

Decorated burial chamber of Meru (TT 240) at North Asasif: some remarks on the layout



Abstract: The paper offers some preliminary considerations concerning the distribution, composition, and orientation of the elements comprising the decoration of the burial chamber of Meru, TT 240. The tomb, situated within the North Asasif slope, dates to the last phase of the reign of Mentuhotep II Nebhepetra. The repertoire of the decorative elements found in Meru's burial chamber may be traced back to the Old Kingdom, while some peculiarities in their distribution and orientation seem to be a consequence of the introduction of the Pyramid Texts, a post-Old Kingdom novelty in the decoration of a non-royal burial space.

Key words: Theban Necropolis, North Asasif, Old/Middle Kingdom, Sixth/Eleventh Dynasty, Mentuhotep II Nebhepetra, burial chamber, sarcophagus/coffin, offering list, false door, Pyramid Texts, "seven sacred oils", glorification/resurrection/departure spells/texts (*s3hw*)

The tomb of the overseer of the sealbearers Meru, TT 240, ends the line of tombs cut in the rocky slope of North Asasif (which is the north cliff of Deir el-Bahari in a natural continuation) that were constructed and decorated for the courtiers of Mentuhotep II Nebhepetra during the last decade of his reign (Allen 1996: *passim*, especially 9–10, 18–19, Fig. 3). The tombs located further east postdate this king, although Meru himself seems to have outlived Mentuhotep II (Willems 1988: 113 with note 249; J.P. Allen 1996: 24–26).

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Like the rest of the rock-cut tombs in this area, TT 240 represents a corridor type (Arnold 2015: 10–11), with its cult chapel accessed via a corridor and its burial chamber approached by a sloping passage [Fig. 1]. The cult space of the tomb (i.e., the offering chapel and the corridor leading to it) was left undecorated, whereas its sarcophagus chamber is among the three decorated burial spaces at this site (the other two belonging to queen Neferu, TT 319, and to the king's treasurer, Khety, TT 311¹). The fourth decorated burial chamber in this line is that of the royal sealbearer Horhotep, TT 314, dating, most probably, to the time of Sesostris I (for the date, see Morales and Osman 2018: 85, 90, 97; for more on this monument, see below).

The tomb of Meru, discovered in 1844/1845 by Karl Richard Lepsius (*LD Text III*: 241–242), remains unpublished except for its texts, the hieroglyphic transcription of which was included in Allen 2006: 46–251. The decoration of its burial chamber, documented by the Metropolitan Museum Expedition

(Allen 1996: 24, Note 102), was not commented upon in Harco Willems milestone study, the author dealing only with Meru's coffin, that is, a coffin-shaped pit cut in the rocky floor of the chamber (*LD II*: Pl. 148 c–d; Willems 1988: 106, 182–185, 187 with Note 30, 202, 247) [see Fig. 1]. A comprehensive publication is being prepared within the frame of the Polish Archaeological Expedition to the North Asasif (Asasif Project) from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, working at the site since 2015 (Chudzik 2016: 297–300; 2017: 195–196; 2018: 192). Conservation work, initiated in the 2018/2019 and continued in the past season, following up on the work of the Italian team (for details, see Chudzik 2020, in this volume), is making the decoration of the burial chamber increasingly clear in preparation for comprehensive egyptological studies. Pending completion of this stage of the work, it is already possible to offer the following remarks concerning motifs and themes comprising its decorative layout.

REMARKS ON THE DECORATION SCHEME

EAST WALL

The east wall of Meru's burial chamber displays a false door, a pile of foodstuffs, and an offering list (see Chudzik 2017: Fig. 12). The list, arranged in three registers, each containing 30 columns, represents classical A-type list content (Barta 1963: 47–101). Its composition seems well thought-out, as the smaller units comprising the whole (for these, see Barta 1963: 69–72) are not divided

between the registers. So register I contains the opening ritual activities (A/1–A/18) and the so-called “small meal” (A/19–A/26), followed by the actions preceding the “large meal” (A/27–A/29). Register II starts with the names of foodstuffs comprising the “large meal” proper, that is, various types of bread, meat, and poultry (A/30–A/59) and Register III continues with a group of other types of bread, drinks, and sweets (fruits

1 For the location of the North Asasif tombs mentioned in this paper and their spatial relationship, see Chudzik 2020, in this Chudzik 2020: Fig. 1, in this volume. For the location of TT 319, see Chudzik 2016: Fig. 1.

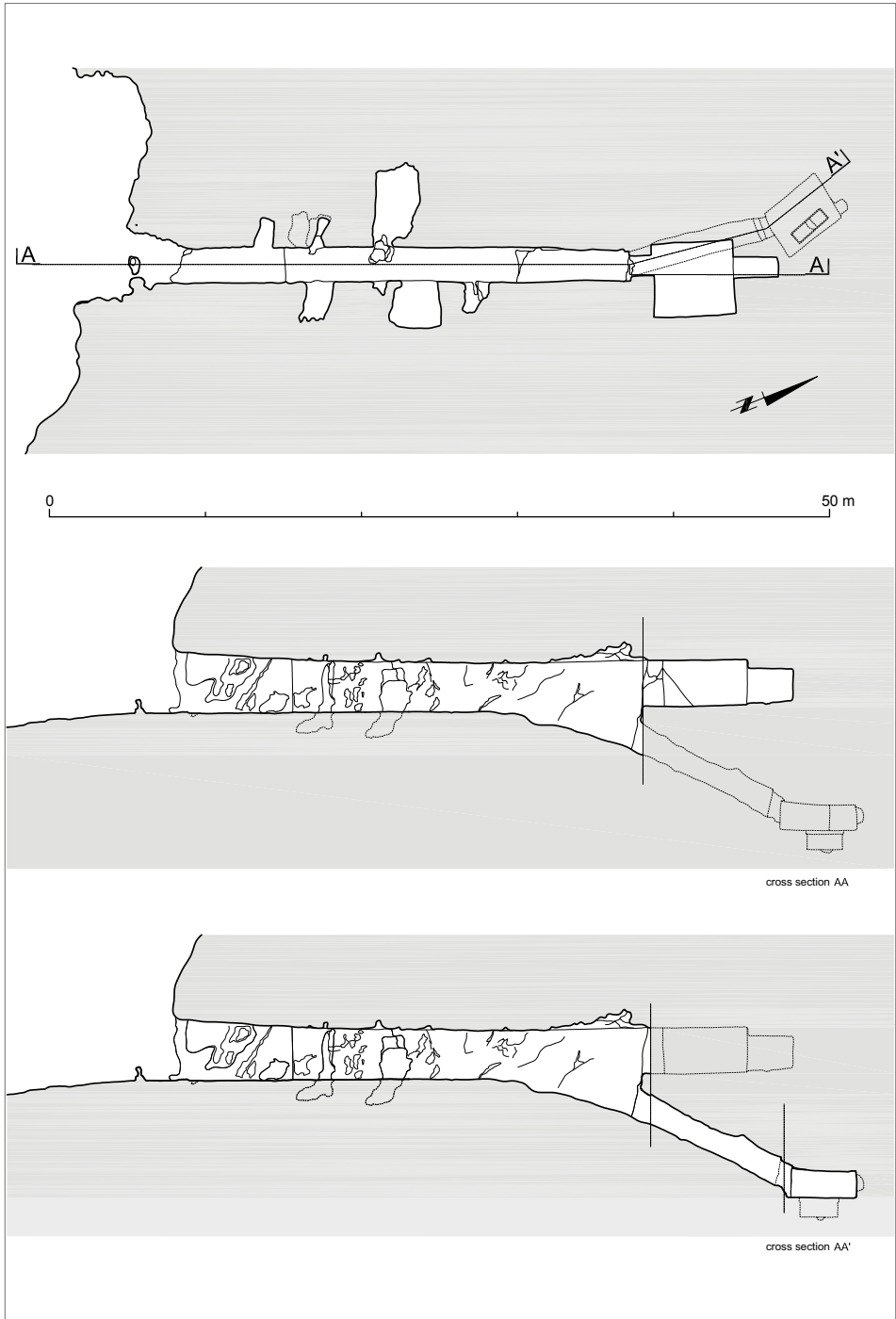


Fig. 1. The Tomb of Meru TT 240: plan and cross sections (PCMA UW Asasif project | drawing K. Andraka, based on 3D documentation by M. Mackiewicz)

and cereals) (A/60–A/87), followed by the closing actions (A/88–A/91). In the fourth, lowermost register of the chart, each column contains a short inscription, which reads *dd mdw n jm3h(y) Mrw p(w) n k3.f* “Recitation for this honored Meru, for his ka”. In the remaining columns, this text is repeated, omitting however the initial *dd mdw*-phrase.

Meru represents a rare case of a tomb preserving the decoration of its burial chamber and its coffin, both following the same general principles of distribution and orientation of particular components. The location of the offering list on the east wall is a general rule, which may be traced back to the earliest decorated burial chambers, at Giza and Saqqara, dating as early as the turn of the Fifth and the Sixth Dynasties (Dawood 2005: 112–113 with references, Fig. 5; Kanawati and Willoughby-Winlaw 2010: 44–49, Photos 3, 16, 17),² and is equally common among the sarcophagi and coffins (Willems 1988: 228–232), the earliest examples dating to the Old Kingdom as well (Lapp 1993: 32–35, esp. § 96 and § 102, Pl. 5b). Interestingly, a comparison of the offering list placed on the wall of Meru’s chamber with that on the front, eastern side (FR)³ of his sarcophagus (not included

in LD II: Pl. 148 d) reveals dissimilarities in their arrangement and even in the paleography of some of the entries, which leads one to consider whether or not two different *Vorlagen* were used in these two cases. Further comparison of the two decorative layouts, of the burial chamber and of the sarcophagus, seems extremely promising.

NORTH WALL

The most destroyed north wall of the chamber preserves the decoration in its western part. Looking at it from left to right, there is first a rectangular segment with three compartments placed one above the other, containing images of two different kinds of linen (in bundles) and two *wnhw*-strips. Inscriptions above inform about the quantity of items in each case. A *serekh*-type false door appears to the right of this rectangle. The preserved decoration in the right (eastern) top corner of the wall indicates the presence of another false door, placed symmetrically to the one depicted in its left part and at the same distance from the edge of the wall on this side [Fig. 2].⁴ The space between the two false doors would have been occupied by the object frieze,⁵ a small bottom fragment of which

2 The date of some of these monuments is debated, the issue amounting to the question of the origins of the practice of decorating non-royal burial space with regard to the introduction of the Pyramid Texts in the substructure of Unis; for a summary of the discussion, see Kanawati and Willoughby-Winlaw 2010: 43–45; contra Dawood 2005: 108–110, 113–116.

3 Here and below, the code system applied to the sides of sarcophagi and coffins follows Willems 1988: 47, Note 6 and *passim*: FR = front side (eastern side), B = back side (western side), H = head-end (northern side), F = foot-end (southern side). For more on the orientation of a body within a sarcophagus and on further connotations of this, see, e.g., Raven 2005: *passim*, especially 40–43.

4 Judging by the chisel marks, the niche cut in this part of the wall is to be associated with the secondary, post-Middle Kingdom phase of use of the funerary space (P. Chudzik, personal communication, 2020).

5 On the term and its content, see Jéquier 1921: *passim*; Willems 1988: 179–190, 209–228.

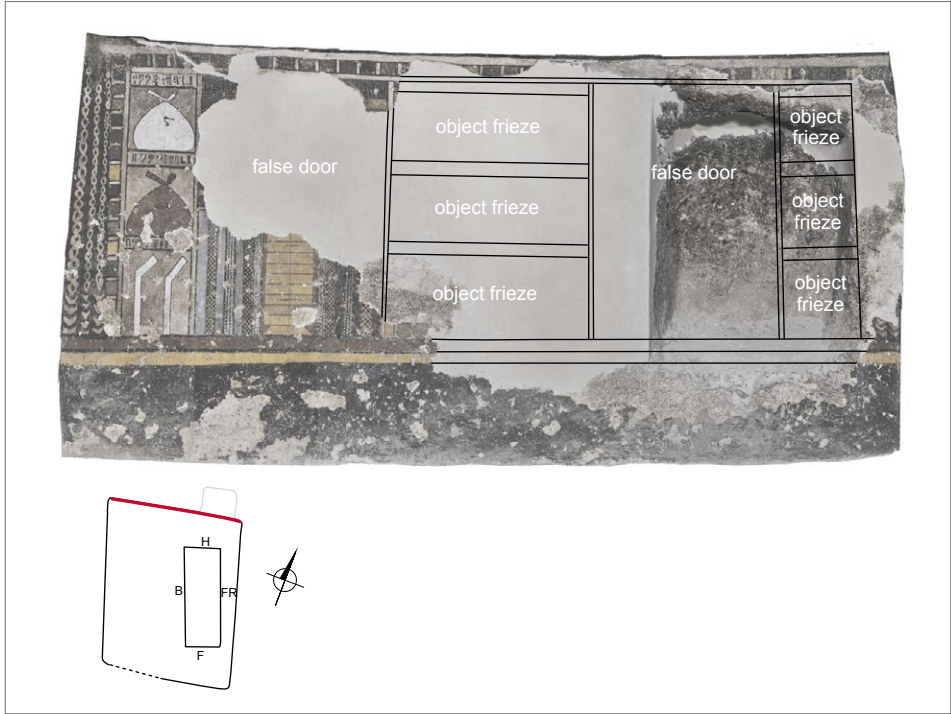


Fig. 2. Burial chamber of Meru: north wall, reconstruction of the layout (PCMA UW Asasif project | photo M. Jawornicki, tracing A. Stupko-Lubczyńska, plan K. Andraka)

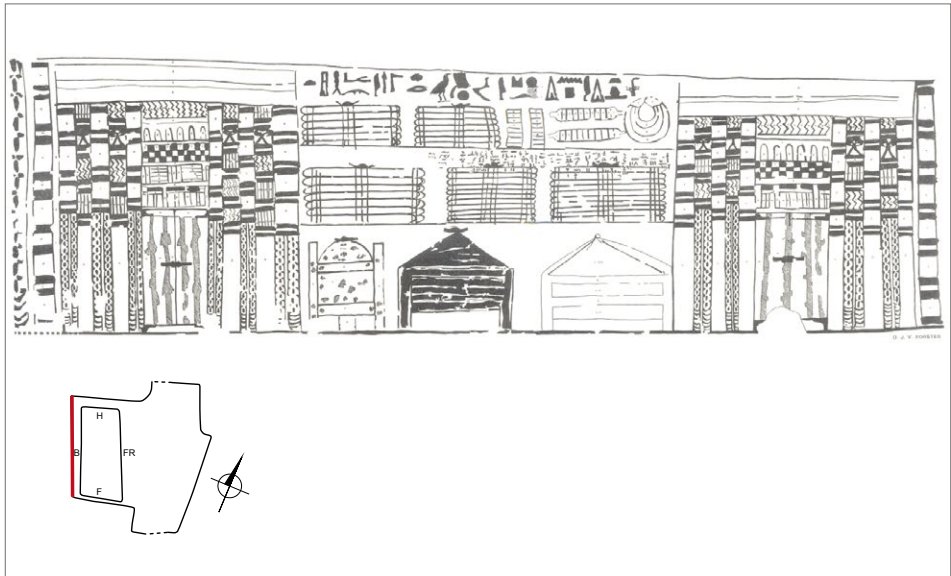


Fig. 3. Burial chamber of Hewetiaah, Meir, D2 (late Sixth Dynasty), west wall (After Blackmann 1924: Pl. XIX (1), plan adapted from Blackmann 1924: Pl. II | tracing A. Stupko-Lubczyńska)

is preserved, adjoining the right edge of the (left) false door; here, two round objects representing, most probably, pellets of incense, can be seen.

A comparable composition of a pair of false doors and the object frieze between them is attested, for example, in two burial chambers at Meir (D2), dating to the late Sixth Dynasty (Blackman 1924: 62–63, Pl. XIX [Fig. 3]; Kanawati and Willoughby-Winlaw 2010: 70–71, Photos 100, 103, 112). In both cases, however, this is the west wall (corresponding to B of the coffin), and the products comprising the object frieze are, typically of this location, jewelry and linen, the latter represented in the form of packages and stored in chests.⁶

In Meru's immediate neighborhood, a similar arrangement of these elements is found in the burial chamber of Horhotep, CG 28023. This decorated limestone lining of the chamber, discovered along with the sarcophagus in the North Asasif area in 1883, dismantled and moved to the Bulaq Museum and subsequently to the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Maspero 1889: 134–180; Lacau 1904: 42–56), has recently been (re-) located convincingly in the courtyard of

TT 314, a tomb lying just west of Meru's tomb (Morales and Osman 2018: *passim*, especially 86–90, Figs 2a–b, 5). The identification of this chamber with the subsidiary burial and not the main burial chamber of TT 314, put forward by Antonio Morales and Mohamed Osman, has led to a reconstruction of the accurate orientation of the walls of this structure,⁷ which is crucial for the interpretation of its decorative scheme. According to this latest finding, it is the west wall in Horhotep's burial chamber that has two false doors [Fig. 4], as in the aforementioned burial chambers at Meir, and because the entrance occupies here the whole space between the false doors, an abbreviated object frieze (comprising scepters, maces, and incense) had to be "packed" in the small compartment above the entrance. The actual object frieze in this chamber is divided between the two lateral walls, forming an apparent sequence starting on the north wall (in its western part) with a set of seven sacred unguents and two eye-paints arranged in one register, and continued on the south wall, where the frieze, in two registers, starts (again, in the western part of the wall) with

6 An analogous location of these motifs is found primarily in the decorated burial chambers at Saqqara, dating from the Sixth Dynasty up to the Heracleopolitan Period (e.g., Jéquier 1929: Figs 17–19, 39, 42–43, 49–50, 55, 82, 140, Pls IV, VII, XI, XII, XIV; for a comprehensive list of these monuments, see Dawood 2005: 117–119, with references; for a reassessment of their date, see Fischer 1997: *passim*; Brovarski 2005: *passim*). There, the west (back) walls (with the false door often placed in the middle) additionally comprise the motif of the seven sacred oils. The same content of the friezes, that is, oils and linen, is observed in this place in the burial chambers of Mereruka, dating to Teti (Kanawati and Willoughby-Winlaw 2010: Photos 55–56) and Inumin, dating to Pepy I (Kanawati and Willoughby-Winlaw 2010: 68–69, Photo 90).

7 Compared to misleading labels in Maspero 1889: unnumbered plates after pages 136, 138, 140, 146, 148, 150, denoting the west wall as the "east" one, etc. [see here, Fig. 4], repeated in Lacau 1904: 42–49.

8 The set of the seven oils, eye-paints, and two *wnhw*-strips, having its place in A-type offering lists (A/3 – A/12), corresponding to PT 72–81, commonly occurs on H of coffins and sarcophagi (oriented to the north), as in the course of the ritual these products are associated with the face of

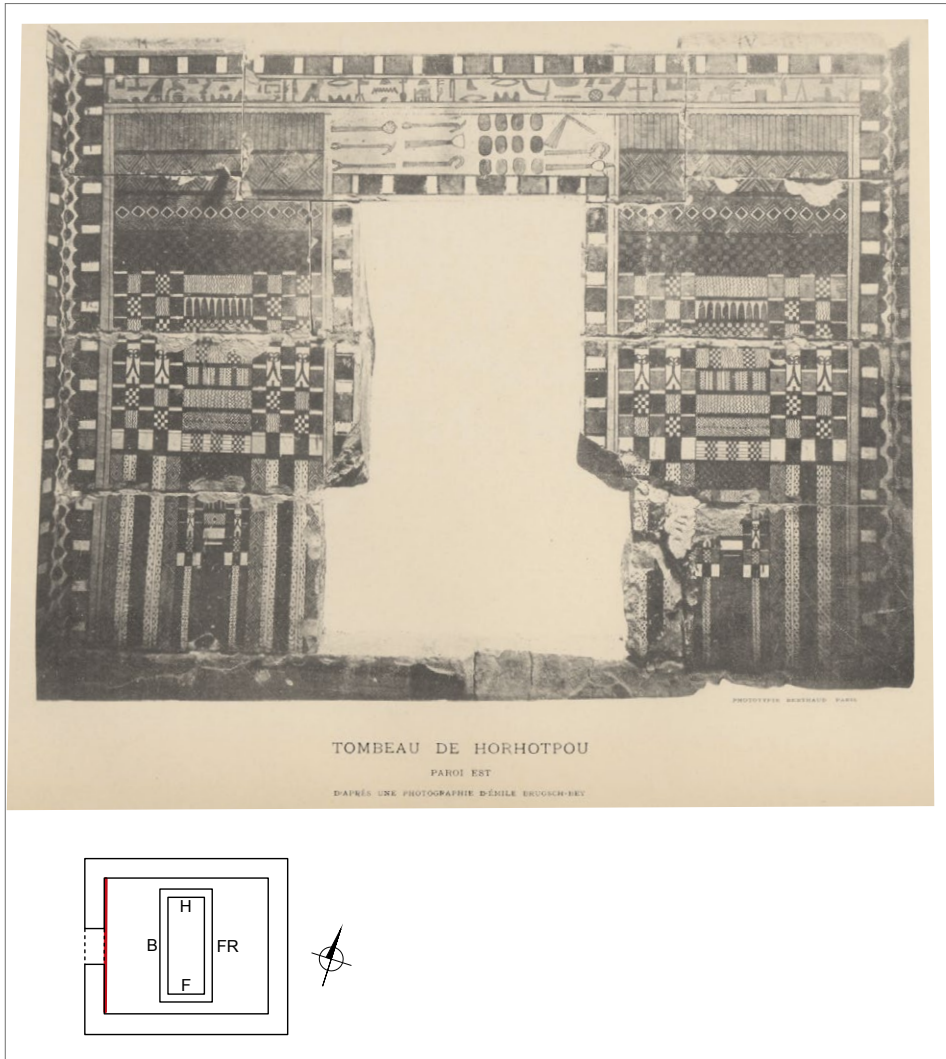


Fig. 4. Burial chamber of Horhotep (subsidiary burial to TT 314): west wall (After Maspero 1889: unnumbered plate after p. 136, mislabeled “east wall”; plan adapted from Lacau 1904: 42, Fig. 1, oriented according to Morales and Osman 2018: Fig. 5 | tracing A. Stupko-Lubczyńska)

the deceased (Willems 1988: 202–203, 209, 211–213; Roth 1993: 67–69; Koura 1999: 77, 290). Interestingly, the texts beneath the frieze on the north wall of Horhotep’s chamber, apart from PT and CT spells directly associated with the depicted objects, additionally contain the sequence of *s3hw*-spells PT 220–222 (Morales and Osman 2018: 92–93 and Table 1 [North wall]); on the subject of an interweaving relationship between the ritual text and the image in the object frieze, see Willems 1988: 200–209). Although Morales and Osman (2018: 63) rightly note the striking position of PT 220–222 on the north wall, compared to their usual placement on the south wall in the royal burial chambers, is seems not completely meaningless if one considers the *s3hw*-connotations of the set of seven sacred oils, as discussed elsewhere by the present author (Stupko-Lubczyńska forthcoming).

two *wnḥw*-strips⁸ and ends, as often, with the depiction of sandals (placed in the second register, in the eastern part of the wall).⁹ The east wall of Horhotep's chamber is traditionally occupied by the offering list accompanied by PT and CT spells (Morales and Osman 2018: 94 and Table 1 [East wall]).

Judging by numerous parallels, the missing part of the object-frieze compartment on Meru's north wall can be reconstructed as containing a set of the seven sacred unguents, which constituted, from the Old Kingdom on, an obligatory component of the decoration of burial chambers, complementary to various types and forms of linen.¹⁰ On the one hand, one may conclude that Meru's case shows a departure from the Old Kingdom pattern of locating the object frieze on the west (back) wall of the sarcophagus chamber, but on the other hand, if the present reconstruction is correct, its main part, occupied by the seven sacred unguents, would justify the orientation of the whole composition toward the head of the deceased (see above, Note 8).¹¹

PYRAMID TEXTS AND THEIR ARRANGEMENT (WEST, SOUTH AND EAST WALLS)

The shift of the object frieze from the west ("back") wall to the north ("head-end") wall may be seen as a consequence of introducing the texts that occupy the remaining space of the chamber, that is, the west wall (in addition to the false door in its northern part, in symmetry with the east wall), the entire south wall and the southern edge of the east wall. These texts, arranged in columns, have been identified as the Pyramid Texts spells 213–217, 220–223 (T.G. Allen 1950: 69–70; Lesko 1979: 106; J.P. Allen 2006: 46–251; Morales 2013: 574–575, 865).

Except for PT 223, the texts represent the "core" sequence of the *sḥw*-spells (also known as "glorification", "resurrection", or "departure" texts), which were attested in the royal pyramids since Unis onwards, and were broadly used in the periods postdating the Old Kingdom (see e.g., Assmann 1986: 999–1000; 1990: 13–14; Allen 1994: 15–17; Assmann 2001: 323–324; Bène and Guilhou 2004; Allen 2005: 31–41; Hays 2009: 54–56, 79; 2012: 92–99; Morales 2013: 691–693, 854–855, 859–865; for the

9 On coffins and sarcophagi, the motif of sandals commonly finds its place on the F or at the foot-end of B (Willems 1988: 209, 213–217, Fig. 26), located here already in some of the decorated burial chambers of the late Sixth Dynasty (e.g., Jéquier 1929: Fig. 82; 1935: 158, Fig. 19).

10 See above, Note 6, and, in addition, e.g., Petrie 1900: Pl. III. Noteworthy, among the northern examples of decorated burial chambers, the *wnḥw*-strips do not occur in the frieze along with the usual depictions of seven sacred oils and eye-paints, substituted(?) for several kinds of linen. In the Theban area, however, the presence of the *wnḥw* is attested in the friezes inside the burial chambers of Khety, TT 311 (north wall, Wilkinson 1983: 22, 23 [18], 67 [38.105.35]), and Neferu, TT 319 (north wall: personal observation, 2017), this apart from the tombs of Meru and Horhotep. The issue requires further research, which should also include coffins and sarcophagi.

11 This would be in agreement with the decoration of H of Meru's sarcophagus, typically showing the set of sacred oils and a headrest, the frieze accompanied by PT 77 (LD II: Pl. 148 c [right]; Lesko 1979: 106).

link between this sequence and the offering ritual, see Stupko-Lubczyńska 2016: 75–82, with references).

PT 223, occupying the eastern edge of the east wall and adjoining the offering list, constitutes, in turn, a summary of the food presentation, which in the pyramids themselves follows the Great Offering Ritual (i.e., the sequence corresponding to the A/B offering list, PT 23, 25, 32, 34–42, 32, 43–57, 72–81, 25, 32, 82–96, 108–171, on which see, e.g., J.P. Allen 1994: 12–13; Hays 2009: 51–54, 75–76; 2012: 81–90; Morales 2016: *passim*, especially 79–96; Stupko-Lubczyńska 2016: 39–57), pertaining the same position whenever attested in the Middle Kingdom sources (J.P. Allen 1994: 8–15, especially notes 8 and 16, Figs 2 and 3 [sequence C]; Hays 2009: 76 [group A.3]; 2012: 84, 677; Morales 2013: 450–451 [with Note 1298], 854, 862, 864). In this respect, the placement of PT 223 in Meru's burial chamber is not exceptional.

Noteworthy, the same spatial relation-

ship between PT 223 (although combined with PT 222) and the offering list has been noted in the Theban area in the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Rekhmire, TT 100, where it occurs in the offering chapel (Davies 1943: Pl. CVIII; Hays and Schenck 2007: 101–102, Fig. 7.3). Attestation of the spell and its position in the same context, that is, next to the offering list, in the cult space of the tomb of Ukhhotep I, B2, at Meir (Blackman 1915: 16–17, Pls VI–VIII; Hays 2006: 185–186), dating to Sesostri I (Favry 2004: 77–78 [No. 23]), has stimulated the present author to speculate on a possible quest for sources taking place in the Hermopolitan region at the dawn of the New Kingdom, and their subsequent transfer to Thebes (Stupko-Lubczyńska 2016: 314, Note 1764). Meru's example proves, however, that, at least in this particular case, the occurrence of PT 223 in TT 100 could have equally well been rooted in the local tradition.

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