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The tomb of Tjay (TT 23). Progress report

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Since 2006 the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences has been working in the Theban tomb of Tjay (TT 23) and neighboring tombs. This paper provides general information on the tomb, its architectural features and decoration. The author gives an overview of history of the tomb's exploration in 19th–20th centuries and a progress report on the current research project.

Keywords: Thebes, Theban necropolis, El-Khoka, Tomb of Tjay, TT 23.

The Theban Tomb 23 (TT 23) is located within the 'lower enclosure' of Sheikh Abd El-Qurna (El-Khokha, Luxor). In modern landscape the tomb is situated between the TT 105–107 cluster on the west, TT 109 on the north, TT 41 and 42 on the east and TT 44 on the south (fig. 1–2).

It was built for Tjay, a scribe of royal dispatchers at the time of the king Merenptah (1290–1214 BC). One of the first records of the owner is a stela from Serapeum dated to the Year 55 of Ramsess II, where Tjay is mentioned as a secretary of the prince Merenptah¹. After Merenptah had succeeded to the throne his secretary became a 'royal scribe of correspondence of the Lord of the Two Lands' and was appointed as the head of the 'Bureau of Correspondence of Pharaoh, L. P. H., in Pi-Ramess...' (fig. 3). In his tomb Tjay is also named a 'supervisor of the granaries of all gods of the South and North'², a 'high priest of Iah'³,

¹ Malinine et al. 1968: 14; KRI II: 377.6–8.

² KRI IV: 118.7; 118.14–15.

³ KRI IV: 111.1; 111.5.

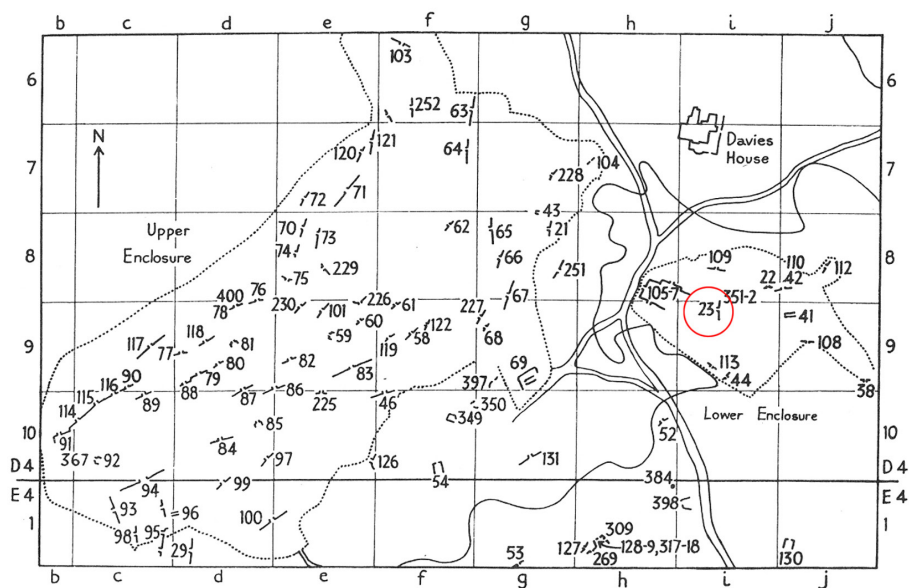


Fig. 1. Plan of Sheikh Abd El-Qurna North (after PM 1.1: pl. V)

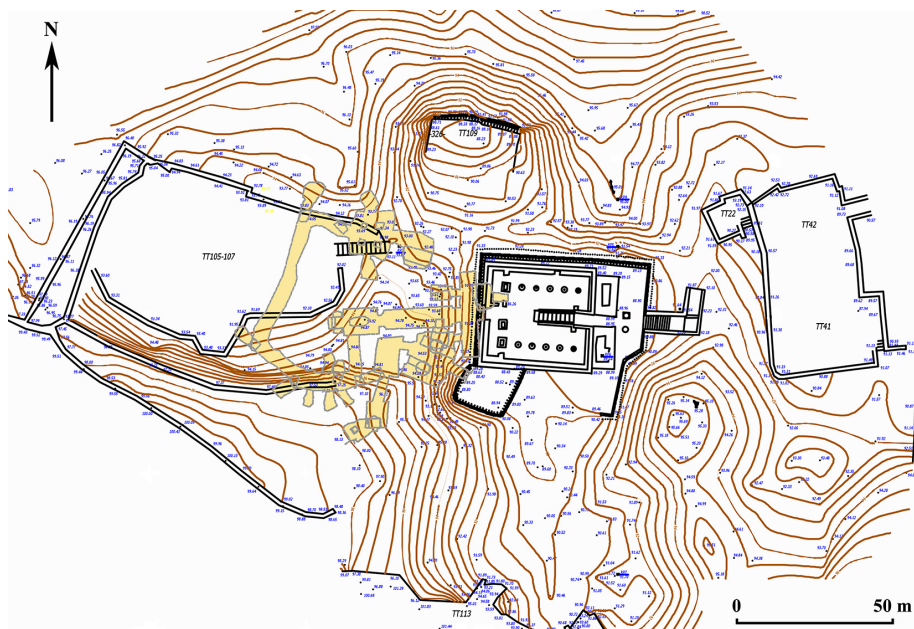


Fig. 2. Topographical map of the area around TT 23
(by V. N. Sorokin, K. G. Loginov with additions by D. Eigner, 2013)

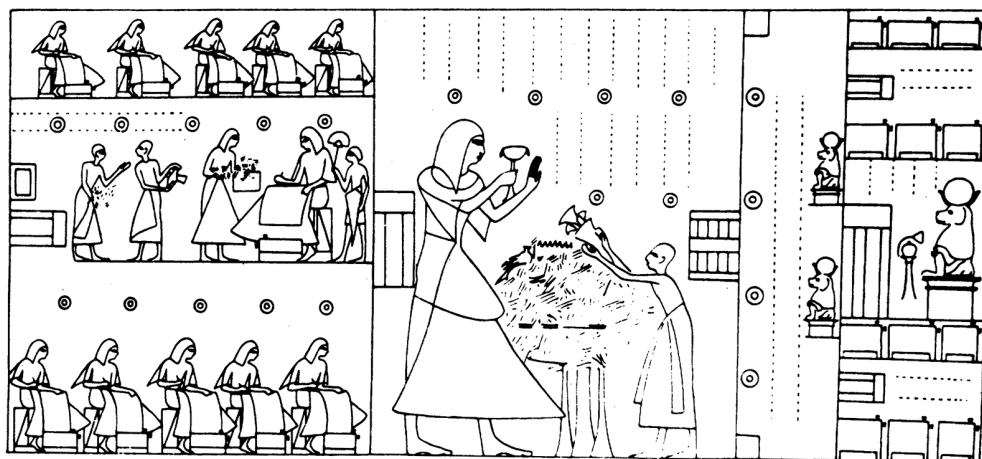


Fig. 3. Royal chancellery represented on the south-eastern wall of the courtyard of TT 23.
Copy-reconstruction by N. de Garris Davies (after Borchardt 1907: 59, Abb. 1)

a ‘fan-bearer on the king’s right hand’⁴, etc. With a certain probability Tjay can also be identified with ‘the chief of treasury’ of the same name, who came to the Valley of Kings on the Year 7 of Merenptah’s reign to inspect construction of the royal tomb⁵.

It is likely that Tjay was close with the king, and he could be his advisor and attorney in some affairs. He was awarded ‘the Gold of Honor’ (fig. 4) — and so far remains the only known official who received this decoration from Merenptah⁶. The high status of Tjay is also stressed by the size of his tomb, which is larger than most tombs of his contemporaries⁷.

Tjay’s family was thoroughly discussed by K. Kitchen⁸. This official was of Theban origin, born to an army scribe Khaemter and a chantress of Amun Tamit. His family was rather big: besides numerous own brothers and sisters he had a much greater number of in-laws. He was married twice — to a chantress of Amun Nebettawy and a mistress of harim of Sebek Raja. It looks like Tjay had no children of his own. Iwy, who is considered his only offspring, is never called so in TT 23, instead of this he is insistently called the son of Nebettawy. Some of Tjay’s numerous brothers-in-law held a position in Memphis⁹, and one of their tombs could be a source of a block with a representation of Tjay riding a chariot¹⁰.

⁴ KRI IV: 112.1; 114. 4; 115.1; 118.6; 118.13–14.

⁵ O. Cairo 25504, Rt. I.5 (KRI IV: 155.6).

⁶ Binder 2008: 250.

⁷ Iskander 2002: 372.

⁸ Kitchen 1991.

⁹ Kitchen 1991: 71–72.

¹⁰ Martin 1987: 30 (no. 72); pl. 26, 52.



Fig. 4. Tjay awarded the Gold of Honor.

Fragment of the scene represented on the western wall of the Room 1 of TT 23

Tjay's sepulture is a temple-tomb complex that includes a pylon, a courtyard, five inner rooms and a sloping passage descending to a burial chamber (fig. 5). The tomb's superstructure could also include a pyramid chapel, however the space for its possible location is rather limited and nowadays is all covered with a thick layer of building and excavation debris. The complex is oriented along the east — west axis.

The pylon is badly damaged. Its upper part is missing, while its base and the lower courses of masonry with relief decorations are still intact. The southern part of the pylon has a 'name-plate', as it was described by K. Kitchen¹¹; however this 'plate' is actually a part of a band with a longer inscription. Sounding made in 2013 revealed remains of an enclosure wall made of mud-bricks that adjoined the pylon from the north and the south (fig. 6–7). Unfortunately, the major part of the wall is destroyed.

Right after the pylon there is a staircase leading down to the courtyard. The stairs were originally framed with side ramps decorated with relief representations of a funerary procession. The courtyard is of rectangular shape in plan. It had a perimetric roof, while its central part remained open. The courtyard (or at least its roofed part) was originally paved with mud-bricks — in its south-eastern corner a part of original floor has preserved. The western part of the courtyard is marked with a portico that precedes the entrance to the inner structures.

¹¹ KRI IV: 107.10; Kitchen 1991: 73.

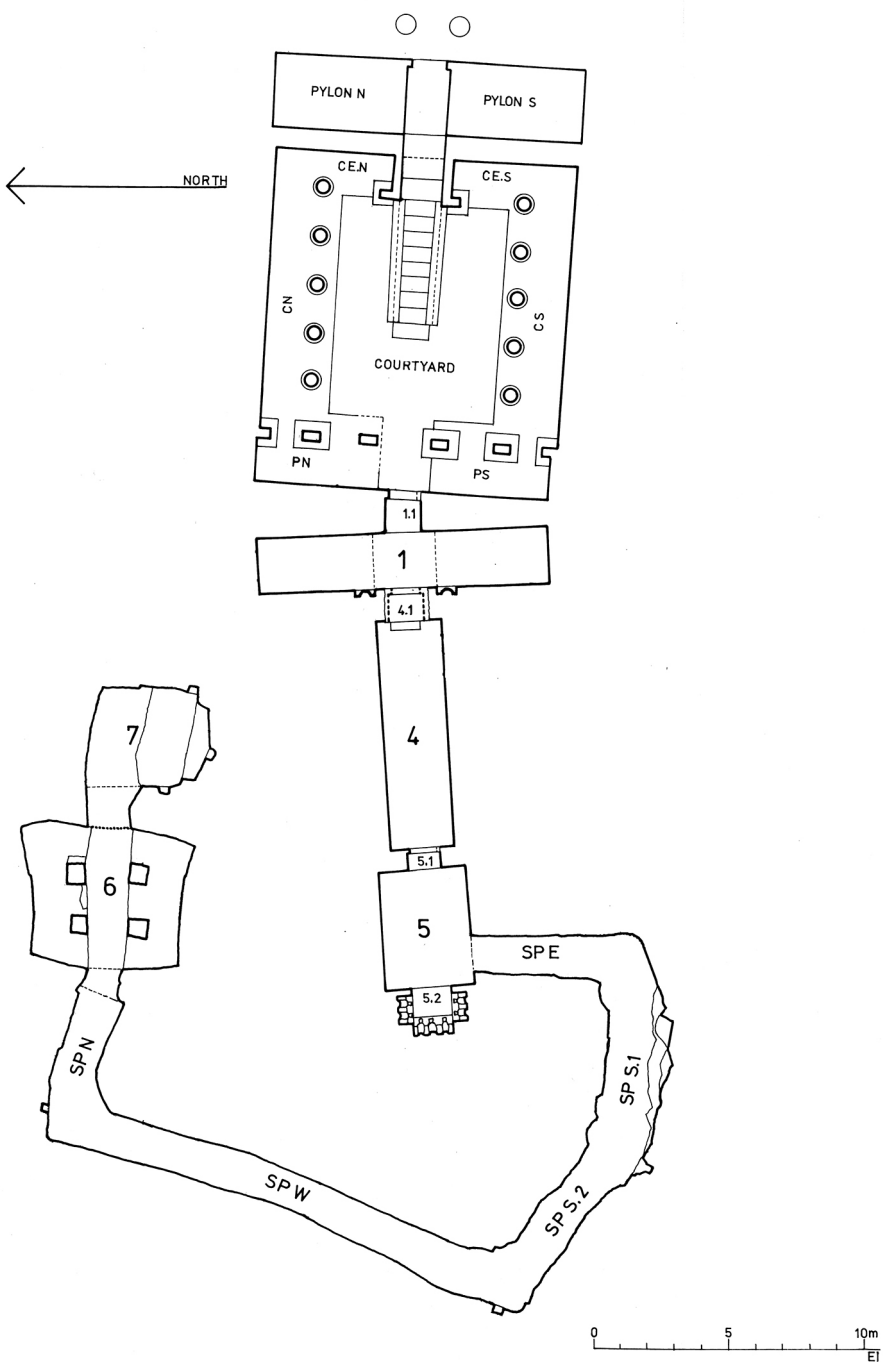


Fig. 5. Original plan of TT 23 (based on drawing by D. Eigner, 2014)



Fig. 6. General view of the pylon and the courtyard



Fig. 7. Test trench to the south of pylon with remains of mud-brick enclosure wall

The limestone rocks, in which the courtyard was cut, is of quite poor quality. For this reason the majority of its walls were faced with sandstone blocks providing a solid surface for decoration. In other cases (mostly on the eastern wall) the arenaceous rock was covered with a thick layer of plaster, which was also carved with reliefs. Destruction of original colonnade and its ceiling caused weakening of the binding agent and subsequent falling out of the sandstone facing. Thus, almost 70% of the original wall decoration of the courtyard turned into numerous fragments. For dozens of years the walls were exposed to direct sunlight and wind, and this caused bad weathering of the remaining reliefs.

However the preserved scenes and texts are quite interesting. They include a New Year hymn to the Light, a representation of the royal chancellery ('ministry of foreign affairs'), scenes of fishing and hunting, depictions of Tjay's townhouse and his triumphal return home, various offering rituals, process of making a mummy, and many others. In the northern part of the portico are remains of Tjay's autobiography (fig. 8). It is remarkable for being carved in hieratic script, which is rather unusual for this kind of texts. It is obvious that it was carved after most of the reliefs had been finished as the lines of the inscription partly overlap the lower scenes. One can assume that the artists did not have enough time to carve this inscription in proper hieroglyphs or that the tomb owner wanted his biography to look like as if it was handwritten on a papyrus.

The tomb itself consists of three main rooms — a broad hall (Room 1), a long hall (Room 4) and an inner room (Room 5) with a niche representing a small sanctuary (Room 5.2)¹².

The walls of these rooms are generally decorated with painted reliefs; the lowest registers of all walls and the upper register of the eastern wall of the Room 5 were left uncarved, just painted. The state of preservation of the tomb is generally better than of the courtyard, though in some places large fragments of the decoration are missing due to natural factors or modern human activity.

Two life-size figures of Tjay are carved in front of the entrance to the Room 1 and welcome visitors. The eastern wall is decorated with a triumphal scene: the tomb owner is depicted receiving 'the Gold of Honor' in presence of the king and high officials. The celebration is continued in a lower register where a festival procession with bulls is represented.

Reliefs of the southern wall of the Room 4 represent a funerary procession coming to the tomb where Tjay is welcomed by the Western Goddess. A part of this scene had been cut away and brought to the Egyptian Museum in Berlin¹³, but it was lost during the World War II. The northern wall is occupied with a representation of a funerary banquet where the numerous kinsfolk of the tomb owner can be seen.

The Room 5 is decorated with an offering scene and representations of various deities. The sanctuary contains a sculptural triad — Osiris, Isis and Horus. On its sides double statues of Tjay and his wives are located (fig. 9). The center of the Room 5 is occupied with a granite sarcophagus of Tjay (fig. 10) lifted from the burial chamber (Room 7) in 1905.

¹² F. Kampp defined TT 23 as belonging to the Type Ve featuring a transverse hall (antechamber) with two side rooms and a long hall (Kampp 1996: I, 26, 206). As he stated, this type of tombs is typical for the period from Hatshepsut to Amenophis II, while the tomb of Tjay was

the only later instance. In our opinion, these side rooms are of a later date. Therefore TT 23 should be ascribed to the Type Vb, which was popular in the Ramesside time.

¹³ Scharff 1923: 32–33.



Fig. 8. Tjay's autobiographical inscription



Fig. 9. General view of the sanctuary



Fig. 10. Sarcophagus of Tjay. Granite

The burial chamber can be reached by a sloping passage (SP) that was cut in dense limestone rock and goes down to the depth of 17.29 m. Its total length amounts to 52.31 m. The corridor changes its direction three times. The floor of the passage (as well as its walls and ceiling) was cut in ledges and has no traces of smoothening or any other finishing. The walls have regular beam-holes and light-niches, which were used for bringing in (and later for lifting) the heavy burial equipment. The northern part of the passage goes through a ‘pillared hall’ (Room 6) — a feature that was typical for royal tombs of the 19th dynasty.

The burial chamber is a small room of irregular shape. Its southern part is deepened for placing a coffin.

By architectural features and decorative program, the closest parallel to TT 23 is the tomb of Djehutymes (TT 32) dated to the reign of Ramesses II¹⁴. Shape and proportions of the elements in the courtyard are rather similar to those typical for the New Kingdom tombs in Saqqara (in particular, the tomb of Horemheb and the one of Tia and Tia). Since Tjay had a rather modest plot of land for building his tomb, his architects had to arrange necessary elements of superstructure on different levels.

The original structure of TT 23 was changed several times (fig. 11). The first remodeling took place before Tjay’s burial, when the doorways of the Rooms 1, 4 and 5 were widened in order to bring in the big granite coffin. Already in the Ramesside period a new tomb was built (the Tomb North 2, or an unnumbered Theban Tomb 325/352¹⁵), the entrance of which was made in the centre of the northern wall of Tjay’s courtyard.

¹⁴ Kákósy et al. 2004.

¹⁵ Kampp 1996: II, 759.

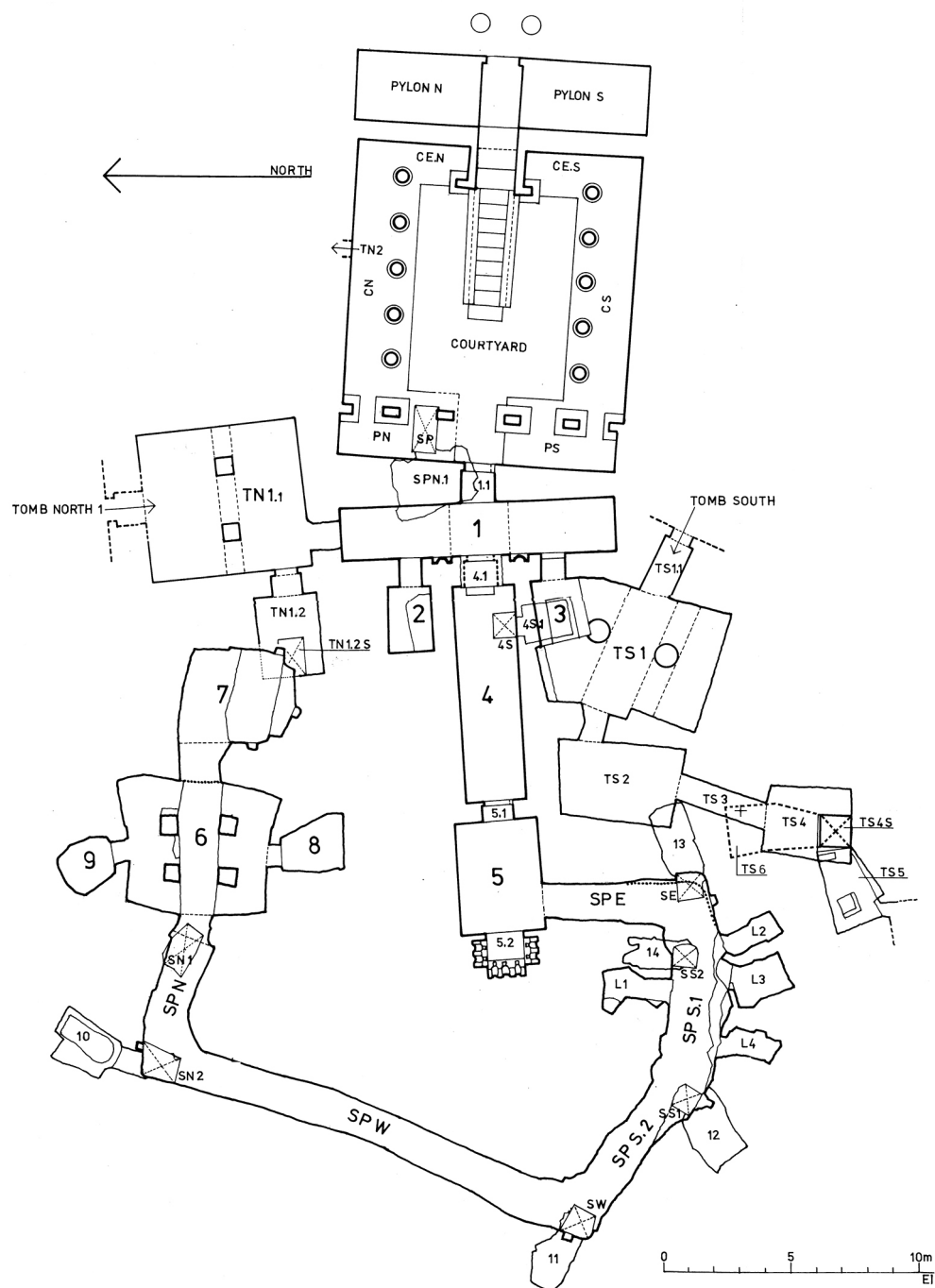


Fig. 11. Plan of TT 23 with later additions (drawing by D. Eigner, 2014)

Other episodes of remodeling occurred in the Third Intermediate and Late Periods. A shaft descending to a small burial chamber was cut in the northern part of the portico. Construction of this shaft affected a pillar of the portico, which was partly dismantled by workmen of the Late Period. A similar shaft, although less deep, was hewn in the Room 4. Within the same period the Rooms 2 and 3, each with a rectangular coffin pit, as well as a small unfinished shaft SN 1 and the side-rooms 8–14 of the SP were constructed. While cleaning the SP in 2008–2009, it was found that one of the pillars of the Room 6 had been repaired with the blocks that had originally decorated a pillar of the portico (most likely the one affected by construction of the shaft).

The latest of ancient intrusions into TT 23's architecture relates to the Roman period when a series of loculi (L1, L2, L3, L4) were cut on both sides of the second segment of the sloping passage.

The Room 3 of Tjay's tomb is also a part of the room 1 (TS 1) of the Tomb South. The last one consists of a small unfinished courtyard of irregular shape, three rooms (TS 1, TS 2, TS 4) and a shaft leading to a burial chamber (TS 6). Due to the bad quality of the rock, in which this tomb was cut, the ceiling and upper parts of the walls in the burial chamber have collapsed.

The Tomb South is not decorated; its walls were evened, but not smoothed or plastered. Two columns of TS 1 that were planned to have a form of papyri bundles are only roughly outlined. The floor of the TS 1 also was not smoothed and is all in ledges.

We assume that construction of the Tomb South was started at the end of the 18th dynasty. For some reasons construction was aborted at the very beginning. The next phase of construction activities took place in the Late Period when rooms TS 2–6 were cut for a new owner. As far as the Tomb of Tjay already existed at that time, builders had to change the axis of the tomb from east — west to north — south. Later amendments to the plans of both TT 23 and the Tomb South turned these structures into one complex.

The northern wall of the Room 1 of the Tomb of Tjay has a robbers' breach, which gives an access to another structure provisionally called the Tomb North 1. It is worth mentioning that travellers and the first excavators of TT 23 got into the tomb through this breach. Here is a description of such a visit recorded by Ch. E. Wilbour on March 9, 1881: 'We went a few steps of the house of the Sheikh-al-Beled Lazim and came to a crater, in the north side of which are three holes squared at the top; in the south side a device a foot high through which one crawled... we were in the tomb of His Majesty's Book-writer Thâi and his wife, the House-mistress and Pallacide of Amon-Ra, Aa. To the left hand an adoration of Amenophis I and Aahmes Nefert-Ari. Right hand a hole no words. We pass South between holy writ, find in the right wall Thâi's statue and turn West into a long room with many finely colored scenes and hieroglyphs...' ¹⁶.

At the moment the Tomb North 1 is not accessible from outside, as it was in 1881, but two rooms can be entered from TT 23. The first one (TN 1) is divided into two parts by a pair

¹⁶ Wilbour 1936: 55.

of square columns. In the south-western corner of TN 1 is a small passage (TN 2.1) leading to a small room (TN 2) with a deep shaft (TN 2S).

The walls of the Tomb North 1 are even, but do not bear traces of smoothing or plastering. The condition of the tomb is very poor — there is a bad collapse of ceiling in the northern part of TN 1. Thus, TN 1 is partly filled with debris coming from the hill located above the Tomb North 1. Unfortunately, the huge weight of the hill is crucial for structural stability of the tomb.

The tomb of Tjay had been first described by C. R. Lepsius in 1840s¹⁷ and later, after years of neglecting, was visited by Ch. E. Wilbour in 1881¹⁸. In 1904–1905 the tomb was excavated by R. Mond. Unfortunately, the results of his work were never published. Thanks to publication of R. Mond's field notes by L. Collins, it is known that he had entered TT 23 from the Tomb North 1 and then cleaned the courtyard and the tomb of Tjay itself. During the excavations R. Mond discovered a large number of objects, including funerary cones, coffins, shawbti figurines and other equipment, the most part of which are nowadays kept in the British Museum in London. R. Mond also lifted the granite coffin of Tjay that he had found in its original position in the burial chamber to the Room 5¹⁹.

Norman and Nina de Garris Davies, whose Qurna house was located in a close proximity to TT 23, were frequent visitors there and made a complete survey of the tomb's upper structures and copied some of the reliefs²⁰. Results of their work were partly published by themselves and other scholars in a series of publications²¹.

In 1980s the Egyptian Antiquities Organization team fulfilled a project on conservation of the tomb. Unfortunately, no documentation on this work is available. Nevertheless it is evident that the Egyptian authorities commissioned reconstruction of the colonnade and the roof of the courtyard — it was urgently needed to protect fragile murals from direct sunlight and weathering. Important works on structural consolidation of the tomb and preliminary conservation of reliefs were also carried out. At the same time a team of the Centre d'Étude et de Documentation sur l'Ancienne Égypte headed by F. Haikal made a photographic and epigraphic survey of the representations and inscriptions of the tomb²². Unfortunately, this work resulted in publication of only one text²³.

In 2006 the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (CES RAS) was granted a concession for systematic study and conservation of the tomb of Tjay and adjoining structures.

The work done in 2006–2014 included topographical survey of the area, cleaning of the rooms of TT 23 and the Tomb South of debris, removing of excavation and building debris from above the rock structure of the tomb, architectural study, epigraphic survey, photography and copying of inscriptions and representations, inventory of loose architectural blocks and fragments of reliefs, and many other activities²⁴. An important part of the work was a study

¹⁷ LD III: 252–253.

¹⁸ Wilbour 1936: 55–57.

¹⁹ Collins 1976: 34.

²⁰ The notebooks of N. de Garris Davies as well as the drawings and copies of reliefs are kept in the Griffith Institute, Oxford.

²¹ Borchardt 1907; Davies 1924: 13, pl. 7; 1929: 233–254; 1942: 38, fig. 13; etc.

²² Haikal 1988.

²³ Haikal 1985.

²⁴ For intermediate progress reports see: Ivanov 2012; 2015.

of objects discovered while cleaning the tomb. Among these finds were pottery²⁵, funerary equipment, textiles²⁶, human remains, etc.

In 2013–2014 emergency works on conserving the Tomb South and some rooms in the SP of TT 23 were made (filling structural cracks, enforcing pillars, etc.).

Simultaneously with archaeological and survey works conservation tests for consolidation and cleaning of reliefs were made; some surfaces were subjected to probe treatment. We were able to observe the results of these tests for a decade, and a program of conservation of the tomb was elaborated on the ground of them. A short season of 2015 was completely focused on this issue. Implementation of this conservation program depends not only on funding but also on permissions for work issued by Egyptian authorities timely.

Season 2018

On January 8 — February 8, 2018 the CES RAS carried out the 10th season in the Tomb of Tjay.

The agenda of the season included continuation of studying the tomb's architecture, photographing and copying texts and reliefs in the tomb, conservation of the tomb, its reliefs and paintings, the granite coffin of Tjay, study and conservation of finds discovered during previous seasons, study of anthropological material discovered in 2006–2014.

Unfortunately, due to a number of reasons we were not able to carry out the conservation works. Therefore during the season the work included:

- 1) studying finds discovered in 2006–2014;
- 2) making photographs and studying the wall decoration;
- 3) copying texts and reliefs;
- 4) studying anthropological material discovered during previous seasons;
- 5) improving safety facilities in the tomb.

1. Study of the finds discovered in 2006–2014

Pottery analysis (by S. Lämmel)

In 2018 we continued study of pottery discovered during cleaning of the sloping passage and shafts of the Tjay's tomb, the Tomb South and the slope above TT 23. It included an initial quantitative analysis of all pottery finds collected in the course of the work, including non-diagnostic body sherds and modern pottery. Reference pieces were drawn and the first set of pottery photographs was also taken.

The preliminary results of this study show that the majority of examined pottery material dates back to the New Kingdom. A large part of it beyond all doubt consists of beer jars. These are mainly represented by bases and there are pigment remains (generally blue or yellow) in the bottom of several of them, suggesting that they were used in the decoration of

²⁵ Lämmel 2015.

²⁶ Орфинская 2016; Орфинская, Толмачева 2016, Tolmacheva 2018.

the tomb. Besides these very coarse, utilitarian vessels, New Kingdom pottery also comprises finer vessels that can be associated with the burial. One of the most remarkable of these vessels is a bottle made of a well-prepared Marl D fabric, covered with a thick white slip and painted with polychrome decoration (blue, black, red and white).

A series of relatively well-preserved New Kingdom marl amphorae was also studied. At least five examples of these vessels belong to a large type with a mouth diameter of about 16 cm that is characteristic of the late 19th and 20th dynasties. As such, they could be a part of the original burial assemblage of Tjay. While three of the large amphorae are made of a Marl D fabric, two others, plus a number of body sherds perhaps representing more vessels, are in Marl A, an unusual fabric for that shape. As Marl A most certainly originates from the region of Qena, these amphorae may epitomize a local version of a northern type. As for all container imitations, the question arises of whether local versions of a shape also involved local versions of the contents that were associated with them. Just for the record, in the present case, the jars most certainly contained wine.

The other large pottery group from TT 23 is formed by the late Third Intermediate Period and Late Period pottery. A complete profile of an imported Levantine jar, probably of Syrian or Lebanese origin, was also reconstructed and studied. This jar, like so many other Late Period vessels from the tomb, was used for mummification activities and its inner surface was covered with a thick layer of black resinous matter. Its relatively elongated proportions, with a sharp narrowing of the body below the shoulder, point to a date in the 6th century BC, and thus helps us providing a more precise timeframe for a period during which mummification activities were taking place in the area, whether in the tomb itself, its annexes (Tomb South and Tomb North) or its surroundings.

This year also, special attention was lent to pottery fragments bearing traces of pigments (so-called palettes) or containing remains of plaster. It can be assumed that these vessels were used in the context of the tomb decoration. This suggestion is supported by the fact that all of the palettes that could be dated seem to belong to the New Kingdom. The same holds true for the most of fragments with plaster remains, although many of them consist in body sherds. In the coming year of work, all secondary-use pottery material from the tomb will be compiled as such assemblages may provide important clues to the history of the tomb, both during and after its construction.

Study of textile material (by E. G. Tolmacheva and O. V. Orfinskaya)

During the season more than 300 samples of textiles discovered in the tomb were studied. The study was conducted according to a methodology that had been elaborated in 2011–2012. It is focused on description of the type of a textile object, its dimensions, nature of threads, way of their spinning, the density of threads, description of starting and side edges, decoration, traces of sewing and reparation. This information was added to the corpus of the textiles from TT 23, which was started in 2011 and now contains more than 4000 samples.

The textile objects are mainly represented by bandages and funereal shrouds. However a significant part of bandages are made of textiles that were not initially produced for funeral needs. These include daily garments (loincloths, tunics, etc.) and, probably, household textiles (hangings etc.) that show signs of intense use (wearing, repairing and altering).

The major part of the textiles can be provisionally dated to the Late Period, although the New Kingdom and Ptolemaic textiles are also recorded.

Study of small finds and loose blocks

During the season some small finds discovered in previous years were re-examined, photographed and drawn. Results of this work will be included in a catalogue of finds that will be an important chapter of our publication of the tomb.

Besides studying of small finds, examination of loose blocks that were found in and around TT 23 was continued. These are blocks of stone (limestone or sandstone) bearing remains of relief or painted decoration. Almost all of them originate from the walls of the tomb of Tjay. In previous years all stones were catalogued and photographed; this season the blocks were sorted by type (fragments of columns, architraves, door-jambs, wall scenes, etc.). This work made it possible to find joints and combine bigger pieces. Thus we will be able to find the original location of the loose fragments. It also provides an idea about subjects of scenes that were carved on the walls of the tomb.

This work will be continued next seasons.

2. Photography and study of wall decoration

This season a part of the courtyard and inner rooms of the tomb were photographed with special targets, which are necessary for processing the images through PhotoScan Pro software. The goal of this work is to build 3D models of different parts of the tomb so one can use these models to produce facsimile drawings of walls decoration by photographs.

Besides photography, an artistic study of reliefs and paintings was started. It resulted in recording patterns of decoration (style, peculiarities of craftsmanship, etc.) and features that are typical to certain artists (representation of limbs, ears, etc.) — that provides additional information on process of construction and decoration of the tomb.

This work will be continued next seasons.

3. Anthropological studies (by N. V. Kharlamova and A. O. Kitova)

During the previous seasons remains of more than 100 individuals were found in and around TT 23. Each of them was described with account of the state of preservation of the bones and soft tissues and targeted for further study²⁷. People, whose remains were found in TT 23, suffered from periodontosis, caries and other conditions indicated by enamel hypoplasia.

Special attention was paid to a study of the mummified individuals. Mummified remains of individuals are extremely valuable sources of information about life, death and funerary rites of ancient people. In order to get this information we used various methods paying special attention to different aspects of mummification.

²⁷ Васильев, Иванов 2008.

The methodology of the study of mummified remains was refined. We were making macro- and micro-photos of soft tissues that had been taken from the bodies with different state of preservation.

4. Improvement of safety facilities in the tomb

In 2018 some works were done to make distant rooms safer and more accessible. In this regard six shafts in the sloping passage of TT 23 and one shaft in the Tomb South were covered with wooden constructions. The sloping passage of TT 23 was equipped with permanent electric cables and lighting.

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В 2006 г. Центр египтологических исследований РАН приступил к археологическому изучению фиванской гробницы Чаи (ТТ 23) и прилегающих к ней сооружений. В статье приводятся общие сведения о гробнице, особенностях ее архитектуры и декоративного убранства. Автор делает обзор истории изучения гробницы в XIX–XX вв. и рассказывает о результатах археологических исследований, проводившихся в последние годы.

Ключевые слова: Фивы, фиванский некрополь, эль-Хоха, гробница Чаи, ТТ 23.