

Coming and going: the tomb chapel

Erected at the edge of the desert, a tomb chapel provided the deceased with a counterpart to his or her former home on earth. An underground vault held the remains, shielding them from the world of the living and protecting them from aggression.

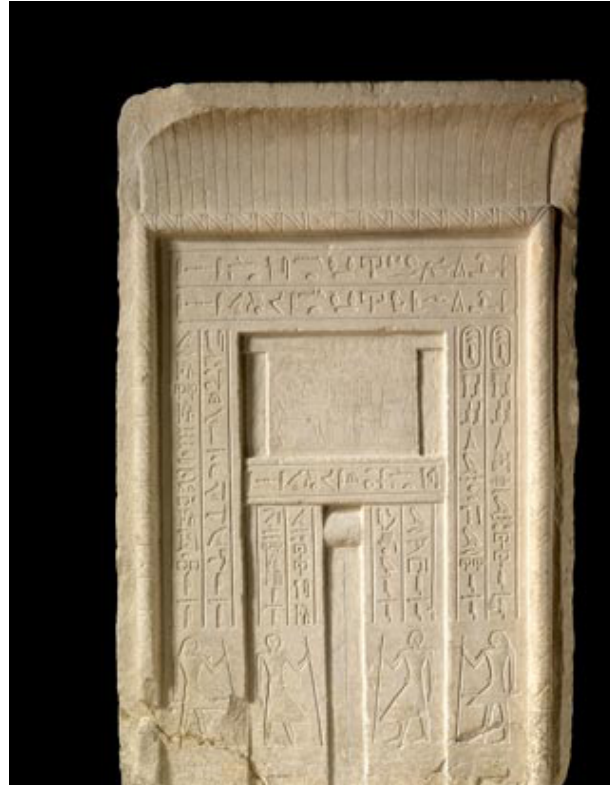
In contrast, the chapel above the vault directly linked the deceased to people who remained “on earth.”

An indispensable building

A tomb chapel could be compared to a somewhat special temple. A dead person’s supernatural entities could leave the land of the dead and enter the chapel to avail themselves of real or pictured offerings. The chapel restrained these entities, preventing them from wandering further afield in the world of the living, where they might do harm. It served as a landmark and refuge that allowed an individual’s immortal entities to come and go between worlds, and to find their owner easily.

A system of survival

At first sight, the scenes decorating the chapel walls—and, more rarely, the burial vault—are striking testimony to the triumph of life. They provide precious information on many aspects of everyday life. Their sole goal, however, was the survival of the chapel’s owner, a way of sustaining the individual. Scenes of farming or craft activities, plus important events in the deceased’s life, were simply a permanent version, on a solid support, of the series of offerings and other acts made on behalf of the deceased (whose exemplary behavior merited them). Texts accompanying these scenes—as well as more specifically funerary images—were also part of the system of survival. Depending on social status, this system might be highly elaborate or fairly minimal—indeed, artificial.



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