

# Studien zur spätägyptischen Religion

Herausgegeben von Christian Leitz

Band 40

2023

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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# The Tomb of the Mayor of Athribis

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Athribis-Studien I

2023

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen  
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet  
über <https://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet  
at <https://dnb.dnb.de>

For further information about our publishing program consult our  
website <https://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de>

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Printing and binding: Memminger MedienCentrum AG

Printed in Germany

ISSN 2190-3646

E ISSN 2747-4933

ISBN 978-3-447-12071-5

Dedication

For the soul of  
my father  
my wife Wafaa  
Dr. Ramadan B. Hussein  
Professor Dr. Yahia El-Masry  
Professor Dr. Shafia Bedir

I wish you were with me  
May Allah be merciful with all of you

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## Acknowledgements

*'He who is not grateful to people, is not grateful to Allah'*

It is a great pleasure to express my deep appreciation to many individuals and institutions for their help and support during the research. My family supported me with love and understanding. Without them, I could never have reached this current level of success. My advisors, Professor Christian Leitz (Tübingen University), and Professor Louise Gestermann (Göttingen University), for providing patience, advice, guidance, and support. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to both Dr. Daniela Mendel-Leitz and Dr. Daniel von Recklinghausen for their time and valuable assistance, who never stopped helping, not just here in Tübingen but also in the site of Athribis. I am also grateful to Dr. Briana Jackson for editing and correcting the English text.

For the photographing of the tomb, I had the pleasure of working with the pioneer Ayman Damarany, Ahmed Amin, Matthias Lang, and Hazem Salah. As for the illustrations, special thanks to the talented draftsman Ahmed Abdel-Halim who did most of the work, as well as to Daniela Mendel-Leitz who kindly edited and reconstructed several figures. I am grateful to the senior surveyors Mr. Amr Zakaria and Dr. Aya Ismail (Sohag Antiquities office) for the updated ground and ceiling plans.

In the project of Athribis, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Mohamed Elbially, Dr. Mansour Boraik, Dr. Marcus Müller, Dr. Carolina Teotino, Dr. Stefan Baumann, Dr. Hany Abuelazm, Mr. Mohamed Abdalbadea, Mr. Sayed Abdu Abdulaziz Hammam, Mr. Sayed Abdulrahman, Mr. Alaa el-Qadi, Dr. Mohamed Naguib, and Mr. Walaa Mostafa.

Words cannot express my gratitude to my dear friends Dr. Ramadan B. Hussein (Tübingen University), may Allah be merciful with him, and Dr. Mohamed Helmi Essa (Sohag University), for their great hospitality, help, and encouragement. In the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo (DAI), I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Mr. Hussein Taha El-Zeneiny for all the efforts made to facilitate travelling and study. In Tübingen, in the institute (IANES), I am really grateful to PD Dr. Susanne Beck, Dr. Jan Tattko, Florian Loeffler, Dr. Amany Hussein, Dr. Victoria Altmann-Wendling, Stephanie Vartanian, and the librarian Monika Nasarek.

As for the archives, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Abydos Temple Paper Archive for allowing some of the unpublished documents to be used in the study of the tomb, and thanks as well to the Oriental Institute based at Chicago House in Luxor for providing me with a complete set of the photographs taken in 1952. I am grateful as well to the Egypt Exploration Society (EES), and the Archive of Petrie Museum in London. Thanks also to the librarians of the EES, and of British Museum, and of Chicago House in Luxor.

The work on the site is made possible through the kind support and permission of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Supreme Council of Antiquities, Permanent Committee, and Sohag Antiquities Office, and in this concern, I would like to thank H. E. Dr. Khalid el-Enany, the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities; Dr. Mostafa Waziry, Secretary General of Antiquities; Mr. Ali el-Asfar and Dr. Ayman Ashmawy, Heads of the Egyptian Antiquities

Sector; and Dr. Nashwa Gaber, Head of the Permanent Committee. In Sohag I am deeply indebted to Mr. Gamal Abdalnaser, Dr. Fredrika Sayed Rasem, Dr. Ashraf Okasha, Mr. Mugi Mahmoud Selim, and in the Athribis inspectorate, special thanks to my colleagues, Mr. Ahmed Seddik, Mr. Shaaban Fahmy Bakhit, Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed, Mr. Shenouda Wadeed, Mr. Hassan Abdulazim, Mr. Ahmed Rashid, Mr. Alaa Shams, and Mr. Abdulshafi Mahmoud Selim. I am grateful as well to Sheikh Ahmed Gharib, Sheikh Selim Ahmed, Alaei Salim, and Refaat Selim.

I could not have undertaken this journey to Tübingen without two scholarships: the first was “Brunner-Stiftung” for 6 months during 2018, and the “Baden-Württemberg-STIPENDIUM”, for 10 months, from December 2021 till September 2022. Indeed, it was very useful not just for staying in Tübingen and using the library but also for the fruitful in-person discussion with the professors, experts, and colleagues in the field of Egyptology, and without such chances, no real scientific progress could be made.

Mohamed Ali Abuelyazid Abdellatif  
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## Introduction

The ancient Egyptians, from prehistoric times until the beginning of the Byzantine era, were keen to place their dead inside tombs, and they chose the locations of those tombs according to religious, geographical, social, or political context.<sup>1</sup> The design began as a simple pit in the sands of the low desert, then gradually developed into a built structure at the beginning of the early dynastic era (about 3300 BCE). Along with built structures, from the Old Kingdom (2687–2191 BCE) onward, rock-cut tombs widely appeared, and their dimensions, designs, and decoration varied over the time.<sup>2</sup>

The tomb in ancient Egypt was not a simple place for the corpse, but it was a house for eternity. According to ancient Egyptian beliefs, death was not the end; through both rituals performed in the tomb and pictorial and textual inscriptions that decorated the tomb walls, together with the offerings made by the family, the deceased was able to ensure existence after death and be granted eternal life, not only in the realm of the dead but also in the realm of the living.<sup>3</sup> Such beliefs were held not only during the dynastic period of ancient Egypt but continued during the Ptolemaic and Roman period Egypt as well.

The tombs with their funerary deposits, pictorial reliefs, inscriptions, and human remains, produce a wide variety of material for understanding ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs, rituals, and practices. This research addresses a study of the location, history, design, scenes, and texts of “the tomb of the mayor of Athribis”, which is a rock-cut tomb, composed of a shaft that leads to an antechamber followed by a burial chamber. The walls and ceilings are fully covered with scenes and texts. The tomb is located in the Graeco-Roman rock necropolis of Athribis, cut in the cliff face of the mountain, west of Sohag in Upper Egypt. Although it dates to late in ancient Egyptian history, the tomb is regarded as one of the most significant ancient Egyptian tombs.

The mayor of Athribis carefully selected the hymns that were inscribed inside his tomb to grant him the eternal life that he envisaged. The decoration shows that his tomb is unique, compared to the other tombs in the same necropolis and even all other contemporary necropolises in the ninth Upper Egyptian nome, as well as other known necropolises from the same period. He embellished his tomb with several innovative decorative and textual features, most of them having never been encountered in any other tombs dating earlier than his. Moreover, he carefully selected the location of his tomb, as he positioned it right behind the main temple in the site “the temple of the goddess Repit”.

### Previous studies:

Despite the importance of the tomb, there is no publication dealing specifically with its scenes and texts. What is written about it is quite sparse, and none of the references to the tomb deal with the inscriptions.

---

1 RICHARDS, *Society and Death*, i.

2 WEEKS, in: *Oxford Encyclopedia III*, 418, s. v., Tombs- an Overview.

3 KANAWATI, *The Tomb and Beyond*, 1.

- The first reference about the tomb was made by the well-known British Archaeologist William Flinders PETRIE during his short campaign in the site of Athribis, only six weeks, between December 1906 and January 1907:  
W. M. F PETRIE, Athribis, London, *BSAE* 14, 1908, 12.  
He mentioned briefly that there is a tomb at the north side of the mountain of Athribis, with a shaft for a tomb owner called P-shen-asir, son of P-duasir called Serapyon, and Thetaset. However, no illustrations nor photographs were made.
- The second reference dates to 1969, and about two pages were dedicated to the tomb in the comprehensive study of the astronomical scenes:  
O. NEUGEBAUER, R. A. PARKER, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts: Decans, Planets, Constellations and Zodiacs*, Vol. 3, London 1969, 75–77, figs. 38A–39.  
The astronomical scenes of the two ceilings of both the antechamber and the burial chamber were briefly described, however, only two illustrations were provided, but photographs were not provided.
- The third and most significant reference dates to 1985:  
R. EL FARAG, U. KAPLONY-HECKEL, and K. P. KUHLMANN, Recent Archaeological Explorations at Athribis, *MDAIK* 41, 1985, 1–8, pl. 4–17.  
The scenes depicted on the walls of the tomb are very briefly described, in about only five pages including the plans illustrations, and it provided the first photographs of the scenes, which were taken by the photographers of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo in 1983–1984. However, the texts of the tomb are neglected in that article, and the identification of some figures and the translations are not fully accurate.
- In 2016, some of the tomb's scenes appeared in about four pages including photographs and illustration in:  
M. S. VENIT, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Cambridge 2016.  
Marjorie Susan VENIT did not visit the tomb, but she followed the description of the article of *MDAIK* 41 1985, and the 1969 description of the astronomical scenes, and redescribed them briefly. However, she also did not refer to any of the texts inside the tomb.
- The 1969 brief description of the two astronomical scenes of both the antechamber and burial chambers appeared two more times recently, in the context of studies of associated or similar scenes in other ceilings, those are:  
V. ALTMANN-WENDLING, *MondSymbolik – Mond-Wissen. Lunare Konzepte in den ägyptischen Tempeln griechisch-römischer Zeit*, 2 Bde, *SSR* 22, Wiesbaden 2018, pl. I  
D. MENDEL, *Die Geographie des Himmels. Eine Untersuchung zu den Deckendekorationen in ägyptischen Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Zeit und zeitgleichen Darstellungen auf Särgen und in Gräbern*, *SSR* 37, Wiesbaden 2022, 71–77, pls. 37–38.

### Scenes and texts presented in this study:

Each individual scene or text is given a separate number, adding up to a total of 36 numbers, and labeled from N.1 to N.36. Only ten of them are in the antechamber and 26 numbers are in the burial chamber. The numbering system in the antechamber begins at the entrance wall, which is on the east side, and progresses to the north, then west, followed by the south, and ends at the scene of the ceiling which is labeled N.10. The same system is followed in the burial chamber, but the number of the scenes of the niches (N.24–N.35) are placed before the

astronomical scene decorating the large ceiling, which is labeled N.36. All the scenes are documented with photographs and digital illustrations. Herein, they are fully described, and the texts as well are fully transcribed and translated.

### *The Outline:*

The study deals with the tomb of the mayor of Athribis and intends to produce the first comprehensive publication on the tomb, including its design, scenes, and texts. The dissertation is composed of two parts. Part I contains three chapters, followed by the conclusion, the English-Egyptian index for all vocabularies that appeared inside the tomb, and four Appendices: the first contains the inventory of the stone fragments scattered on the ground of the tomb including digital illustrations, the other three consist of transcriptions and English translation of the unpublished Arabic documents from the Abydos Temple Paper Archive (ATPA). Part II contains the figures and plates.

### Part I:

- The first chapter is dedicated to the site, the tomb owner, the site of Athribis, the necropolis, the architectural design of the tomb, the technique of the cut and execution of the relief, the general distribution of the scenes on both walls and ceilings of the antechamber and the burial chamber, and the arrangement of the friezes and the bases of the walls. Moreover, it discusses the arrangement of the unique long hymns on both the northern and southern halves. Furthermore, it documents the history of the tomb from its discovery to the present, including activities relating to robberies, the local community, the installation of a door and ladder in 1940s, the monitoring of the tomb undertaken by the Antiquities Authority through the inspectorate of Sohag, the role of PETRIE, the role of the Chicago epigraphic survey, the role of Sohag Antiquities office, and the restoration of the tomb between 1983 and 1985.
- The second chapter deals with the scenes and texts of the antechamber that decorate both the walls and ceiling of the room, comprising a total of ten scenes and texts: eight scenes (labeled N.1, N.3, N.5, N.6, N.7, N.8, N.9, and N.10 which is the ceiling), and two long hymns, labeled N.2 in the northern half of the room and N.4 in the southern half. The decoration of the walls is arranged in two registers. The upper register is occupied by the long hymns and the lower register is dedicated to the scenes. All scenes are thoroughly described, and the inscriptions associated with the scenes and all other inscriptions are transcribed and translated.
- The third chapter deals with the scenes and texts of the burial chamber and its three burial niches that decorate both walls and ceiling, comprising a total of 26 scenes and texts. Seven scenes are on the walls of the room (labeled N.14, N.15, N.17, N.18, N.19, N.22, N.23) and two long hymns, labeled N.13 in the northern half of the room and N.16 in the southern half. Four short texts are in the same room, two of them inscribed on the northern and southern reveals of the doorway, labeled N.11 and N.12, and two more at both northern and southern ends of the west wall, labeled N.20 and N.22. The room contains three burial niches, each containing four scenes including its ceiling, (scenes labeled from N.24–N.27 belong to the western niche; N.28–N.31 belong to the northern niche; and N.32–N.35 belong to the southern niche), and the last scene is N.36 which occupies the whole ceiling of the burial chamber. All scenes are thoroughly described,

and the inscriptions associated with the scenes and all the other inscriptions are transcribed and translated.

## Part II:

This part contains 54 figures and 81 plates.

- The figures are the digital illustrations for all the above-mentioned scenes and stone fragments, as well as the previously published drawings, site maps, and ground and section plan of the tomb, in addition to updated ground and ceiling plans for the tomb and for the entire site of Athribis. The figures also include schematic drawings showing the distribution of scenes and texts inside the tomb.
- The plates are the digital photographs taken of the architectural elements, scenes, and texts described and translated. Site photos show the location of the tomb in the necropolis of Athribis and its position behind the temple. Also included are the unpublished photos made by the Chicago epigraphic survey in 1952. Some of the photographs used in the study are extracted from 3D laser scanning made by Matthias LANG in collaboration with the German team of the Athribis Project (Tübingen University).

## *Research challenges*

During the study of the tomb, the challenges were both practical and theoretical. Concerning the work inside the tomb itself, the main difficulty was the darkness which complicated recording the scenes and texts and made taking the proper photographs difficult. Thus, each day, an electrical cable, more than 100 meters long, was used in order to connect the electrical source and produce the light inside the rooms. The second difficulty was the documentation of the unclear scenes and inscriptions. The problems with clarity were due to the variation of the artisans' skills, which was sometimes rather poor, fallen plaster, wall damage, and the untraditional and cryptographic way of writing certain hieroglyphs during the Graeco-Roman period. As for the theoretical challenges, the main difficulty was a lack of scholarly publications in that field, in addition to the lack of parallels to some of the scenes, including some of the artistic details and many parts of the inscriptions.

## **Aims and objectives:**

The main aim of this research is to shed the light on the tomb of the mayor, its design, its scenes, and its texts, and study them in the context of similarity and differentiations with the nearby tombs and with contemporary other tombs in Egypt. The study introduces, for the first time, a full publication of the tomb of the mayor of Athribis, located in the mountain, right behind the temple of Athribis. It will provide a full documentation of the design and its 36 scenes and texts, in addition to plans, an interpretation of the current physical situation of the tomb, and its history from its discovery to the present.

*The study aims to answer the following research questions:*

- Why did Psenosiris choose this specific place for his tomb?
- When did Psenosiris build this tomb? Is it Ptolemaic, or Roman?
- The tomb contains three burial niches, indicating two more people were supposed to be buried in the same burial chamber with the mayor of Athribis. Who are those two people?

- What is the similarity between the decoration of the tomb and the other contemporary tombs? To what extent does the decoration program follow ancient Egyptian tradition?
- What is the type of scenes used in the decoration of the walls and ceiling of both rooms, and what is the contextual significance of their distribution?
- What is the type of hymns used inside the tomb? Is each type attested in other tombs, or is it only in the tomb of the mayor?
- Are there any similarities between the decoration in the tomb and the decoration in the temple of Athribis?
- Do the texts and scenes show a relationship between the tomb owner and Athribis, its temples, and the deities associated with it?
- What kind of innovations did the mayor of Athribis implement to make his tomb different from any other known tomb in Egypt?

#### *Significance of the study:*

The study is generally quite significant to the map of the archaeological sites of Sohag and in particular to the map of the site of Athribis. Moreover, it will serve as a guideline for archeologists, inspectors, and stakeholders responsible for the site, for understanding and interpretation of the importance of such tomb and its association with the other funerary elements and religious centers in the necropolis and the site. This study demonstrates that the necropolis of Athribis should be noted for its unique tomb decorations. Contributing such research to the discipline of Egyptology will allow access to the tomb's unique features and decoration, which is not otherwise readily accessible. For the first time, the tomb is being thoroughly documented and analyzed, and it contains unique images and texts that contribute to the creative innovations in later periods of Egyptian history. It presents a thorough transcription and translation of the texts of the tomb, which were never mentioned in any previous studies. Although some of the scenes were briefly mentioned before, they were not fully described and not entirely accurate. This study also provides digital photographs and illustrations for all scenes and inscriptions, in addition to full descriptions, transcription, and translations. A second volume with a commentary of the scenes and texts by the author and Christian Leitz is in preparation.

#### *Methodology:*

The study depends on Archaeological analysis, epigraphical and photographic documentation, site survey, art historical analysis which includes both formal, stylistic and iconographical analysis, parallels, and innovations within its local broader contexts. It depends on a philological and comparative analytical approach and descriptive framework. Brief comments are provided for some of the scenes and texts, especially for the hymn labeled N.2 to facilitate the reconstruction of the missing sections of the hymn.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research:*

This thesis sheds light on many scenes and inscriptions that so far do not appear in any of the other known tombs. The four long hymns, in particular, are a uniquely useful source for studying the texts and the funerary life at such a late date. Furthermore, the astronomical scenes decorating the ceiling in both the antechamber and burial chamber provide a great opportunity for understanding the astronomical beliefs at that time. Although the study presents a detailed full publication for the whole tomb, it has also uncovered areas that need additional research.

Essential questions and promising new directions for future research, among other issues, include the following:

- What are the Egyptian religious cult centers and toponyms mentioned inside the tomb and where are they located?
- Where exactly are the temples and sacred places belonging to Athribis that are mentioned inside the tomb located, and what is the religious and funerary role for each of them?
- What is the significance of the distribution of scenes and texts in the tomb?
- Philological comparisons and parallels for all inscriptions inside the tomb.
- Each long hymn could alone serve as a topic for research.
- What is the function of each of the two long hymns inside the burial chamber?
- Why and when were the changes and modifications made to the inscription and scenes of the tomb?
- What are the similarities and differences between the tomb of the mayor and other tombs in Athribis, and throughout the whole 9<sup>th</sup> nome of Upper Egypt?
- The technique of decoration in the tomb needs to be studied by experts in that field.
- Consideration of the possibility of opening the tomb for visitors.
- Where have the missing parts of the reliefs gone, were they sold to a European museum or are they lost forever?