

The “Kay Project”: the ‘Cliff Tombs’ in the Theban Necropolis

The “Kay Project”, developed from 2016 by the Egyptology and Coptic Civilization Study Centre “J.F. Champollion” of Genoa, Cairo and Luxor, is devoted to the study of some particular funerary structures of the Theban necropolis commonly called as “cliff tombs”. These are graves with attached ritual elements (stelae and niche-chapels) located on hills and served by artificial paths. In the texts of the New Kingdom and Late Period these structures are often linked to the term Kay “top, hill, high” (Wb.IV.4.6); the use of “Kay tombs” is attested at Thebes from the beginning of the New Kingdom to the Late Period; at the end of XX dynasty these structures were reused as royal caches. The experience gained by the Champollion Centre mission on the study of Theban necropolis make it possible to start a new and more complete research to classify these structures and to identify the different stages of the building life cycle, through the study of its original features and subsequent transformations. This poster presents the latest results of the ongoing research on the so-called “cliff-tombs” in Theban Necropolis.



The cliff tombs features

The cliff tombs are structures that exposed a new and particular style of funerary concept which became familiar at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty. These cliff tombs are present in different sectors of the necropolis, but mainly in the Southwestern valley, as a burial place for queens and princesses until the middle of the 18th Dynasty. In the Southwestern valley there are: the tombs of Princess Hatshepsut in Wadi Sikkat Taget-Zeid (Fig.1), the tomb of the Asian wives of Tuthmosis III in Wadi el Gabannat Gourud and the tomb of Princess Neferure in Wadi Sikkat el-Agala. In the Valley of the Kings the most well-known tomb is the KV 34 (Fig.2), while the first tomb built for Tuthmosis I is KV 38, roughly exhibits the same features. Other known cliff tombs are the KV39, the KV41, the VH1 (Fig.3), the VH2, the MMA 1021 (Fig.4) and the WNA (Fig.5); some of these were reused as caches during the III Intermediate Period.



Fig.1. The Hatshepsut tomb

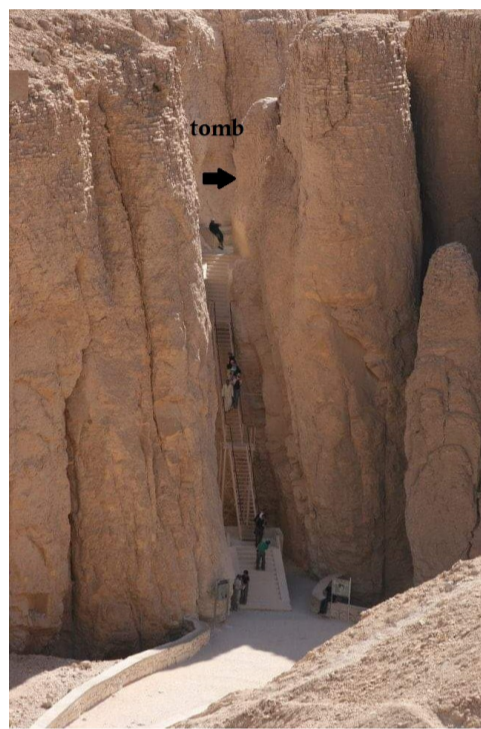


Fig.2. The KV 34



Fig.3. The VH 1



Fig.4. The MMA 1021

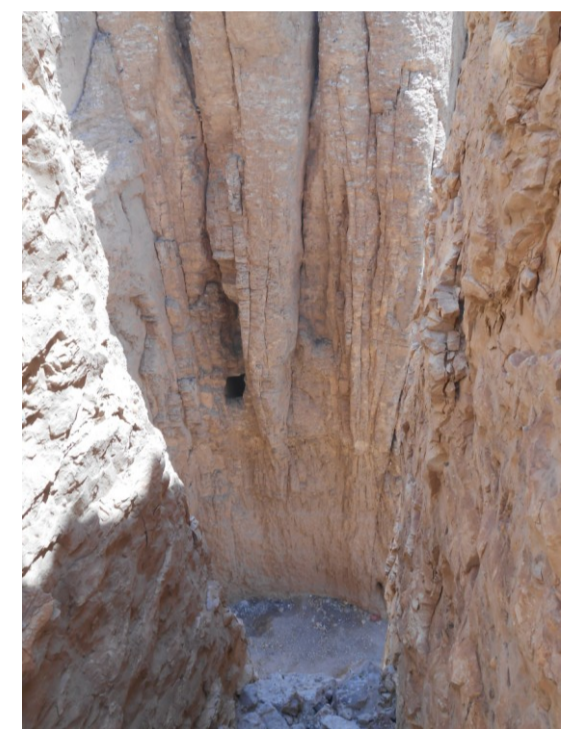


Fig. 5. The WNA

The first common factors which relates to the cliff tombs are their height and the inaccessibility of their location. This is likely to ensure their security. Additionally, there is good reason to consider a relationship between their position on the middle of the high rock cliff and the ritual concept of “cascade”; this may reflect a direct relation between the location of the cliff-tomb and the morphology of the selected rock wall. Others features are the entrances to the tombs which are carved inside a wide platform hidden by the external cliffs, while, above the tomb, outside, on the rock wall there is a carved “niche” similar to a “false-door”; the niche seems to be connected with a short semi-circular “channel” carved outside the cliff rock walls used to guide rain water down as a proper “cascade” (Fig.6-7). Finally, traces of the “path system” – planned and realized by the royal necropolis scribes and workers settled in Deir el-Medina village – are still visible in some sites (Fig.8-9). These are the main features of these funerary structures, started shortly before the reign of Hatshepsut and lasting until the end of the reign of Tuthmosis III, that help us to understand this interesting phenomenon and the complexity of relations between natural and human factors in Theban Necropolis in this historical period.

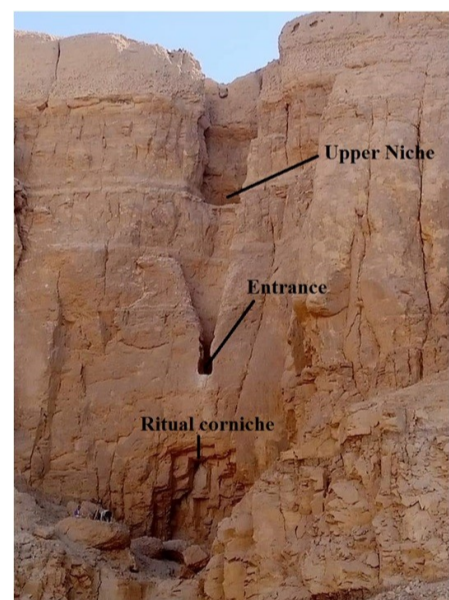


Fig. 6-7. The Hatshepsut tomb in Wadi Sikkat Taget-Zeid and its features

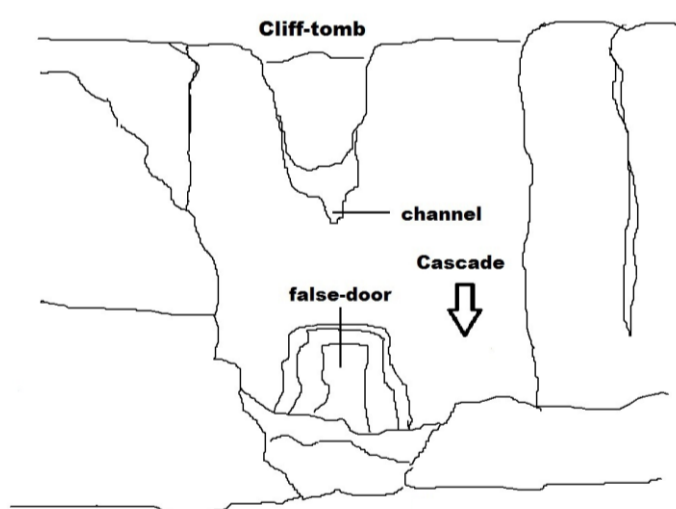


Fig.8-9. Traces of the path system in in Wadi Sikkat Taget-Zeid



The reuse of cliff tombs: the WNA researches

Most of the cliff tombs were reused as caches from the end of Ramesside Age until Ptolemaic Period; from these, one of the most important is located in the area of Deir el-Bahari, known as “Wadi en-Nisr”. The tomb is called Bab el-Maâleg or al-Bâb al-Mu’lîaq (Fig.10-13) and its owner is unknown, even if some scholars believe that it was built for Amenhotep I or Inhapi or Tuthmosi II. In the 2014-2015 season, the Centre Champollion mission started a new survey of the area and its cliff tomb. Morphological analysis and the presence of various materials scattered on the tomb floor and in the subsoil of the wadi (potsherds, linen strips, skeletal remains and pieces of wooden coffin) support the hypothesis that the tomb was built in XVIII Dynasty and it was used as cache from the XXI dynasty until Ptolemaic age. Further research on this site, as well as on the other cliff tombs, will allow us to provide more accurate information about this interesting phenomenon.

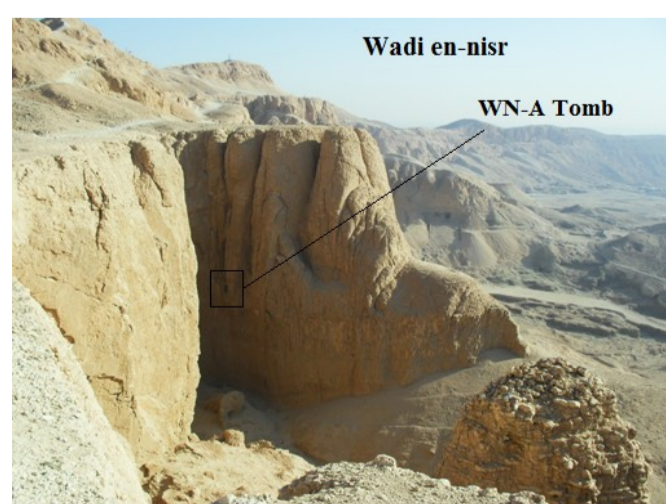


Fig.10. The Wadi en-Nisr site



Fig.11. The author outside the cliff tomb



Fig.12. The archaeological survey excavations on site



Fig.13. Some finds in Wadi en-Nisr site