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The certainty of change : a research into the interactions of the decoration on the western walls of the cult chapels of the mastabas at Giza during the Old Kingdom

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Chapter XIIConclusions.I. Introduction.

Although a stable situation in which no changes take place, might be enviable for persons living in it then and there, from an archaeological point of view such a steady state makes the study of many aspects of a cultural system difficult. Although information can be obtained even from a cultural system in stasis, it turns out that most of the data useful for the elucidation of its various aspects is gathered from more dynamic systems.

All the angles of incidence that have been employed in this research project lead to the conclusion that the system under study is dynamic. Consequently, its conclusions have been derived from results obtained from the study of the chronological developments of the various subsystems pertaining to the cultural system under study, i.e., the decoration of the western wall of the cult chapel of mastabas, etc..

For this research project the following choice has been made of the chronological development of definable variables within the various subsystems:

1. The type of (sub)themes employed on the western wall and the false door and their location on them.
2. Their frequency of employment.
3. Their interactions on one element or between elements and the quantification thereof.

II. Conclusions.

Two chronological developments can be discerned involving the western wall, and indirectly also other parts of the cult chapel.

1. The chronological developments in the mode of food supply for the *ka* of the deceased.
2. The chronological developments in the signalling/guiding function exerted by certain (sub)themes placed on specific sections of the western wall.

These two developments appear to be interconnected and interdependent.

Another development is that in order to explain the “behaviour” of certain (sub)themes, the unifying function of some (sub)themes had to be introduced.

II.1. Discussion.

The purpose of the tomb was manifold, but first of all it was intended to serve as a *burial place* of the remains of the deceased and to *allow performing* the funerary rites that were considered necessary for the deceased to enter the realm of the afterlife.¹

¹ Roth, *Social change*, discusses the change that took place during the transition from the 3rd to the 4th dynasty. Up to the end of the 3rd dynasty the sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased depended on the enormous quantity of goods placed in the magazines in the tomb, the « homestead » of the deceased (the transport and storages of these goods was part of the funerary rites). At the start of the 4th dynasty the substructure of the tomb changed from the simulation of a house with many rooms and magazines into a one-roomed burial chamber. This resulted in a growing dependance

1. on the daily cult in the chapel that had to be performed by priests or members of the family (the offerings or prayers of visitors were welcome too).
2. on the benevolence of the king which resulted in the introduction of the offering formula (early 4th dynasty in the chapel of Rahotep at Maidum, but still with the god Anubis (Harpur, *Maidum*, 112 and fig. 98).

It also *marked* the place where offerings could be brought for the sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased. All of these aspects of the tomb assured his/her survival in the world he/she was about to enter.²

Another purpose of the tomb was to serve as a *monument*, and as a status symbol, thus serving as a place where the living could come to bring offerings, but also for remembrance, thus assuring the survival of the deceased in the world of the living.

The sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased could be secured by the actual bringing of food and water, which was accompanied by cultic activities, which were performed in front of the false door.³ The tomb owner expected these offerings to be brought preferably on a daily basis, but certainly on festival days.⁴ The chapel could also be considered as a means for providing the deceased with the necessary sustenance in a magical way.

The chapel as a whole was an instrument designed in such a way that the cult for the sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased could be performed in it in accordance with the views about death and afterlife which prevailed at that moment. This also implies that the design of the chapel and everything pertaining to it was completely dependent on the prevailing beliefs of the time, and had to be adapted to them whenever they changed.

The design of the cult chapel was centred on three major parts:

1. The ground plan.
2. The decoration on all of its walls, of which in a direct cultic sense that of the western wall was probably the most important.
3. The false door(s) and its (their) decoration.

The first of these three is not included in the research project; of the second only the western wall is taken into account; and of the third solely its decoration and not its design.

The prevailing views about death and the afterlife can be taken together within the term “cultic character”, because the cult was completely embedded in these ideas. Consequently, any change in them caused a change in the design of the cult chapel, possibly in the ground plan, but certainly in the decoration of the walls and the false door(s).

This implies that there is a direct link between cultic character and decoration, and that changes in prevailing views about death and afterlife can be studied as a result of determining and interpreting the changes in the decoration of two of the three major parts of the cult chapel.

II.2. Argumentation.

From the start of the Old Kingdom (sub)themes with a type Ib cultic character had been present on the western wall, but their full deployment was insignificant, compared to the total type Ib cultic character of the false door. The conclusion is that during the 4th dynasty the cultic importance of the western wall was practically solely confined to the false door(s) against that wall.

At the start of the 5th dynasty the importance of the cultic role of the remaining part of the western wall began to increase (period IV.L – V.E/E), indicating that changes were taking place that necessitated such a reaction. This increase involved both the type Ia and the type Ib cultic character, the former showing the tomb owner in his/her daily (idealized) live, and the latter showing the response of the tomb owner to the actual or passive (magical) supply of food.

² Assmann, *Tod und Jenseits*, 54 ff.

³ An offering stone was placed in the cult chapel especially for this purpose. This feature was not only placed in front of a false door (Reisner, *Giza I*, plate 66d), but later also in front of slab stelae (Der Manuelian, *Slab stelae*, fig. 91), or against walls of buildings considered to be of cultic importance (Dobrev, *Tables d'offrandes*, 143-57).

⁴ Simpson, *Gmast 2*, plate XVII.

Apparently during the period V.E/L - V.M/E the depiction of the daily life of the tomb owner (the group of (sub)themes 2, 6 and 8) started to lose its importance on the western wall (but certainly not on the other walls of the chapel). To the already present type Ib (sub)themes of the priests and the butchery scene, (sub)themes like the offering table scene and the closely connected non-ideographic offering list were added, thus increasing the type Ib cultic character of the remaining surface of the western wall. This loss of the main depiction of the tomb owner on the western wall did not endanger the possibilities of the *ka* of the deceased to find some expression of the image of the deceased, because on the western wall a new main depiction of the tomb owner, the offering table scene, was gradually shifted from the southern wall.⁵

The disappearance of (sub)theme 2 (tomb owner with family), and with it the (sub)themes with which it formed a group ((sub)themes 6 and 8), cannot be explained by a change in the basic religious views and the cultic functioning of the chapel. Nevertheless a possible explanation can be found in the realisation that everything that had to do with the tomb, the chapel and the cult in it, was meant to last for ever, because in that way not only the “everlastingness” of the supply of food could be guaranteed, but, just as important, the name of the deceased was kept alive in the “social” memory of the living. But it was plainly visible, even early in the Old Kingdom, that in the necropolis of Saqqara, the oldest in the vicinity of Memphis, older tombs and the cult pertaining to it were neglected and finally forgotten.⁶ Not only did this lead to a diminishing faith in the everlastingness of the tomb itself, but also, from the early Old Kingdom onward, to a diminution of trust in guaranteed continuity of the daily offerings.⁷

It is probable that for that reason (sub)theme 2, a scene which showed the tomb owner as a provider for his family and the people who worked for him and who were dependent of him,⁸ was considered to be unable to guarantee an undisturbed supply of food for the *ka* of the deceased.

In order to strengthen the provider role of the tomb owner, measures of the following type were taken:

1. The shift of (sub)theme 2 from wall section 3 to wall section 2, the western wall's most important section, thus changing its main function from signalling/guiding to a function directly connected with the role of provider. This scene underlined the living person aspect of the deceased, and in that role it could, in the absence of a signalling/guiding (sub)theme on wall section 3, retain its signalling/guiding function, even when placed on wall section 2.
2. Combining (sub)theme 2 on wall section 2 with (sub)themes 6 and 8 to a scene out of the daily life of the tomb owner, the ultimate depiction of the provider role.

But apparently mistrust grew that even this stressed form of the provider role was not sufficient guarantee anymore, and again new measures had to be taken.

The next step was an increasing tendency to make the supply of food for the *ka* of the deceased less dependent on the actual bringing of food and water to the cult chapel. The result was a gradual

⁵ LÄ, III, 252-267, s.v. “Jenseitsvorstellungen”, there 257.

⁶ The oldest mastabas in the vicinity of Memphis are the 1st dynasty tombs which were built on the eastern escarpment of the Saqqara plateau (LÄ, V, 387-400, s.v. “Saqqara, Nekropolen der 1.-3. Dyn.”, there 388). When the first tombs of the 4th dynasty were built in the necropolis on the Plateau of Giza, the mastabas of the 1st dynasty at Saqqara were already between 400 and 500 years old (LÄ, I, 970, s.v. “Chronology”).

⁷ This loss of trust might also be due to the increasing uncertainty of the economic situation (Redford, *Egypt*, 57-8). Only in a few cases was the cult prolonged during several generations, e.g. the cult for Mehu and for Kagemni (Altenmüller, *Mehu*, 85). Another factor could have been that the plateau of Giza was no longer the royal necropolis (LÄ, II, 830 (G), s.v. “Grab”).

⁸ The text mentions only male tomb owners because all the tombs in table VI.1.Vol.2 which have a (sub)theme combination of 2-6, 2-8 or 2-6-8 on the western wall are owned by men.

increase of the employment of (sub)themes which could be considered to be helpful in guaranteeing the food supply on a non-actual, magical basis.⁹

Apart from the actual bringing of food and water to the cult chapel, there were other ways in which the supply of food for the *ka* of the deceased could be maintained:

1. By means of depicting the goods that were to be offered to the deceased,¹⁰ examples being (sub)themes 10 (piles of food) and 11 (the non-ideographic offering list).
2. The depiction of the production of food, which on the western wall is limited to (sub)theme 9 (the butchery scene).¹¹
3. Through texts, the most important being the offering formula.¹² This text was, until V.M, placed exclusively on the architrave of the false door, and from then on also on the door jambs and later on the panel of the false door, although, undoubtedly due to lack of space, its placement there remained rare.¹³
4. By depicting the tomb owner sitting in front of a table in the act of consuming food ((sub)themes 3, 40 and 41). Until the end of V.M/E (sub)theme 3 is placed solely on the southern wall, and after its shift from the southern wall to the western wall (table VI.3.Vol.2) it became the most important of the group of (sub)themes that was concerned with the magical food supply.

However, it has to be borne in mind that the food supply of the *ka* of the deceased had always been dependent on magic; even when the offerings were actually brought to the offering stone in front of the false door; it was by way of magic that the *ka* of the deceased obtained its sustenance. Consequently, the only change in the sustenance of the *ka* is at this side of the false door, because whatever the cultic activity, at the “afterlife side” of the false door the sustenance always reached the deceased by way of magic.

⁹ As discussed in LÄ, IV, 586, s.v. “Opferliste”, the offering list, which is based on text and depiction, is a magical way of providing the tomb owner with the items needed for the cult. The non-actual form of food supply, which gained importance from the start of the 5th dynasty onward, was based on the same principle of the magical power of text and depiction. LÄ, III, 1142, s.v. „Magie“ states that magic could be used as a substitute for material care, thus giving a possible solution for life-sustenance after death (see CT, III, 170b-c and less obvious CT, IV, 23i). Fitzenreiter, *Grabdekoration*, 81 states “Denn in dem Moment, in dem das regelmässige Opferritual aufhört, verliert der Tote seine Identität und wird vergessen”. This statement is invalid while the care taken to warrant the continuity of the food supply indicates that it was not the daily offering cult which was indispensable, but the food supply, either magically actual (the daily offering ritual) or magically passive (the depictions).

¹⁰ Depictions of this kind had already been placed on the eastern wall of the cult chapel in the early 3rd dynasty tomb of Hesyre’ at Saqqara (PM, III², 437-9).

¹¹ Harpur, *DETOK*, 70.

¹² The non-ideographic offering list is a (sub)theme which contains text. It was shifted from the panel of the false door to the western wall where it appeared as (sub)theme 11. The first occurrence of this (sub)theme on the western wall is in IV.L (chronological ordering IV.1.Vol.2).

¹³ Originally the offering list, stating type and quantity of goods that the deceased would need in the afterlife, was basically funerary (LÄ, IV, 587, s.v. “Opferliste”). In that period the main sense of the false door was to serve as a (for the living impenetrable) “door” into the “house” in which the deceased lived. (Sub)theme 42 (non-ideographic offering list), which (at first) had a purely funerary content, was originally placed on the panel of the false door, thus enabling the (magical) transfer of the grave goods to the house of the deceased. However, despite the presence of the offering lists on the panel, which could have made the actual placing of grave goods in the burial chamber superfluous, the habit of supplying real grave goods did not completely stop (Hetepheres, Reisner, *Giza, II*). In the course of time the list changed from a compilation of grave goods to a list of goods that were necessary for the cult for the deceased, and as such became more important and consequently, larger. Finally it became too large for the panel, and had to be shifted to the western wall, where it continued its close connection with the table scene but now in the form of (sub)theme 3.

Diminishing faith in permanent attendance of the tomb had a dramatic effect on the frequency of employment of (sub)themes accentuating the living person aspect of the deceased. The uncertainty about the sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased resulted in an increase of the type Ib cultic character on the remaining surface of the western wall, an increase directly linked to an increase in the magical food supply aspect of the wall.

However, this increase resulted in a concomitant decrease of the type Ia cultic character of that wall, and in the period V.M/E this type of cultic character reached a final and minimum value. This type Ia cultic character is based on depicting the tomb owner as a living person busy with the daily routine of the estate and thus acting as provider.

From the development described above it *cannot* be concluded that the basic view of the tomb owner actually living in the interior of the mastaba was coming to an end.

Even though the definition of type Ib cultic character does not distinguish between an actual cult and a cult concentrated more on the sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased in a magical way, it is possible to observe a relatively swift change of the actual sustenance by way of offerings to the (passive) sustenance by way of magic. This change takes place in the period between V.E/L and V.L/E, and at the end of this period wall section 3 lost its last signalling/guiding (sub)theme.¹⁴ The latter change indicates that this function was no longer deemed necessary for the functioning of the cult chapel, because the change in mode of supply which was taking place made the survival of the deceased less dependent on priests or visitors bringing offerings or prayers.¹⁵

One of the causes of these mutations was a growing need for decoration showing activities around the magical production and supply of food, and also of decoration depicting the food itself. Another cause was that, due to a strong connection between two (sub)themes, the mutation of one of them automatically caused the mutation of the other (an example of this being the interconnected shifts of the non-ideographic offering list from the panel to the western wall and the offering table scene from the southern to the western wall).

The difference between (sub)themes 2 and 3 is that (sub)theme 3 acts as the main focal point of the care taken “here” for those who live in the transcendental world of the “hereafter”,¹⁶ and thus functions as the main cultic “hereafter” (sub)theme. (Sub)theme 2 is the most important depiction of the daily life of the tomb owner with his family, and thus the main “here” (sub)theme. The fact that each of the (sub)themes could be placed on the western wall stresses the prime function of the western wall, that of forming a connection between the “hereafter” and the “here”. Furthermore (sub)theme 2 is the most important during the start of the Old Kingdom, a function that is taken over by (sub)theme 3, the main “hereafter” (sub)theme. This indicates a change in the interpretation of the function of the western wall.

From the beginning, the false door was the most important part of the cult chapel. Its task was actually twofold, because the false door not only acted as the element of the chapel in front of which the actual cult took place, but also served as an intermediary between the “here” and the “there”, thus making it possible for the tomb owner to magically get the sustaining principle from the offerings. Its decoration was totally adapted to these two tasks.

The panel of the false door had always been dedicated to the magical part of the cult (the main (sub)themes on the panel being the offering table scene, the ideographic and the non-ideographic offering list). These (sub)themes all had a type Ib cultic character, and as such were connected with the cult in its overall magical form. The increase in the importance of the magical part of the cult made

¹⁴ From the moment that (sub)theme was not placed on wall section 3 anymore its place was taken in by other (sub)themes. (Sub)themes 5 and 10 were the most placed there (determined in table VI.1.Vol.2 resp. 32% and 20% of all the placements). No proof can be found that either of the (sub)themes 5 or 10 became dominant on wall section 3 after the disappearance of (sub)theme 1, and the conclusion is that the signaling/ guiding role of wall section 3 ended at that moment

¹⁵ It is however possible that this function was taken over by the decoration of the entrance thicknesses.

¹⁶ LÄ, V, 1128-1133, s.v. “Speisetischszene”.

itself first apparent in an increase in the number of items mentioned in the non-ideographic offering list on the panel. The result was that the list started to increase in size until it became so large that it could no longer be placed on the panel; consequently it was increasingly transferred to the western wall. However, the offering table scene and the non-ideographic offering list had been together on the panel of the false door for a very long time, and their togetherness had developed into a tradition.

Thus, when the non-ideographic offering list was transferred to the western wall, an offering table scene had to be placed next to it. This scene could not be taken from the panel, and so it was shifted from the southern wall of the chapel and, starting V.E/L, got more and more placed on the western wall, a development which ended early in V.M. This development strongly enhanced the importance of the western wall for the magical food supply.

During the period V.M/E the (sub)theme depicting the piles of food offerings ((sub)theme 10) is introduced on the western wall where it is employed as a (sub)theme with a unifying function in a magical cultic surrounding. In this way it also enhances the magical cultic character of the western wall.

On the door jambs of the false door the situation was different: the (sub)themes on them were more concerned with the actual cult of actually laying offerings on the stone in front of the false door. They had, like the (sub)themes on the panel, a type Ib cultic character, and were connected to the actual part of the cult.

Consequently, the increasing importance of the magical cult had no influence on the frequency of employment of the (sub)themes of the panel, but it had a dramatic impact on the employment of the (sub)themes on the door jambs.

Nearly all the (sub)themes that were usually placed on them disappeared (family, offering bearers, priests and offering paraphernalia), the only ones that continued to be placed on them were the two most important (sub)themes: the depiction of the tomb owner and his name and title(s). The door jambs were from then on taken in by the offering formula in which the name and the title(s) of the tomb owner were incorporated.

From the 4th dynasty on the offering formula had been the main feature of the architraves of the false door and this (sub)theme was introduced on the door jambs as a (sub)theme with a magical type Ib cultic character, thus enhancing the magical type Ib cultic character of the false door.

With these mutations the cultic character of the false door remained of type Ib, but its connection with the actual cult had been terminated completely at the start of V.L.

The growing importance of the magical food supply was accompanied by a strong increase in the type Ib cultic character of the western wall and a nearly complete disappearance of its type Ia cultic character; furthermore it was accompanied by a decrease in the cultic type Ib character of the false door. Although the result for the whole western wall is that no net change in type Ib cultic character took place, it can still be concluded that after the change during the period V.E/L – V.L/E the false door was no longer the centre of cultic importance on the western wall, this role had been “spread” over all the elements of the wall.

The actual cult in the chapel was never abandoned completely, because if magic had become the only means of food supply, it would have been effective even if the (sub)themes had only been placed on the walls of the burial chamber. Late in the Old Kingdom in some tombs the offering list, depictions of offerings and other items connected with the magical supply of food were indeed placed on the walls of the burial chamber,¹⁷ but it never became a method chosen by many tomb owners. This fact indicates that the decision to place decoration on the walls of the burial chamber was not caused by a change in religious beliefs.

¹⁷ LÄ, II, 854, s.v. “Grabdekoration”. Some examples are: Kaem’ankh (PM, III¹, 131-2), date V.L (Kanawati, *Giza I*, plate 34-37); Kakerptah (PM, III¹, 166-7) date VI.E (Junker, *Giza VIII*, figure 56); ‘Ankhamor (PM, III², 512-5), date VI.E and Mehu (PM, III², 619-22), date VI.E. Also see Kanawati, *Burial chamber*.

Yet the change in cult is not necessarily linked to a change of ideas about the afterlife itself. Up to the start of the change the perception of life after death had been twofold. There was an idea that the tomb was the world in which the deceased bodily lived, and the false door was the door of the house through which the deceased could enter the world of the living, but there also existed the more transcendent idea of “going up to the great god” and “walking on the beautiful roads of the west”,¹⁸ and as already discussed, the final step by which the food, either real or imaginary, got to the tomb owner was always magical.

III. The signalling/guiding role.

When the place intended for the offerings (the niche and later the false door) was no longer located on the eastern wall of the tomb, but in an exterior or interior cult chapel, it was no longer directly visible for a passer-by. This invisibility not only necessitated the introduction of identifying and signalling/guiding decoration on the entrance and its thicknesses but also the introduction of the same type of decoration on the western wall opposite the entrance.

At first, this signalling/guiding function was twofold because depictions of the tomb owner with family, and above all with name and title(s), identify the deceased (person signalling) and depictions incorporating the offering table identify the purpose (purpose signalling) of the cult chapel.

Later, when the depictions of the tomb owner with the offering table were no longer employed on the entrance thicknesses, and only depictions of the tomb owner either alone or with family remained placed there, it is evident that a change in the meaning of the chapel had taken place.¹⁹

Indication of the purpose is no longer necessary; only the signalling of the tomb owner on the outer reaches of the tomb remains important, all the more so because this signalling/guiding function no longer existed on the western wall.

This loss of the purpose signalling function at the entrance of the chapel is directly connected with the change in cultic character of the western wall. It was no longer necessary to indicate the purpose of the chapel, because the actual offering cult was no longer the only possible way to sustain the *ka* of the deceased.

As already stated, the disappearance of (sub)theme 2 (together with (sub)themes 6 and 8) from wall section 2 resulted in the loss of the last remnants of its signalling/guiding function in the chapel. In order to reinstate this function a depiction of the tomb owner in a standing posture and without accompanying members of the family ((sub)theme 1) was placed on wall section 3. It is possible that this (sub)theme was imported from the door jambs of the false door, but no evidence for this can be deduced from the data at hand. This (sub)theme was placed on wall section 3 for only a short period (until the end of V.L/E), and from this period on no further (sub)themes with a signalling/guiding function were placed on this wall section.

IV. Epilogue.

It is evident that the change in the mode of food supply on the western wall is a change that in fact involves a great number of elements of the chapel. All these changes and mutations take place in reaction to a growing conviction that it is impossible to guarantee an *everlasting* sustenance of the *ka* of the deceased. This conviction could have been strengthened by an economic recession that to all probability accompanied the end of the Old Kingdom and that might even have been one of the factors that caused its downfall.

¹⁸ Oster, *Bedeutungswandel*, 88 ff..

¹⁹ The offering table scene disappears from the entrance thicknesses in the period V.M/E, the sitting tomb owner in the period V.L/E, both of them to be replaced by the effigy of the tomb owner in a standing position.

In previous studies several of these changes and mutations have been discussed, but always as independent developments. Very often this leads to explanations of the various changes that strongly contradict each other.

However in this research project all of these changes have been brought together in *one* model, and it turns out that changes that seem very often without rime or reason, are in fact part of a much bigger scheme, and that all of these apparently independent mutations are interdependent in a very intricate way. This model also makes it clear that these changes can be understood to be part of one major explanation.