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## The Functions of the Open Court of Theban Private Tombs of the 25th -26th Dynasties

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### Keywords

Theban necropolis, Private tombs, Open Court, Lichthof, Solar Osirian Unity.

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### Abstract

The Theban necropolis is divided into many parts, which bear their modern Arabic names. These parts are, from north to south: el-Tarif, Dra Abu el-Naga (north and south), Al Assasif, el-Khokha; Sheikh Abd el-Qurna (upper and lower part), the Southern Assasif, and Qurnet Murai. Deir el-Medina, the whole necropolis extends for about three kilometers along the edge of the cultivated land opposite Luxor. This paper focuses on the main functions of the open court of the Theban private tombs of the 25th – 26th dynasties which are located in Al Assasif area including both the north and south Assasif in addition to some exceptional tombs. It will discuss the common name of this court, its importance as an architectural element that characterizes these tombs, its use as a cult place within the tomb, its use for the continuous relationship between the living and the deceased, and its natures as the solar, Osirian, and the Solar-Osirian unity in this court. The methodology of this study is descriptive, analytical, and comparative study as it describes the scenes of the open court and analysis its themes and compare between the different Theban private tombs of the 25th -26th dynasties of the Theban necropolis. The study shows the importance and unique architecture, art, and religious nature of this court.

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## **Introduction**

The Theban necropolis provides a good roadmap to follow the development in architecture, religion, and art.<sup>1</sup> Al Assasif is part of the Theban necropolis that contains the private tombs of the 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> dynasties (see Figs: 1, 2). These tombs are characterized by its unique architecture design, decorative programme, and themes that witness the general development which occurred in the first millennium BC. The monumental tombs with its Lichthof open to the sun light and the cult of the divine rebirth with solar context and the cycle of Osiris are all make these tombs special.

These tombs are a great source to study this development such as the revival of the Archaism in the Egyptian Art of the late period private tombs.<sup>2</sup> The architecture of the Late Period private tombs combines features adapted from the New Kingdom royal tombs, and the Old, Middle, and New Kingdom royal mortuary complexes.<sup>3</sup> One of these elements of the developments in Architecture, religion, and art is the open court or the so-call, Lichthof of the Theban private tombs. Studies related to this period of time are relatively limited. The area of Al Assasif is under excavations and restorations needs more focus in literature as it contains many new concepts, themes and developments to be discussed in depth in religion, architecture, and art. The methodology of this study is descriptive, analytical, and comparative study as it describes the scenes of the open court and analysis its themes and compare between the different Theban private tombs of the 25<sup>th</sup> -26<sup>th</sup> dynasties of the Theban necropolis. The study shows the importance and unique architecture, art, and religious nature of this court.

### **The open court name and design:**

The Open court of the Theban private tombs is commonly known “Lichthof” in the literature (i.e., Diethelm. Eigner (1984), Julia Budka (2008), Filip Coppens (2014))<sup>4</sup>. It is a German word means “the well-lighted place” which refers to its design as an open court to the sun light. Although this name has provided a special name to this court which matches with its nature, it will be hard for non-Germany speaking to reach its literature which the researcher is trying to overcome in this paper.

### **The continuous relationship between the dead and the living:**

The Lichthof is considered as a place where living can connect with the deceased. The open court is used as the cult of the deceased and communication with the world and the living during the Eighteenth dynasty which continued in the Late Period private tombs such as the tomb of Karakhamun<sup>5</sup>. The area of Al Assasif was selected for the

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<sup>1</sup> Filip Coppens. “The so-called lichthof once more: on the transmission of concepts between the tomb and temple” Theban in the First Millennium BC, Cambridge Scholar publishing (2014): 352.

<sup>2</sup> Elena Pischikova, “Style and Iconography of the decoration in the tombs of Karabasken and Karakhamun: Archaism and Innovation” Theban in the First Millennium BC, Cambridge Scholar publishing (2014): 75.

<sup>3</sup> Elena Pischikova, “Style and Iconography” (2014): 89.

<sup>4</sup> Diethelm Eigner, “Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spätzeit in der thebanischen Nekropole. UZK 6; DOAWW 8. Vienna; Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, (1984); Julia Budka, “Der ‘Lichthof’ im Grab des Anch-Hor.” Sokar 18 (2008), 80-87.

<sup>5</sup> Elena Pischikova, “Style and Iconography” (2014): 75.

construction of the 25-26<sup>th</sup> dynasties private tombs as it locates on the processional way of the beautiful festival of the valley which leads to Al Deir El Bahari temple<sup>6</sup>,

### **The cult of the gods within the open court:**

The religion development in these tombs can be seen from the cult nature of the private tomb as a private divine temple where the tomb owner plays the role of the worshiper<sup>7</sup>. This development is an extend to the Ramasside tombs where the tomb owner himself worshipped gods in the tomb court without provisioning scenes for the deceased<sup>8</sup>.

To cope with the new role of the tomb as a cult place, ancient feature such as the false door within these tombs have been replaced to be a niche with a divine image<sup>9</sup>. An example for the divine niche located in the northern and south walls of the court of Karakhamun tomb (see Fig: 3).

The Kushite-Saite temple tomb was considered as a tomb of Osiris was developed by Bietak and Eigner<sup>10</sup>. The cultic equipment and the decorative motives of the lichthof stands as an evidence of the process taking place from the end of the New Kingdom and throughout the first millennium BC.<sup>11</sup> Such as these alters which being used in this court as in the tomb of Karkhamun, the presence of two limestone alters in front of the niches which discovered by south Assasif conservation in 2012<sup>12</sup> which also seen the tomb of Ankhhor TT 414 (see Fig: 4).

### **The cult of God Ra in the open court**

There are many evidences that indicate the cult of god Ra, the sun god, within the private tombs of the 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> dynasties of the Theban necropolis. The architecture design of these tombs contains a court which is open to the sun<sup>13</sup> which ensures the direct relation between the sun and the existence within the tomb.

This open court is commonly known as "Lichthof" and it is commonly being used in the monumental tombs of Assasif area during the 25<sup>th</sup> -26<sup>th</sup> dynasties<sup>14</sup>. Filip Coppens has compare between this open court and an elevated chapel in the late Dynastic Ptolemaic and Roman temples focusing on the similarities in its functions as a place for the cult of god Ra and Osiris<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Elena Pischikova, "Style and Iconography" (2014): 90.

<sup>7</sup> Elena Pischikova, "Style and Iconography" (2014): 91.

<sup>8</sup> Kampp-Seyfried, "The Theban Necropolis," 10.

<sup>9</sup> Diethelm. Eigner, "Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spatzeit" (1984), 170.

<sup>10</sup> Diethelm. Eigner, "Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spatzeit" (1984), 116-119.

<sup>11</sup> Cooney, Kathlyn, "The Edifice of taharqa by the sacred lake ritual Function and the role of the king", JARCE, 2000, 15-47.


<sup>12</sup> Elena Pischikova, the History of the south Asasif Necropolis and its Explorations in tombs of south Asisif Necropolis, 2014, 61.





<sup>13</sup> Sarah. L. Wilson, "Aspects of the Theban tomb decoration in the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth daynasties" (Doctor of philosophy thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Diethelm. Eigner, "Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spatzeit", (1984), 116-119.

<sup>15</sup> Filip Coppens. "The so-called lichthof once more" (2014): 343.

The existence of stelae that were decorated with solar hymns within certain tombs also confirming the cult of god Ra within these tombs<sup>16</sup>. These are some examples of the tombs that contains stela which decorated with solar hymns;

TT 36 Ibi (  )ibi The tomb owner was the Chief Steward to the God's Wife Nitocris during the reign of Psammetichus I. The tomb is located on the Asasisif, and was jointly excavated by the Belgians, who worked on the superstructure, and the Germans, who excavated the substructure<sup>17</sup>.

TT 37 Harwa (  )H  rw  who was one of the foremost officials of his time, and the first holder of the title “Chief Steward of the God’s Wife of Amun” (imy-r pr-wr n Hmt-nTr n Imn), an office that would be held successively by some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals in Thebes during the Twenty-fifth and Twenty sixth Dynasties.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the tomb of TT 27 sheshonq (  )šišonq.

### The cult of god Osiris within a tomb

The Theban private tombs were used as a place for the cult of god Osiris god of Dead. The existence of Osirian cult in the funerary sphere was developed at the end of the New Kingdom<sup>19</sup>. One of the evidence that confirm that approach is the existence of the “Pflanzenbeete” which is a bed or a patch that could be planted and watered at regular intervals and it exists in near to the offering table in many private tombs<sup>20</sup> such as;

Padihorresnet TT 196 who was Chief Steward to Nitocris and Governor of Upper Egypt. The tomb is not mentioned by early travellers to Egypt, and although some work was carried out on it by the Belgians, it is as yet unpublished, with little information available on its decoration.<sup>21</sup>

Menturmhat TT 34 which was constructed at the end of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the reign of Taharqa and continued into the early years of the 26<sup>th</sup> under the rule of Psammetichus.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the tombs of Pabasa TT 279, Ibi TT 36, and Ankhhor TT 414.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Budka, “Der ‘Lichthof’ im Grab des Anch-Hor.”Sokar 18 (2008): 80-8.

<sup>17</sup>Graefe. E, Das Grab des Ibi, Obervermogenverwalters der Gottesgemahlin des Amun(Thebanisches Grab Nr. 36) (Brussels, 1980); Kuhlmann and Schenkel, Ibi; Eigner, Monumentalen Grabbauten, 51-2, fig. 27, 28-30.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Naunton, The Tomb of Harwa (TT 37)– a high official of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, ancient Egypt December 2006/January 2007,P26 derived from: <http://www.harwa.it/eng/index.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Filip Coppens. “The so-called lichthof once more” (2014): 345.

<sup>20</sup> Diethelm. Eigner, “Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spatzeit”, (1984), 119-174.

<sup>21</sup> E. Graefe, `Zwei Ergebnisse einer Inspektion des Grabes No. 196 in Assassif, CdE 46 (1971), 234-49.

<sup>22</sup> Russmann, Edna R. “Mentuemhat’s Kushite Wife (Further Remarks on the Decoration of the Tomb of Mentuemhat, 2).” Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 34 (1997): 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40000796>.

Some scholars have connected the existence of the “Pflanzenbeete” in the tomb with the regeneration and the cycle of Osiris. The open court of the tombs were designed as the elite *qrsw* coffin which can be linked to God Osiris as the *qsrw* coffins used to have text columns which replaced later on with the Osirian bound papyrus motif confirming the symbolic representation of the tomb of Osiris<sup>23</sup>. Another evidence for the cult of god Osiris within these tombs is the existence of niches which being dedicated to the Osiris such as the cultic niche of god Osiris in the open court of the tomb of Ankhhor TT414<sup>24</sup> (see Figs:5,6)..

### **The Solar-Osirian Unity within the tomb:**

Lots of indicators prove the unity between the sun god Ra and the dead god Osiris in the tomb such as the stelae which dedicated to god Osiris and god Ra as the stela of Merit-Nieth, the daughter of Ankhhor<sup>25</sup>. Another example for the Solar-Osirian unity within the tomb is the decorative motives which decorate the entrance of the open court of Ankhhor tomb where the sun god, Ra and the dead God, Osiris, are represented seated in front of the cartouche of the divine adoratrice Nitocris<sup>26</sup>. The most completed decorations of the tomb of Karakhamun shows the tomb as a solar temple with Osiris and Re, combined in the same alliance<sup>27</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

The open court of the Theban private tombs represents one element that show the development of Architecture, religion, and art during the late period that merge the best practices used in architecture, religion, and art since the Old Kingdom and passing with the Middle and Late Period and continued till the Ptolemaic and Greek period. The different nature of the open court as the cult place and the place where the living connect with the deceased, in addition to its osirian and Ra natures of the open court make this court a special architectural element with unique decorative motives and art. Focusing on using the open court name of this architectural element instead of Lichthof will make it reachable for researcher in literature.

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<sup>23</sup> Edna R. Russuman, "The motif of bound papyrus plants and the decorative program in Mentuemhat's First court (Further remarks on the decoration of the tomb of Mentuemhat)." JARCE32 (1995); 125.

<sup>24</sup> Bietak, Manfred, and Elfriede Reiser-Haslauer. Das Grab des ‘Anch-Hor. Obersthofmeister der Gottesgemahlin Nitokris, I. UZK 4; DÖAWW 6. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978, 103-105

<sup>25</sup> Eigner, Diethelm. : Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spätzeit", (1984) 191-192

<sup>26</sup> Bietak, Manfred, and Elfriede Reiser-Haslauer. Das Grab des ‘Anch-Hor” 1978, 94-95

<sup>27</sup> Elena Pischikova, Style and Iconography (2014): 70

Christopher Naunton, The Tomb of Harwa (TT 37)– a high official of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, ancient Egypt December 2006/January 2007,P26 derived from: <http://www.harwa.it/eng/index.htm>

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## Figures



Fig. (1): Aerial view of the North Assasif necropolis. Photo Kenneth Griffin



Fig (2): Aerial view of the South Assasif necropolis. Photo Gwyn Ashworth-Pratt,  
SACP



Fig (3): Open Court. Tomb of Karakahmun. Photo Katherine Blakeney, SACP



Fig (4): View of the sacrificial plate ensemble and Libation Basin on the east side of the Atrium (reconstructed state of the first Construction phase) (photo J. Budka).





Fig (5): The decoration of the southern Tarniche of the "Lichthof" of TT 414: Re-Harachte (right) and Osiris (left) in front of the central cartouches of the god's wife Nitocris; On the outside, Ankhhor flanks the composition as the owner of the tomb (today's condition, partly reconstructed) (photo J. Budka)



Fig (6): View of the western niche of the "Lichthof" from TT 414, on the right the rest of one destroyed Osiris cult site (present state) (Photo J. Budka).



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