

Essex Egyptology: 6/4/25 Dr Nicholas Brown: The Valley of the Kings: Its Life and Afterlife

In April, Nicholas Brown gave us a talk over Zoom from Connecticut, USA about the historical development and function of the Valley of the Kings and its associated funerary sites in the Theban area. As a funerary archaeologist, his interests, field work and research are currently centred there and at Deir el-Ballas, Nick's work encompasses funerary beliefs, state funerals and their funerary rites - the topic of his recent dissertation.

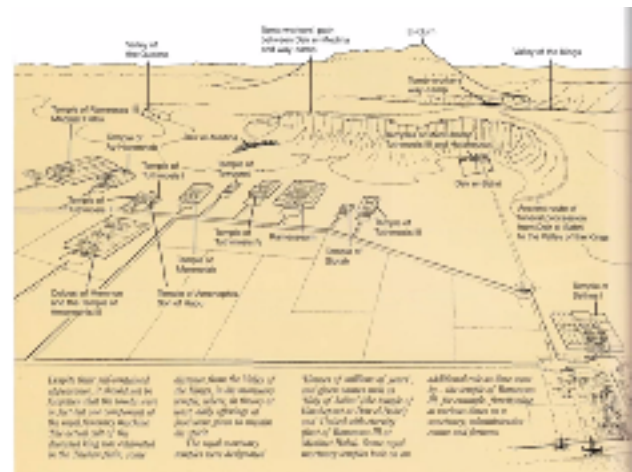
What did the burial of a pharaoh look like? What afterlife beliefs guided it? What do ancient texts tell us? Texts include religious, procedural and administrative ones - the logistics involved in the preparation of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings - the royal necropolis during the New Kingdom, which was in use for about 500 years.

Physical Landscape

The Theban necropolis was chosen as an area deemed suitable for the transition from the living to the dead. It provided a stage for funerary pageantry. It comprises the Kings' Valley, the Queens' Valley, and the Western Valley, all serviced by the Workmen's Village at Deir el Medina, and linked to the various mortuary temples set along the West Bank of the Nile at Thebes.

In the Old Kingdom, the tomb and its mortuary temple were located together - the pyramid and its valley temple connected via a causeway. By the New Kingdom, tombs were secreted in the Valley of the Kings, separate from their related mortuary temples and its funerary cults.

The first royal tombs cut in the Kings' Valley were located high up on the cliff side, such as the tomb of Thutmose III. Inscriptions in the tomb of Ineni and the vizier Hapuseneb use the term '*hr*' meaning a 'cliff tomb', and employ word play where '*hr*' means 'upon' and connotes to ascending (as in the king to the celestial heavens). The tombs of Thutmose I, Hatshepsut and Thutmose III all involve physical ascending to access them (and metaphysical ascending to reach the afterlife).



In the story of Sinuhe, he ascended to his '*3ht*' (Akhet), and at the Amarna Royal Wadi, the Akhet provides rebirth through the rising of the sun disk everyday, not through the resurrection of Osiris. Thus Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife were manifested in the physical landscape.

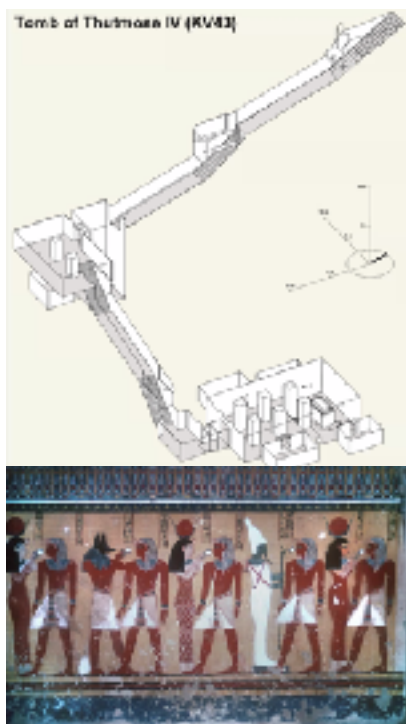
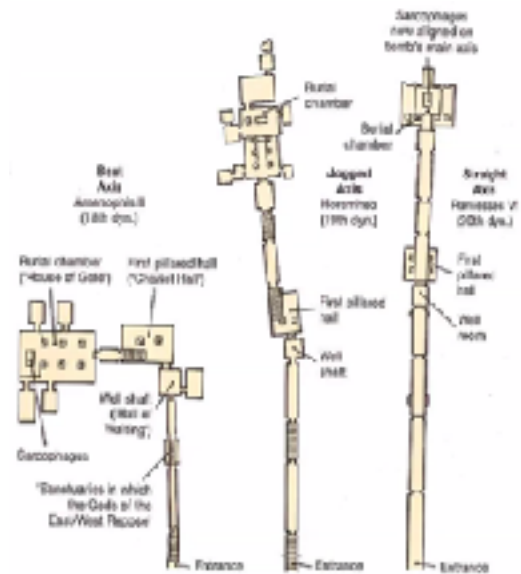
Evolution through time

The 17th Dynasty tombs of Sekhemre Intef and Nubkheperre Intef at Dra Abu el-Naga form the precursor to the Valley of the Kings. The first tombs in the Valley proper are those of Thutmose I, Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. These early tombs are situated higher, have a steeper descent from their entrances, and feature a bent axis - a sharp turn in the tomb, which was meant to reflect the king's journey to the afterlife. This descent through these tombs is echoed in the Amduat texts.

Over time, between the 18th and 20th Dynasties, the tomb plans straighten, influenced by the Aten sun disk and solar theology to enable the penetration of sunlight into the burial chamber. The later tombs are also less deep and more symmetrical in plan.

The earliest tomb - that of Thutmose I (KV38) - is situated at the southern end of the Valley under the pyramid-resembling Qurn peak. The royal tomb architects took advantage of the local landscape and resources and married these to afterlife beliefs. The tomb biography of Ineni records that tomb building was secret work.

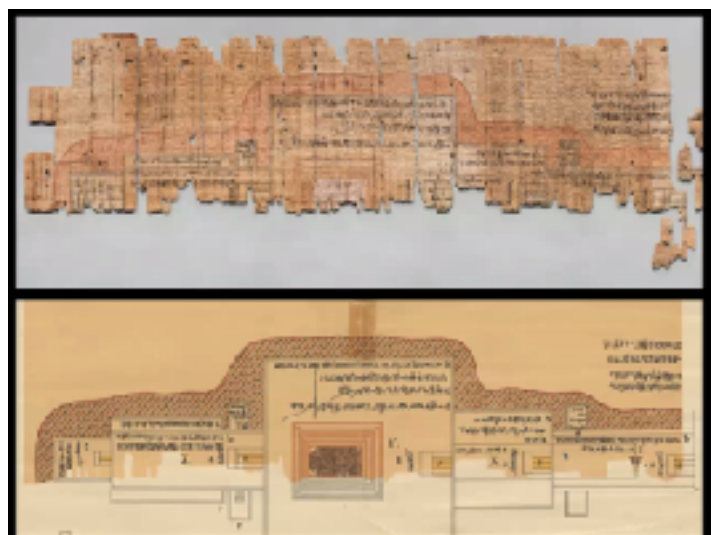
It is thought that the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina was founded for the skilled artisans commissioned to create the royal tombs in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens at that time. As well as their decoration work in the royal tombs and their crafting of the king's funerary equipment, details of their work is recorded on surviving papyri and depicted on ostraca. The excavation and decoration of their own tombs next to the village is also a testament to their skills. Admin texts include attendance logs, delivery notes of supplies, the order and delivery of funerary equipment, etc.



Nick's current project in the tomb of Tutmose IV (KV43) has discovered workman's architectural marks - red dots and lines - made as orientation and levelling guides with adjacent rooms to line these up with columns in burial chambers. Niches for citing 'magical bricks' have also been found.

In the earlier tombs, only the burial chamber or antechamber were decorated, but from the 19th Dynasty, all the tomb corridors and chambers were decorated. The earliest, fully decorated tomb is that of Seti I (KV17). The 20th Dynasty tomb of Rameses III (KV11) does have bent axis but that was due to collision with another tomb during its excavation. In the tomb of Rameses IV (KV2),

foundation deposits were found. These were sacred offerings to the gods made to ensure the success of the tomb. A papyrus plan of that tomb survives (Museo Egizio, Turin) which shows the location and detail of its burial chamber, sarcophagus & shrines plus its linen pall. (There is mention in a text of the 'bringing of a cloth').



Modern exploration of the Valley of the Kings

Early visitors include Richard Pococke (c1743), Napoleon's 'Savants' (1799) who produced the *Déscription de l'Égypte*; Giovanni Belzoni (1816-17) who discovered 13+ tombs including Rameses I (KV16) and Seti I (KV17), and Champollion visited in 1829. It was John Gardiner Wilkinson who devised the numbering system for tombs - initially clockwise around the Valley, but now by tomb discovery. Lepsius (1844) and Victor Loret who discovered the tomb of Thutmose III and the KV35 cache in Amenhotep II's tomb. Theodore Davis with Edward Ayrton 1902-13 excavated the tomb of Yuya and Thuya. Most famously, the pairing of Carter & Carnarvon led to the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb (KV62) in November 1922.

Recent research projects in the Valley are Reeves & Martin, the Waseda University excavation of the tomb of Amenhotep III, Schaden/Ikram (KV63 & KV10), the University of Basel Project, Zahi Hawass (Egyptian Expedition), Don Ryan, Andreas Dorn (Workmen's Huts), and Stephen Cross's Geological Survey.

The Theban Mapping Project is a recommended online resource at <https://thebanmappingproject.com/valley-kings>

Finally, Nick invited people to support the work of the Ancient Egyptian Heritage and Archaeology Fund at <https://www.ancientegyptarchaeologyfund.com/donate/>

Q & A

Q: What was the sequence for the creation of the tomb and its equipment?

When a tomb was begun, the royal workshop simultaneously started working on its funerary equipment.

Q: How much time did it take to complete a tomb from start to finish?

We have progress reports, but there is insufficient evidence to specify the time period, although Thutmose IV had a 8 year reign, and his tomb, commenced in his regnal year 2, was fully carved but its decoration was not fully completed by the time he died.

Q: How many workmen were involved? It ranged between 60 to 120 workmen.

Q: What factors affected the work progress? This included illnesses and strikes during the reign of Rameses III.

Q: Are there still any undiscovered tombs in the Valley?

Maybe some buried elsewhere e.g. Dra Abu el-Naga. Possibly Ahmose at Abydos, and Amenhotep I in the Western Wadi?

Q: Is there any logic regarding the choice of location?

The crew would have gone out to pick a suitable spot. Natural landscape features, splits in rock, etc provided pointers for suitable locations.

Q: Was the TT320 cache a likely early tomb built for Ahmose Nefertari?

Possibly - its entrance is high up, and the area was regarded as a site sacred to Hathor.

Q: Have builder's marks been found in other tombs?

Andreas Dorn's research, and the tombs of Thuya & Yuya, Tutankhamun, Rameses IV & VI, and Siptah. It would make a great dissertation topic!

Q: Was the funerary procession small and secretive, or a great pomp and grand spectacle?

The grand procession of tomb treasures, artefacts and burial equipment into a tomb is most likely a Hollywood-style invention. It is highly probable that all the contents of the tomb including the outer and middle of the nested coffins were already in the tomb when the funeral took place. If the king had died elsewhere in Egypt, the body may have been mummified in that location, then transported to Thebes for burial. The transport journey from death to the burial site would have been a procession viewable by the public, but at the burial site, it would have been to a small, elite and exclusive audience to maintain secrecy.

Michael Tweddle, 7/4/25