

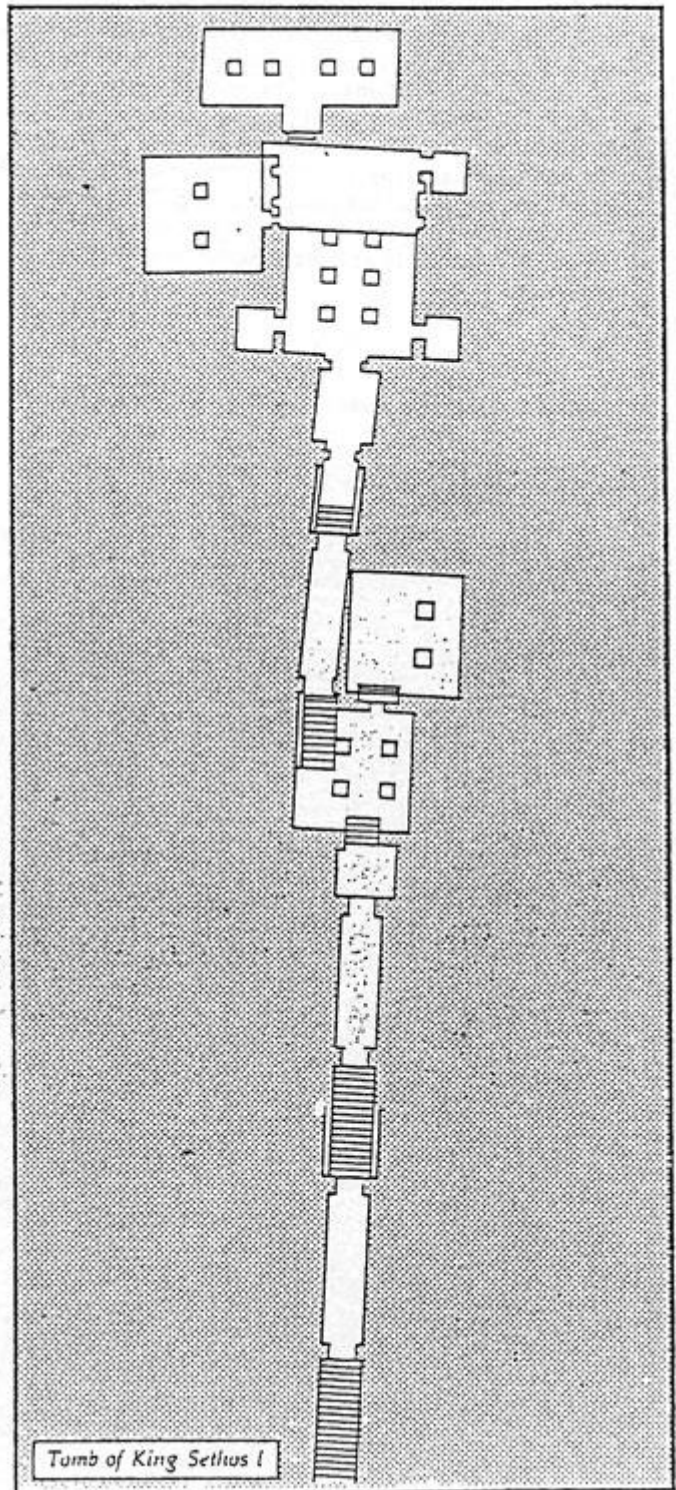
# Workmen of the Pharaoh's Tombs

The kings of the Egyptian New Kingdom (c 1560-1085 BC) were buried in the Valley of the Kings in western Thebes across the Nile from modern Luxor. The tombs of their queens lay a little further south in the Valley of the Queens. A special group of workmen was employed to construct these royal tombs. The internal arrangement of the tombs varied but generally consisted of corridors and rooms aligned one behind the other leading inwards and downwards to lower levels.

As an example, one of the largest tombs was that of Sethos I (c1303-1290 BC), measuring about 115 m in length, with the floor of its last room some 54 m below the level of the entrance. A flight of steps descends to the entrance from where three corridors, the second of which has a stairway in it, give access to a series of vestibules and rooms some of which have their roofs carried on square pillars. The principal chamber, on the main axis, has a vaulted ceiling under which the king's sarcophagus formerly lay. Five smaller rooms open off the main burial chamber. The walls of the corridors and rooms were decorated with reliefs and paintings/ representing the passage of the dead king to the underworld by various stages, in each of which he was protected by figures of deities and appropriate texts to enable him to pass through unharmed and live for eternity.

Excavation and research on the remains of the village where the workmen lived and the adjoining cemetery ' where they were buried at Deir el Medineh, roughly halfway between the two royal burial sites, has revealed a very full picture of their daily lives. The evidence comes from a large number of ostraca\* papyri, stelae and tomb inscriptions together with personal possessions and the ruins of the houses of the men and their families.

The royal necropolis workers were termed 'servants in the Place of Truth' in the period of the Ramesside kings the 19th and 20th Dynasties. They were organised into a gang which like a boat's crew was divided into a right and left side. The number of men in the gang fluctuated, but normally amounted to about sixty. Following directions from a prepared plan showing the layout of the proposed tomb, the job involved cutting out the passages and chambers from the limestone rock. The walls were then covered in plaster and decorated with scenes and inscriptions in outline. These outlines were carved into low reliefs and then coloured. Each side of the gang had a foreman 'great-one of the gang' or 'chief of the gang'; a 'scribe of the tomb' who kept a record of the progress of the work, the issue of materials and tools, absences from work and the payment of wages, and a 'deputy' who assisted the foreman. Two 'guardians of the tomb' had control of the storehouses where the tools and wicks



for use with oil lamps in the interior of the tomb were kept. A further two men, termed 'door-keepers of the tomb', guarded the entrance to the burial place. Among the workers were stonemasons, carpenters, sculptors and draughtsmen. Generally the posts were hereditary, passing from father to son over several generations. Attached to the community of workmen in the village were 'servants of the tomb' who were water carriers (using donkeys lent to them by the workmen), fishermen, wood-cutters, gardeners, washermen and occasionally potters. Finally the services of a few female slaves belonging to the government were allotted to the workmen to grind grain for flour.

The grain, emmer wheat for bread and barley for beer, was part of the wages paid in kind to the workers. The rations paid monthly also included vegetables, fish, water and wood for fuel. In addition, in less regular issues, there were dates, cakes and prepared beer; while bonus payments on festival days and special occasions included oil, salt, natron (used for cleaning and preserving), wine and meat. The government also supplied a certain amount of clothing for the men and their families. The normal amount of grain paid to an ordinary workman was 4 *khar* of emmer and 1½ *khar* of barley (the *khar* 'sack' measure equalled 76.56 litres). It appears that the supplies were enough to cover the needs of an individual family and leave some over to barter for other items.

The workmen had time off for festivals; this was in addition to their normal rest days on the 10th, 20th and 30th day of each month. A month in Ancient Egypt consisted of three periods of ten days each. The working day was eight hours, divided into two equal shifts of four hours with a break for a meal and a rest. The men stayed overnight in huts while working in the Valley of the Kings, returning to Deir el Medineh village for their rest days.



The village itself was surrounded by a wall enclosing about seventy houses while another forty or so lay beyond. A street ran through the village with the houses opening directly on to it. They were arranged in blocks with no space left between them. Most houses had four rooms: an entrance room, an inner living room loftier than the rest of the house and two small rooms off the main room used for stores, work areas and sleeping quarters for the women in the home. At the rear of the house was a walled kitchen area with a small oven, a grain bin and grinding stone. Sometimes a small cellar lay under the floor of the central room.

The community had its own tribunal, whose members were people from the village, which heard and settled disputes. The cemetery of the workmen was located on the slope of the hill to the west of the village. Most tombs laid out in the 19th Dynasty were later turned into family burial chambers for descendants of the original owner. Small sanctuaries of the gods whom the workers worshipped were built near the village with the workmen acting as priests.



Thus the workmen of the royal tombs lived their lives in reasonable conditions, probably considered themselves a cut above the ordinary worker, as indeed compared to the peasants they were, while preparing the burial places of the pharaohs.

An interesting link with the workmen exists in the Burrell Collection in the form of a stela of a man named Hay who was a 'deputy' at Deir el Medineh in the 20th Dynasty. The stela (Reg No 13/62) is of limestone and measures 15.2 cm x 10.4 cm. The owner, though named, is not himself depicted in the scene, instead his son Pa-medu-neter-nakht is shown on the left with hands raised in an attitude of praise before a figure of the god Amun Re. The latter, wearing his characteristic head-dress with two tall plumes, grasps a was sceptre symbolising 'dominion' in his extended hand and an ankh sign for 'life' in the other.

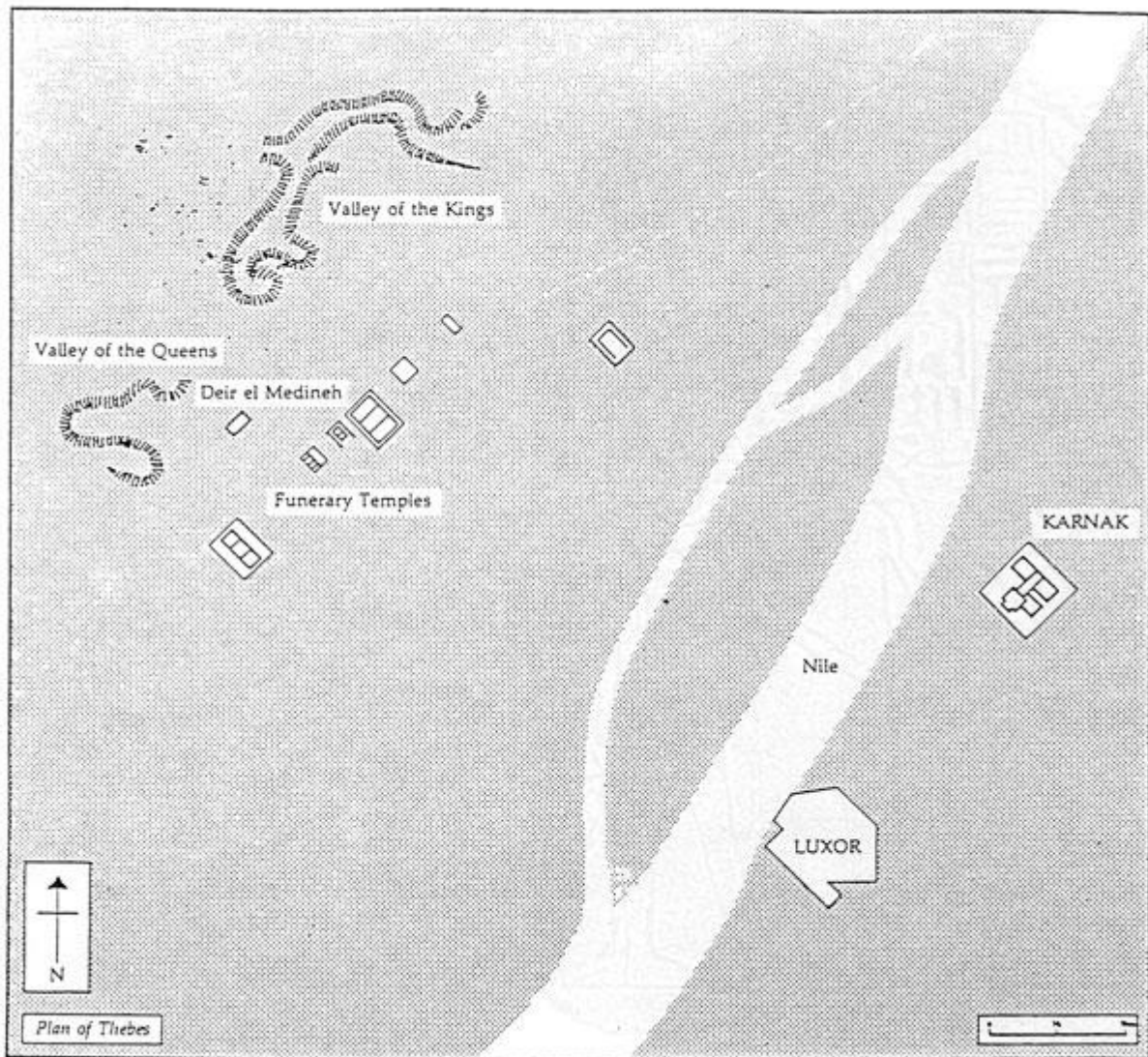
Pa-medu-neter-nakht is dressed in a long loin cloth with a triangular apron at the front and a sash crossing his chest from left shoulder to right hip, denoting his position as a lector priest. A heavy shoulder-length wig covers his head.

The inscription, part of the formula for invocation offerings for the deceased, is as follows

*'A boon which the king gives to Amun Re, lord of heaven, ruler of Thebes for the 'ka' of the deputy in the Place of Truth, Hay, the justified and for the 'ka' of the priest and lector-priest of all the gods, who fashions (sacred) images in the workshop, Pa-medu-neter-nakht, the justified, his son.'*

Hay is known from other sources; his tomb has been located on the hill slope above the workers' village. It is numbered 267 on the Egyptian Antiquities Service list of the Theban necropolis. Inscriptions in the tomb give the names of some of Hay's relations and thus it is possible to construct a family tree. Hay was the son of Amennakht, a 'chief carpenter' and his wife Tarekhan. He married a lady named Henutmet and their son as we learn from the stela was Pe-medu-neter-nakht. The families at Deir el Medineh were closely

interrelated through marriage and the evidence for further connections in this instance is not clear. Research is complicated by the fact that there were at least half a dozen people with the name Hay in the community in Ramesside times.



*Ostraca* -fragments of limestone, or sometimes pieces of broken pottery on which rough notes, designs, records of work done, or rations received, etc, were written and later discarded.

*Stelae* - slabs of stone inscribed and decorated, placed in tombs to identify the owners and designed to ensure a supply of funerary offerings to the deceased.

*Ka* — person's double or spirit.

#### FURTHER READING

Cerny, J : *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period* Cairo, 1973

Bierbrier, M: *The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs* British Museum Publications, 1982

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