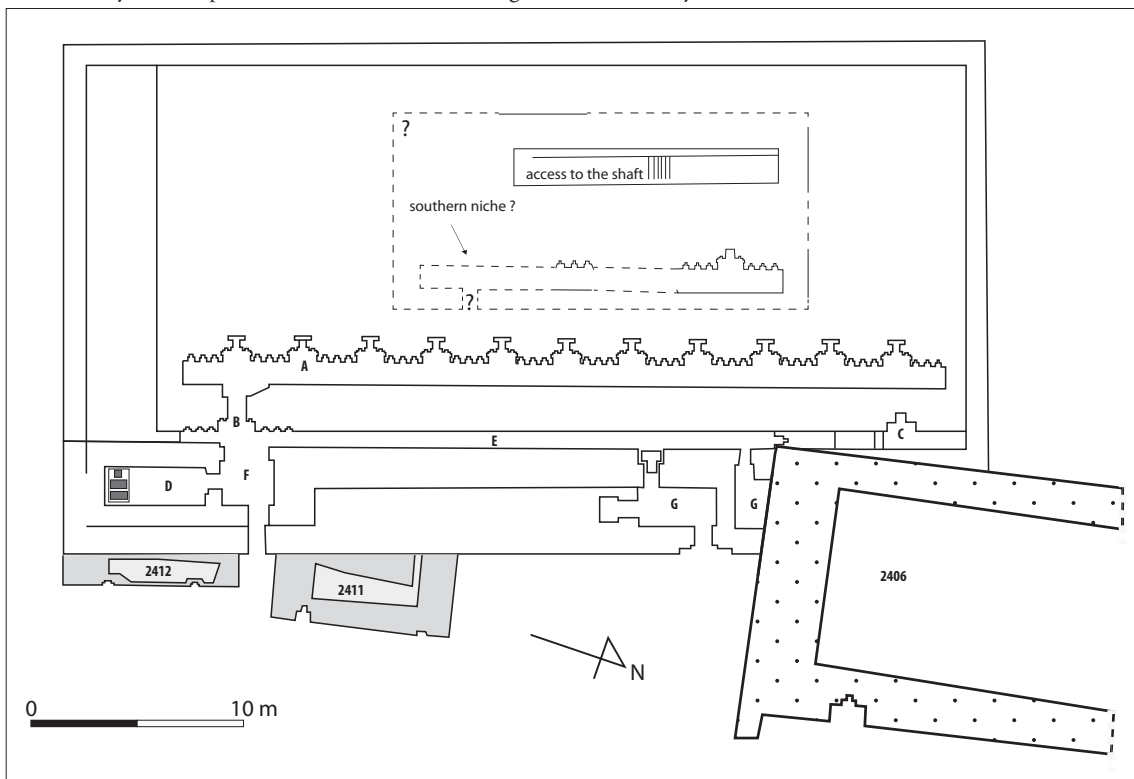


FIG. 7. Later mastabas (S2412 and S2411) built against Hesy-ra's mastaba, possibly belonging to members of Hesy-ra's family (adapted from Quibell 1913, pl. I and Quibell 1923, pl. II).

a. *Phase one: a nucleus mastaba*

The nucleus mastaba (Fig. 5) is considered the inner core; this structure and the complete mastaba (phase II) were “both paneled with palace-façade pattern on the valley side (east) only.”<sup>10</sup> The corridor of the nucleus was “exposed at two points in holes made by ancient robbers.”<sup>11</sup> Quibell found this corridor filled with brickwork, which we interpret as being contemporary with the extension of the mastaba. The visible so-called “concealed niches”<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 6) are typical of the projections and recesses of the palace-façade architecture and are much less shallower than those in the paneled corridor and it seems unlikely—if not impossible—that they were intended to support panels. It is more probable that the nucleus followed the standard mastaba form, with a palace façade and two main niches,<sup>13</sup> consistent with the existence of a pair of older panels.

This nucleus mastaba may well be contemporary with, or slightly later than, S2406.



FIG. 8. Robbers' hole opening into the concealed and filled corridor, north end, showing the palace façade features (Quibell 1913, pl. XXIV, no. 3).

<sup>10</sup> REISNER 1936, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> QUIBELL 1913, pl. XXIV, 3.

<sup>13</sup> BAUD 2009, p. 209.

Note on the burial shaft ( $\alpha$ ):

The subterranean section of the tomb was entered via a staircase descending from north to south. The underground chambers were arranged across three levels, with two corridors lined with rows of storage magazines. This layout exhibits the “fishbone” pattern characteristic of the substructure of elite mastabas from the late 2nd Dynasty and early 3rd Dynasty. A seal bearing the name of Neterkhet (JE 44378) was discovered in the antechamber of the burial shaft, located in the southern part of the underground complex.<sup>14</sup> We have no information on how the shaft and its layout related to the various phases of the superstructure.

**b. Phase two: *Hesy-ra's complete mastaba***

At some point, the original mastaba nucleus was expanded into what seems to be the monument's main phase, in which the burial is likely to have taken place before later being remodeled by Hesy-ra's descendants (Fig. 7).<sup>15</sup> A substantial brickwork addition was made to the original nucleus, extending approximately 4.5m towards the east, north and south. This eastward extension included a long chapel-corridor, with its interior wall decorated with the palace-façade motif. Excavations by Quibell revealed that the ceiling of the corridor measured 3m in height, and he indicated that an additional 2m of brickwork would have been required to reach the mastaba's full height of 5m. The new mastaba façade subsequently incorporated a double-niche design, the southern formed by the entrance to the inner corridor.

The construction of Hesy-ra's mastaba was completed with the addition of a statue chapel, a feature also found in several mastabas of the period (S3518 and S2407, cf. Fig. 11), as well as an outer corridor. The incorporation of these elements seems to have culminated in the construction of an outer encasing wall, as indicated by the internal lines depicted on Quibell's maps (Fig. 7). He explained them as follows: “vertical joints, which are indicated so far as they could be observed show that an outer skin was added after the building was nearly finished and that, possibly, the tomb had been previously enlarged.”<sup>16</sup>

The architectural elements of the complete mastaba may be described as follows, in what may be their chronological order:

Set a:

- The chapel-corridor (A) features an inner wall design in the palace-façade style, with eleven niches, each separated by three recesses. The walls were covered with a fine plaster and decorated with paintings (see below). The architectural feature of such cult corridors is also present in other mastabas of North Saqqara from the reign of Djoser such as S3518, S2407, S3040, S3070, S3009, as demonstrated by Claudia Lacher-Raschdorff<sup>17</sup>;
- The entrance (B) has three recesses on each side except for the outer wall. This opens onto a passage leaning to the chapel and the first panel, where Hesy-ra is seated before an offering table;

<sup>14</sup> Full description in QUIBELL 1913, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> REISNER 1936, pp. 270–271.

<sup>16</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> LACHER-RASCHDORFF 2014, pl. 14.

- The northern niche (C) on the eastern façade. In the mastaba model as it developed in the Archaic Period, the niche and the stela defined the locus of cult at the southern end of the eastern wall, as evidenced at Helwan and Saqqara from the end of the First Dynasty. A distinction can be observed between the main niche, the south one, which is deep and large, and its counterpart in the north, which is a smaller version. Hesy-ra's monument refers to this pattern with an entrance sunk into the mastaba (B)—so deep as to form an entrance to a chapel-corridor and the anticipated offering stela—echoing the lesser northern niche on the outer wall.<sup>18</sup>

Set b:

- Statue chapel (D): It was built together with a new brick layer on the eastern wall. Access to the chapel was through a doorway opening to the north (Fig. 8). This feature was developed in Saqqara during the time of Djoser, as evidenced by mastabas S3518 and S2407 (cf. Fig. 11). Hesy-ra's contained a stone statue, now destroyed, of which only the base remains.



FIG. 9. View of the statue chapel, looking from north to south (Quibell 1913, pl. 14, no. 2).

<sup>18</sup> BAUD 2009, p. 209.

- Outer-corridor (E): A secondary corridor was constructed to the east, in front of the main corridor, built either after or at the same time as the chapel. This modification led to a new brick casing around the exterior, as the corridor wall became integrated into mastaba S2406. The northern end of the corridor was arranged as a niche (Fig. 9). The closure of the northern niche may or may not have taken place at the same time. According to Quibell, at least the western wall appears to have been painted and adorned with a frieze and scenes depicting various activities, reminiscent of the decoration found in later mastabas. These included depictions of cattle, human figures, and a crocodile waiting at a ford.<sup>19</sup> These fragments are now displayed in Room 27 of the Egyptian Museum, alongside the panels.
- Entrance hall (F): This entrance from the outside to the main chapel, situated at the southeast corner of the wall is reminiscent of the entrance to the Djoser complex,<sup>20</sup> itself resembling to the entrance of Khasekhemuy's enclosure at Abydos. As in the entrance colonnade of Djoser's complex, a statue of the owner was visible, facing "north toward the circumpolar stars that in the Pyramid Texts are said to 'know death'."<sup>21</sup>



FIG. 10. Outer corridor, north end (Quibell 1913, pl. 14, no. 3).

<sup>19</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 4

<sup>20</sup> We are grateful to Anja Stoll for drawing our attention to this feature. For an architectural comparison between Khasekhemuy's enclosure and Djoser's complex, see FRIEDMAN 1995, pp. 8–9 and fig. 6a.

<sup>21</sup> FRIEDMAN 1995, p. 11, cf. *Pyr* 10806; 1454b; 1760b.

Set c:

New rooms—possibly chapels or service areas (G)—were constructed within the thick frontal wall to the east of the mastaba. As a result, the outer wall of the exterior corridor was reshaped, with one or more new openings into the enclosure at selected access points, though the precise sequence of these modifications remains uncertain.

### c. *Phase 3: Post Hesy-ra Additions*

Following the death of Hesy-ra, two smaller mastabas were built against the exterior wall of the outer corridor (S2412 and S2411, cf. Fig. 10). It is not possible to determine whether their owners were connected to Hesy-ra, although it is highly probable, as family or social ties typically determined the placement of secondary mastabas. This section of the necropolis is characterized by a high density of monuments that are built into each other.

In any case, the general layout of the main mastaba with its chapel-corridor and statues chapel is similar to several Saqqara mastaba from the same time (Fig. 11).

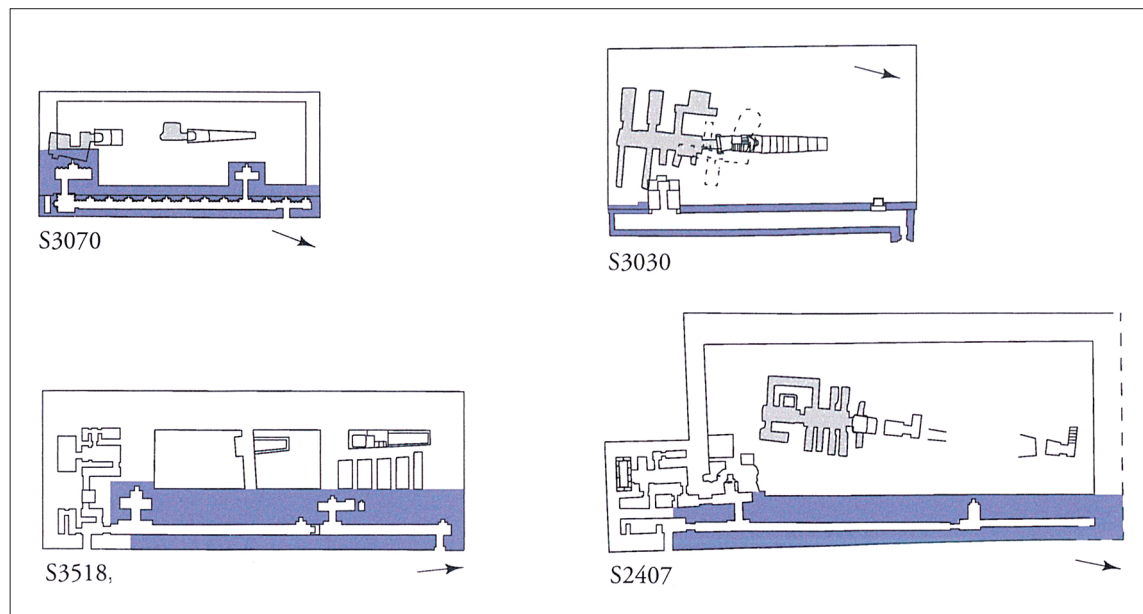


FIG. 11. Layouts of mastaba with cult-corridors from Hesy-ra's time (details from Lacher-Raschdorff 2014, pl. 14).

## 1.2. The main cult-chapel and its eleven niches

The entrance of the mastaba leads to an elongated corridor measuring 23m in length, 3m in height, and 1m in width. The roof is made of wooden beams<sup>22</sup>.

The western wall of the corridor is adorned with eleven recessed niches (or doorways), each containing a wooden panel depicting Hesy-ra.

<sup>22</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 5.

The outer walls of the 1st and 2nd Dynasty royal mortuary enclosures at Abydos feature regularly placed and closely set recesses, grouped into sets of three or four; this architectural feature was followed shortly by the mastabas of the elite in the 2nd Dynasty. This motif, known as the ‘palace-façade’, is considered reminiscent in mudbricks and then in stone, of the motifs and shapes seen in the palaces of the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic period as seen on sealing impressions. These palaces “were at least partially built in very light materials for which wood and reeds will have formed the framework. [... This] will normally result in vertical building elements and the use of reinforcements and niches will give greater stability to the walls.”<sup>23</sup> The niche developed from the royal tombs of the 1st Dynasty as a point of contact and circulation, both in the superstructure and infrastructure,<sup>24</sup> quickly took on the function and shape of a door<sup>25</sup> between this world and the next, a feature fully developed in the 3rd Dynasty, in royal architecture<sup>26</sup> before becoming the well-known false-door stela, ensuring a long-lasting legacy in Egypt, from the 5th Dynasty onwards.



**FIG. 12.** Mastaba Saqqara 3505 (1st Dynasty), West façade of the superstructure from the south, Emery et al. 1958, pl. 15a.

<sup>23</sup> HENDRICKS 2001, pp. 102–103.

<sup>24</sup> Tomb of Djef, details of walls with niches/recesses (in red): PETRIE 1900, pl. LXIII.

<sup>25</sup> See also, for example, the large recessed niche like a false-door located just south of the centre of the façade of the superstructure in Tarkhan tomb 1060: PETRIE et al. 1913, p. 13, pls. 15 (1), 15 (2). <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/tarkhan/tarkhangreattombs/1060index.html>.

See also the recessed niche of the south wall in the burial chamber of 1st Dynasty mastaba S3540 (EMERY et al. 1954, p. 13, fig. 4, pl. XIVa).

<sup>26</sup> See the three single leaf wooden doors with horizontal lintels cut into limestone in the Step pyramid subterranean apartments: FIRTH, QUIBELL 1935, pl. 45 (2).



FIG. 13. Shape and paneling of the chapel-corridor, west-side (modelled from Reisner 1936, fig. 166).

Hesy-ra's wooden panels come from niches set within the stepped recesses of the corridor-chapel's façade (Fig. 13). The mastaba serves as a space of circulation, for the deceased and more importantly for the *ka*. This circulation can be intensified and refracted through the multiplication of points of contact, which likely correspond to the increasing number of openings—whether real or symbolic—in earlier funerary apartments. From the Old Kingdom onwards, this principle was further developed through the proliferation of images of the deceased.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Hesy-ra, with both the multiplication of niches and the proliferation of images of the deceased, stands at the intersection between the prehistoric tradition of multiple openings and the Egyptian funerary culture, in which the deceased is represented through numerous depictions, both in the decoration of Old Kingdom chapels and in their statuary programs.

The niches occupy a prominent position here. Each niche opening measures 120cm in width and nearly 1m in depth. The panel itself is set at the back of a recess, the width of which likely matching that of the panel. According to Quibell, the panel rested almost at ground level on a wooden or stone lintel embedded approximately 20cm into the wall. Above, a row of bricks projected outward, overhanging the upper edge of the niche, and was held in place by a wooden lintel—its imprint identified—measuring 1.50m in width and 6cm in depth.<sup>28</sup>

Quibell also notes that this lintel was fixed 1.15m above the stone floor of the niche, positioned just above the panel. However, a slight inconsistency arises: while the current dimensions of the panels—probably recut—align with this measurement, the final panel, presumably intact, measures 134cm. This discrepancy suggests that not all niches necessarily followed an identical structural arrangement.

The issue of the rectangular hole carved into each panel has likewise raised questions. The complete absence of any attachment marks—whether as negative traces in the mortar at the back of the panel or on the panels as they survive today—suggests that it was not used to secure the panels themselves to the wall, which would, in any case, seem unnecessary. Quibell suggested in his report<sup>29</sup> that this recess was intended to accommodate a wooden piece designed to support a lintel, a beam, or a horizontal panel above the inscribed area of the panel. The double false-door stela of Nefersekeru in the Louvre (E 17233) provides an example of a composite wooden stela featuring tenons and mortises, dating to the 5th Dynasty.

In Hesy-ra's mastaba, the vegetal and architectural origin of the regular recesses is also evoked with the masterful trompe-l'œil painting of the niched wall of the inner corridor (Fig. 14). It depicts colourful woven mats and rugs stretched along hanging poles tied with a cord running through a series of loops and around a horizontal rod. The decorative patterns and methods

<sup>27</sup> BAUD 2009, pp. 191–192.

<sup>28</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 5.

of securing mats to poles with ropes have been studied by Lloyd Graham in detail. Such rugs covered the ceremonial buildings in the Late Predynastic Period and Early dynastic times.<sup>30</sup> An interesting point is the similarity of Hesy-ra's decoration with the trompe-l'œil mats in 1st Dynasty mastabas S3505 and S3121<sup>31</sup> (Figs. 12 and 15), to the extent that we can suppose it is a direct and conscious borrowing, confirming both the inventiveness of Hesy-ra's program and the deliberate reference to architectural features of the foundational Thinite Period.

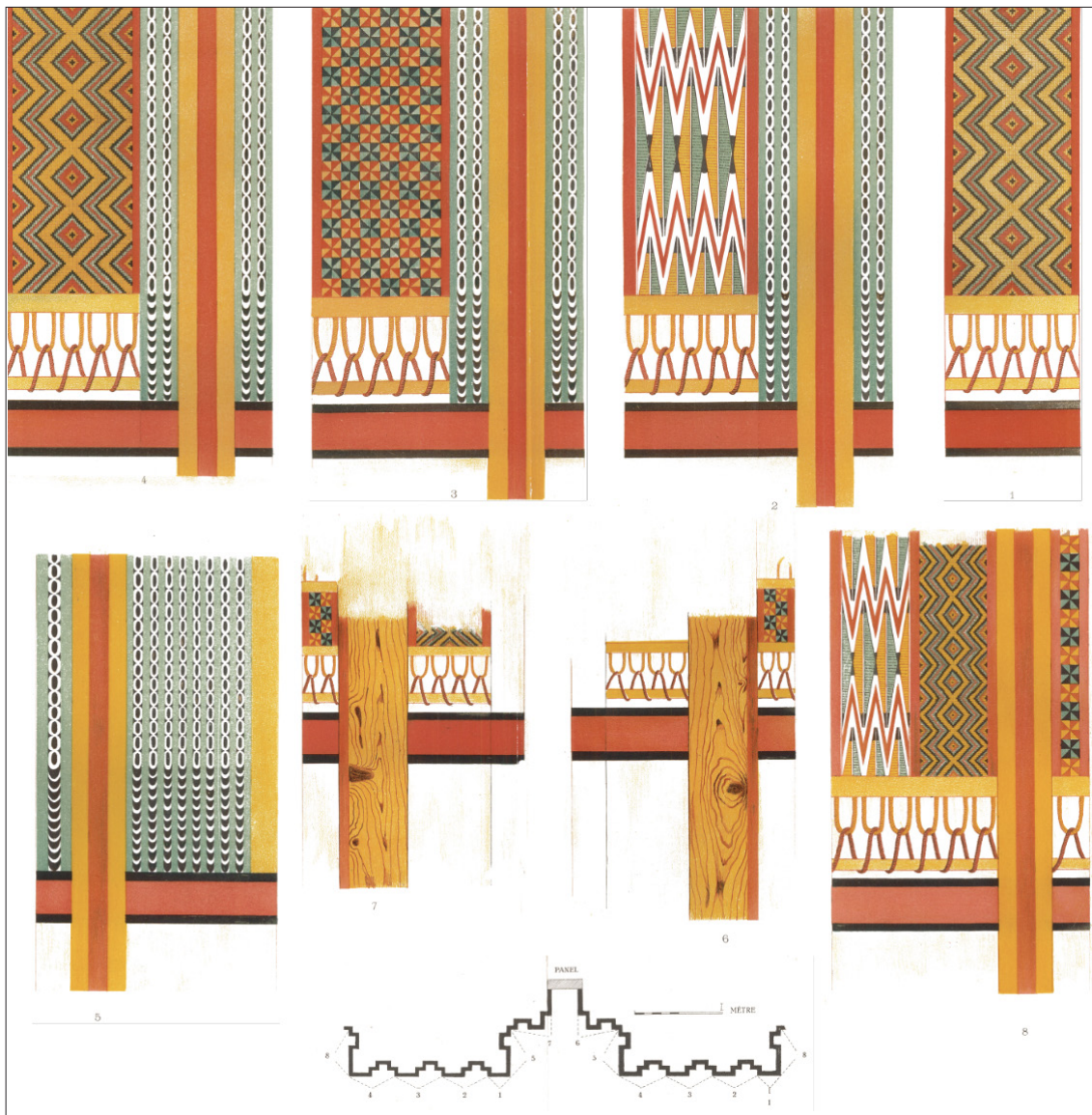


FIG. 14. Painted decoration on the paneled wall of the chapel-corridor (adapted from Quibell 1913, pl. VIII-IX).

<sup>30</sup> For a complete study of these practices, see GRAHAM 2019.

<sup>31</sup> EMERY et al. 1958, pp. 6–8.

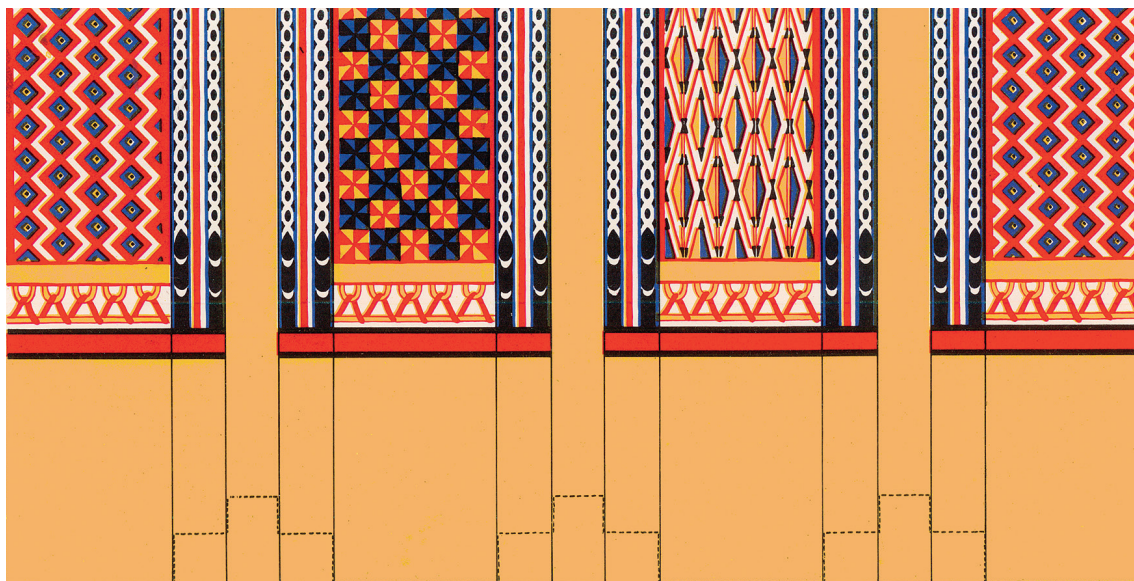


FIG. 15. Painted decoration of the small niches on the superstructure façade of mastaba S3505 (adapted from Emery et al. 1958, pl. 7).

Facing the niches, the eastern wall of the chapel corridor is entirely painted and is divided into two long horizontal registers. The upper register shows a collection of offering goods, beginning with a long oil-storage magazine.<sup>32</sup> The lower register shows Hesy-ra's belongings displayed in open boxes and trays, including measuring vessels,<sup>33</sup> professional tools, a *senet* game, and furniture (see below §3.3).

The north end of the corridor is likewise painted, with “four stands with basins above them, two of alabaster, two of red pottery.”<sup>34</sup> The decoration of the south end is lost.

The corridor connecting these walls is very narrow, its width matching to the depth of the niches (Fig. 16).



FIG. 16. View looking north into the chapel-corridor (Quibell archives, the University of Milan, photo no. 2880).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> ALTENMÜLLER 1976.

<sup>33</sup> MIATELLO 2023.

<sup>34</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 18, pl. IV, XVI.

<sup>35</sup> May Professor Patrizia Piacentini be warmly thanked for her assistance with access to Quibell's archives housed in Milan.

These niches serve as striking transitional spaces within the layout, enhancing the liminal effect and the connection between the unseen realm and the world of the living, while creating a dramatic staging of the panels. The reconstructions by architect Paul François convey a sense of such an arrangement (Pl. I and Fig. 17).



FIG. 17. Axonometric view of the west corridor (Paul François/LA3M-CNRS).

The tomb space is dynamic and produces a multisensory effect (Fig. 18). It must be imagined as one of sensory saturation: a narrow, very long corridor, pierced by deep niches, with a ceiling rising to three meters in height—a space both enclosed and punctuated by openings whose boundaries are barely discernible. These haptic (and likely auditory) sensations are complemented by a striking visual effect, described by David Wengrow as “at once mesmerizing and disorientating.”<sup>36</sup> This effect is created by surfaces entirely covered with trompe-l’œil depictions of a variety of multicolored patterns, rendered with extraordinary precision to evoke woven hangings and banners. These geometric motifs are visually vibrant, evoking the shifting movement of a kaleidoscope, and they imbue the monument with life, animating it. As L. Graham highlights in a study of geometric motifs in Egypt and Mesopotamia, such patterns are far more than decorative; they actively engage the viewer, creating a dynamic interplay between perception and architectural space. In this sense, they find their counterpart “in the modern world, [when] artists in traditional societies use the shimmer of optically active repetitive patterns to convey spiritual power, and a similar motivation may have informed the creation of the dazzling tableaux at Saqqara.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> WENGROW 2006, p. 240.

<sup>37</sup> GRAHAM 2019, n. 84, with references to Australian aboriginal art: ISAACS 1999, p. 40; MORPHY 2013, pp. 185–189.



FIG. 18. Restitution of the light-scape in the chapel (Paul François/LA3M-CNRS).

## 2. HESY-RA'S IDENTITY AND SELF-PRESENTATION: AN ADMINISTRATOR OF MINERAL RESOURCES WITH A RITUAL ROLE IN THE *SED* FESTIVAL?

Hesy-ra's identity is often overshadowed by his fame in literature as the first dentist in Ancient Egypt—if not in human history. His social standing, evident from his tomb and the high quality of his panels, and his depiction carrying scribal equipment in each of these panels, is frequently cited as proof of the importance of scribes in Ancient Egypt.<sup>38</sup> These ideas, repeated in numerous publications and echoed in popular art history accounts, appear to have discouraged scholars from closely re-examining Hesy-ra's titles, as if the matter had been conclusively settled. However, a careful reader of the literature will notice occasional doubts expressed early on, about whether Hesy-ra was truly a dentist or even a courtly scholar.

Upon closely examining the coherence of the titles in their historical context at the end of the Thinite period, it becomes evident that Hesy-ra held a significant position as the head of the royal organization of scribes. This role specifically entailed overseeing various institutional activities, with a specific focus on managing economic operations, notably the mining activities in the deserts, possibly including the Eastern Desert. We must also note how many of these titles can be traced back to the early Dynastic period and disappear just after the time of Hesy-ra.

<sup>38</sup> An example of this commonplace: MICHALOWSKI 1994, p. 205.

The first panel (CG 1426, cat. 1) contains all of Hesy-ra's known titles, whereas the others present only a selection (Fig. 19).

Title	Translation	CG 1426	CG 1427	CG 1428	CG 1429	CG 1430	SR 15065
<i>wr jbh swm</i>	Chief of the spears and arrowheads						
<i>hkꜛ Mhyt</i>	<i>Heka</i> -priest of Mehyt						
<i>smsw Qd-hꜛtp</i>	Elder of the <i>Qed-hotep</i>						
<i>Mꜛ.tj Mnw</i>	He-who-is-seen-by-Min						
<i>(j)r(y)-ht-nswt</i>	Officer of royal property						
<i>mdh sꜛ-nswt</i>	Master scribe of the king						
<i>wr 'rf</i>	Chief of the bags						
<i>jt Mnw</i>	(Divine) father of Min						
<i>mdh [lion goddess]</i>	Master of [lion goddess]						
<i>wr P</i>	Chief of Buto						
<i>hꜛt sjnw</i>	Head of the messengers						
<i>wr md Sm'</i>	Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt						
<i>hm-nꜛr Hr msn P</i>	Priest of Horus-Harpooner-of-Buto						

FIG. 19. Hesy-ra's titles and their distributions across the panels.

Wolfgang Helck, who meticulously analyzed Hesy-ra's titles, focused in particular on their graphic layout on the panels and the organization of title sequences.<sup>39</sup> Four panels show a fixed sequence of titles (CG 1427, CG 1429, CG 1430, SR 15065). This sequence begins with the primary functional title *smsw (hwt) qd-hꜛtp*, followed by two related titles, *mdh H-t(?)* and *mdh sꜛ nswt*. This combination indicates that Hesy-ra was not only the head of the institution of *Qd-hꜛtp* but also belonged to the scribal profession. The latter two titles are found together in other title chains from the Thinite period and early Old Kingdom.<sup>40</sup> W. Helck suggests that the deity mentioned may symbolize the scribal profession, though this interpretation is difficult to verify. Nevertheless, the consistent pairing of the title *mdh [lion goddess]* with "Master scribe of the king" supports this interpretation.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> HELCK 1987, pp. 258–261.

<sup>40</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 260.

<sup>41</sup> See the table of a contemporary to Hesy-ra, *Nfr-sꜛm-R'*, who was *mdh sꜛ nswt*, *mdh [lion goddess]*, *hꜛp sꜛ*, *hkꜛ Mhyt Sꜛt*, *hntt pr-mdꜛt*, *(j)r(y)-ht nswt* ("Master scribe of the king, Master of the Lioness-god(?), Controller of the scribes, *Heka*-priest of Mehyt, Foremost of the House of Scrolls, Officer of the royal property), cf. WARD 1964; the stela of *Wp-m-nꜛft*: *mdh sꜛ nswt mdh [lion numen]*, *hm-nꜛr Sꜛt*, *hntt pr-mdꜛt*, *(j)r(y)-ht nswt*, *hm bꜛw P*, *hm-nꜛr Hr mhꜛy*, *hm-nꜛr Jnpw*, *'d-mr wh'*, *wr io Sm'w*, *hkꜛ Mhyt...* (Master scribe of the king, Master of the Lioness-god(?), Priest of Seshat, Foremost of the House of Scrolls, Officer of the royal property, Priest of the Souls of Buto, Priest of the Northern Horus, Priest of Anubis, Overseer of fishers, Great One of the Ten of Upper Egypt, *heka*-priest of Mehyt), cf. DER MANUELIAN 2003, pp. 32–36 (Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, UC Berkeley, 6–19825).

## 2.1. The institution of the *Qd-ḥtp*

The *Qd-ḥtp* seems to have served as a chapel or a palace during the *sed* festival (Fig. 20). It is depicted as the second building the king enters, after being anointed in a structure topped with the standards of Upuaut and of the *bau* of Hierakonpolis, still wearing his festival attire. The term refers to the “building of rest” as opposed to the “building of appearance” (*qd-ḥꜣw*).<sup>42</sup>

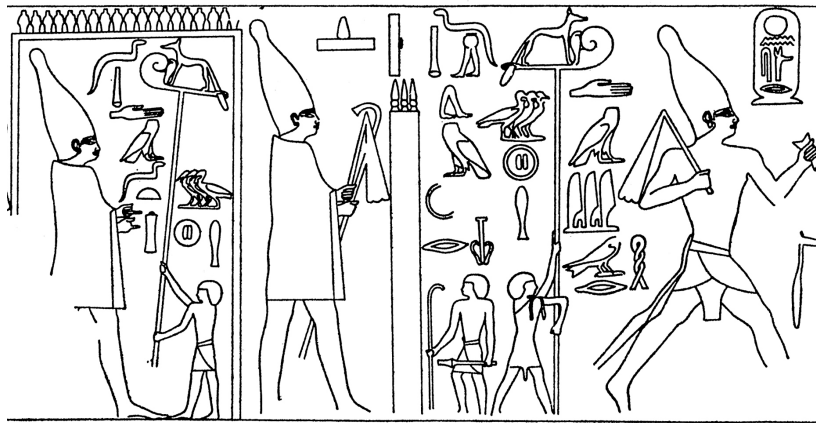


FIG. 20. Detail from the small representation of the *sed* festival in the sun temple of Niuserre (after Kaiser 1971, pl. IV, nr. 33–34).

By extension, the building’s name came to denote the institution it housed, whose chief was an elder-*smsw*.<sup>43</sup> An ivory tag from the time of Djer mentions a *ḥwt Qd-ḥtp* associated with the well-known administrator of economic endowments, *Swdj-ka* (*Swd-kꜣ*), from Mastaba S3504.<sup>44</sup> This institution is also associated with the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, as seen on a stone vase also dating to the First Dynasty.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, it appears in an ink inscription on an alabaster vase from Mastaba S2429, probably indicating the origin of the vase and its contents.<sup>46</sup>

The status of this institution as an organized administrative entity with economic and productive activities is confirmed by the titles recorded during the Thinite period and the objects bearing its name.<sup>47</sup> This palace institution played an economic role, particularly in the management of goods and raw materials. In the 2nd Dynasty, *Mry-jt*, who held the title *wꜣ-mdw Qd-ḥtp*, was also “Administrator of the Hall and the Great Cellar” (*ḥrp-sh-ḥnty-wr*), as well as “Administrator of the Department of Living” (*ḥrp-sh-ḥꜣ-ḥꜣ*), indicating his involvement in provisioning activities. He was also a ship-carpenter (*mꜣn-mḥn*), possibly suggesting a link to royal expeditions, and his role of priest of Khnum (*ḥm Ḥnmw*) likely linked him to both the palace and craftsmanship.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> BAUD 1999, p. 271.

<sup>44</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 237; PETRIE 1900, vol. 2, pl. 12, no. 3.

<sup>45</sup> PETRIE 1900, vol. 1, pl. 6, no. 8.

<sup>46</sup> QUIBELL 1923, p. 10, pl. 23.


<sup>47</sup> HELCK 1987, pp. 237–238; KAPLONY 1966, pl. 5, no. 1095; PETRIE 1900, pl. 6.8; PETRIE 1901, pl. 12.3; MACRAMALLAH 1940, p. 22, fig. 55; SAAD 1969, no. 2.

<sup>48</sup> HELCK 1987, pp. 237–238; KAPLONY 1966, pl. 5, no. 1095.

## 2.2. Roles related to desert expeditions

Three titles are of particular interest in relation to Hesy-ra's administrative and economic role: *wr ṛfw* (“Chief of the bags,” *wr jbh* (or *bjj*) *swn* “Chief of the metal spears and arrowheads” and *ḥꜣt-sjnw* “Head of the couriers.”

The first title, which W. Helck translates as “*Grosse der Beutel(träger)*,” in his view refers to those who transported gold in bags.<sup>49</sup> The word *ṛfw* indeed refers to leather or cloth carriers used for storing and transporting various ores, particularly gold.<sup>50</sup> The third title, *ḥꜣt-(s)jnw*, is otherwise unattested in this lexical combination but does appear as *wr-(s)jnw*, likely with the same meaning as “Head/Chief of the Messengers.”<sup>51</sup> The title “*ḥꜣt+* [people or institution]” is attested in the Old Kingdom.<sup>52</sup>

The second title has often been misinterpreted as referring to a head dentist and physician,<sup>53</sup> although the correct forms would be *wr swn(w)*<sup>54</sup> and *wr jbh(yw)*.<sup>55</sup> Besides these lexical forms, the title *swnw* is never written without the small pot *nw* (W24), and these medical titles do not appear before the 5th dynasty.<sup>56</sup> However, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, Raymond Weill translated Hesy-ra's title as “*chef de l'épieu et de la flèche*,” interpreting the signs as logograms and linking the function to the domains of desert and hunting.<sup>57</sup> The sign later interpreted as F18 (𐀀) could simply be F16 (𐀀), representing a mammal horn. W. Helck, following R. Weill and doubting the medical interpretation, translated this title as “*Grosser der Elfenbein- und Pfeilschnitzer*” (“Chief of the ivory and arrowhead carvers”).<sup>58</sup> Considering the association of Hesy-ra with copper in his tomb, we propose to take this interpretation a step further and read the first logogram as *bjj*, a phonetic value of the sign, and translate it as “metal spears.”<sup>59</sup> This title might be connected to the copper picks mentioned on a label from Den, spelled with the logogram for metal  and the horn, and referring to “copper spears.”<sup>60</sup>

The connection of Hesy-ra with desert expeditions for mineral extraction such as copper and gold may be suggested not only by his titles but also by the representation of his funerary equipment on the opposite wall of the corridor. Halfway through this display, there is a series of trays displaying various utensils, many evidently made of metal. Notably, one tray holds a collection of tools and instruments, probably made of copper with wooden handles, alongside daggers in their sheaths, razors, and points—possibly needles—and tweezers.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, at the end of this arrangement (i.e., at the northern end of the corridor), two trays display several

<sup>49</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 261.

<sup>50</sup> SCHEEL 1986, pp. 200–201.

<sup>51</sup> ODLER 2023, pp. 71–73.

<sup>52</sup> See JONES 2000, no. 1852 (*ḥꜣt(y) (j)m(yw) stp-s*); no. 1854 (*ḥꜣt(y) jbh*); no. 1855 (*ḥꜣt(y) hry(w)-tp nb(w)*, *Šm' mj-qd.f*); no. 1856 (*ḥꜣt(y) sh*); no. 1857 (*ḥꜣt(y) tmut*).

<sup>53</sup> See bibliography in JONES 2000, pp. 381, 396–397.

<sup>54</sup> JONES 2000, no. 1462.

<sup>55</sup> JONES 2000, no. 1412.

<sup>56</sup> Personal communication from Marina Massoumipour-Masset, who is preparing a PhD dissertation on “*Les Médecins et dentistes de l'Égypte ancienne*,” Sorbonne Université.

<sup>57</sup> We are grateful to Marina Massoumipour-Masset for this reference.

<sup>58</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 261.

<sup>59</sup> GARDINER 1957, p. 463.

<sup>60</sup> GRAEFE 1971, p. 82; KAPLONY 1966, p. 166; ODLER 2023, p. 72.

<sup>61</sup> QUIBELL 1913, pl. XXII; see ODLER 2023, p. 157–159.

sets of weights in multiples of 10 and *cubits* (units of length and weight), followed by a large tray (or chest) containing carpentry tools such as axes, saws, chisels, and drills. The handles are painted yellow, indicating wood as expected, as in the rows of weights preceding them.<sup>62</sup>

We know that in Ancient Egypt, the measurement of weights was closely connected to the value of metal,<sup>63</sup> and the weights depicted in Hesy-ra's context are reminiscent of those dating to the Protodynastic period<sup>64</sup> and associated with copper *debens*.

This prominent presence of copper highlights Hesy-ra's access to valuable minerals and his role as the king's scribe, a key figure in the institutional control of production. This is further evidenced by the inclusion of what has been identified as grain measures in the decorative program, corresponding to fractions of *heqat*.<sup>65</sup> A similar connection between funerary self-presentation and mining and metallurgical activities is attested around the same period among the outer elite. In the nearby necropolis of Helwan, a tomb from the 2nd Dynasty depicts the metallurgist (*mdh*) Wab-Khnum surrounded by numerous metal objects and crucibles.<sup>66</sup>

The excavation of Hesy-ra's monument conducted by Quibell during the winter of 1911-1912 produced few artifacts. Copper was nonetheless present, in the form of a small model knife<sup>67</sup>—probably part of the funerary equipment—along with other metal fragments, also identified at the time as copper.<sup>68</sup>

There is little doubt that the exploitation of deserts and copper resources was a major concern during the reign of Djoser, crucial to supporting the vast architectural programs for which copper was indispensable. While the best-known copper sources were located in the Sinai, with expeditions documented as early as the Protodynastic period,<sup>69</sup> copper ore and other metals could also be obtained in the Eastern Desert, a region explicitly associated with Hesy-ra (see below). One example of this is the Wadi Dara, exploited during the Thinite period and early Old Kingdom.<sup>70</sup> The palace was directly involved in these mining expeditions through the supervision of officials from the royal household,<sup>71</sup> thus likely involving Hesy-ra.

### 2.3. Master scribe of the king

Hesy-ra is closely associated with the administrative control of economic activities—the very role of the scribe (*sš*) within the Egyptian state. On the panels, he is shown with his writing instruments, clearly presenting him as the king's chief scribe, a role further confirmed by his title *mdh sš nswt*, and what appears to be his accompanying title *mdh* [lion-goddess]), “Chief of the cult of [lion-goddess].” These two titles appear in combination during the 3rd

62 QUIBELL 1913, p. 21, 33, pl. XVI. Text: KAHL et al. 1995, p. 93.

63 ODLER 2023, p. 157.

64 ODLER 2023, p. 157.

65 QUIBELL 1913, pl. XVI; POMMERENING 2005, pp. 281–287; MIATELLO 2023.

66 KÖHLER, JONES, 2009, p. 149; ODLER 2023, p. 53.

67 QUIBELL 1913, pl. XXVIII, no. 26.

68 QUIBELL 1913, pp. 39–40.

69 ODLER 2023, pp. 105–107.

70 E.g. CASTEL et al. 1995; CASTEL et al. 1992; CASTEL, POUIT 1997.

71 TALLET, LAISNEY 2015, p. 39.

and 4th Dynasties, before the former was replaced by  $(j)m(y)-r(\text{z}) s\acute{s}^{\prime} -nswt$ .<sup>72</sup> A parallel example is that of Nefer-seshem-Re, whose name and titles are inscribed on a stone dish found at Byblos:  $Nfr-s\acute{s}m-r^{\prime} mdh s\acute{s} nswt mdh$  [lion-goddess]  $hrp s\acute{s} hkz Mhyt s\acute{s}t hnty pr-md\acute{s}t$ , meaning “Nefer-seshem-Re, Master scribe of the king, Master of [lion-goddess], Overseer of scribes, Magician priest of Mehyet and Seshat who presides over the House of Books.”<sup>73</sup> Notably the element  $r^{\prime}$  is written phonetically, as it is in Hesy-ra’s name ( $\overline{r}$ ). In the 4th Dynasty, the architect of Khufu’s pyramid, Upuemnofret, held among other titles  $mdh s\acute{s} nswt mdh$  [lion-goddess],  $hm-ntr S\acute{s}t hnt(y)t pr md\acute{s}t rh nswt hkz Mht$ , meaning “Master scribe of the king, Master of [lion-goddess], Priest of Seshat who presides over the House of Books, Known to the King, Magician priest of Mehet,”<sup>74</sup> as well as  $wr mh \acute{S}m^{\prime}w$ , “Great of the Ten of Upper Egypt.” Another relevant example, probably slightly later, is Mer, buried in northern Saqqara. His primary title was  $(j)m(y)-r(\text{z}) s\acute{s} md\acute{s}t^{\prime} n nswt$ , “Director of the scribes of the royal books and documents,” followed by the traditional  $mdh s\acute{s} nswt mdh$  [lion-goddess]. Mer was also directly associated with the Treasury and the Arsenal, linking him to an expeditionary role similar to that of Hesy-ra, albeit expressed in a more modernized formulation.<sup>75</sup>

The case of Hesy-ra exemplifies the culmination of the palace scribal system, that took shape at the end of the 1st Dynasty, shortly after the emergence of the title.<sup>76</sup> By the 2nd Dynasty—if not earlier—this organizational structure already encompassed expeditions into the deserts. Evidence for this appears on a small schist vase mentioning a “Scribe of the Desert Regions” ( $s\acute{s} smjw\acute{t} Stb Pr-jb-sn$ ) of Peribsen.<sup>77</sup> In Djoser’s time, a scribe holding the same title also bore the designation “Scribe of Gold” ( $s\acute{s} nbw$ ),<sup>78</sup> underscoring the link between these domains. On the ground, the rock inscription of the scribe Iny ( $s\acute{s} Jnw$ ) in the Wadi Ameyra attests to the presence of scribes within mining expeditions, possibly as early as the 1st Dynasty.<sup>79</sup>

This indicates that the role of scribes was integral not only to the palace’s administrative functions but also to logistical and managerial aspects of resource extraction and expeditionary activities.

## 2.4. Hesy-ra’s religious benefits

The titles held by Hesy-ra illustrate both his social standing and his economic capital, while also reflecting the structure of the state and the elite social world in which he operated. His ritual and priestly titles, although connecting him to the sacred realm, also brought him

<sup>72</sup> HELCK 1954, pp. 75–76.

<sup>73</sup> MONTET 1928, pp. 84, no. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Mastaba Giza G1201, stele HM\_6-19825 cf. <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/objects/45817/full/>; PIACENTINI 2002, p. C.GI.5.

<sup>75</sup> PIACENTINI 2002, pp. 394–395. And <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/clo1001200> (with complete bibliography).

<sup>76</sup> A funerary stela for one of the deceased accompanying Den belongs to an inspector of scribes ( $shd s\acute{s}w$ ), stela Hanover Kestner Museum 1935.200.35; MARTIN 2011, no. 188. Another one, from the late First Intermediary Period, is for a chancellor of the king of Lower Egypt ( $h\acute{t}m bji$ ) and administrator of scribes ( $hrp s\acute{s}w$ ), stela Ashmolean Museum E3977; MARTIN 2011, no. 43.

<sup>77</sup> KAPLONY 1968, p. 39, no. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Cairo JE 34897; Cairo JE 34900; KAHL 1994, p. 375, nos. 24–25; KAPLONY 1963, pl. 92, fig. 352; PIACENTINI 2002, pp. 65–66.

<sup>79</sup> TALLET, LAISNEY 2015, doc. 322, 34, pl. 43.

substantial income. Some of the religious benefits indicated by Hesy-ra's titles have genealogical and etymological ties to the Eastern Desert, though it remains uncertain how active these connections were by the end of the Thinite period and the beginning of the Old Kingdom. For example, the title "Divine father of Min" (*jt Mjn*) or "He-who-is-seen-by-Min" (*m33.ty Mjn*), associated with the god Min, is significant: Min was closely linked to Coptos, the starting point for routes and tracks leading to the Red Sea, and thus the natural patron of prospectors and leaders expeditions in the region.<sup>80</sup>

Other titles point to sacerdotal benefits. The title "Great One of Buto," attested since the Thinite period,<sup>81</sup> together with that of Priest of Horus-Harpooner-of-Buto, indicates that Hesy-ra received benefits from domains in the western Delta, although the reason for his association with this region remains unclear. Horus of Buto was a dynastic deity linked to the throne since the beginning of the 1st Dynasty.<sup>82</sup>

However, as Pierre Tallet has noted, a question arises regarding the possible connection—whether real or memorial—between Hesy-ra and an agricultural domain in the eastern Delta, in the Nome of the Dolphin. This link is suggested by the toponym Ibet-Hesy-ra (*Jbt-Hsj-r*) in one of Wadi Jarf papyri (Papyrus H, col. 3, l. 2). This establishment—probably a royal foundation—supplied cereals to the teams of royal workers.<sup>83</sup>

## 2.5. Rank titles: *Jry-ht-nswt* and *Wr-10-Šm'w*

In summary, Hesy-ra held relatively few titles of rank. The title "Great One of the Ten of Upper Egypt" (*wr 10 Šm'w*), which in Naqada II period referred to those who accompanied the king in his rituals, later became associated with the judicial sphere.<sup>84</sup> It should primarily be understood as denoting membership in a group of high-ranking dignitaries who assisted the king in managing his estates and the state.

The title "Officer of Royal Property" (*jry ht nswt*) was likely still a functional designation at the end of the Thinite period, before evolving in the Old Kingdom into a classic title of rank, eventually understood as "Known to the king" (*rh-nswt*).<sup>85</sup> The "royal property" in question could include the king's regalia and other valuable possession. In Hesy-ra's case, the link to the Qed-hotep should not be overlooked. Whether this title was purely ritual or carried an economic function is difficult to determine; however, the fact that it was also held by nomarchs and dignitaries of El Kab—who were connected to the exploitation of the Eastern Desert and its mineral resources—supports the latter interpretation and aligns with Hesy-ra's broader functions.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup> ODLER 2023, p. 123.

<sup>81</sup> See the titles on a sealing from the tomb of Merka in Saqqara (S3505): HELCK 1987, pp. 236–237; KAPLONY 1963, no. 366.

<sup>82</sup> *Wr P*: attested as early as Dynasty I, under Qaa: KAPLONY 1963, p. 583 (II), pl. 94.

<sup>83</sup> TALLET 2017, p. 107.

<sup>84</sup> HELCK 1987, p. 243

<sup>85</sup> FISCHER 1976, p. 69; GOEDICKE 1966, pp. 61–62; HELCK 1956, p. 63; HELCK 1954, pp. 26–27.

<sup>86</sup> QUIBELL 1898, pp. 3–4, pl. XVIII; WILLEMS 2008, p. 19.

### 3. HESY-RA'S SELF-PRESENTATION: PANELS' ORDER AND ROYAL CYCLE

Hesy-ra's self-presentation is a complex ensemble combining architecture, epigraphy, and decoration. Its focal point is undoubtedly the series of eleven panels on the west wall of the corridor chapel. Yet the original arrangement of the six surviving panels remains largely uncertain.

Auguste Mariette removed five of these panels without offering any recorded comment on their original sequence. Four of them were later displayed in the Boulaq Museum, and they first appear in print in the fifth edition of the *Notice descriptive* of the Boulaq collections in 1874, in an appendix<sup>87</sup> that complements the photograph published in the *Album* in 1872,<sup>88</sup> before being described in his posthumous book on mastabas.<sup>89</sup> In all these publications, the three panels followed the sequence recorded in the general catalog (CG 1426, CG 1427, and CG 1428).

Quibell notes that some niches still contained panels, despite their varying states of decay. He recorded that the five panels removed by Mariette (CG 1426, 1427, 1428, 1429, and 1430) had come from the five southernmost niches. Quibell himself found panel SR 15065 *in situ* in the northernmost niche, at the end of the corridor.<sup>90</sup>

To reconstruct their likely arrangement, we must rely solely on the content and iconography of the panels themselves, interpreting them through the lens of Egyptian decorum and the rules of figuration, including conventions governing the appropriate use of imagery, themes, and motifs. Although necessarily speculative, this methodological approach enables us to move beyond the limitations of the surviving evidence and to propose plausible sequence for their original display. In this endeavour, several key considerations must be addressed:

- a. The conventions of Egyptian figuration and portraiture, together with the specific semiotics of Egyptian imagery,<sup>91</sup> cannot be interpreted literally by modern viewers. These representations are not “realistic” in the contemporary sense. While an Egyptian portrait may reflect certain individual traits, it also incorporated idealized features that carry symbolic meaning, including indicators of age.<sup>92</sup> The arrangement of the panels is governed by rhythm and symbolism rather than by narrative sequence.<sup>93</sup>
- b. In addition, Egyptian visuality operates according to the specific conventions of Egyptian art, often described by the term “aspective”—an object-centered mode of depiction.<sup>94</sup> This system extends beyond natural human perception, combining multiple viewpoints and orientations within the same object, and offering different directions in which the image can be read. Vectoriality—the sequence in which the viewer is guided from one

<sup>87</sup> MARIETTE 1874, pp. 314–315: “Quatre panneaux de bois qui couvraient le fond de quatre fausses portes dans le tombeau d'Hosi. L'œil est un peu dépaycé devant ces singuliers monuments. L'extrême finesse de la sculpture, le profil accentué et peut-être un peu rude du personnage, la disposition inusitée des ustensiles qu'il tient en main, les formes rares d'hiéroglyphes, frappent l'attention. Nous n'avons pas trouvé dans le tombeau d'Hosi de preuves qui nous permettent d'en préciser l'époque. Les panneaux que nous avons devant nous ne peuvent cependant pas descendre plus bas que le règne de Chéops, et selon toute vraisemblance ils lui sont antérieurs.”

<sup>88</sup> MARIETTE 1872, pl. 12.

<sup>89</sup> MARIETTE 1882, pp. 80–82.

<sup>90</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> TEFNIN 1979, p. 241.

<sup>92</sup> LABOURY 2009.

<sup>93</sup> BAINES 1999, p. 28–29.

<sup>94</sup> BAINES 2007, p. 213.

element to another—is essential and distinctly dual: on the one hand, the east-west axis, leading from the outside world to the necropolis, from the entrance to the first panel, from the east wall to the niches;<sup>95</sup> on the other hand, the south-north axis, running from the first niche to the end of the corridor.

- c. The non-synchronous temporalities of the monument and its panels nonetheless form a coherent and self-sufficient whole. While the panels are published and studied as a unified set, it is important to remember that this ensemble emerged from a staggered process over time rather than from a single, original design.<sup>96</sup> The mastaba underwent three phases of expansion, with its original architectural plan repeatedly enlarged and adapted. It is therefore highly probable that the panels were not produced all at once as part of a single project: variations in style and in the paleography of the hieroglyphs strongly suggest otherwise. What we see today represents the monument's final phase—cohesive in appearance, yet the product of successive interventions rather than a single, initial conception.

The choice of wooden panels can be explained, in practical terms, by the ready availability of acacia wood. Symbolically, wood was also a common material for private statues, which the panels are understood to represent (see below). Moreover, several wooden panels are known from the Old Kingdom, and it is quite possible that they were more widespread than the surviving evidence would suggest.<sup>97</sup>

### 3.1. CGC 1426 and CGC 1428 as an original pair from the first stage of the mastaba

As W. Davis has observed,<sup>98</sup> the panels CG 1426 and CG 1428<sup>99</sup> stand apart from the rest of the composition through their distinctive selection of titles, the arrangement of hieroglyphs, and specific stylistic features.

Panel CG 1426 reflects the canonical theme of the funerary stela as it developed from the end of the 1st Dynasty onward in Helwan and Saqqara, marking the standardization of the funerary meal during the 3rd Dynasty. Tall, rectangular stelae with titles and offerings first appear with the stela of Merka from Saqqara,<sup>100</sup> which features a list of offerings and an offering table

<sup>95</sup> DAVIS 2003; DAVIS 2017.

<sup>96</sup> DAVIS 2003, pp. 41–42.

<sup>97</sup> The known wooden stela and from the Old Kingdom are dated to Dynasty 5 on stylistic grounds: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo10009281>; ZIEGLER 1990, no. 16, pp. 104–107.

The composite panels of Neferkhwu (Louvre E 17233, 5th Dynasty): ZIEGLER 1990, no. 28, p. 176–186, can be compared to the complete wooden false door of Ika in the Egyptian Museum (Cairo JE 72201), also dated to the 5th Dynasty.

A fragmentary wooden relief, dated to the end of the Old Kingdom, is also known (Louvre E 20369): ZIEGLER 1990, pp. 241–243, no. 44.

Noteworthy, too, is the wooden stela found *in situ* in a 5th Dynasty mastaba, set within a similar niche and closely resembling Hesy-ra in shape and structure: KANAWATI 2013.

<sup>98</sup> DAVIS 2003.

<sup>99</sup> Photographs, drawings and editions of the individual panels are to be found in the catalogue at the end of the article.

<sup>100</sup> EMERY et al. 1958, pl. 39; BAINES 1999, pp. 26–27.

with a long, split foot, topped with loaves arranged in two symmetrical groups.<sup>101</sup> Hesy-ra is shown seated on the left side of a relatively tall stool, its single visible leg carved in the form of a bovine hind leg, the stool itself set on drum bases. Hesy-ra's legs obscure the stool's front legs. Over his right shoulder, he carries his scribal equipment. He wears a short, rounded wig composed of 21 horizontal rows of small, pointed circles radiating in wavy lines from the crown of his head and fully covering the ears. This wig type (seen in CG 1426, 1430) is rare; an early example occurs in Helwan on the stela of [...]sisi,<sup>102</sup> and another in that of Kha-bau-sokar.<sup>103</sup> The long garment, fastened with two parallel ribbons draped over the shoulder, first appears in the 2nd Dynasty<sup>104</sup> and becomes more common in the 3rd and 4th Dynasties.<sup>105</sup>

Panel CG 1428 depicts Hesy-ra standing, offering a clear illustration of how, during this period, the representation of the deceased in a standing posture emerged alongside the traditional funerary meal motif. Hourig Sourouzian links this new iconography—found in both relief and statuary—to the architectural development of deep niches with elongated panels, which appear to invite the tomb owner to stand and take an active role in the funerary cult.<sup>106</sup> Another likely source of inspiration is the series of limestone panels carved for Djoser in the underground chambers of his mastaba (Fig. 30).

In this panel, Hesy-ra wears the same short kilt seen in the other panels of the series. His wig, however, is markedly different, composed of tight, rounded curls and ringlets. This hairstyle can be traced back to Naqada III, in both two and three-dimensional art, such as the Battlefield Palette (London Museum EA 20791<sup>107</sup>) and a faience statuette (Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908.E.1057<sup>108</sup>), and appears only sporadically in varied forms in later periods.<sup>109</sup> Its presence suggests an earlier date, and W. Davis identifies such stylistic elements as characteristic of the 2nd Dynasty<sup>110</sup>.

The stela depicting Abneb in a double representation shows him wearing the same two wig styles as those in CG 1426 and CG 1428, providing further support for associating these panels (see Fig. 23).

The most distinguishing feature setting CG 1426 and CG 1428 apart as a pair is the layout of the texts and the arrangement of the hieroglyphs.

<sup>101</sup> SOUROUZIAN 1998, p. 321. Examples in DER MANUELIAN 2003, p. 228 (figs. 271–272), p. 229 (figs. 273, 277), p. 230 (figs. 279–284), p. 131 (figs. 285, 288), p. 232 (fig. 292), p. 233 (fig. 300), 234 (figs. 301, 303).

<sup>102</sup> KÖHLER, JONES 2009, pp. 184–185, pl. 33.

<sup>103</sup> CHERPION 1999, figs. 63–64; this type of wigs was also represented during the 4th Dynasty; see, for example, the wig of Mer-ib (Berlin Museum 1107) or Akhet-hotep (Metropolitan Museum 580123).

<sup>104</sup> See stelae of Sehener: S2146E, cf. QUIBELL 1923, p. 10, pls. 26–27; DER MANUELIAN 2003, p. 230, fig. 283; Shepset-Ipet (S3477): DODSON, HILTON 2004, p. 49; Nytwa and Nytneb (Louvre E 27157): ZIEGLER 1990, no. 23, pp. 157–160.

<sup>105</sup> Examples see: DER MANUELIAN 2003, p. 230, figs. 280–284; p. 231, figs. 285, 288–289; p. 232, figs. 290–293; p. 233, figs. 295, 298–300; p. 234, figs. 301, 304; p. 235, fig. 309.

<sup>106</sup> SOUROUZIAN 1998, p. 321.

<sup>107</sup> PATCH 2011, pp. 147–149, cat. 123.

<sup>108</sup> <https://images.ashmolean.org/search/?searchQuery=E.1057>.

<sup>109</sup> See bronze statue of King Merenre (Cairo Museum JE 33035; ECKMANN, SHAFIK 2002, fig. 24a; limestone sarcophagus relief of Princesses Kawit and Ashait, wives of Mentuhotep II (Cairo Museum JE 47267 and JE 47397; SALEH, SOUROUZIAN 1987, cat. 68–69); wooden statue of Imhotep from Deir el-Bahari (Calouste Gulbenkian museum, Lisbon, Portugal no. 142; ARAÚJO 2006, pp. 63–65, cat. 3).

<sup>110</sup> DAVIS 2003, p. 51.

As noted earlier, the title slabs on CG 1427, 1429, 1430, and SR 15065 are identical in form (Fig. 22). In these latter panels, the title section is clearly set apart from the scene by a carved dividing line. In contrast, no such separation exists on 1426 and 1428, where the titles and imagery share the same continuous field (Fig. 21).

The spatial arrangement of hieroglyphs also marks a clear distinction between the two sets of panels. At the turn of the Old Kingdom, exposed monumental writing was very limited, generally restricted to funerary slabs bearing brief inscriptions. In CG 1426 and CG 1428, the layout of signs within quadrats is irregular—incomplete and overlapping—unlike the orderly arrangement seen in the four other panels (Fig. 22). The proposed diagram (Fig. 23) illustrates this non-standard organization of the hieroglyphs.

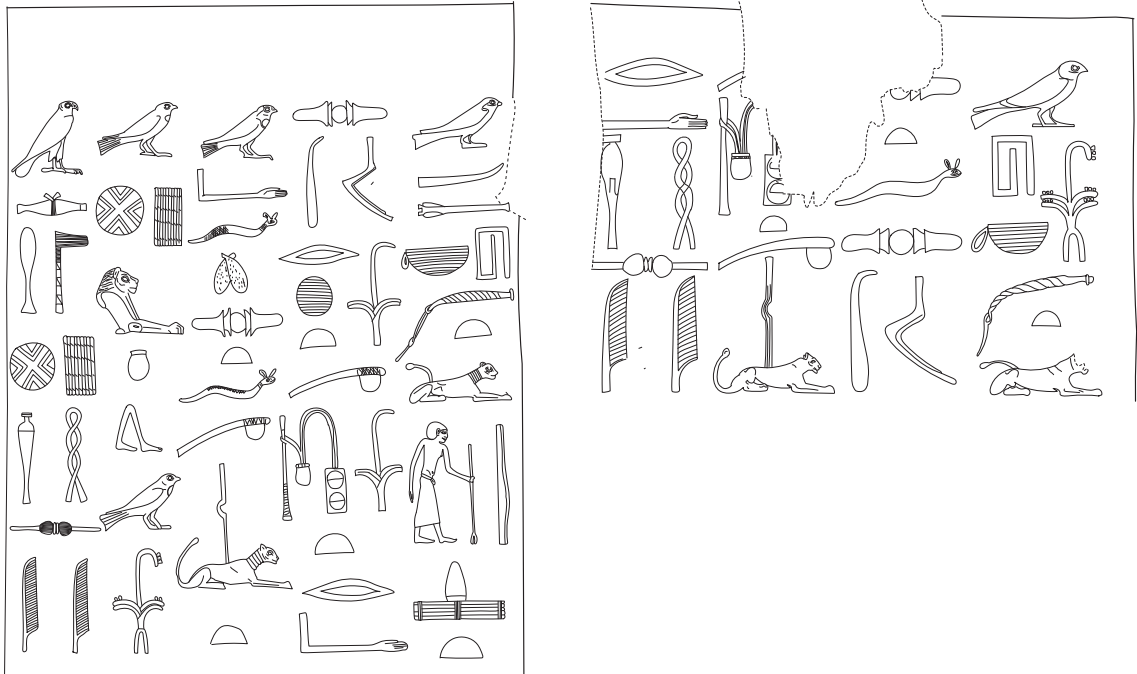


FIG. 21. Title slabs on panels CG 1426 and CG 1428.

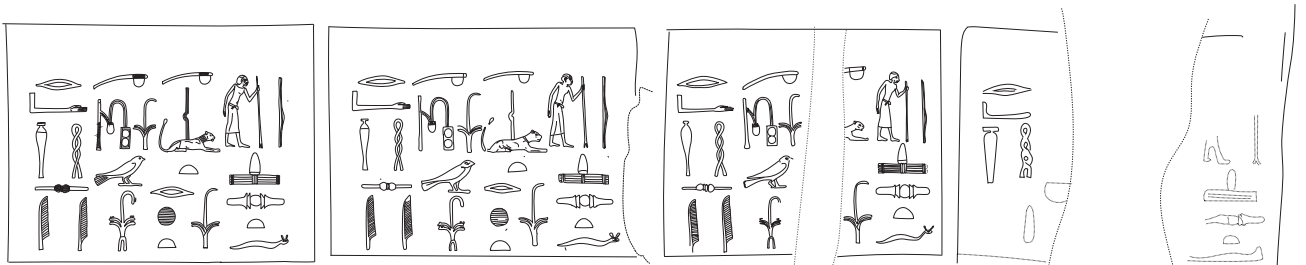


FIG. 22. Title slabs on panels CG 1427, CG 1429, CG 1430, and SR 15065.

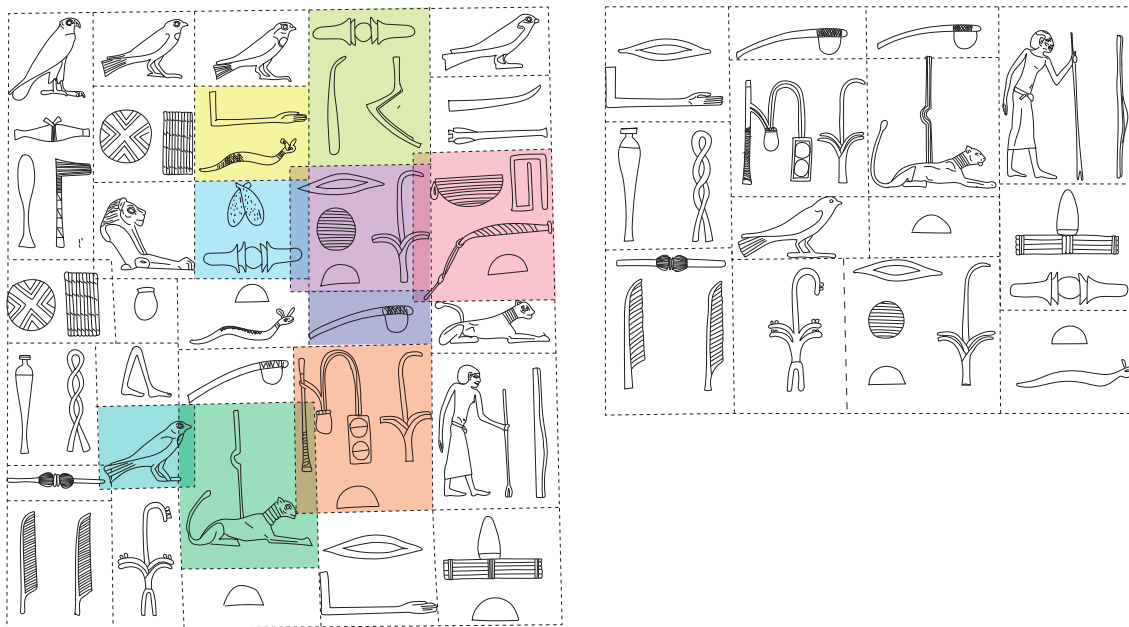


FIG. 23. Overlapping quadrats in panel CG 1426 versus distinct quadrats in panel CG 1427.

Similarly, the arrangement of lines and columns in the offering list on panel CG 1426 is not entirely consistent. In the second column, the second classifier—a piece of meat on a tray—for the word *mn(j)* ('gazelle meat') appears next to the first classifier (a gazelle head) and seems instead to belong to the third column (Fig. 24).

This non-canonical arrangement of sign-images recalls the aesthetic and artistic world of Thinite miniatures and seal impressions, at a time when the graphic conventions for arranging hieroglyphic signs had not yet fully crystallised—something that only occurred during the 3rd Dynasty. Several signs in Hesy-ra's titles, like some of the titles themselves, trace back to the Early Dynastic Period. By contrast, the more controlled columnar layout of the quartet of panels suggests a slightly later date of execution.

All these elements suggest to "the possibility that the reliefs—like the tomb itself—possessed an 'internal cultural temporality.'" <sup>111</sup> As noted in Section I, the corridor-chapel with its eleven niches possibly belongs to a second phase in the mastaba's development, expanding from an original nucleus that likely followed a more traditional plan with only two façade niches (see above). Panels CG 1426 and CG 1428 would therefore correspond to this initial phase of the Hesy-ra's mastaba, when the monument featured just two niches. Taken together, they invite comparison with the slab stela of Abneb, a contemporary of Hesy-ra,

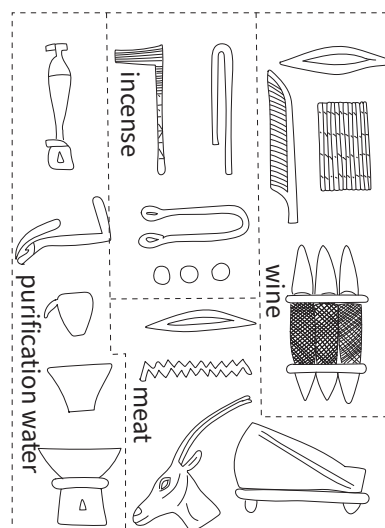
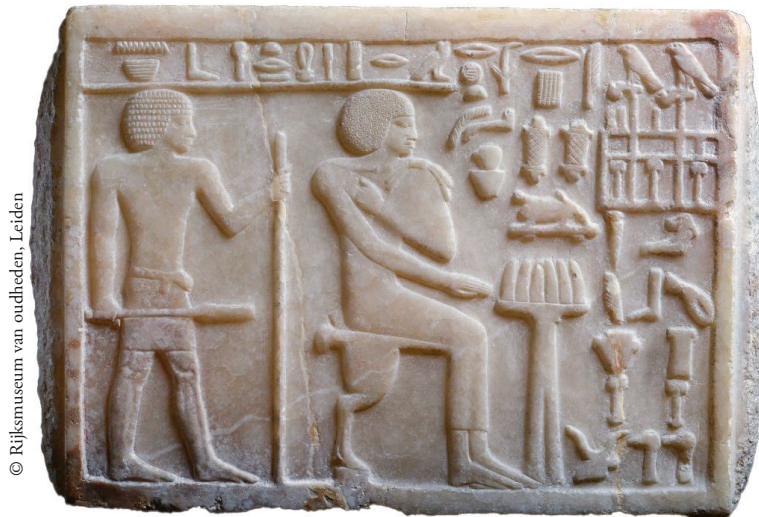


FIG. 24. Irregular column arrangement of signs in the offering list on panel CG 1426.

<sup>111</sup> DAVIS 2003, p. 41.

which offers an almost perfect parallel to this dual self-presentation (Fig. 25). On Abneb's stela, the deceased appears twice: in an active walking pose holding the insignia of power—a staff and scepter—and seated in a long Osirian mantle on a chair with bovine legs, before an offering table piled high with loaves of bread.



© Rijksmuseum van oudheden, Leiden

FIG. 25. Slab stela of Palace Steward Abneb, Leiden RMO AM 10-c.<sup>112</sup>

The cult niche of the tomb of Kha-bau-sokar and his wife (Fig. 26), located near that of Hesy-ra, presents a slightly different artistic solution for expressing the deceased dual identity of the tomb's dual function: the rear stela depicts the offering scene, while the two lateral walls portray the deceased in his official capacity, facing toward the world of the living.

This association also marks the introduction of this concept into Old Kingdom funerary architecture, in which the monument takes the form of a dual complex. It simultaneously accommodates the offering cult, ensuring the deceased's survival in the afterlife, and also commemorates their place in social memory through the evocation of their rank and functions. These two aspects are vividly expressed in the dual representation of the deceased—seated and standing—facing their visitors.

### 3.2. The series of eleven panels (Hesy II)

At a certain stage, the original mastaba nucleus was enlarged, giving rise to what was likely the monument's main phase. With this expansion and the creation of the long chapel-corridor, the points of contact and worship multiplied, now taking the form of eleven niches.

Nothing survives of the five central panels (niches 6 to 10), and they were never recorded. The final panel, SR 15065, was removed *in situ* by Quibell and shows Hesy-ra engaged in a ritual act. The remaining five panels can be securely assigned to the first five niches.

<sup>112</sup> <https://hdl.handle.net/21.12126/22538>.

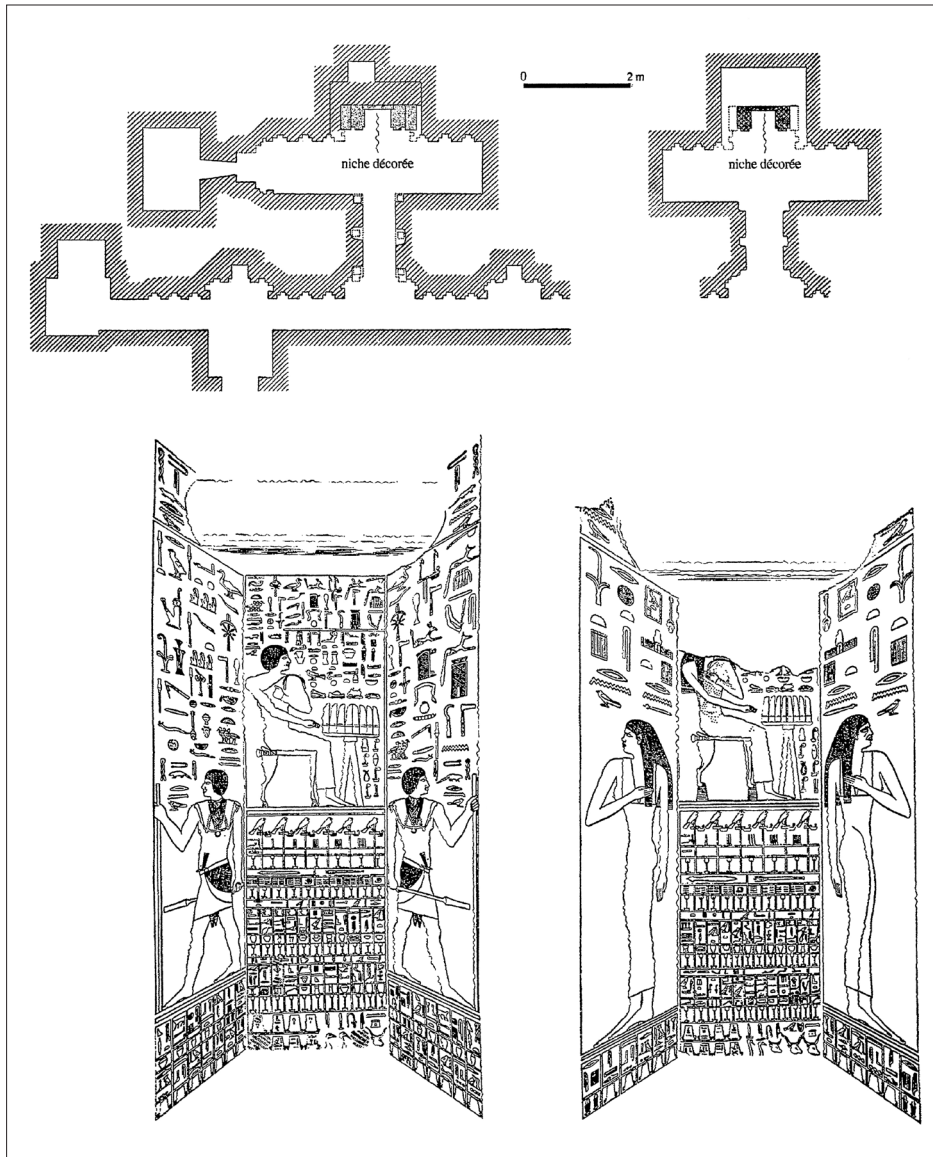


FIG. 26. Chapels and sculpted niche of Kha-bau-sokar and Neferhetepthor, drawings by M. Baud after Reisner and Murray (Baud 2007, p. 232, fig. 64).

### 3.2.1. *The funerary meal as the first panel (CG 1426)*

We follow—both here and in the context of the reinstallation of the panels in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo—the widely accepted argument put forward by Wendy Wood,<sup>113</sup> which identifies panel 1426 as the first in the sequence, corresponding to the southern end of the corridor. In this position, the niche aligns with the east-west axis—recalling the dual vectoriality discussed earlier—as a simple recess in the mastaba’s structure, mirroring the false-door stela of the southern niche in the façade, where the deceased is shown seated before his offering table. Facing the world of the living, this panel is also the most complete in terms of Hesy-ra’s titulary,

<sup>113</sup> DAVIS 2003; WOOD 1978.

as one would expect in such a prominent location. It simultaneously initiates the south-north axis and the alignment of the chapel, whose overarching theme centers on the offering cult.<sup>114</sup>

This contradicts Reisner's proposal, according to which the panel depicting Hesy-ra seated—the only example of this pose in the series—should have occupied the fifth niche, in order to align with the axis of the burial chamber, as was often the case with slab-stelae and mastabas, with panels depicting Hesy-ra standing placed on either side. However, as W. Wood points out, “Reisner never attempted to follow up his placement of the table scene with a full reconstruction of the reliefs. Nor did he attempt to interpret the series in the context of the function of the chapel and its decorative program.”<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the fifth niche is not, in fact, aligned with the burial chamber (Fig. 4), and the practice of placing the stela of the deceased seated before an offering table at the southern end of the eastern face of the mastaba appears to have been far more common—and far more consistent with the overall arrangement observed here.

### 3.2.2. *A binary sequence of panels*

It appears that, although the arrangement expanded from two panels to eleven, the formal and functional binary structure remained a key organizing principle of the new series. The panels are, in fact, divided into two distinct groups: those portraying an active Hesy-ra and those showing a passive Hesy-ra receiving offerings. The following figure (Fig. 27) illustrates the distribution of several iconographic markers between these two panel types.

Long straight wig	Short round wig
Arm extended forward	Arm folded
Insignia of rank and position	Offerings
Movement west-to-east	Movement east-to-west
<b>Active (ruling)</b>	<b>Passive (receiving offerings)</b>

FIG. 27. Comparative features of the two panel types.

The last panel (SR 15065) is an exception: although Hesy-ra is clearly shown in an active stance, a small list of offerings appears in front of his legs (see below). The series should therefore be considered as a series of ten panels plus one.

Binary organization is by no means foreign to Egyptian representation: on the contrary, Egyptian thought is, in part, inherently dualistic.<sup>116</sup> In this case, the binarity reflects the fundamental duality of the funerary monument outlined above: it is both a place for displaying the deceased's social identity and status as a dignitary, and a place for receiving the funerary cult—two aspects that are mutually sustaining and interdependent.

Furthermore, a tangible, context-specific element supports the notion that the panels were conceived as a binary structure. The detail has so far eluded historians studying Hesy-ra's panels, owing to the subtlety of the information in Quibell's publication. Only through reexamination of the panels during their recent redeployment were we able to fully appreciate its

<sup>114</sup> WOOD 1978, p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> WOOD 1978, p. 9.

<sup>116</sup> TEFNIN 1979, p. 229.

significance—an exercise that placed us in heuristic conditions akin to those of experimental archaeology.

As noted earlier, the niches were painted with trompe-l'œil motifs evoking large banners and tapestries. Quibell describes them as follows:

The niches were plastered, and the plaster painted with geometrical patterns in black, red, yellow, and green, evidently the usual patterns of the decorated niche; the color was rather dull, fragile, and threatening to fall, but enough remained for us to recognize the design on each panel, and the detail of the cording by which the mats were stretched taut [sic] was more carefully and less conventionally executed than in any examples known hitherto.

Quibell offers little further comment in the main body of the text; yet his description of the niches contains a crucial information: “The patterns on the niches reduced to 1/5 linear. The diagram above shows the order in which they recur; in the even-numbered niches, the design numbered 5 is on each side of the panel, in the odd-numbered niches, the design no. 8.”<sup>117</sup>

Put simply, there were two distinct hanging patterns in the niches, alternated in sequence.

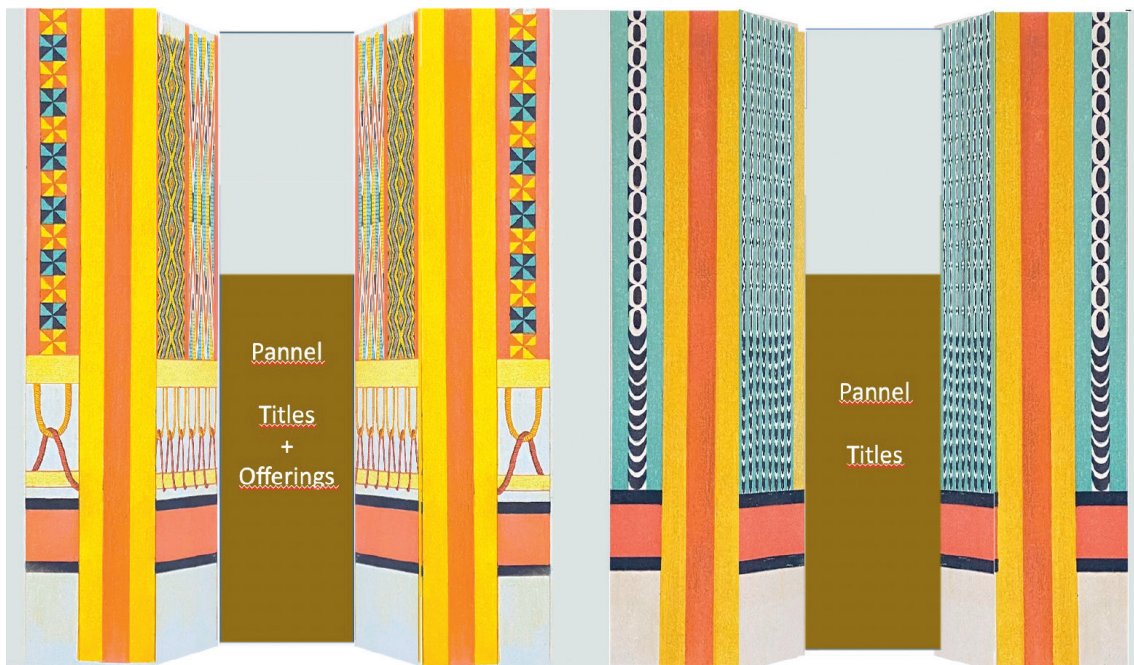


FIG. 28. Binary decorative scheme on the niches; left: niches 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11; right: niches 2, 4, 6, 8, 10.

This binary alternation of decorative motifs framing the niches provides a strong contextual argument in support of the hypothesis that the panels alternated between two models, depictions of Hesy-ra in an active role and those showing him receiving offerings (Fig. 28). Moreover, as John Baines has observed, “the alternation among attributes held and worn makes it likely that

117 QUIBELL 1913, p. 16.

an arrangement would be complex and rhythmically rather than sequentially patterned.”<sup>118</sup> This principle informed the arrangement of the panels in the new gallery of the Egyptian Museum.

The first panel (CG 1426) depicts Hesy-ra in a position of receiving offerings. The second and fourth panels are likely to be those showing Hesy-ra in an active role—either CG 1427 or CG 1429—while the third and fifth panels depict him receiving offerings, possibly CG 1428 or CG 1430. At present, however, it is not possible to determine with certainty the precise order within these pairs. The numbering and order of publication by Mariette may reflect the sequence in which the panels were discovered, a sequence that appears to have been maintained over time. Notably, panel CG 1427 is in a relatively good state of preservation, comparable to CG 1426, whereas the other panels are more damaged, particularly in their lower sections, suggesting that they may have come from the same part of the tomb. It is therefore possible that Mariette chose to present the three first panels in the order in which he found them, though this remains unproven.

### 3.3. The panels as statues within the tomb space: Hesy-ra united with his funerary equipment

The figurative space defined by the panels follows a south-to-north axis. The orientation of Hesy-ra’s body and stride functions as an indicator of vectoriality, to borrow Valérie Angenot’s term,<sup>119</sup> suggesting a movement leading deeper into the tomb.

Egyptian representation merges multiple frontal views of an object, transcending visual perception to integrate various perspectives into a single depiction.<sup>120</sup> In contrast to the Western notion of perspective, which privileges the viewer’s standpoint, the Egyptian *aspective* is an “object-centered mode of representation”—to use J. Baines’ words<sup>121</sup>—that combines frontal and profile views. This approach allows for two potential axes: that of the image itself, and the frontal axis of the subject. Accordingly, each figure of Hesy-ra, though oriented northward toward the interior of the corridor, is also virtually shown gazing straight ahead toward the east (Fig. 29).

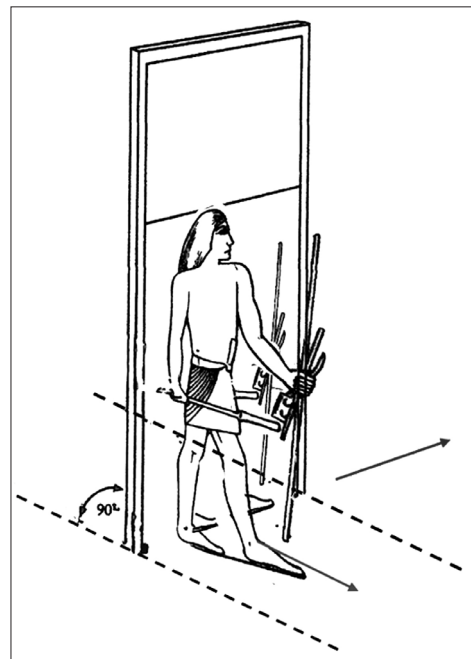


FIG. 29. Hesy-ra’s bivectorial visual space, adapted from Davis 2017, p. 200, fig. 4.

<sup>118</sup> BAINES 1999, p. 28.

<sup>119</sup> ANGENOT 2010.

<sup>120</sup> E.g., LABOURY 2022, p. 150.

<sup>121</sup> BAINES 2007, p. 213.

Much like the series of underground relief panels of King Djoser—which share many affinities with Hesy-ra's and may account for his decision, at some point, to expand his program from two panels to a more elaborate sequence in emulation of royal architecture—the arrangement here guides the visitor to follow the panels' northward orientation, even as one enters from the south (Fig. 30).

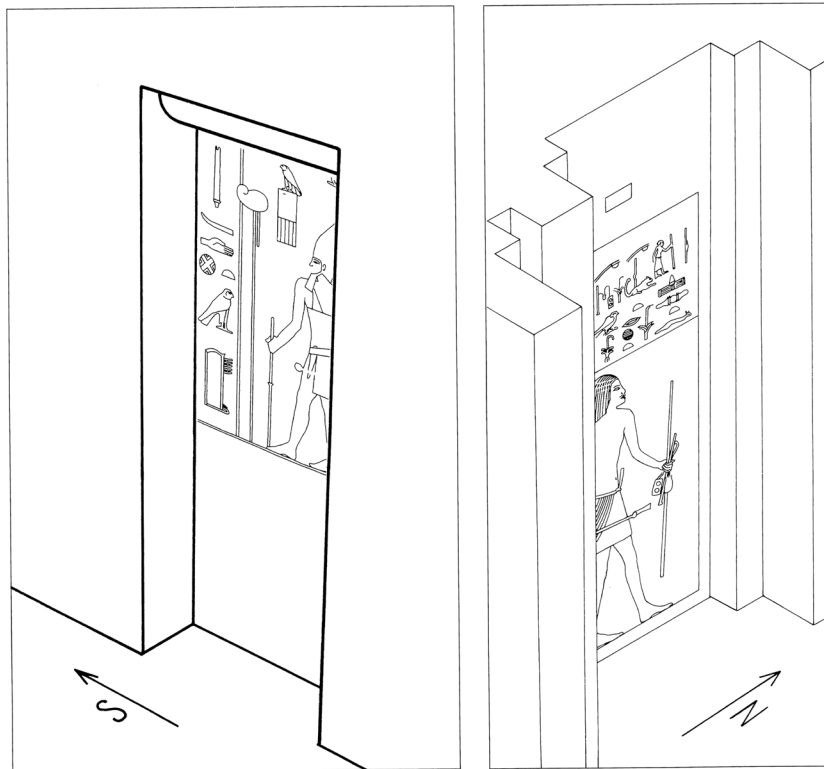


FIG. 30. View of Djoser in doorway, orientated south, and Hesy-ra in doorway, orientated north, after Friedmann 1995, fig. 10a, p. 16.

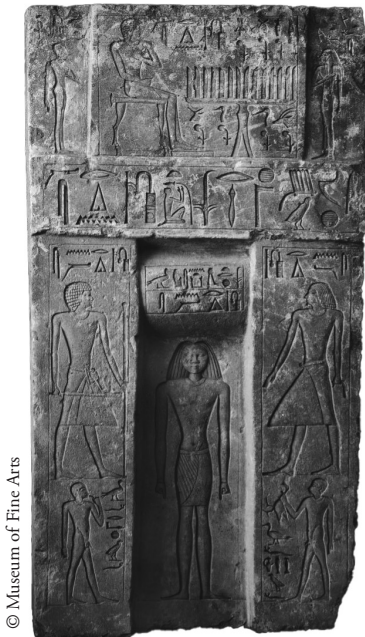
As Florence Friedman notes in her study of Djoser's panels, "this is an important point because normally one reads towards the faces of the figures," and regarding Hesy-ra she observes: "Here, just as in the Djoser reliefs, one walks and reads in the direction in which the figures face."<sup>122</sup> The niches of Hesy-ra, like those of Djoser, are conceived as open palace doors, with mats framing the passageway and revealing the figure of the deceased, poised for rebirth toward the East (Fig. 30).

<sup>122</sup> FRIEDMAN 1995, p. 14.

In the private sphere, later on, certain false-doors niches even depicted the deceased frontally, stepping out from the passageway—an intentional breach of the rules of decorum (Figs. 31–32).<sup>123</sup>

Thus, Hesy-ra’s panels—particularly the nine positioned between the first and the eleventh—are the high-relief equivalent of the rock-cut statues that were sometimes multiplied along the corridor walls of mastaba chapels in the Old Kingdom (Fig. 32).<sup>124</sup>

It is therefore no coincidence that Hesy-ra’s posture closely parallels that of contemporary Sepa, whose statues—now in the Louvre and probably also from North Saqqara (Fig. 31)<sup>125</sup>—depict him with the same rank titles as Hesy-ra: “Great of the Ten of Upper Egypt” (*wr mh Šm’w*) and “Officer of royal property” (*(j)r(y)-ht nswt*). Formally and functionally, Hesy-ra’s two-dimensional images are the equivalent of such statues.<sup>126</sup> Like Hesy-ra, Sepa holds a scepter in his right hand and his long staff in his left. He wears a comparable round wig, and his kilt—featuring the same plated effect—is secured with a plain belt and an oval knot. He is likewise shown in a striding pose, with subtle modeling suggesting musculature. The technique used to lay out and engrave the hieroglyphs—raised relief for the cartouches Sepa’s name and titles—offers another point of similarity (Fig. 33). This treatment can be read as a visual reference to seal impressions (Fig. 34), which were key instruments of authority and control for high-ranking officials of this kind.<sup>127</sup>



31.

FIG. 31. False door niche of Redines, Mastaba Giza 5032, 6th Dynasty (MFAB 21.961a-c).



32.

FIG. 32. Mastaba of Idu (North Wall, G7102, from 3D model).

<sup>123</sup> DER MANUELIAN 1994.

<sup>124</sup> BÁRTA 1998.

<sup>125</sup> Louvre N37 (A36) et N37 (A38): <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/010009484>.

<sup>126</sup> SOUROUZIAN 1998, p. 321; VANDERSLEYEN et al. 1975, p. 218.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, seal impression Ashmolean Museum E616: <https://cutt.ly/WrieUlqC>.



FIG. 33. Sepsa statue (Louvre N38): a three-dimensional equivalent of the two-dimensional depictions of Hesy-ra (Caire CG 1427 et CG 1530, detail).

In any case, the delicate, smooth modelling of Hesy-ra's figure and hieroglyphs—beyond showcasing virtuosity and access to the finest craftsmanship—can be explained by their function as statues. One can imagine how the flickering and raking light of an offering lamp,<sup>128</sup> with a modest output of around 2 watts, would play across the reliefs, using light shadow to heighten the sense of volume and movement (cf. Fig. 18). As Meghan Strong, who has studied artificial light in ancient Egyptian religious contexts, observes, the New Kingdom practice of offering light to cult statues in tombs and temples may have its roots in the Middle Kingdom and possibly even in the Old Kingdom.<sup>129</sup>

To summarise: the images are statues oriented toward the East, and the representations of Hesy-ra create a visual confrontation between the deceased and the offerings through the face-to-face arrangement of the two long walls of a chapel designed as an elongated corridor—an architectural feature that both reenacts and sustains the ritual climax of the funerary ceremonies (Fig. 35).

<sup>128</sup> The reconstruction by Paul François is based on non-spouted open vessels lamps, possibly equipped with a wick anchors. For the archeological evidence, see STRONG 2021, pp. 20–26.

<sup>129</sup> STRONG 2021, p. 108.

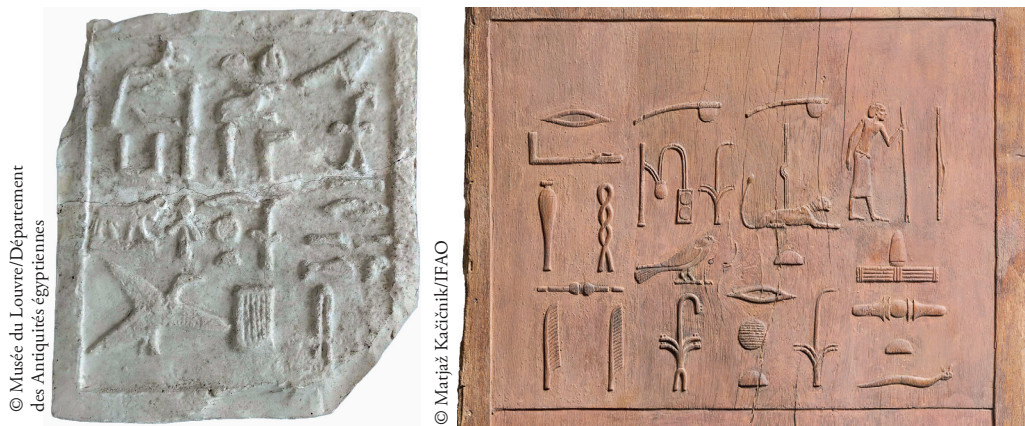


FIG. 34. Casts of the name and title plaques on the base of Sepa's statue (Louvre N38) and on Cairo CG 1427, detail.

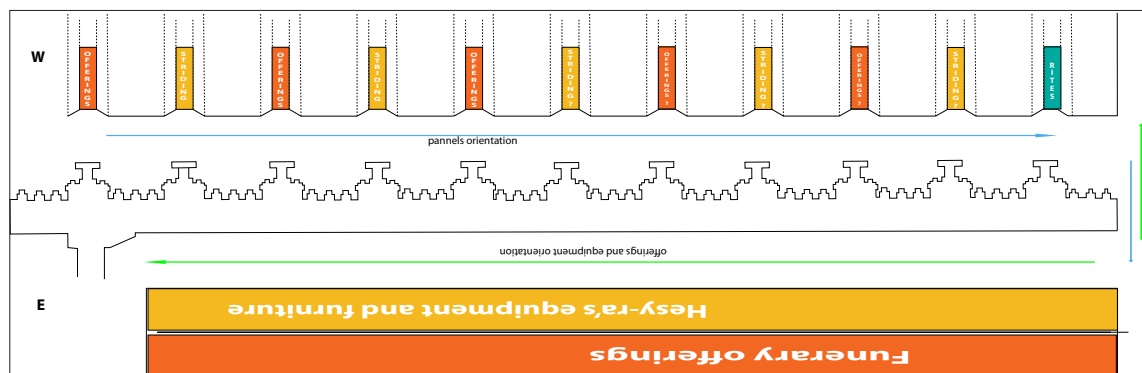


FIG. 35. Compositional arrangement of the decorative program of the west and east walls of the corridor-chapel.

We now turn to the east wall, which displays the offerings and possessions of the deceased. These objects are arranged within rectangular frames, set out on mats or placed inside wooden chests. At regular intervals—roughly every four meters—narrow vertical bands painted in brown interrupt the sequence. Quibell interprets these as the tent poles supporting covering that shelters the mats on which Hesy-ra's belonging are presented,<sup>130</sup> producing an effect “like pictures in a gallery,” as he aptly described.<sup>131</sup> This analogy is fitting: the arrangement evokes an exhibition of funerary goods, with chests opened and displayed on the mats—quite unlike later scenes, where we more often see friezes of objects or containers carried on the heads of porters. Here, the intention is to reveal and display what would later be hidden away in the burial chambers. For the visitor, moving through this long and narrow corridor would have evoked the experience of a procession, especially when the decorative program is considered from the perspective of an audience.

Viewed through the lens of Egyptian conventions of visual representation, these trays and open boxes are aligned directly with Hesy-ra on the opposite wall. The linear

<sup>130</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 5: “At intervals of about 4 meters, the series is broken by vertical bars of red which go right through this register and the one above it. We take these bars to be the masts of a tent, the floor of which was covered with matting.”

<sup>131</sup> QUIBELL 1913, p. 2.

arrangement—extending from left to right, and vertically across two registers—should be understood as the two-dimensional rendering of the three-dimensional space as perceived by the deceased.<sup>132</sup> Thus, in front of Hesy-ra, seated at his offering table and facing right in the first panel, appears the so-called “oils storage magazine,”<sup>133</sup> a tabular list of various oils of foreign origin. When brought into the same pictorial plane, these two elements become contiguous, together forming the conventional offering tableau: a double-entry register of products is displayed before the deceased, on the opposite side of the offering table (Fig. 36).

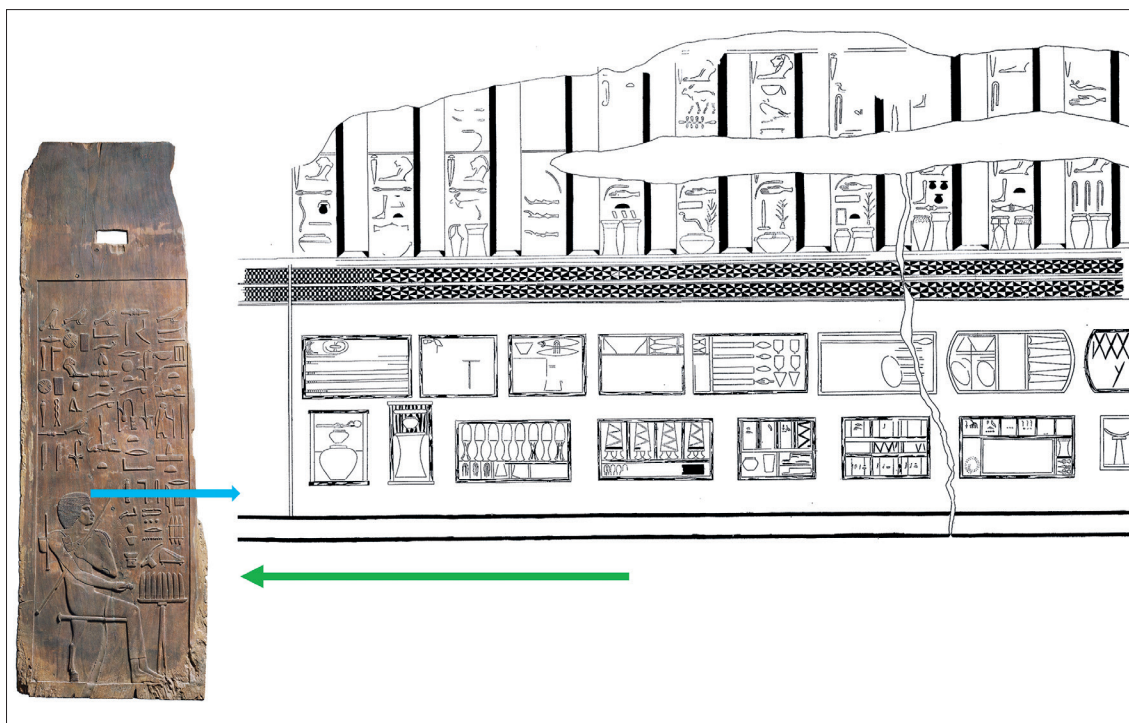


FIG. 36. First niche and initial section of the eastern wall; brought into the same plane.

The overall arrangement of the east wall also reflects a dual structure, both formal and functional. The iconographic composition is organized into two continuous, elongated registers.<sup>134</sup> The lower register is devoted to funerary equipment, presenting Hesy-ra’s personal possessions essential for the continuation of his life—and his official role in the afterlife. Metal tools, measurement standards, grain measures, and writing implements are clearly depicted, directly reflecting Hesy-ra’s identity as an administrator of state resources and, more specifically, as a supervisor of mining expeditions. The upper register, by contrast, is dedicated to offerings—items brought to Hesy-ra to sustain him in the hereafter.

<sup>132</sup> On this, see BRÉMONT 2016, in particular fig. 6; SCHÄFER 1974, p. 223.

<sup>133</sup> ALTENMÜLLER 1976; QUIBELL 1913, pl. XVI-XXII.

<sup>134</sup> QUIBELL 1913, pp. 5–6.

Architecture and imagery combine to create a referential spatial framework that defines and displays Hesy-ra's identity, within which ritual activity is inherently implied. In other words, the tangible architectural space we see is a reduced, mapped<sup>135</sup> version of an idealized sacred space. As noted above, this mapping operates through the bidimensional surfaces of the walls but also through the interplay between the two elongated walls, which must be read together, in synchrony. This “map” is self-contained, and from this perspective, the viewer is only an incidental presence. Entirely self-referential, the composition unites architecture, imagery, texts, and sensory experience into a strikingly effective whole.

### 3.4. A ritual and magical setting: The writing kit as a link to the king and the *sed* festival

The tomb of Hesy-ra represents the architectural culmination of a long evolution in funerary practices and beliefs. The chapel functioned to ensure posthumous survival through a system of daily or periodic offering rituals performed after the owner's death. This liminal space served as a site for self-presentation—both to the living and to posterity. In Hesy-ra's time, such self-presentation was typically confined to a single niche with a false door. Hesy-ra's design, however, represents a unique and ambitious expansion of this model.

Moreover, scholars who have studied written self-representation from the late 4th Dynasty onwards—the so-called “biographies”—have shown that these texts are largely polarized around the figure of the king, who is presented as the source, the measure, and the ultimate arbiter of the deceased's status and achievements.<sup>136</sup> In the Early Dynastic period and the early Old Kingdom, the same dynamic applies, though it is conveyed not through continuous narrative texts but through the tomb's architecture and inscriptions.<sup>137</sup> The iconographic program must therefore be read within this royal framework too, which establishes a unique link and deliberate connection between the deceased and the figure of the king, as well as his ritual complex.

The binary, rhythmic arrangement of the west wall alternates between panels presenting offerings to Hesyra and panels affirming his identity as a high official. In the final panel, these two themes merge. Hesy-ra is shown in motion, with one leg and one arm extended forward. In his left hand, he holds a libation vase; in his right, a circle—interpreted either as a lump of natron or a loaf of bread. Such image-signs are unique: they appear in no other two-dimensional representations of a tomb owner.<sup>138</sup> Functioning almost like hieroglyphs, they hint at the ritual service Hesy-ra is performing while also, as many scholars have observed,<sup>139</sup> alluding to his very name.

<sup>135</sup> Emil Joubert has effectively applied this concept to describe the correspondence between intellectual space and the space of funerary equipment during the Third Intermediate Period, and we are indebted to him for these conceptual tools: JOUBERT 2024, pp. 23–24.

<sup>136</sup> ASSMANN 1983; STAUDER-PORCHET 2017.

<sup>137</sup> BAINES 1999.

<sup>138</sup> FISCHER 1972, p. 17.

<sup>139</sup> FISCHER 1972, p. 18.

Although Hesy-ra appears in an active posture, the panel also includes offerings before him. Yet, unlike the passive panels in the series—where the signs of the offerings are directed toward him—here the offerings, fine oil and wine, are directed to the right. In this scene, they are bestowed by Hesy-ra rather than received by him. This final panel thus shifts the ritual cycle toward an act of giving, reorienting the sequence toward ritual action.

According to H.G. Fischer, the action of the panel—like the emblematic *hesy*-vase—serves as a self-reference to Hesy-ra himself. The contrast between youthful feature here and his aged appearance in the first panel may signal his regeneration.<sup>140</sup> This reading aligns more closely Egyptian decorum than W. Wood's proposal that the offering is directed toward the statue shown among the objects in the upper register on the opposite wall, which she interprets as representing the king. As J. Baines has already noted,<sup>141</sup> such a scenario is highly improbable: it would constitute an unprecedented breach of decorum to depict the king in a tomb of this period, let alone to present him as a reduced-scale statue hidden among the tomb owner's funerary equipment.

This final, transitive, action is oriented toward the north. The objects involved—the disk and the vase—activate Hesy-ra's name, fully engaging its performative dimension as “one-who-praises-the-solar-rays” toward the north and circumpolar stars, the celestial realm in which the deceased king resides, reborn as a celestial entity—a transformation later formalized in the Pyramid Texts.<sup>142</sup> The only known parallel to such a sequence of panels with comparable ritual resonance occurs in the funerary complex of Djoser, particularly in its subterranean chambers, which serve as model ritual installations. This continuity aligns with the tradition of royal tombs from the 2nd Dynasty onward, where underground apartments represent key locations of the *sed* festival, the ritual of royal renewal in the afterlife. Stylistically and technically, Hesy-ra's panels closely resemble those of Djoser, though they differ in material, the king's being carved in fine white limestone.<sup>143</sup>

Hesy-ra's program consciously emulates the royal arrangement and was likely executed by the same craftsmen and workforce. His self-presentation is polarized around the figure of the king and engages—albeit indirectly—in a visual dialogue with the royal sphere through a network of potent images. This approach is consistent with Early Dynastic ritual and semiotic practices, in which the social identity of the deceased is constructed through a web of interconnections articulated in signs—whether visual or material, objects-as-signs or signs-as-objects. What the modern Western mind tends to regard as distinct categories—a sign and the thing it denotes—were, in this context, inseparable components of the very fabric of the world, materially present and active.<sup>144</sup>

We argue that the pivotal nexus linking Hesy-ra to the king is the writing kit he carries, prominently displayed in each panel yet arranged slightly differently each time to capture and guide the viewer's gaze. Such an object is never depicted in two-dimensional self-representations of the inner elite—those with direct access to the king—but is instead a marker typically

<sup>140</sup> See also BAINES 1999, p. 29.

<sup>141</sup> BAINES 1999, p. 29, n. 35.

<sup>142</sup> E.g., PT 441 §818c.

<sup>143</sup> See evocative photographs in LECLANT et al. 1978, p. 58, fig. 65.

<sup>144</sup> On this, see Michel Foucault on the semiotic and semiologic *Episteme* of the Renaissance: e.g., FOUCAULT 1966 (ed. 2014), pp. 48–51.

associated with the outer elite, such as scribes subordinate to figures of Hesy-ra's rank and status. This makes it a semantically charged element within the composition. As a personal insignia, the writing kit connects Hesy-ra to his role within the sacred institution of Egyptian kingship and, more specifically, to the highly significant concept of the king's body as regalia worn on behalf of the sovereign. The body—and its image—occupies a central place in both self-experience and the commemoration of social identity. Attributes such as the writing kit, along with other portable paraphernalia associated with the individual and their body establish meaningful and effective connections between disparate elements of the world. It is the ritual stage that endows these pictorial objects, endowing them with their full symbolic force.<sup>145</sup>

The palette serves as a deictic reference to the king without depicting him directly, effectively anchoring Hesy-ra's image to the sphere of royal power. In this way, the iconography of power from the Early Dynastic period operates as a horizon of reference. A paradigmatic example is the Narmer Palette, where the king is accompanied by close officials identifiable through the objects and attributes they carry on his behalf—such as a pair of inkwells tied together with a cord, the royal sandals, or even a little ewer (Fig. 37).

This suggests that the writing palette was not intrinsically the scribe's personal possession, but rather an object held in delegated trust from the king—comparable to the seal-bearer who carries the royal seal in trust, on the sovereign's behalf. Titles represented by the hieroglyphs for such objects would thus be more accurately translated as “Seal of the king” or “Brush pen of the king.”

The depiction of a high dignitary with a writing kit, through rare in reliefs, does have a precedent: a royal attendant carrying writing equipment appears in a relief from the 2nd Dynasty temple at Gebelein (Fig. 38), now in Turin (inv. no. 12341),<sup>146</sup> shown in attendance upon a king. What is striking in Hesy-ra's panels is not the mere inclusion of the writing kit *per se*, but the fact that he is depicted with it while standing alone. In this way, Hesy-ra is shown in the role of a royal attendant, yet in isolation—an unusual representational strategy that draws the viewer's attention and subtly conjures the king's presence without directly depicting him.



FIG. 37. Narmer palette, detail (Cairo CG 14 716; detail from Midant-Reynes 1992, p. 230, fig. 20).

<sup>145</sup> WENGROW, BAINES 2004; WENGROW 2006, p. 69.

<sup>146</sup> Stela Museo Egizio 12341, 2nd Dynasty, Hathor temple, Gebelein: [https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/S\\_12341](https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/S_12341).

On the Gebelein relief, the striding king is shown holding a bundle of four staves, with his waist girded by the pendant bull's tail (Fig. 38a). This attire is characteristic of the king during the ritual run of the *sed* festival.<sup>147</sup> The attendant carrying the writing kit, named *Nhbt-mwt*, is shown lifting the tail of his panther-skin garment—an attitude reminiscent of that adopted by officiants in the Heb-Sed reliefs from Abu Gurob.<sup>148</sup>

The reference to the king is not merely symbolic or intellectual; within the spatial and ceremonial framework of the necropolis, the king's bodily presence and image are as tangible as Hesy-ra's own. Hesy-ra's mastaba, aligned along the same north–south axis, is physically anchored to Djoser's monument within the Saqqara necropolis. One might envision Hesy-ra—elder of the *Qed-hotep*, a building associated with the *sed* festival—accompanying Djoser, who is himself depicted in his own niche reliefs performing the rites of the *sed* festival (Fig. 38b).<sup>149</sup>

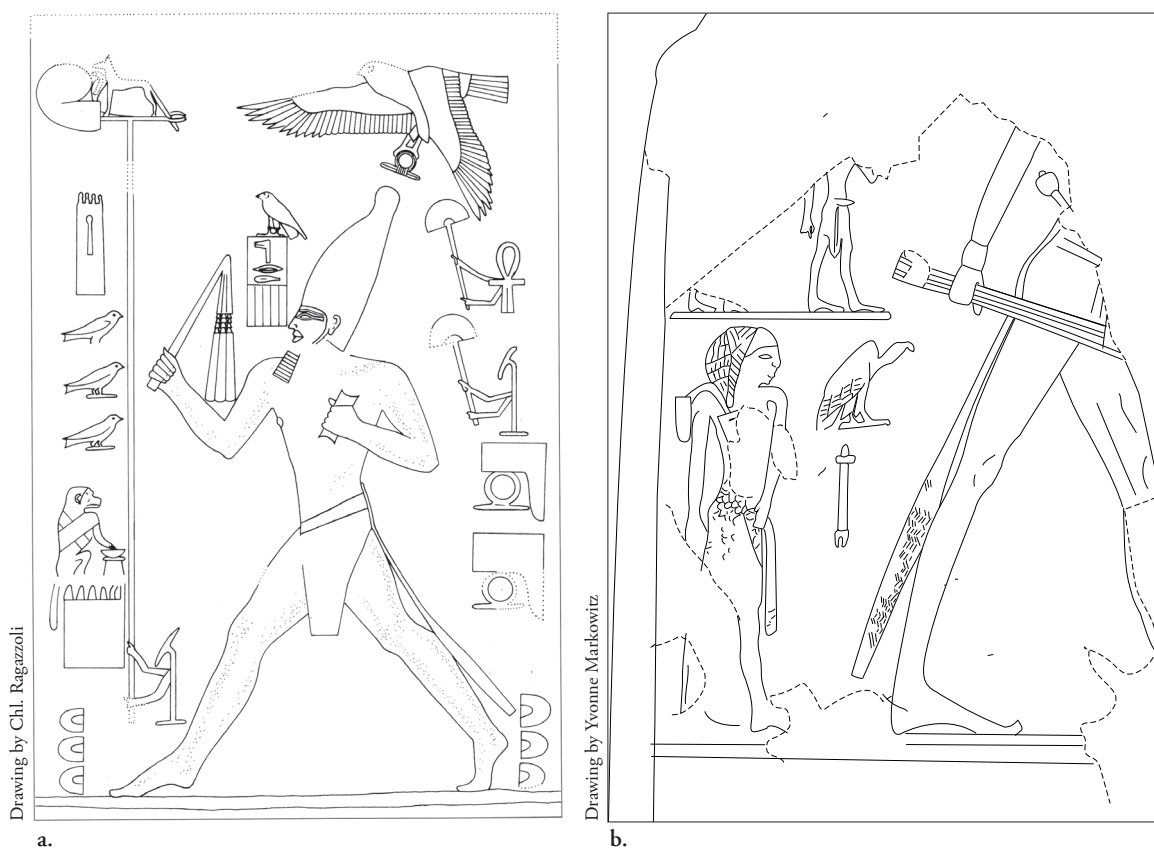


FIG. 38. a. Relief from Gebelein (Stela Museo Egizio 12341); b. Middle panel of king Djoser under the pyramid, from Friedmann 1995, p. 23, fig. 14.

<sup>147</sup> See also MORENZ 1994, pp. 225–226.

<sup>148</sup> SMITH 1949, p. 137; on the motif of the *sed* festival relief, see KAISER 1971, pl. 5, 44.

<sup>149</sup> FRIEDMAN 1995.

## CONCLUSION

The chapel's space possesses a distinctive potency, serving as a point of contact between the visible and the invisible realms, between the sensory world and the ideal world of gods and efficient spirits. In light of the preceding analysis, it is essential to consider the tomb experiential dimension and the sensory effects it was designed to elicit. The panels must be read both frontally (east) and in profile (north), with the recesses functioning as shrines from which the images of the deceased actively emerge, fulfilling the role of statues in the round. The writing kit carried by Hesy-ra—a unique feature and highly charged feature—forms the nexus of this complex arrangement, situating him within a complex network of references and correspondences that align him with the king himself in the performance of the *sed* festival.



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FIG. 39. Room 27: reconstruction of the corridor with panels, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

## CATALOGUE

## Panel CG 1426

Cat. 1



Preserved height: 114cm  
 Preserved width: 39cm  
 Top edge: 28cm  
 Bottom edge: 3cm  
 Left edge: 3cm  
 Right edge: 3.2cm

- [1] *wr jbh (or bjz) sun*  
*hkz Mht*  
*smsw (hwt) Qd-hotep*
- [2] *m33.tj Mnw*  
*(j)r(y)-ht-nswt*  
*mdh sš nswt*  
*R<sup>c</sup>(w)*
- [3] *wr r<sup>f</sup>*  
*jt Mnw*  
*mdh [lion-goddess]*
- [4] *wr P*  
*h3t sjmw*  
*wr md Šm<sup>c</sup>*
- [5] *hm-ntr Hr msn P*  
*Hsy*
- [a] *qbbw j<sup>c</sup>*  
 [b] *sntr rn(j)*  
 [c] *jrp*

- [1] Chief of the spears and arrowheads  
*Heka*-priest of Mehyt  
 Elder of the *Qed-hotep*
- [2] He-who-is-seen-by-Min  
 Officer of the royal property  
 Master scribe of the king  
 Ra(u)
- [3] Chief of the bags  
 (Divine) father of Min  
 Master of [lion-goddess]
- [4] Chief of Buto  
 Head of the messengers  
 Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt
- [5] Priest of Horus-harpooner-of-Buto  
 Hesy.

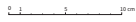
- [a] Purification vases  
 [b] Incense and gazelle meat  
 [c] wine



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Dessin Chloé Ragazzoli



## Panel CG 1427

Cat. 2



Preserved height: 115cm  
 Preserved width: 40cm  
 Top edge: 28cm  
 Bottom edge: 3.5cm  
 Left edge: 2.4cm  
 Right edge: 2.4cm

[1] *smsw Qd-hotp*  
*jt Mjn*

[2] *mdh* [lion-goddess]  
*(j)r(y)-ht nswt*

[3] *mdh sš nswt*  
*wr mdh Šm'*

[4] *Hsy-r'(w)*

[1] Elder of the Qed-hotep  
 (Divine) father of Min

[2] Master of [lion-goddess]  
 Officer of royal property

[3] Master scribe of the king  
 Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt

[4] Hesy-ra

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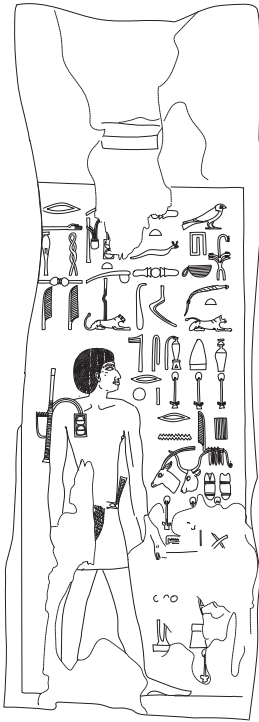


Dessin Chloé Ragazzoli



## Panel CG 1428

Cat. 3



Preserved height: 113,5cm  
 Preserved width: 40cm  
 Top edge: 29cm  
 Bottom edge: 3.5cm  
 Left edge: 2.6cm  
 Right edge: 2.7cm

[1] *wr mdh Šm'*  
*hk(3) Mht*

[2] *jt Mjn*  
*m3.tj Mjn*

[3] *mdh sš nswt*  
*mdh* [lion-goddess]

[4] *Hsy-r'(w)*

[a] *sntr*  
*qbb h3*  
*t h3*  
*hnqt h3*

[b] *rnj h3*  
*jh h3*  
*jrj h3*

[c] *šs [h3]*  
 [...]

[d] *mnht [h3]*  
 [...]

[1] Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt  
*Heka* priest of Mehyt

[2] (Divine) father of Min,  
 He-who-is-seen-by-Min

[3] Master scribe of the king  
 Master of [lion-goddess]

[4] Hesy-ra.

[a] Incense  
 Libation-vases: 1000  
 Loaves of bread: 1000  
 Jars of beer: 1000

[b] Gazelles: 1000  
 Cows: 1000  
 Wine: 1000

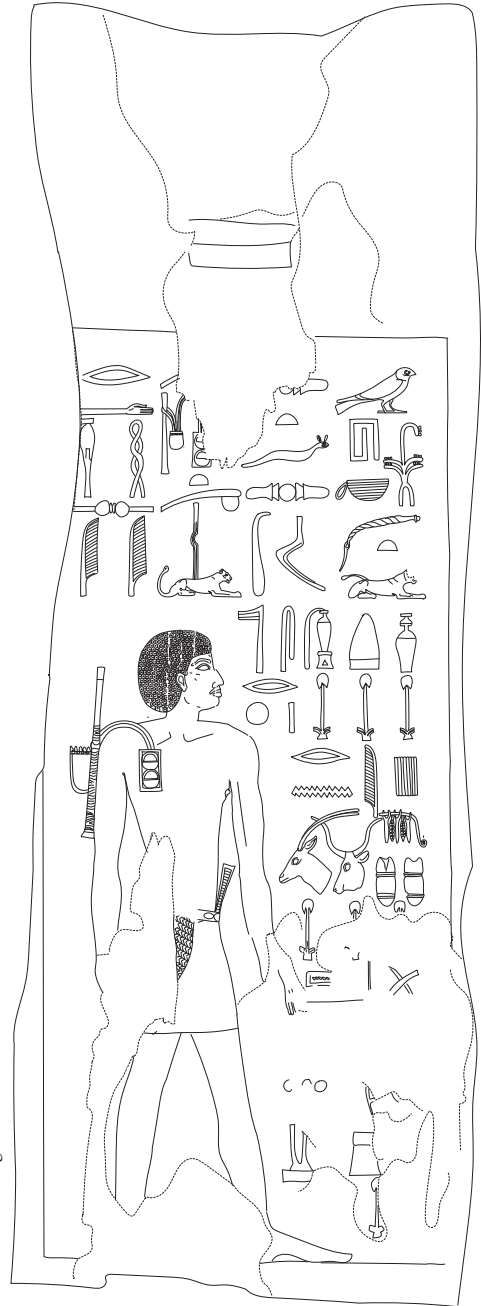
[c] Linen: [1000]  
 [...]

[d] Alabaster: [1000]  
 [...]

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Dessin Chloé Ragazzoli



## Panel Cairo CG 1429

Cat. 4



Preserved height: 110cm  
 Preserved width: 40cm  
 Top edge: 28cm  
 Bottom edge: 3.5cm  
 Left edge: 2.5cm  
 Right edge: 2.6cm

[1] *smsw Qd-hotp*  
*jt Mjn*

[2] *mdh* [lion-goddess]  
*(j)r(y)-ht nswt*

[3] *mdh sš nswt*  
*wr mdh Šm'*

[4] *Hsy-r'(w)*

[1] Elder of the Qed-hotep  
 (Divine) father of Min

[2] Master of [lion-goddess]  
 Officer of the royal property

[3] Master scribe of the king  
 Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt

[4] Hesy-ra



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Drawing Chloé Ragazzoli



## Panel CG 1430

Cat. 5



Preserved height: 86.2cm  
 Preserved width: 40.7cm  
 Preserved top edge: 3cm  
 Left edge: 4.6cm  
 Right edge: 4.8cm

[1] *smsw Qd-hotep*  
*jt Mjn*

[2] *mdh* [lion goddess]  
*(j)r(y)-ht nswt*

[3] *mdh sš nswt*  
*wr mdh Šm'*

[4] *Hsy-r'(w)*

[1] Elder of the Qed-hotep  
 (Divine) father of Min

[2] Master of [lion goddess]  
 Officer of the royal property

[3] Master scribe of the king  
 Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt

[4] Hesy-ra

[a] *sntr h3*  
*qbb h3*  
*t h3*  
*hnqt h3*

[b] *(rnj) hd h3*  
*jh h3*  
*smn h3*

[c] [...]

[a] Incense: 1000  
 Libation vases: 1000  
 Loaves of bread: 1000  
 Beer: 1000

[b] White gazelle: 1000  
 Cows: 1000  
 Geese: 1000

[c] [...]

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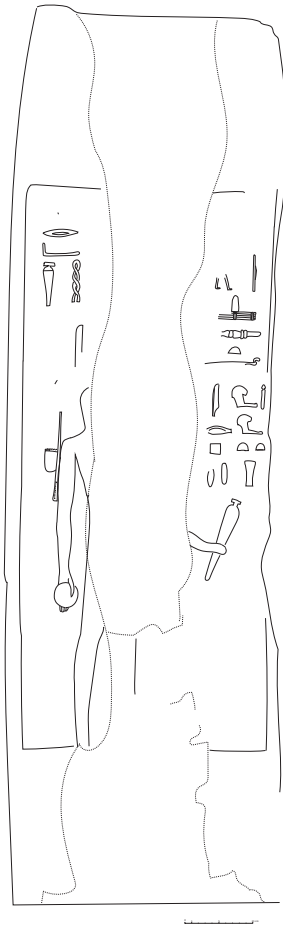


Drawing Chloé Ragazzoli



## Panel SR 15065

## Cat 6



Preserved height: 132cm  
 Preserved width: 40cm  
 Preserved top edge: 26cm  
 Left edge: 2,3cm  
 Right edge: 2cm

[1] *smsw Qd-hotep*  
*jt Mjn*

[2] [*mdh* [lion-goddess]  
*(j)r(y)-ht nswt*]

[3] [*mdh šš nswt*  
*wr mdh Šm'*]

[4] *Hsy-r'(w)*

[a] *tpy h3t: h3tt*

[b] *jrj*

[1] Elder of the Qed-hotep  
 (Divine) father of Min

[2] [Master of [lion-goddess]  
 Officer of the royal property]

[3] [Master scribe of the king  
 Chief of the Ten of Upper Egypt]

[4] Hesy-ra

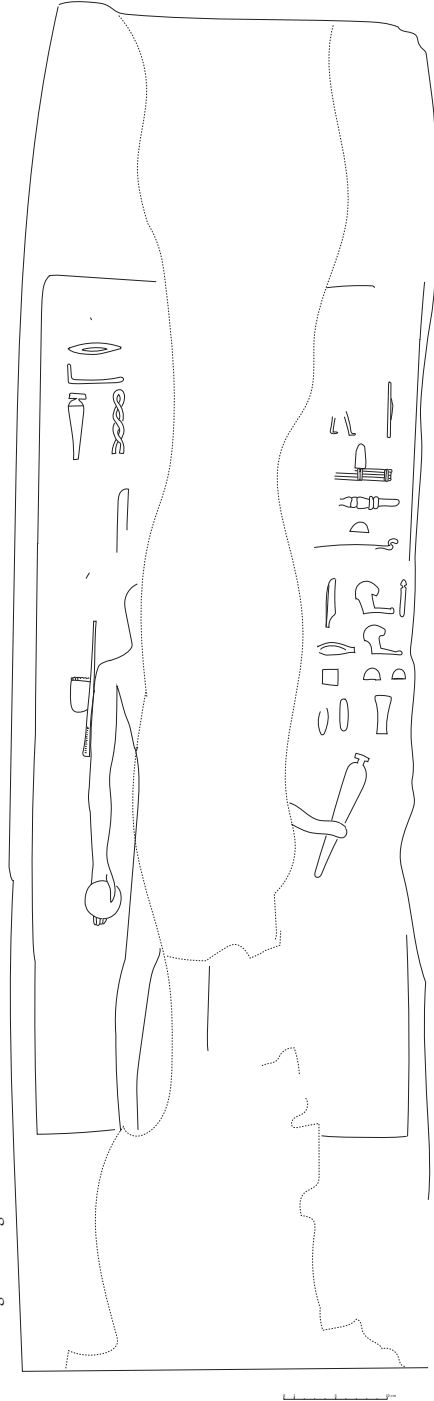
[a] Oil of the first quality: Balm-*hatet*

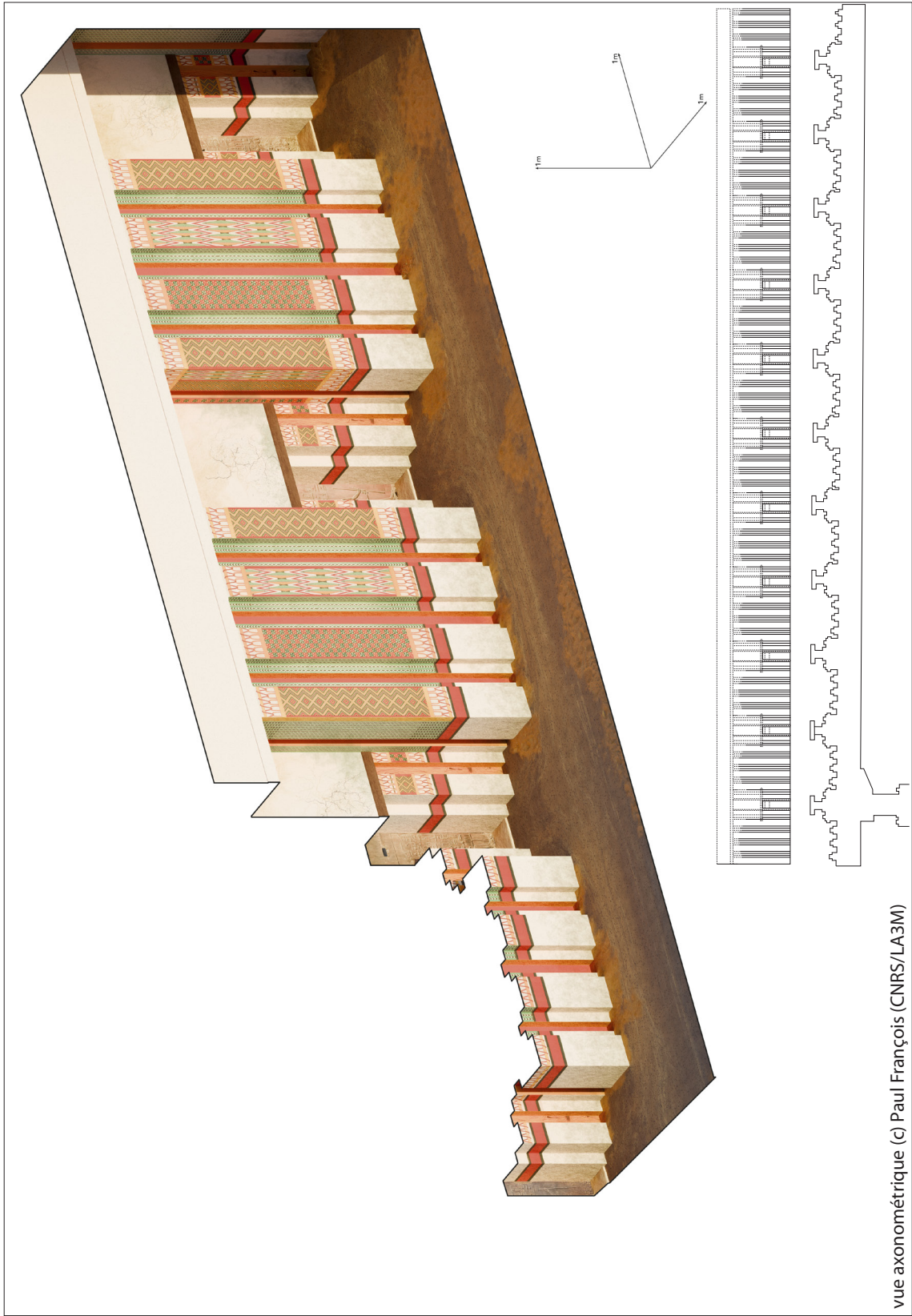
[b] Wine

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Drawing Chloé Ragazzoli





vue axonométrique (c) Paul François (CNRS/LA3M)

PLATE I





Virtual reconstructions of the inside of the tomb © Paul François/CNRS-LA3M

PLATE III

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