

Piecing together the dispersed tomb of Ry at Saqqara

Saqqara, the prime necropolis site of Memphis in the New Kingdom, exists largely in museum collections around the world. The study of its dispersed blocks has enabled **Nico Staring** to unlock the identify of an anonymous tomb excavated in 2013.

A brief excavation history

The New Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara south of the Unas causeway contains the tombs of some of the foremost state officials of the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties, including Horemheb, Maya and Tia (map below). This is where archaeologists of the joint mission of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden and Leiden University in 2002 entered the subterranean burial apartments of a New Kingdom tomb. These spaces were accessed from an underground breakthrough which connected it to a maze

of subterranean rooms and passages of a tomb complex of Second Dynasty date, situated below the late Eighteenth Dynasty 'temple-tomb' of Mery-Neith/Re, steward in the temple of the Aten at Memphis. This burial was thought to connect to the remains of a chapel seen protruding from the sand in the mid-1990s (see photo on the next page, top). At that time the mission focused work on the tomb of Pay, overseer of the king's apartments at Memphis. It was not until 2013 that focus of work shifted again to this section of the New Kingdom necropolis.

Saqqara: the New Kingdom necropolis south of the Unas causeway.

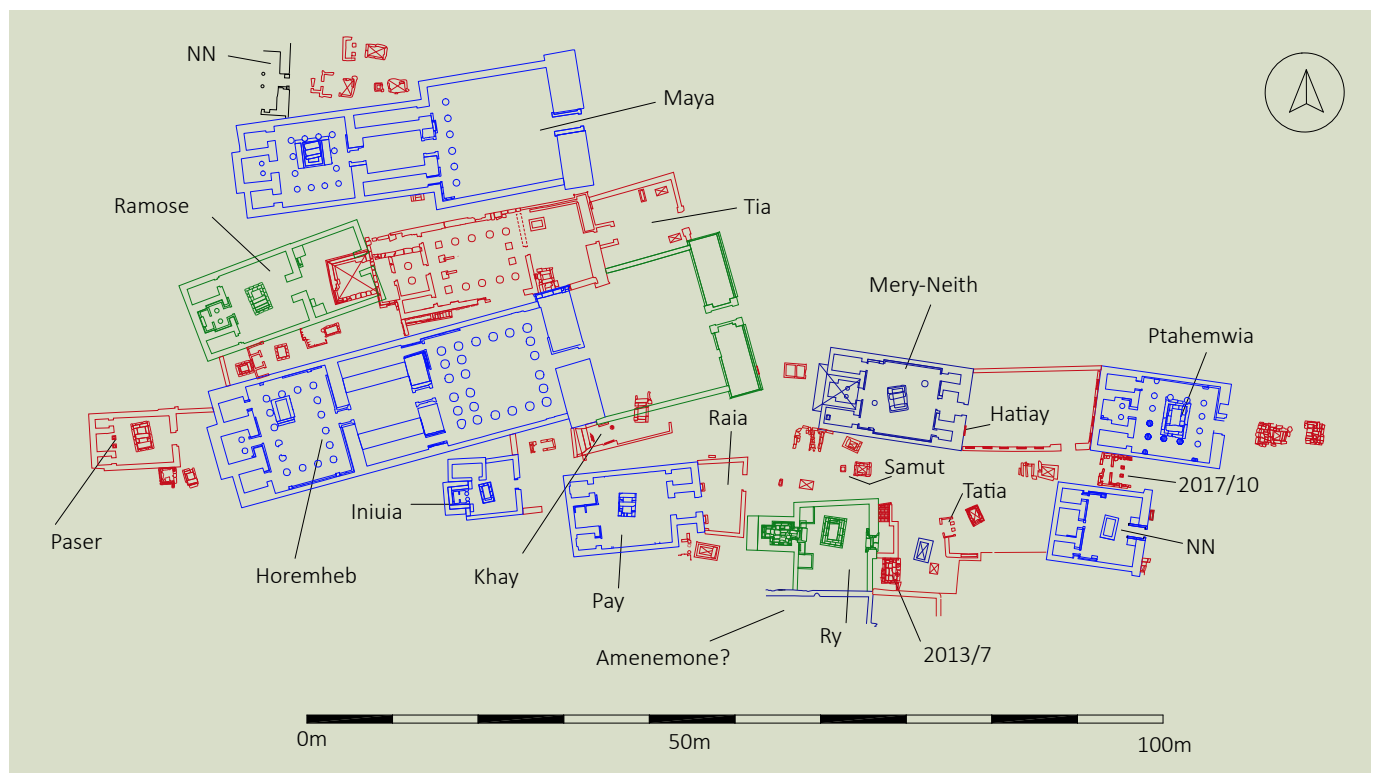


Image by Nico Staring, after plans created by Willem Beex, Annelies Bleeker, and Paolo Del Vesco

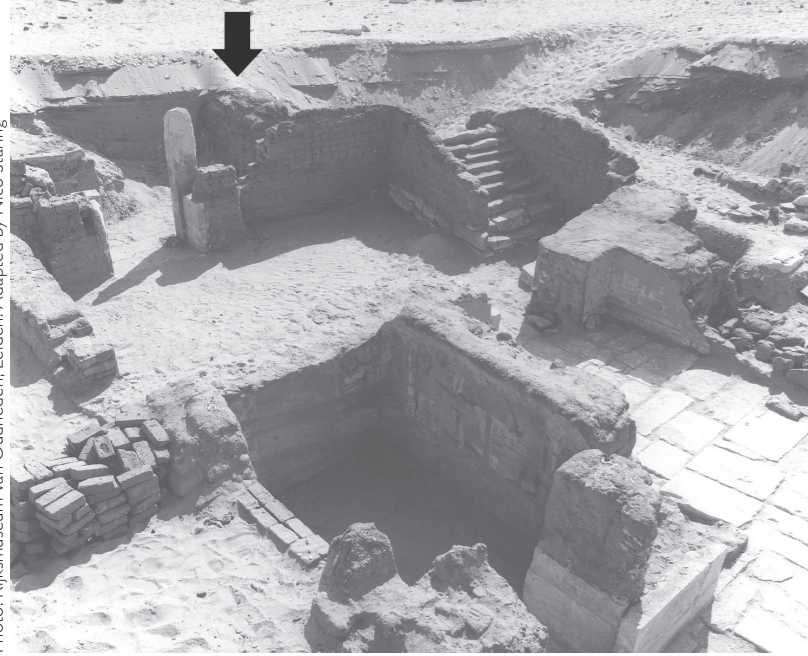


Photo: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden. Adapted by Nico Staring

The remains of a chapel belonging to 'tomb X' as it appeared in the 1990s (arrow).

The anonymous 'tomb X'

In 2013, the mud-brick perimeter walls of a tomb were fully excavated (image below). Neither the excavation of the superstructure nor the clearing of the tomb shaft in 2015 yielded clues as to the identity of the owner. As a result, the tomb has been referred to until now as 'tomb X'. Its superstructure, measuring c. 17 x 11 m, is oriented east–west and consists of a gateway, an open courtyard, and a single cult chapel to the west (plan opposite page). It is interesting to note that the courtyard's south wall is formed by the pre-existing northern exterior wall of a neighbour to the south. The layout of 'tomb X' is, overall, rather asymmetrical. Notice, for example, that its north and south walls do not run parallel, and the tomb entrance, burial shaft and west chapel are not exactly aligned. Also, the entrance to the cult chapel is situated off the centre of the courtyard west wall. At some stage, a north–

The perimeter walls of 'tomb X', excavated in 2013.



Photo: Nico Staring

south oriented, L-shaped annex was added to the east gateway, and a chapel of Ramesside date built against the south-eastern façade.

Limestone pavement slabs and a wall revetment were only used for the entrance doorway and the cult chapel. The stone bases that originally supported stelae are preserved on either side of the entrance to the west chapel. A remarkable feature connected to (and partly built over) them are the low, walled enclosures built of mud bricks. These features contained a huge amount of broken offering pottery of late Eighteenth Dynasty date.

The architectural layout of the west chapel, with its walls preserved to a height of around 1.3 m, consists of an antechapel 2 m deep, and a narrower inner sanctuary almost 1 m deep. The thick walls of the chapel, in combination with the now missing lintel architrave and stone revetment, would have supported roofing slabs, on which a mud-brick pyramid once stood.

'Tomb X' identified as the tomb of Ry

All interior walls of the chapel originally had a limestone revetment, bearing a decoration programme executed in both raised and sunk relief. The fragments of four such relief-decorated blocks were found *in situ*, and setting lines scratched into the limestone pavement point to the former presence of blocks that are now missing.

The offering bearers depicted on the antechapel east wall proved to be the key to unlocking the identity of the tomb owner (opposite page, bottom left). Two distinctive features of these figures are the folds in their necks and the skull cap-like shorn heads. The way in which the man in the middle supports with both hands a bowl on his right shoulder, filled with food offerings, is also very

uncommon. One parallel at Saqqara can be found on a relief-decorated block from the Egyptian Museum in Berlin (ÄM 7277; image bottom right).

On further investigation, more blocks in Berlin were found to belong to the same corpus. They include the famous ones showing a deceased couple – Ry and his wife Maia – in a purification scene (ÄM 7278). The figure on the right-hand side of the Berlin block joins directly to the block found *in situ* on the north wall of the antechapel. With the first piece of the puzzle thus laid down, it was possible to piece much of the chapel back together: block Berlin ÄM 7275 joins directly to the block found *in situ* on the inner chapel north wall (both images on the next page). It shows Ry and his wife standing in adoration before the god Re-Horakhty, and the register below depicts a row offering bearers. The adjoining west wall of the chapel once accommodated the monolithic limestone stela, Berlin ÄM 7290 (see next but one page), and the chapel south wall is where block Berlin ÄM 7277 used to be. The pyramidion, the capstone of the mud-brick pyramid, is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, (JE 14975). Stela Brooklyn Museum 37.46E, inscribed with hymns to the sun god, once stood upon a limestone base against the courtyard west wall, on the south jamb of the antechapel entrance. On account of the available wall space, one further relief-decorated



Photo: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden

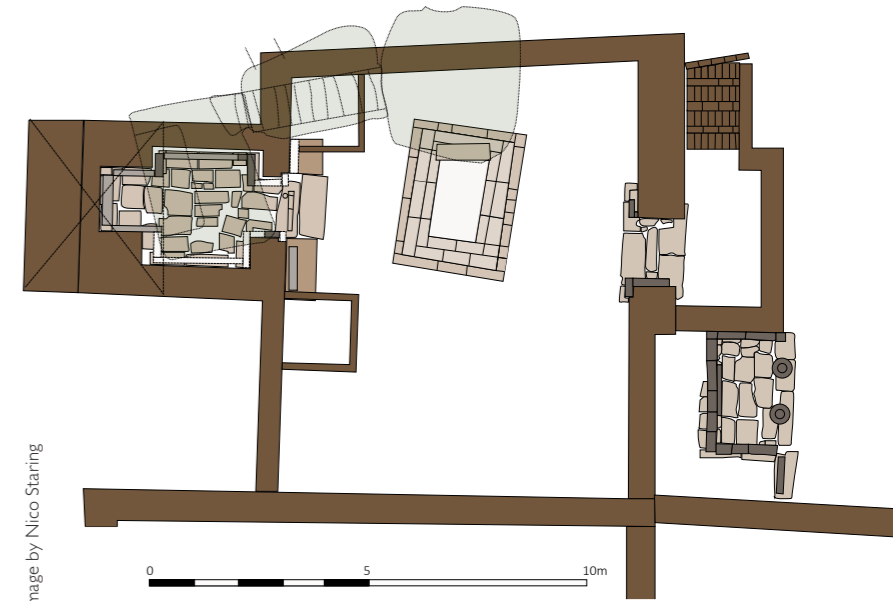


Image by Nico Staring

A plan of the tomb.

block can be assigned to the tomb of Ry. Fragments registered R94-78 were found by the former Egypt Exploration Society / Leiden mission in 1994, and they possibly decorated the antechapel south wall (see next but one page). The original position of a block now held in the museum of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem is as yet unknown.

A closer look at Berlin ÄM 7278

The antechapel north wall (images next page) depicts an offering and purification scene centred on the tomb owner and his wife. A group of five individuals approach the seated couple, Ry and Maia, from the right. This scene thus continues from the offering bearers on the adjacent wall. The five individuals include two male officiants. The first, a man with shorn head, clad in a sash kilt and wearing a leopard skin over his shoulder, acts as a priest. In his two raised hands he holds a *nemset* jar from which he pours a libation of water indicated

Left: fragment of a relief-decorated limestone block, found *in situ* at the tomb. Below: Comparison with another fragment now in Berlin helped to identify the tomb owner.

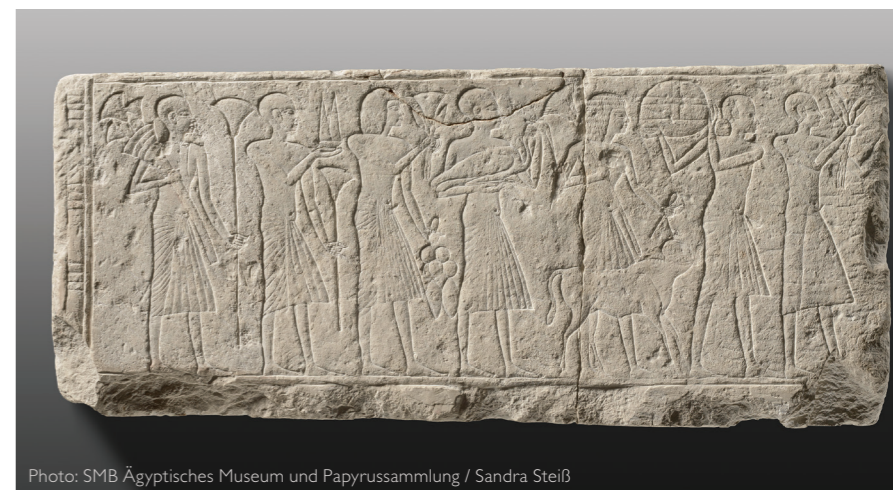


Photo: SMB Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung / Sandra Steiß



Putting the puzzle pieces together: two more fragments in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin can be shown to fit with fragments left *in situ* at the tomb of Ry.



Photos: SMB Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung / Jürgen Liepe, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden. Composite images by Nico Staring



by two wavy lines extending over Ry and Maia. A single column of framed hieroglyphs identifies this man as the servant, Ahanefer. In front of the well-stacked offering table a man stands dressed in an elaborate garment. In his raised left hand he holds a long-armed censer burning incense, and in his raised right hand another *nemset* jar with spout from which he pours a libation of water. A short hieroglyphic text set in a framed column identifies him as the stablemaster, Maia – evidently a man professionally associated to Ry, his superior in office. The hieroglyphic text carved in 17 framed columns presents an excerpt from the *Book of the Dead* (BD) spell 149I. In papyrus manuscripts, BD 149 is entitled ‘Spells for knowing the mounds of the house of Osiris in the Field of Rushes’, and in the late Eighteenth Dynasty it usually concludes the sequence of spells and vignettes. It enables the deceased to pass the underworld mounds in the great

bark of Re and, together with the deity, to enter the horizon after the nocturnal journey.

Ry: Horemheb’s chief of bowmen and overseer of horses

The titles of office held by Ry are chief of bowmen and overseer of horses. They indicate that he was a military man, commanding troops in the infantry and cavalry. Overseers of horses were drawn from the ranks of chiefs of bowmen. Prominent bearers of this title-combination are Ay, Paramessu (Ramesses I), and Seti (I), military men all, who later in their career rose to the throne. The titles’ positions in the lists of rank indicate that its bearers held one of the highest ranks in the military,



Photo: SMB Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung / Ingrid Geske

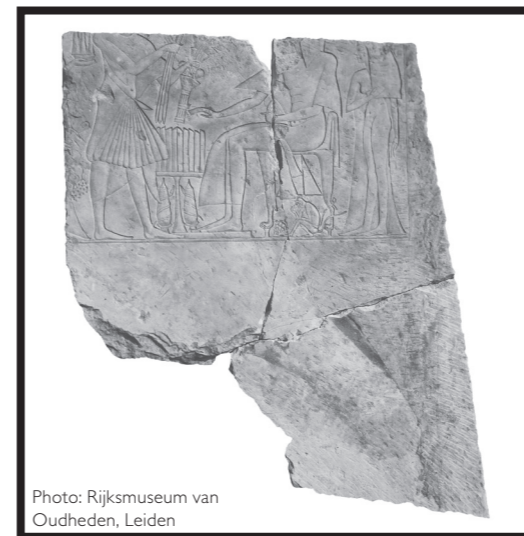


Photo: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden

subordinate only to the general. During Ry’s tenure, the latter office was held by Horemheb. When Horemheb became king, he was succeeded by Amenemone who, earlier in his career, had – like Ry – been head of bowmen. Could it be that Amenemone is, in fact, Ry’s neighbour to the south?

From Saqqara to Berlin, Brooklyn, Cairo and Jerusalem

The question of how the stone elements from the tomb of Ry at Saqqara entered the various museum collections around the world is an interesting one. The initial discovery and disassembling of the tomb can be traced with some confidence back to the 1820s. Art

collectors, dealers, and gangs of local workmen exploited the Saqqara plateau in search of collectable antiquities. Portable ancient Egyptian objects and inscribed tomb elements were thus transferred to the private collections of Europeans resident in Egypt, and the subsequent sales of their collections contributed to the dispersal of entire tomb structures – as happened to the tomb of Ry. Various blocks entered the private collection of Giuseppe Passalacqua (1797–1865), who offered it for sale in Paris in 1826. In the following year, it was acquired by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia for the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. Ry’s courtyard stela went into the collection of Henry Abbott (1807–59), which he gathered in Egypt in the 1840s. It was shipped from Egypt to the US in 1851–52, where it was acquired by the New York Historical Society in 1860. In turn, the NYHS collection was subsequently transferred on loan to the Brooklyn Museum, which eventually purchased it in 1948. The pyramidion was found by Auguste Mariette (1821–81) at Saqqara in February 1861 although, according to his own recollection, he had excavated it at Abydos. The relief-decorated block currently held in Jerusalem was presented to the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Museum by Fr Cleophas Steinhausen in 1922. He had acquired it in Alexandria before 1914. It is not known how or when it was removed from the tomb of Ry at Saqqara. Ongoing research into the long life history of the tomb may eventually answer that question, and find the last missing pieces of this monumental puzzle.

Limestone stela Berlin ÄM 7290, from the west wall of the chapel.

Fragments R94-78 found by the EES / Leiden mission in 1994 that possibly decorated the south wall of the antechapel south wall.

• Nico Staring is a member of the Leiden-Turin archaeological mission at Saqqara and a postdoctoral research fellow of the project ‘The Walking Dead at Saqqara: The Making of a Cultural Geography’, hosted at Leiden University (LIAS/SMES). The project is financed with a Vidi Talent Scheme awarded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO, dossier No. 016.Vidi.174.032). The present paper was also made possible with a grant awarded by the Leiden University Fund / Prof Dr A. W. Byvanck Fund. The author would like to thank Lara Weiss and Huw Twiston Davies, team members of ‘The Walking Dead’ project, for valuable feedback; Vincent Oeters; Maarten Raven, former director of the Leiden mission at Saqqara; and Geoffrey T. Martin, who generously shared his archive of unpublished Saqqara New Kingdom material with the author.