



Restoring the burial chambers of Maya and Meryt

At the end of the 1986 season, while excavating the tomb of Ramose, the joint EES/Leiden Museum expedition at Saqqara unexpectedly discovered the underground complex belonging to the neighbouring tomb of Maya and Meryt. These rooms had been badly damaged both by robbers and through natural causes. **Jacobus van Dijk**, who is supervising this part of the expedition's work, reports on the current restoration project.

The first years after the surprise find, in 1986, of the tomb of Maya, the overseer of the Treasury under Tutankhamun and Horemheb, were spent excavating the superstructure of the tomb, a large temple-like mud-brick building, the walls of which were lined with limestone slabs decorated with superb reliefs. The investigation of the tomb proper, which consists of a series of underground chambers and corridors at a depth of well over 21m below pavement level, was begun in 1988. The walls of three of the rooms in this complex have a limestone revetment with relief decoration, a feature not found so far in any other tomb, at least at Saqqara. The reliefs show Maya and his wife Meryt in adoration before a variety of underworld deities such as Osiris, Geb, Nut, Isis and Nephthys, Wepwawet and Sokar. There are also some vignettes from the Book of the Dead and a long hymn to Osiris which is unknown from other sources. All these scenes are in shallow sunk relief and the figures as well as the hieroglyphs have all been painted a bright yellow to represent the underworld itself. At night the sun-god passed through this dark abode revivifying its inhabitants, gods and men alike, with his rays – hence the golden yellow found everywhere on the walls.

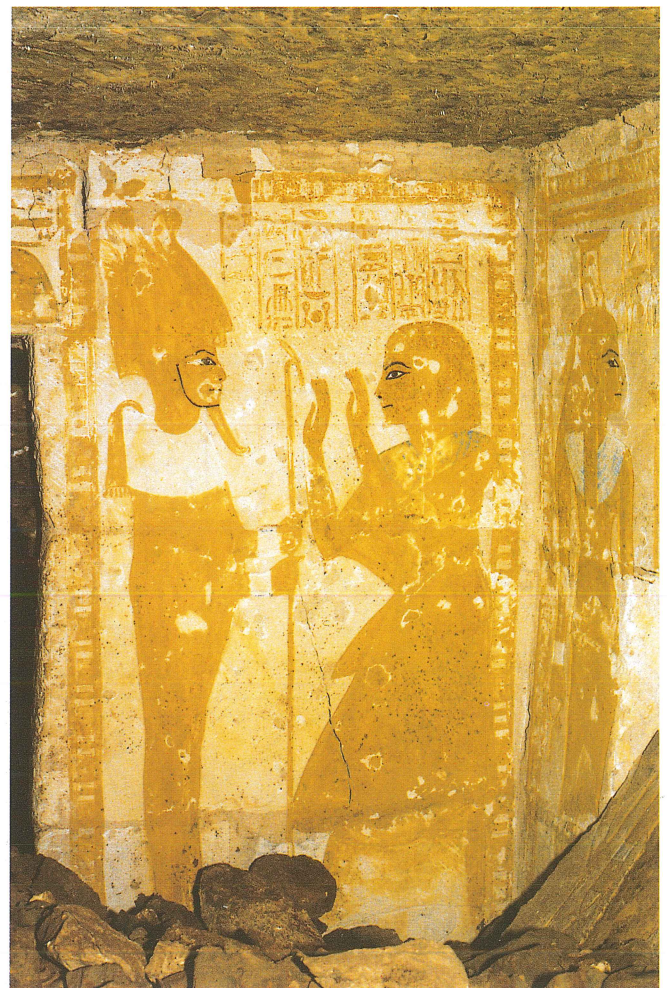
When we began excavating the underground complex it soon became clear that the decorated walls had suffered extensive damage, especially in the two innermost rooms. Maya's architects had tried to conceal

the doorways by covering them with relief slabs like the rest of the walls, and although the decoration in most cases makes it clear to us (and doubtless to the informed ancient Egyptian) that a doorway lies beyond, this point was obviously lost on the tomb-robbers who perhaps entered the substructure for the first time towards the end of the Ramesside period. Unaware of the subtleties of Eighteenth Dynasty Egyptian tomb decoration, they simply smashed most of the walls in search of further hidden chambers.

Much damage has also been incurred through natural



Some of the many loose fragments smashed up by tomb-robbers



Maya adoring Osiris. One of the few scenes which survived more or less intact in its original location (Chamber O, north wall)



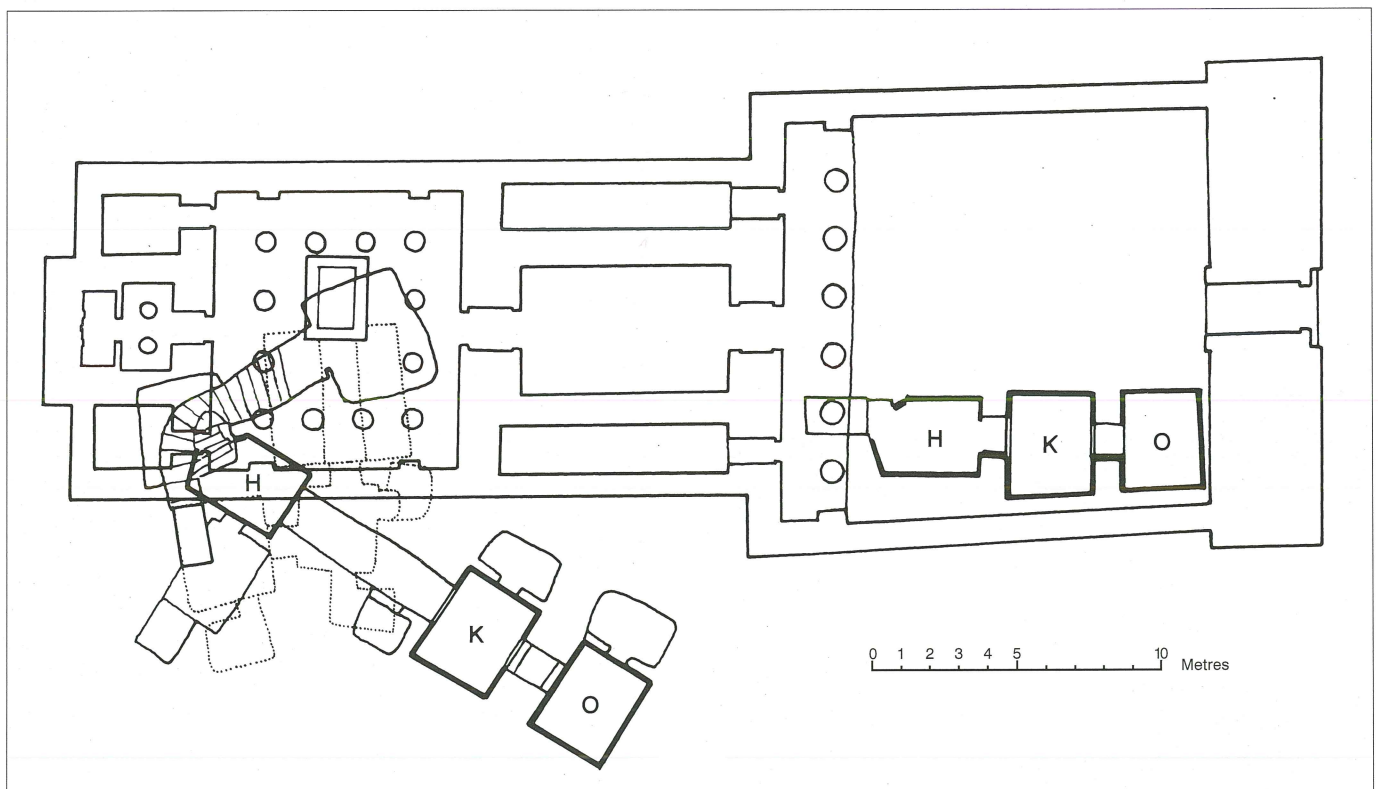
causes. The chambers were hewn in a soft clay-like stratum of the bedrock, whereas the ceilings and floors were formed by the very much harder layers above and below. Obviously this made the ancient workmen's task much easier, but the long-term effect has been disastrous. The relief slabs covering the walls in the soft stratum were wedged tightly between the ceiling and the floor; they were thus quite literally 'between a rock and a hard place' and the pressure exerted on them over more than three thousand years has caused many of them to fracture. The enormous mounds of rubble which filled the rooms and corridors when we entered them therefore not only contained many smashed-up reliefs but also numerous flakes of decorated limestone, both large and small, which had simply come away from the surface of the stone.

It was thus clear that a major restoration project was needed, but where could this be done? In view of the situation described above it was clear that it would be impossible to restore the reliefs *in situ* without either raising the ceiling or lowering the floor in order to release the pressure on the reliefs. Large cracks running through the ceiling did not bode well for the long-term safety of the reliefs if left where they were, and several earth tremors which happened while we were at Saqqara drove the point home to us that it would be far better to look for a different solution, the more so because a location at some 21m underground would make it difficult for visitors to see the restored reliefs even at the best of times. Thus, with the full support of the Egyptian authorities, it was finally decided to

cut three new rooms into the bedrock directly under the surface of the large open courtyard of the superstructure of the tomb, where there are no standing monuments or any other decoration. All the reliefs would then be brought up from the underground complex and restored in these newly-constructed chambers. The new rooms were dug out and provided with concrete and baked-brick walls and ceilings during the summer of 1994, and the following season saw the installation of the first reliefs on the walls in the new location.

The revetment in each of the three decorated chambers originally comprised about fifty limestone slabs, but before these could be reassembled it was necessary to piece the individual blocks together from fragments and to restore the many decorated limestone flakes to their original positions on the surfaces of the blocks. This is a slow and painstaking process and many cardboard boxes full of small fragments still need to be repositioned. Luckily most of these tiny fragments can be added at a later stage and so during the past three seasons the expedition has concentrated on building the basic walls.

In the original burial chambers the relief blocks sat directly on the floor, which was very uneven. The ancient workmen simply mounted the undecorated limestone slabs on top of each other against the walls. The outline draftsmen and the sculptors then moved in to decorate the blocks. In the new location the reliefs have to be protected against humidity and salt. For this reason they are now mounted on a flat concrete plinth



Sketch plan showing the original (left, depth c. 21.5 m) and the new location (right, depth c. 2.5 m) of the three decorated chambers (H, K and O). The dotted lines indicate the first level of the underground complex (depth c. 10 m)



South-west corner of the central chamber (K) as found

which has been sealed with a coat of Araldite. The surfaces of the newly-cut walls were coated with bitumen and a space left between the walls and the reliefs so that air could circulate between them. Getting the lowermost courses of blocks exactly right therefore proved difficult, especially since the ancient sculptors took no particular care to produce straight dados and blockframes, but once the first courses were in place the rest usually followed without too many problems.

During the process of dismantling the blocks from the original chambers some interesting discoveries were made. One big slab which was still in its original position turned out upon removal to have a charcoal graffito scribbled in large characters on its reverse. The signs do not appear to yield any connected sense, but it is interesting to find the name of Amun-Re among them. Perhaps they were quarry marks rather than a proper text. Some further graffiti, this time in ink, were



North-east corner of Chamber K as found: Meryt in adoration



The same south-west corner as reassembled in the new location

revealed when some of the original plaster used to cement the lowermost blocks in position came away on their removal. The graffiti were written upside down on the lower edge of the slabs, then covered with plaster while the ink was still wet, resulting in a 'negative' of the text on the reverse of the detached plaster flakes. They are personal names, presumably of some of the craftsmen who built and decorated the chambers; the only complete example reads 'Khay'.

The walls have now been almost completely reassembled, making it possible for the first time to study the reliefs coherently rather than as a collection of disconnected fragments. Many problems remain to be solved; for example, why certain changes were made during the process of carving the reliefs, why so much more time and care were spent on one room compared to the others, and who was buried in which chamber.

For the moment the walls still look unfinished as most of the plaster which originally covered the small gaps between the blocks is no longer present. However, once we have completed the gigantic jigsaw puzzle of putting back as many of the hundreds of small fragments as we can, and added the finishing touches to the walls, they will surely form a splendid exhibit which we hope will be enjoyed by future generations.



The same scene in its new location (left). The wall to the right of the doorway is inscribed with a long hymn to Osiris

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