

Tombs: Information Pack



Overview

Tombs were houses for eternity for the deceased. They protected the dead body and also provided a place for rituals that helped the deceased in their afterlife. As a result, they needed two key elements: a hidden burial chamber (normally subterranean), sealed from the world, and a public place for offerings, prayers, and other public rites. This was true for royalty and private people – the only differences were scale and the type of decoration within the tomb itself.

Decoration

Key Scenes

There are several scenes that were essential to ensure the deceased had a successful afterlife, including depictions of themselves, their family, funerary rituals, offerings of food and goods to the tomb. All of these elements guaranteed the eternal safety and preservation of the deceased.

Private Tombs: Individuality

Private tombs also show a great degree of individuality, reflecting aspects of the deceased themselves – whether their day-to-day jobs or personalities. Tombs are vital to our understanding of LIFE not just death. Two examples of this are shown below:

- Tomb of Sennefer (left): Sennefer lived during the reign of king Amenhotep II, ca. 1427–1401 BC. He held important titles, including Mayor of Thebes and Overseer of the Granaries, Fields, Gardens, and Cattle of Amun. Much of the spare space in his tomb is covered in grape vines, giving it the nickname 'Tomb of the Vines'. Is this connected to his job, or did he just really like wine?
- Tomb of Rekhmire (right): Rekhmire lived during the reigns of kings Tuthmosis III and Amenhotep II (mid 15th cent. BC). He was both Mayor of Thebes and Vizier – one of the highest jobs Egypt. His tomb shows exotic animals, the import of which he would have overseen, and also includes a text outlining the jobs of the vizier.





Coffins

Bodies were placed inside coffins within the tombs. Private coffins were made of wood, while heavy stone sarcophagi (outer coffins) were typically only made for royalty. In early periods, coffins were rectangular, but developed in later periods to anthropoid shapes, i.e., in the form of a mummy, with elaborate painted decoration (see left).

Statues

Part of the deceased's soul stayed in the tomb. In addition to the body, it could also enter statues of the deceased, to receive offerings, for example. Family groups are common, but individuals can also be shown alone. On the right is Sennefer (he of the Tomb of the Vines) with his wife and daughter. Note his fat rolls – he may not have been fat in real life, as fat rolls indicate wealth! On the left, note the difference in skin colour: wealthy women are shown pale, as they don't have to work outside.



Examples in UK Museums

Museums mostly have collections of tomb objects (e.g., statues), not tomb scenes. The best (and perhaps most beautiful) exception is the tomb of Nebamun, several scenes from which are now in the British Museum (e.g., left, showing the deceased and his family fishing and fowling – scenes that show the suppression of chaotic elements in the world). https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=119661&partId=1&searchText=nebamun&images=on&page=1

Possible Points for Exploration

As tombs show so many different scenes from daily life, they provide a range of topics for discussion. Below are some themes that could be examined in more detail, keeping in mind who would have done the various jobs (remember, tomb owners were wealthy members of society).

Family

Private tombs are made for men, but they show their family – wives and children of different ages. The make-up of wealthy Egyptian families can be looked at.

Food

Nutrition was essential in the afterlife and the deceased is shown sitting before tables piled high with food. What did they eat? It's not just enough to show the prepared food, but also the different preparation stages, to make sure that the food would never run out.

Jobs

Not only do tombs provide information about the jobs of the deceased, they also show other jobs and occupations, including baking, making furniture, farming, dancing and playing music.