

Starting from the Egyptian tomb TT99 in Thebes (Senneferi), describe the architecture and finds of this tomb. How does this material culture illustrates the position this person had in the ancient Egyptian society
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The Egyptian tomb TT99 is located within the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna at Thebes, or modern-day Luxor, on the west bank of the Nile. The tomb belonged to Senneferi, a high-ranking official during the reign of Thutmose III in the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1479-1425 BCE). Although the reuse and deterioration of the material culture and decoration have made it difficult to reconstruct the monument as it appeared in antiquity, the material remains and architecture of the tomb can still offer valuable insight into the status, wealth and personal networks of Senneferi. Through layout, decoration and burial equipment, it is possible to understand how the tomb functioned as a display of social identity. The evidence suggests that Senneferi was a significant figure within Egyptian society and was closely linked to the royal family during one of Egypt's most prosperous periods. TT99 showcases Senneferi's high status and displays the materialisation of political, economic and religious structures during Egypt's "Golden Age" of the New Kingdom.

The historical and geographical context of the tomb is crucial to understanding its significance with regard to the lives of ancient Egyptians. Thebes was the capital of Egypt during the period of the Middle and New Kingdoms, but also functioned as the religious centre of the state during this time. It was considered one of the richest and most impressive cities in Egypt, which housed temples, royal palaces and substantial necropolises, including the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. At its peak, it had an estimated population of 50,000 inhabitants and became the centre of an empire extending from the Euphrates to Northern Sudan (UNESCO, No date). Thebes was also closely associated with the God of air, Amun, one of eight primordial Egyptian deities, who became a nationally worshipped god during the New Kingdom era (Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, n.d). The prosperity and influence of Thebes during this period are reflected in the tombs constructed in its necropolises, including TT99.

Architecturally, TT99 follows the common T-shaped form, which is common during the Eighteenth Dynasty. This layout includes a broad transverse hall at the front with a long passage that leads into a deeper inner hall or shrine, sometimes with pillars. Although this architectural arrangement was common, it was not universal. Instead, it was typical of high-ranking officials who had the economic means and social status to commission such elaborate constructions (Porter and Moss, 1970). The scale and organisation of TT99 provide an initial indication of Senneferi's elite position within Egyptian society.

The layout of New Kingdom tombs can also be interpreted symbolically. Strudwick (1997) suggests that the New Kingdom tombs in Thebes follow a fundamental layout plan. The upper level, which often consisted of a superstructure or niche and reflected the realm of the sun god. The middle level, which consisted of the offering chapels where rituals were performed by family members and priests, and reflected the realm of the living. The lower level, which comprised the burial shafts and subterranean chambers, reflected the realm of the dead and of Osiris. Evidently, Senneferi used the spatial arrangement of the tomb to connect himself and his eternal journey with the solar and Osirian cycles of regeneration. This suggests theological awareness and the concern to ensure that his

eternal life would be unified with the fundamental cycles of Egyptian religious belief (Taylor, 2001).

The physical construction can reveal important information about the status of its owner. Unlike domestic architecture in ancient Egypt, which was often made from perishable materials such as mud-brick, wood and reeds, Tomb TT99 was cut directly into the limestone hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, providing a durable and stable structure intended to last for eternity. This is a reflection of the importance of constructing a permanent setting for the deceased in ancient Egyptian lives, compared to the temporary houses of the living (Taylor, J.H. 2001). The tomb was often called the “house of eternity”, reflecting the idea that the tomb served as the eternal dwelling place of the deceased. The construction of such tombs required considerable resources, skilled labour and administrative organisation, all of which suggests that Senneferi had access to wealth and influence.

The tomb's decorations further reinforce the impression of elite status. The excavations of TT99 revealed that the chapel walls were once adorned with elaborate, colourful paintings, though much of the decoration has been damaged or lost. The decorative focus of the tomb appears to have been concentrated in the accessible chapel spaces rather than in the burial chambers below, which remained largely undecorated. This layout correspond with patterns identified by Cooney (2007) in her study of Ramesside coffins and burial practices. Cooney notes that elite individuals were frequently buried in undecorated burial chambers beneath elaborately decorated tomb chapels that could be visited by the living. In contrast, non-elite burials sometimes placed greater emphasis on decorating the burial chamber itself. If similar practices existed during the Eighteenth Dynasty, the decorative emphasis of TT99 would further support the interpretation that Senneferi belonged to the upper levels of society. The elaborate chapel decoration would have functioned both as a religious space for ritual offerings and as a public display of the tomb owner's achievements and status (Cooney, K. 2007).

The architecture of TT99 also reflects the significant economic investment required to construct such a monument. Excavation, carving, decoration, and the organisation of burial chambers all required specialised labour. These resources would have been available primarily to individuals with access to wealth and administrative authority. Historical sources indicate that Senneferi held several important titles, including “Overseer of the Seal”, which suggests he had an important place in Egyptian bureaucracy and could explain how he was able to finance a tomb of this kind (Strudwick, N. 2016).

Egyptian didactic literature emphasises the importance of preparing objects for death, in the form of coffins, tombs and funerary objects. These objects serve as protection of the dead, transformative magical aids for the soul, a material means of drawing the dead back into the world of the living, transferring and enhancing wealth into the next life and granting prestige to living family members within the competitive world of funerary rituals (Cooney, K.M. 2007). The main focus of ancient Egyptian burials was the corpse, which would ideally be mummified and held within a coffin that would serve as a sacred vessel for the soul. Although this was the ultimate aim for many, mummification required investment, which only a few of Egypt's wealthiest individuals could afford. Within tomb TT99, the remains of five individuals were discovered during excavations, which are thought to be Senneferi, his wife Taïamu, his mother and father, and a single juvenile (Strudwick, N. 1997). One of the remains was found mummified in an elaborate manner, which included a thick coating of plaster and elaborate bandaging. Examination of the

remains revealed they belonged to a female, aged around 50, who is assumed to be Senneferi's wife or mother. The artificial mummification of a corpse was only available to the rich and the elite in ancient Egypt, and would have required the financial means to afford the 70-day process as well as the materials such as natron and funerary equipment (Smithsonian Institute, No date). The poor were usually buried in the simplest graves along with only a few special possessions, and the poorest would be buried in hot sand, which would allow the corpse to be mummified in a natural way (Baum, H. No date). The mummification of five individuals, with at least one of them being elaborate, suggests that the owner of the tomb would have been a part of a high social standing, maybe an official or existed within the royal circle, and also had the financial resources to carry out such elaborate funerary practices.

Additional finds from TT99 include fragments of wooden boxes, parts of coffins and a plethora of pottery and ritual objects. Although many artefacts were excavated, many were also cleared out through outdated archaeological practices between the end of the 18th century and the 1950s, which means there is a considerable amount of important material missing. The fragments of wooden box were extremely flat, which suggests they were more than likely from storage chests than coffins. Wooden boxes were an essential part of the burial equipment of Eighteenth Dynasty nobles and they would often carry items such as the opening of the mouth ceremony tools (Strudwick, N. 1997). This ceremony was an incredibly important ritual within Egyptian funerary practice, as the belief was it allowed the dead to breathe, eat, see and speak in the afterlife (No author. 2003).

With regards to the coffin, 'black' type fragments were found in TT99, which were the primary form around the time of Thutmose III, and some do display the name of Senneferi. The Papyrus Louvre E3226, an important document dated to the reign of Thutmose III, mentions Senneferi. Although the papyrus insinuates a close relationship between the pharaoh and Senneferi, the choice of coffin decoration is further evidence that he lived during this period and could reflect a personal relationship with Thutmose III. During this period, coffins were often painted with yellow paint to represent gold, but the presence of gold leaf found within the tomb of Senneferi suggests that he was able to afford the real thing, which again, further indicates a level of wealth and status that allows the purchase of such material (Strudwick, N. 1997).

To conclude, the architectural features and archaeological finds associated with TT99 suggests that Senneferi was from a high social status and had acquired reasonable wealth within New Kingdom Egypt. The location of the tomb within the prestigious necropolis of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, alongside other high-ranking officials, suggests that Senneferi belonged to the upper levels of society. The architectural layout of his tomb, particularly the T-shaped plan, is similar to other high-ranking officials, with the situation of decorated chapels above the burial shafts aligning with other wealthy tombs from ancient Egypt. The highly specialised construction of the tomb also reflects the access to skilled workers and durable materials that could only be accessed through considerable wealth and high social status. Within the tomb, the elaborately mummified bodies and the plethora of funerary items also suggests great financial means compared to poorer burials which included little funerary items and sometimes low-cost natural mummification. These funerary items include fragments of wooden boxes, which were essential in the burial of Eighteenth Dynasty nobles, and gold leaf on the fragments of the coffin which again would suggest financial means to purchase such material. All of this evidence points towards TT99 being the tomb of a noble, a high-status and wealthy individual, with

associated papyri serving as confirmation of Senneferi's connection to the royals and specifically to Thutmose III.

Tomb TT99 provides an important and interesting case study for understanding how material culture can give an insight into the lives and status of individuals from bygone years. Although damage and reuse can cause difficulties when working with material culture, the surviving evidence within the tomb continues to offer valuable insight into the wealth, social status and personal connections of Senneferi, with the tomb reflecting his personal life as well as the broader cultural life of elite society in New Kingdom Egypt.

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