Crossing the Gates of $t3$-$dsr$: The Sacred District Scenes in TT 123; Affecting and Being Affected

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Abstract

The scenes of the Sacred District are characterized by the presence of a group of buildings that appear in a compact form and where there is no activity of human agents or of the deceased. According to some scholars, the scenes refer to the Butic funerary rituals. The purpose of this text is to present a study of the scenes of the Sacred District comparing those in Theban Tomb 123 to other Theban tombs. The article also proposes to think of images not as representations, but as alternative forms of existence that set in motion a series of affective flows. The affective flows generated by the encounters between bodies, allowed the dead person to leave his state of latency and become a manifest being.

الملخص

تتميز مشاهد الحي المقدس بوجود مجموعة من المباني التي تظهر بشكل مدمج ولا يوجد فيها نشاط للبشر أو للمتوفى. وحسب بعض العلماء، تشير المشاهد إلى ما يعرف بـ "الطقوس الجنائزية البوتية"، الغرض من هذا البحث هو تقديم دراسة مشاهد الحي المقدس ومقارنة تلك الموجودة في مقبرة TT123 بمقابر أخرى في مدينة طيبة. تقوم الدراسة أيضًا التفكير في الصور ليس على أنها تمثيلات، ولكن كأشكال بديلة من الوجود التي تطلق سلسلة من النتائج. سمحت تلك النتائج للموت أن يترك حالة الكمون ليصبح ذاتيا له وجود واضح.

Theban Tomb 123

Theban Tomb 123 is in the plain of Sheikh Abdel Qurna, west of the Ramesseum, next to TT 55 (Ramose) and TT 56 (Userhat). In the pharaonic period, the tomb belonged to a scribe named Amenemhet and was built during the rule of pharaoh Thutmose III. Although the tomb has many structural problems, with several rock voids and cracks, the decoration is in good condition, and it is possible to observe the original coloring of the scenes in many places. The bas-relief is very detailed and of excellent quality. In the vestibule, the Offering List in its complete version, the Hunting in the Swamp scene and the scenes with oxen adorned with garlands stand out. In the transverse corridor, attention is drawn to the scene of Hunting in the Desert where Amenemhet is under a war chariot, a scene that possibly represents a pig farm, both located on the north wall and the scene of the funeral procession and the Journey to Sais and Abydos, both located on the south wall. The Sacred District scene is located just below the funeral procession scene. The scene is in good condition and has some of the original coloring, especially the red tones (fig. 1). In the eastern part, a large void of rock can be seen that prevents the complete visualization of the scene. Signs of abrasion can be seen in various parts of the scene, as well as in other parts of the tomb, suggesting that in the past there was an attempt to erase and change the decorative program.


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Although most of the tomb scenes were never published, the inscriptions on the tomb’s facade were included in Kampp’s work, Säve-Söderbergh did a study of the motive of the hippopotamus hunt, and Settgast published sketches of the Sacred District scene, but without much detail. These studies used photographs and sketches from TT 123 that were produced mainly between the 1920s and 1940s by the Oriental Institute of Chicago, Siegfried Schott, and Norman and Nina de Garis Davies.

The Sacred District in Theban Tombs

Popular in the days of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, the scenes of the Sacred District are part of the scenes of the funerary ritual characterized by the presence of a series of buildings grouped in a compact way, where neither humans nor the dead person is shown. For Settgast, this is because the intention of the scene is to highlight the complex of buildings, showing the places where rites took place during the funerary ritual. In TT 60, dated to the Middle Kingdom, the scene is accompanied by an inscription that identifies the set of buildings with an area called β3-dsra. Often found in the Coffins Texts, the word has been translated as Sacred District, Sacred Area, Sacred Temenos or Necropolis. According to Diamond, the way in which the Sacred District is represented in the tombs gives the impression of a fenced area with clearly defined limits that functions as a transition zone within the structure of the scenes of the funerary ritual. In this way, we can think of the Sacred District as a liminal zone through which the dead person must pass before reaching the West.

Settgast divides the scenes from the Sacred District into eight different sections: 1) The Muu Dancers Hall; 2) The Women’s Tent; 3) The Garden; 4) The Gods of the Great Gate; 5) The Divine Chapels; 6) The Sacred Lagoons; 7) The Slaughterhouse; 8) The Four Sacred Pools. There is no standard order of presentation of the...
Fig. 2. The Sacred District in TT 123. Drawing: José Roberto Pellini.

Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the funeral scene in TT 123. Drawing: José Roberto Pellini and Lorrana Dauari.
scenes. The choice of scenes depended both on the owner’s personal preference and the artist’s choices, as well as on the space available for the scene and the time needed to make the drawings.

The Sacred District in TT 123

Although in general the Sacred District starts with the Muu Dancers Hall as it happens for example in TT 15, 21, 81, and 82, in TT 123, the first building shown is the Women’s Tent that is represented as a simple structure with a roof and an internal division (fig. 2, left). Three women are depicted, two to the right of the internal division and one to the left. They are practically identical in costume and posture, which makes it difficult to identify them. Analyzing a similar structure in TT 82, Davies suggested that the woman on the left may represent the dead man’s wife. This is complicated if we consider that one of the things that characterizes the Sacred District is precisely the absence of human beings.10

To the right is a garden with a rectangular lake surrounded by palm trees at both the top and at the bottom and sycamores on the sides. Settgast suggests that this scene represents the wkt channel that connected Sais and Buto.11 According to Junker,12 while the wkt channel was portrayed as a winding watercourse during the Old Kingdom, in the New Kingdom it came to be represented as a body of water in the shape of a lagoon surrounded by palm trees and sycamore trees, as seen in TT 123. In TT 15 (Tetiky), TT 21 (User), TT 81 (Ineni), and in the tomb of Reneni at el Kab, the same scene is accompanied by two obelisks, a clear association with the sacred city of Heliopolis. This reinforces the idea not only that the Sacred District has relations with the funerary Butic rituals,13 but that the rituals are a journey that the deceased made, or should make, to the sacred cities of the Delta, especially to Sais, Heliopolis, and Buto.

Following the journey, the Hall of Muu appears.14 The structure is rectangular, and the upper part shows an irregular division, perhaps an indication of other rooms behind. Two Muu dancers, wearing a crown made of reeds or papyrus, appear with their arms at their sides.

Following (right of) the Hall of Muu, Osiris is shown standing in a chapel, looking towards the entrance to the Holy District. If we think that the funeral procession scene in the above record is part of the total context, Osiris could be looking towards the procession that is approaching the Sacred District. It is interesting to note the presence of Osiris within the Sacred District, something that also happens in TT 15, 21, and 81, showing us the transformation of the Butic ritual into a ritual with characteristics linked to the cult of Osiris.15

After Osiris, we can see a large square structure decorated with khekeru friezes. Within are four individuals, two facing left and two facing right. As in the Women’s Tent, they are identical in posture, in the clothes they wear, and in their faces. They have no arms and appear to bend slightly.16 This is the largest and most conspicuous

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10 Nina de Garis Davies, “The Tomb of Tetaky at Thebes (No. 15),” JE 11.1–2 (1925), 10–18.
11 Settgast, Untersuchungen zu altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen, 51.
12 Hermann Junker, “Der Tanz der Muw und das Butische Begräbnis im alten Reich,” MD 9 (1940), 38–39.
13 Settgast associates the scenes of the Sacred District with the funerary rituals that took place in Buto between the Pre-Dynastic period and the beginning of the Old Empire. Junker, in his analysis of the tombs of the Old Empire, demonstrated that the Butic ritual involved a boat trip, tonenfahrt, between Buto and other sacred cities of the Delta, mainly Sais and Heliopolis. Thus, the deceased king left Buto by boat, proceeded towards the cities of Sais and Heliopolis, and returned to Buto, where the final burial took place. According to the author, at that time, the scenes of the Butic ritual were transformed and began to present new elements, especially associated with the cult of Osiris, which came to be represented within the Sacred District during the New Empire. Settgast, Untersuchungen zu altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen, 66–74; Junker, “Der Tanz der Muw,” 38.
14 Altenmüller suggests that the Muu were ritual agents who appeared at certain times throughout the ritual to greet the dead when transporting the boat to Sais and to receive the dead when the coffin was placed on the sled in the gates of Buto. In this sense, they would be boatmen who took care of the protection and transport of the deceased during the journey to Sais and Buto. See Hartwig Altenmüller, “Bestattungsritual,” Lf I, cols. 745–65.
16 Junker suggests that the four individuals within the structure represent Buto’s dead kings, the ancestral kings. Settgast, on the other hand, interprets the structure as the Great Gate of the Gods and individuals as guardians of the gate. A similar interpretation is given by Davies, who identifies the four individuals as demons who guard the gates of Paradise. See Junker, “Der Tanz der Muw,” 32–37; Settgast,
building within the Sacred District. Unlike TT 123, where no entry to the building is shown, in TT 21 and TT 81, the building appears to have an entrance marked by the discontinuity of the external limits that may represent the entrance to the building.

In sequence, as in TT 53, there is another garden with palm trees and a fenced pond. In the upper portion, there is a senet game board, which is also present TT 100 and in Pahery’s tomb in el-Kab. According to Hodel-Hoenes, senet in the funerary context represents the game that the dead man plays against the invisible, if he wins the match, he can be reborn.  

Proceeding to the right, the scene is divided into half registers where the divine chapels are located. In the upper register are nine chapels with closed doors. Junker suggests that while in the Old Kingdom the chapels represented the royal cemetery of Buto, in the New Kingdom, they started to be reinterpreted as places of refuge for Osiris and his entourage. In the register below, six chapels appear and at least three gods can be seen. Settgast identifies the gods as being the children of Horus, Hapi, Imsety, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuf.

In TT 123, the Four Pools shown to the right are represented as four rectangular structures connected by channels. These pools mark the end of the Sacred District. Two female figures with short hair and a headband kneel by the channel, holding spherical jars. Davies and Gardiner suggested that they are performing a desert fertilization ritual to make it habitable for Osiris. Diamond suggested that the female figures represent the “bone collectors” (dmD(y).t), whose role was to collect the bones of the dead thus allowing the deceased to be reborn. Other examples of this scene occur in TT 17, 21, 39, 81, 82, and 100.

After the Sacred District, there is a scene to the right that in TT 123 is poorly preserved due to fractures and voids in the wall, but that we can reconstruct based on similar scenes from other tombs, especially TT 53 (Amenemhet), 96B (Sennefer), 125 (Duauneheh) and 179 (Nebamon). The scene shows two Maa dancers, or pseudo Maa, as Altenmüller suggests. Further to the right, two priests appear, one holding a papyrus roll and the other presenting the peshe-kef to a chapel. In the tombs of Puimre, Amenemhet, Rekhmire, and Duauneheh, a similar chapel appears, but with a torch inside. In TT 123, the drawing is very faint, and it is impossible to verify the whether there was a torch inside the chapel.

Although in TT 123, we only have small strokes preserved, other tombs show the next scene consisted of a priest holding a sceptre behind a boat with a person sitting at the bow and the stern. In a similar scene in TT 100, the trip ends in front of the Goddess of the West, symbolizing the arrival of the dead in the Hereafter. According to Settgast, there would be another boat that would symbolize the offerings for the crossing to the West to be successful, that is, the idea is that the delivery of offerings could allow safe passage. Finally, at the far right, is a building, of which in TT 123 we can see only a trace. However, in TT 100, the dead man, shown in smaller scale, appears with a hoe in his hand building a garden. As in TT 123, we have the outline of the ceiling and the space and proportions of the scene are similar, therefore we can assume that originally this scene was also present in TT 123.

Directly connected to the scene of the Sacred District is the scene of the journey to Sais. In TT 123, the journey is represented in the register above the Sacred District from the bottom up where we can observe the presence of a standing male figure with his arm extended (reconstruction shown in fig. 3, middle register). In the sequence, we have a small reed boat with at least three rowers, and a person standing at the stern holding the tiller for the steering oar. Next (to the left), we see a larger ceremonial papyrus boat. A female figure with short hair and a headband is seated at the bow. Behind her is a lector priest and a tall rectangular structure. To the left of the structure, we can observe a standing male figure and a female figure identical to the one at the bow of the

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20 Davies, “The Tomb of Tetaky at Thebes,” 52.
the boat. The same scene can be seen in TT 53, 69, 92, 100, 112, 125, 127, 342, and in the tomb of Pahery. In TT 69, 92, 100, 112, and 127, as well as in Pahery, the beginning of the scene shows a priest (or the dead man), making an offering to the Anubis in his sanctuary (see fig. 3, middle right). While in TT 69, Anubis appears in his theriomorphic form, standing, holding a \textit{w\textsuperscript{s}} sceptre with one hand and an ankh in the other, in Pahery’s tomb, the god appears in the form of a jackal recumbent on a sanctuary. In TT 123 it is very likely, given the space and proportions of the scenes, that this image of Anubis was present, but given the fractures and voids in this location, it is impossible to attest to this with confidence. As demonstrated by Altenmüller,\footnote{Altenmüller, “Zu Frage der \textit{Mww},” 6–7.} inscriptions in these scenes identify the building as Sais. The rectangular structures that appear in the New Kingdom scenes are interpreted by Settgast\footnote{Settgast, \textit{Untersuchungen zu altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen}, 31.} as the sarcophagus of the dead, an identification based on scenes from TT 69, 92, 100, 112, 127, and the tomb of Pahery, where a sarcophagus is carried by a group of men. According to Altenmüller, in some New Kingdom tombs, the scene of the journey to Sais is combined with those of the journey to Buto in the form of an extended seasonal trip (\textit{Saisfahrt}).\footnote{Altenmüller, “Zu Frage der \textit{Mww},” 6–7.} As a result, even though the cities of Sais and Buto are relatively distant from each other, they are depicted side by side, or close together as in TT 123.

Crossing the Gates of \textit{tA-dsr}: Affecting and Being Affected

The big question is why Amenemhet chose to portray the Butic ritual. I think this choice has to do with how images were conceived in ancient Egypt. In Egyptology, the idea that images are mimetic or idealized representations of something, or someone is well accepted.\footnote{Rune Nyord, \textit{Seeing Perfection: Ancient Egyptian Images beyond Representation, Elements in Ancient Egypt in Context} (Cambridge, 2020), 1; Nicola Harrington, \textit{Living with the Dead: Ancestor Worship and Mortuary Ritual in Ancient Egypt} (Oxford, 2013), 46.} The idea that existences are manifest potential elements is one of the centers of ancient Egyptian ontology. In Egyptian cosmology, Atum, the creator god, becomes active when he differentiates himself from the primordial waters.\footnote{See James Allen, \textit{Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creations Accounts, YES 2} (New Haven, 1988), 34; Theophile Obenga, “African Philosophy of the Pharaonic Period,” in Ivan Van Sertima (ed.), \textit{Egypt Revisited} (New Brunswick, 1989), 315; Maulana Karenga, \textit{Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics} (New York, 2004), 183–86; Ragnhild Finnstad, \textit{Image of the World and Symbol of the Creator: On the Cosmological and Iconological Values of the Temple of Edfu} (Wiesbaden, 1985), 360–62; Ragnhild Finnstad, “On Transposing Soul and Body into a Monistic Conception of Being: An Example from Ancient Egypt,” \textit{Religion} 16 (1986), 363.} According to Egyptian cosmology, creation is not something that happens from nothing, but is a process of differentiation of everything that exists in a latent and potential state. Everything that exists in the Universe, including the Creator himself, exists in the form of a latent potentiality that inhabits an invisible, deep, dark, and eternal sphere. The transformation process is experienced as a process of differentiation where the being ceases to be an undifferentiated matter and becomes a distinct entity.\footnote{Rune Nyord, \textit{Seeing Perfection}, 6.} As Allen summarized, “darkness is light waiting to happen,”\footnote{James Allen, \textit{Genesis in Egypt}, 34.} just as “chaos is not chaos, but unstructured creative potentialities.”\footnote{Karenga, \textit{Maat}, 186.} In this way, existence, in the ancient Egyptian conception, alternates latency and realization and happens from a continuous process of differentiation. In other words, existence is a continuous becoming that takes the form of a process of differentiation within a sea of potentialities. As a result of this process, beings become manifest.

According to Karenga, this idea that being is a latent potentiality amidst a sea of possibilities is not exclusive to the creator, but is inherent to all beings, including humans, both in terms of their capacity for development and of transcendence.\footnote{Karenga, \textit{Maat}, 185–87.} That is why the human being was thought to be in a continuous process of becoming. Death is life in another form since life continually moves between the spaces of latency and realization. According to the author, the ka, the ba, and the akh could be thought of as the manifestations of this transcendence. Nyord suggests, the “ka of a person is the undifferentiated potential of which the person is a manifestation, not
necessarily as a realization once and for all, but rather through a continuous process of updating.” That is, the ka would be an indeterminate potential that could be actualized as a living being, as a dead man’s mummy, his sarcophagus, his statue or any other image or object. In this way the ka, ba, and ankhu designate the human being as a perceived and complete form, and therefore we cannot think about them as parts of a human being, but as transcended vital totalities, that is, the ka, the ba, and the akh are alternative forms of human existence that can manifest themselves simultaneously. In the form of ka, ba or akh, the human being can move between states of existence without being confined to any one of them.

I suggest that just as the ka, ba, and akh are alternative forms of existence that allow the dead to continue living in a transcendent way, images in tombs can be thought in the same way. Nyord, in his discussion of the ontological character of images in ancient Egypt, has shown that one of the ways the Egyptians used to refer to images was through the concept nfrw, which can have the meaning of limit or presence. Although the term was mainly used to refer to divine images, this idea of presence could be extended to non-divine beings. In this way, images could be thought of as one of the means that the transcendent dead could continue to exist in a manifest way. The process of transcendence here would be enabled by specific rituals such as the Opening of the Mouth or even the delivery of daily offerings. This would allow the deceased, as a present and manifest being, to affect and be affected by other bodies.

Affect can be defined as an autonomous force between bodies that best expresses itself not in terms of emotions or experiences, but of intensities that increase or decrease the action potential of a body. Affect, therefore, refers primarily to the reciprocal capacities of bodies to affect and be affected. Bodies here are not just human bodies, but they cover all kinds of bodies that can affect and be affected, for example, an animal, a table, a book, or a tree. Affection here is not a characteristic that pertains to an individual body but is a quality of the different kinds of relationships through which interrelated bodies are constituted, actualized, and constantly transformed. For Deleuze and Guattari, an affective event is a meeting between the virtual and the real, a meeting of incorporeal concepts with the materiality of the world. Affect in this way is a relational process that makes us think of agency as the efficacy that is distributed between assemblages of human beings and not humans.

This is evident in the way in which the Egyptians created material-discursive strategies such as, for example, scenes to capture the attention of visitors, align the tomb so that the sun illuminates certain parts of the tomb and not others, leave express requests for visitors to make offerings, etc., that were intended to attract the visitor so that he would somehow take part in the funerary rituals when entering the tomb. Amenemhet, knew that the tomb would be visited—at least he expected it—and so he expected his images to affect people and people to affect his image allowing him to become manifest. Speech plays a key role in this process. As is well established, among Egyptians, speech did not only serve to structure the social image but also had a creative power. Among the Egyptians the word was regarded as a creative source. According to Meyer-Dietrich, the creative power of speech operated at different levels: operative (the transfiguration of objects and people, healing/cursing, curing or cursing); satisfaction (to calm and satisfy people), and identity (to reaffirm the identity and agency of individuals). For example, to Assmann, during the process of embalming, even more important than the chemical or surgical treatment of the body was the verbal treatment that the deceased received, because it was through speech that the deceased was animated with conscience and physical strength. Through the act of reciting, the incantations the body gained unity, and thus, one by one, every part of the body came to life. Speech in this sce-

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35 Nyord, Seeing Perfection, 16–21.

36 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis, 1987), xvi.

37 Patricia Clough, “(De)coding the Subject-in-Affect,” Subjectivity 23.1 (2008), 141.


39 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 99.


41 Jan Assmann, Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt (Ithaca, 2005), 33.
nario has a clear ontological value, since according to the Memphite Theology, uttered by the demiurge, speech brings the world into existence.42

It is well established that the chapels of New Kingdom Theban tombs were open to the public. On certain occasions, such as the Beautiful Feast of Valley,43 family members, friends, and visitors in general could enter and visit, fulfilling the functions of memory and worship, being linked to the idea of accessibility. As a public area, the chapel played a central role in the communication process between the living and the dead as the space where visitors interacted with the material-discursive44 strategies proposed by the dead. For example, in some tombs, architectural elements such as pillars interact to the wall obstructing the view of the reliefs, capturing the attention and directing the visitor’s body movement.45 At the same time, decorative elements such as varnish were applied to certain scenes to highlight their significance and thus attract the visitor, as seen in TT 49, where some images of Neferhotep are covered with varnish creating a 3D effect.46

In this sense, the images are strategies that Amenemhet, the owner of TT 123, thought out and had created to affect people as a way to remain existing. The generated affects in these relationships and encounters allowed him to transcend to other forms of existence and thus guaranteed the continuity of his life. So, together with architects and artists, he thought about strategies which were intended to affect people and try to convince them to participate in his funeral rite,47 such as the alignment of the tomb with the winter sunlight that illuminates the statues and hits the desert scenes first; the narrow passageway that encouraged walking, either into the tomb or out; the way in which the sound echoes more or less depending on where one is inside the tomb. Everything was designed to increase or decrease the ability of visitors to act. This also involved choosing and positioning the repertoire of scenes. In the passage corridor on the left there are scenes of the funerary procession, and on the right, there are scenes of hunting in the desert. The funerary scenes are directed to the west, that is, towards the funerary chamber. The desert scenes are directed to the east, to the tomb’s entrance. Thus, the funerary scenes induce the visitor’s way into the tomb, into the world of the dead, and the desert scenes take the visitor out into the world of the living.

The visitor here is not a mere spectator, he participates actively in all events alongside Amenemhet through the affective flows that were created during these encounters. In this way, the Sacred District is not just a representation or a discourse on ancestry, but it is an affective performance that truly allows Amenemhet to cross the boundaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead and to find his ancestors. This affective performance and the results that it will produce in the form of different actualizations of the existing potentials depend on the visitors’ affect and how they are affected by the images. Affecting and being affected by the place—by the images—sets in motion affective flows that will activate the magic of the place and only then Amenemhet will be able to continue meeting his ancestors.

Although Egyptologist usually think of the Sacred District as a representation of narratives about ancestry, I think that it is more than a narrative—the Sacred District is the very path that the dead takes in becoming manifest. If Nyord is correct in his interpretation that images in ancient Egypt vary ontologically depending on where they are and the role they play in each relationship,48 we can suggest that the funeral procession scenes, as well as the Sacred District scenes, involve affective flows whose principle is to actualize the dead and thus make him manifest. This allows him to fulfill his destiny, meet his ancestors, and continue existing as a transcendent being through a continuous process of becoming.

44 Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC, 2007), 146.
45 See for example TT 96, Hode-Hoenes, Life and Death in Ancient Egypt, 112–39.
46 Personal impression obtained during work at TT 49, from 2008 to 2012.