



## TOMB OF UNISANKH – A PRELIMINARY REPORT\*

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### Introduction

Ninety-nine years ago, Edward E. Ayer (1841–1927),<sup>1</sup> the father of the Egyptian collection of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, IL, purchased two chapels of Old Kingdom mastabas from the vicinity of the pyramid complex of Djoser at North Saqqara. One of them belonged to Netjeruser,<sup>2</sup> a high official from the later reign of Nyuserre till that of Menkauhor,<sup>3</sup> the other to Unisankh who is broadly considered to have been son of Unis, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty.<sup>4</sup>

The Tomb of Unisankh was excavated by James E. Quibell (1867–1935)<sup>5</sup>, then the chief inspector at Saqqara, for the purpose of its sale to the museum in Chicago in 1908. Zaki Y. Saad worked in the Tomb in the season of 1939–40.<sup>6</sup> The team of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo led by Peter Munro worked in the Unis Cemetery NW, including the Tomb, in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, the Australian Centre for Egyptology headed by Naguib Kanawati undertook survey preceded by major reconstruction works

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I render my thanks to Jana Součková of the Náprstek Museum, Miroslav Bárta of the Czech Institute of Egyptology and Petra Vlčková of the Masaryk University in Brno for their help and support. I am also much indebted to William J. Pestle of the University of Illinois at Chicago for assistance with the English of this article and for his help throughout the past three years. My thanks also go to Jen-Yu Wang and Jana Jiroušková for photographs and illustrations.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dawson – Uphill – Bierbrier, 1995: 26.

<sup>2</sup> Mariette, 1889: 164–174; Murray, 1905: 19–24, XX–XXV.

<sup>3</sup> Strudwick, 1985: 114.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Munro, 1993: 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dawson – Uphill – Bierbrier, 1995: 240–241.

<sup>6</sup> Saad, 1940: 687.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Munro, 1993.

of the Tomb.<sup>8</sup> Despite the great interest and the large extent of works carried out in the Tomb by Egyptologists, the Tomb has remained – mainly due to the geographical division of its parts – unpublished.

## Tomb

The tomb was built within the so-called Unis Cemetery NW at North Saqqara. Together with two adjoining tombs of the vizier Ihy<sup>9</sup> (later usurped by the King's daughter Seshseshet Idut<sup>10</sup>) to the east and the vizier Iynefert to the west, the tomb of Unisankh forms the core of the so-called *Line A* of the cemetery. A narrow street divides *Line A* from *Line B* (the double-mastaba of the queens Khenut and Nebet) to the south. The back wall of *Line A* parallels the enclosure wall of the pyramid complex of Djoser in the distance of several meters.

The first structure built under Unis within the cemetery, after a large-scale grading south to the pyramid complex of Djoser, was doubtless the double – mastaba of Unis' wives, the queens Khenut and Nebet. The construction of the tomb of the vizier Ihy was begun simultaneously or shortly thereafter, judging from the identical layouts of the three tombs' entrances. Still early in the reign of Unis, *Line A* progressed gradually to the west with the tombs of Unisankh and the vizier Iynefert.<sup>11</sup>

The Tomb is an example of a class of non-royal, large, multi-roomed mastabas belonging to wealthy officials, a type that first appeared during the reign of Nyuserre and continuously developed throughout the Sixth Dynasty.<sup>12</sup> The inner rooms within the mass of the superstructure are concentrated in the mastaba's south half. Only the chapel (Room V) and the shaft to the burial chamber extend to the north half. Five roofed rooms are arranged in the shape of "L" surrounding the open courtyard from the south and the west. The first tomb with this specific layout was that of Ptahshepses Junior II at Abusir.<sup>13</sup>

The inner rooms of the superstructure are divided into three parts – the outer section (Rooms I, II & III) and the inner section (Rooms IV & V)<sup>14</sup> separated by the open courtyard (a stand-alone entity).

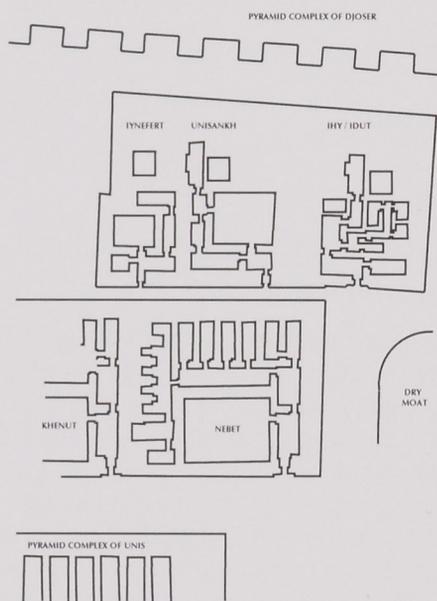


Fig. 1: Unis Cemetery NW (after Munro 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003: 33–74.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Marcamallah, 1935.

<sup>11</sup> For a contrary opinion cf. Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003: 13.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bárta, 2005: 105–125.

<sup>13</sup> Bárta, 2000: 45–66.

<sup>14</sup> The inner section of the tomb is identical with the part now in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, IL, Inv. No. A 24448.

A very special feature of the Tomb is an opening (height: 1.04 m, width 0.53 m) connecting Rooms III and IV, i.e. the outer and the inner sections of the Tomb. In Unis Cemetery NW, a similar opening can be found only in the tomb of the vizier Nyankhba, located to the south-east of the Tomb in *Line C*.<sup>15</sup> The opening was equipped with a door and was used for moving things like offerings and cultic inventory into the inner section.

The superstructure of the Tomb was built of limestone originating in the quarries of Maasara (located in the neighborhood of the modern cement factory close to Helwan) on the opposite bank of the Nile.<sup>16</sup>

### Room I

The Tomb is entered from the south through a short narrow corridor (EW: 1.02 m, NS: 1.28 m) leading to the entrance vestibule (Room I; *in situ* at Saqqara; 3.16 m, 2.10 m). The room must have been the most frequented place in the entire tomb. It principally served as a communication space connecting the exterior with the open courtyard and Room II. The walls of the room are badly damaged. They retain only the lower courses of masonry largely below the lower limit of the relief decoration.

The lower limit of the relief decoration in the Tomb varies between 1.50 and 1.65 m. The scenes on the north and south walls were dominated by a standing figure of the Tomb Owner “[inspecting the gifts brought for him from his houses and estates in (?) Lower and Upper Egypt by servants of *ka*” (... *mḥw šmꜥw jn ḥm(w)-k3*) and “[belonging to] funerary foundations” (... *pr-dt*), respectively. On the west wall, a seated figure of the Tomb Owner “[inspecting the gifts] during every feast, every day, for ever” (... *ḥb nb rꜥ nb dt*) is placed above the door leading to Room II. One of the offering bearers striding towards the Tomb Owner “brings a young *oryx* antelope” (*šhpt rn m3-ḥd*). The decoration of the east wall is not preserved at all.

Room I is the only place in the Tomb where names of the Tomb Owner’s attendants occur: Ankh (*ꜥnh*),<sup>17</sup> servant of *ka* Mereri (*ḥm-k3 Mrrj*)<sup>18</sup> and Khentyseshemnefer (*Hntj-ššm-nfr*)<sup>19</sup>, whose name appears twice. All these inscriptions represent later additions to the original relief decoration.

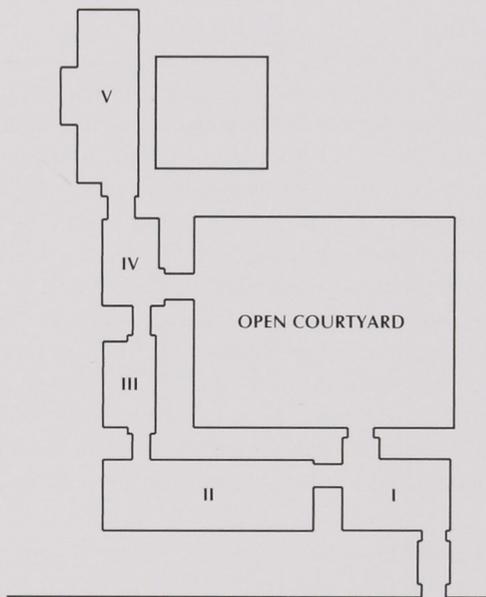


Fig. 2: Tomb of Unisankh (Illustration by Pavel Onderka)

<sup>15</sup> Hassan, 1975: 41–48.

<sup>16</sup> I am much indebted for this information to Ass. Prof. Dr. Jaromír Leichmann of the Masaryk University in Brno, who carried out analyses of samples provided by the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, IL.

<sup>17</sup> Ranke, 1935: 62.19.

<sup>18</sup> Ranke, 1935: 162.22.

## Room II

Room II (*in situ* at Saqqara; 2.10 m, 6.15 m) is accessible from Room I through the door in the east wall. Another door leading to Room III is set in the west part of the north wall. Judging from the decoration of the west and east walls (see below), the room might have served as a storage-room (rather an expositional than factual one).

The topics of the decoration on the opposite walls of this room correspond to each other. The scenes on the north and south walls depict the Tomb Owner “inspecting cattle within the gifts which are brought for him from his estates in Lower and Upper Egypt” (*m33 jw3 n ndt-hr jnw n=f m njwwt=f nt mhꜣw šmꜣw*) and “inspecting cattle within the gifts of the first year” (*m33 jw3 n ndt-hr nt rnpt tpt*), respectively. On the south wall, the Tomb Owner is depicted standing. On the north wall, the figure of the Tomb Owner is placed above the door and he is thus depicted seated (on a chair with lion’s legs as elsewhere in the Tomb). The bearers striding towards the Tomb Owner “bring cattle” (*šhꜣt jw3*) and are organized into three registers. Scribes presenting scrolls and drawing up records stand at their head. The decoration of the north wall also includes depictions of a lame herdsman and a bearer bringing a “fat calf” (*hrj dbꜣ*). Vessels for seven sacred oils and chests with their content being shown above them (necklaces and again vessel for seven sacred oils) are depicted in three registers on the west and east walls.

## Room III

Room III (*in situ* at Saqqara; 1.54 m, 2.72 m) is entered from Room II. It is the only undecorated roofed room and served as a proper storage area. The above-mentioned opening connecting the outer and the inner section of the tomb is set in the north wall of Room III.

## Room IV

The chapel vestibule (Room IV; FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448; 1.60 m, 2.60 m) is entered from the open courtyard and the opening that links it with Room III. It primarily served as a communication space, its purpose being similar to that of Room I. The door set in the north wall leads to the chapel (Room V).

The topics of scenes on the room’s west and the east walls are the same. The Tomb Owner “inspects all great annual gifts which are brought for him from (his) houses and (his) estates belonging to the funerary foundation in Lower and Upper Egypt” (*m33 ndt-hr rnpt nb(t) nfr jnnt n=f m hwt(=f) njwwt(=f) nt pr-dt m mhꜣw šmꜣw*). In front of the figure of the Tomb Owner, four registers show bearers carrying gifts and coming either on foot or on skiffs. The version on the west wall is more complete since the door from the open courtyard is set to the east wall. There is one man among the sailors on the west wall most probably depicted with symptoms of a disease (e.g. *Stirnrose*).<sup>20</sup> A scene of bringing the scroll for inspection (*djt sš r m33*) – which also appears in large numbers in Room II – is shown at the head of the lowermost register of the same wall.<sup>21</sup> The scene on the north wall showing “inspection of all great annual gifts which are brought from Lower and

<sup>19</sup> Ranke, 1935 does not list the name.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Altenmüller, 1998: 140, Sc. 25.1.1.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Der Manuelian, 1996.

Upper Egypt (*m33 nḏt-ḥr rnpt nbt nfrt jnnt nt m mhꜣw šmꜣw*) represents an adaptation of the scenes on the west and east walls. Due to the door set in the wall, the Tomb Owner is depicted seated facing three rows of offering bearers coming on foot. A special feature of this wall's decoration is a scene of a bearer bringing a young *oryx* antelope placed next to the door. One finds the identical scene in the lowermost register on the south wall. The decoration of the south wall depicts bearers "bringing every good thing during festivals" (*šḥpt ḥt nb(t) nfrt m ḥbw*) including "young oxen" (*rn jw3*). One of the bearers at the end of a register is not executed in relief but painted only, since the door when open, would conceal him. The opening in the south wall does not interfere with the decoration.

## Room V

Room V (FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448, 1.80 m, 5.45 m) is entered from the south through the chapel vestibule (Room IV). It is a corridor plus niche chapel. The false door is transferred to a niche situated in the very middle of the west wall.<sup>22</sup> The walls of the niche are decorated with depictions of vessels with seven sacred oils accompanied by their names (*stj-ḥb* – "festival fragrance", *ḥknw* – "hekenu oil", *sft* – "cedar oil", *ny ḥnm* – "ny khnum unguent", *tw3wt* – "tuaut unguent", *ḥ3tt ʿš* – "the best pine/cedar oil", *ḥ3tt nt ṯḥnw* "the best Libyan oil").

The reliefs at the sides of the false door niche portray a typical west wall subject – the Tomb Owner seated in front of an offering-table and a pile of offerings. The scenes are supplemented by offering lists with 90 items (15 columns, six lines).<sup>23</sup> The two versions of the scene on the two segments of the west wall differ in numerous details. The most important differences follow: On the south segment, the Tomb Owner stretches his hands towards the offering table, however, on the north segment, the Tomb Owner's right hand is balled into a fist and he holds it on his chest.<sup>24</sup> The southern offering-table is loaded with

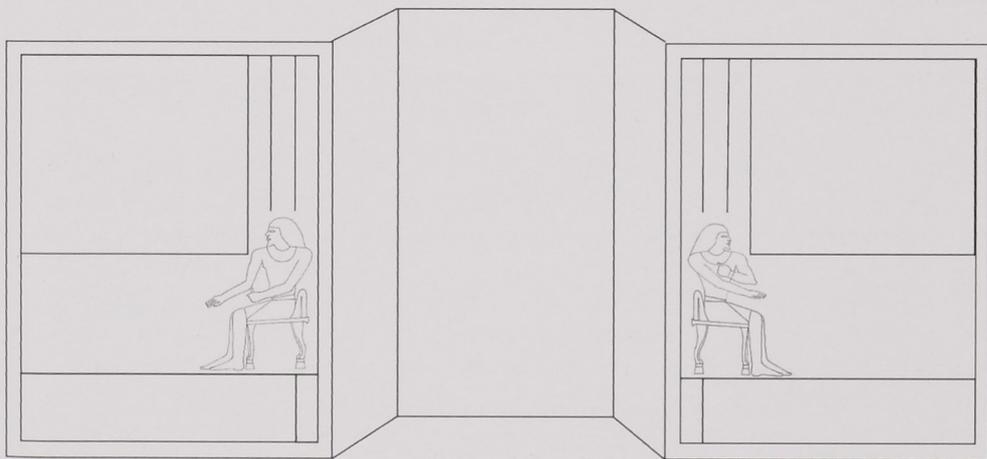


Fig. 3: Room V, Sketch of the west wall (Illustration by Pavel Onderka & Jana Jiroušková)

<sup>22</sup> Harpur, 1987: 95.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Barta 1963.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Simpson, 1976: Fig. 40.

papyrus reeds, whilst the northern one is loaded with slices of bread. The texts above the figure of the Tomb Owner (mentioning his titles and epithets) differ in some details, as do the items in the offering lists and the texts on the opposite jambs of the false door. Below this scene is a register with bearers “bringing the choicest meat” (*shpt stpwt*) – carrying legs of oxen and whole poultry.

This lowermost register of the west wall corresponds with the butchery cycle scenes depicted in the lowermost registers on the east and north walls. Depictions of men working on animals are accompanied by texts – either direct speech or brief captions (*jm h3ty pn* – “Take this heart!”, *rdj jw(t)* – “Brining.”, *pdt ds* – “Sharpening the knife.”, *šdt* – “Cutting out.”, *rdj(t) jw(t) jwf* – “Bringing the meat.”, (*jt r*)*k* – “Pull, then!”, ... *n pr-dt* – “... of the funerary foundation.”, *pdt ds* – “Sharpening the knife.”, *f3g* – “Cutting off.”, *rdj(t) jw(t) jwf n h3t* – “Bringing the fillet.”). The decoration of the east and north walls are divided into six registers, the lowermost being that with the butchery cycle scenes. The following two are filled with bearers carrying different gifts. The three upper registers are smaller in their height and are decorated with depictions of foodstuffs. The decoration does not fill the entire length of the wall. The part that would have been concealed when the door was open was left undecorated. The decoration of the south wall follows the concept of the east and north walls, being only altered by the presence of the door.

## False Door

The false door is also made of Maasara limestone and its surface is painted red imitating the Aswan red granite. The false door belongs to Wiebach’s type VI-3.<sup>25</sup> It is surrounded



Fig. 4: Room V, the false door – upper part (FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448; Photograph by Jen-Yu Wang)

<sup>25</sup> Wiebach, 1981: Tf. II.

by a torus and topped by a cornice. The texts inscribed on the architrave, the panel, and the lintel are concluded with the Tomb Owner's name and his seated representation. Each jamb includes one column of text concluded again with the Tomb Owner's name and his standing representation.

## Open Courtyard

Open courtyard takes up a considerable part of the Tomb's superstructure and represents its stand-alone section. Open courtyards were introduced into the non-royal architecture in the reign of Nyuserre. In some Sixth Dynasty tombs they were substituted by pillared-halls that fulfilled the same function. An open courtyard was the place where important ceremonies in honor of the tomb owner took place.<sup>26</sup> An offering altar was placed in the north of the open courtyard.

## Burial Chamber

The shaft to the burial chamber is located to the north of the open courtyard and to the east of the chapel (Room V) in the north half of the mastaba's mass. It descends to the burial chamber and is aligned true north-south. The burial chamber was probably very similar to that of the vizier Ihy. Its walls were decorated with colored painting on a layer of gypsum plaster.<sup>27</sup>

## Tomb Owner

The basileophoric male proper name Unisankh (*Wnjs-ḥw*) or Ankh-Unis (*ḥw-Wnjs*)<sup>28</sup> had been in use from the early reign of Unis onwards (the royal name serving as a *terminus post quem*) till the very end of the Old Kingdom and possibly even during the First Intermediate Period.<sup>29</sup> The attestations of the name come from the capital, the provinces, and even outside of proper Egypt. The Tomb Owner is most likely the first bearer of the name. However, this had not been his original name. He must have changed it from another, likely on the occasion of Unis' ascent on the throne or soon thereafter.

The Tomb Owner held nine titles altogether: *the King's son* (*s3 nswt*), *sole companion* (*smr wḥty*), *overseer of Upper Egypt* (*jmy r3 smḥw*), *property administrator of the King* (*tpy hrt nswt*), *staff of the rekhyt people* (*mdw rhyt*), *support of the kenemut people* (*jwn knmwt*), *priest of Maat* (*hm ntr M3ḥt*), *overseer of a (law) court* (*jmy-r3 hwt wrt*) and *privy to the secrets* (*hry sḥt3*). The sequence of titles corresponds to Baer's period VC, i.e. late Djedkare Isesi to early Unis.<sup>30</sup>

Three groups of the titles might be distinguished: The core titles – *the King's son*, *overseer of Upper Egypt* and *property administrator of the King* – appear in all the decorated rooms. A group of five titles – *staff of the rekhyt people*, *support of the kenemut people*, *overseer of a (law) court* and *privy to the secrets* – is attested only in Room IV. Two titles – *sole companion* and *priest of Maat* – are attested only from the false door. Two

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bárta, 2005: 107.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003: 62–64; Pl. 51, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ranke, 1935: 63.8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Abu Bakr – Osing, 1973: 112.

<sup>30</sup> Baer, 1960: 66–67, 289, No. 112.

representations of the goddess Maat within the title are the only female elements in the decoration of the Tomb.

The most frequently presented title is *overseer of Upper Egypt*. It always accompanies the name of the Tomb Owner when given. The absence of the title the King's son in the sequence on the panel of the false door points to the fictiveness of the Tomb Owner's royal parentage.<sup>31</sup> The titles *overseer of Upper Egypt* and *overseer of a (law) court* indicate that Tomb Owner was expected to become a vizier. The position of the Tomb between the tombs of the vizier Ihy and the vizier Iyefert convincingly confirms this assumption. The Tomb Owner died at the age of 30 to 35<sup>32</sup> before attaining this highest office. The title *the King's son* points to a very special position the Tomb Owner enjoyed and which may support the possibility that he (together with the vizier Ihy) was the new king's fellow, installed to the highest position of administration at his ascent on the throne.

Epithets are arranged in a similar way as the titles in the inscriptions from the Tomb: possessor of reverence (*nb jm3hw*)/revered (*jm3hw*) before (*hr*) the great god (*ntr ʿ3*); the King (*nswt*); Anubis (*Jnpw*), who is upon his mountain (*tpy dw=f*), who is in the wet (*imy wt*), lord of the sacred land (*nb t3 dsr*); Osiris (*Wsjr*); and the western desert (*smjt jmntt*). Epithets appear exclusively in the inner section of the Tomb. They follow titles in the chapel vestibule (Room IV) and precede them in the chapel (Room V). The Tomb Owner's epithet *nb jm3hw hr nswt* is not listed by Jones.<sup>33</sup>

## Dating<sup>34</sup>

Based on titles, the Tomb is dated to Baer's period VC (between Year 16 of Djedkare Isesi to Year 10 of Unis), the same period as the neighboring tomb of the vizier Ihy.<sup>35</sup> Strudwick<sup>36</sup> is evidently inaccurate in establishing the sequence and dating of the tombs in the Unis Cemetery NW. Kanawati and Abder-Raziq suggest the early to middle reign of Unis<sup>37</sup> for Iyefert and the late reign of Unis for Ihy<sup>38</sup> following the reversed progress of *Line A*. While the dating of Iyefert is acceptable, Ihy must have constructed his tomb in the early reign of Unis.

Since the Tomb Owner's suggested age at death equals or minimally exceeds the length of the reign of Unis, the Tomb Owner must have been born under Djedkare Isesi, likely in the first half of his reign. A sudden death in *pre-maturus* age is supported by the low quality with which the relief decoration was finished. Only parts of the decoration (mainly in Room IV) are executed in high relief, the majority being in low relief. The Tomb Owner was buried in the early reign (i.e. the first decade) of Unis' after only a couple of years of service to the King.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Strudwick, 1985: 71–72, No. 62; cf. Schmitz, 1976.

<sup>32</sup> I am much indebted for this information to Prof. Eugen Strouhal of the First Medical Faculty, Charles University in Prague, who examined the human remains found in the burial chamber of the Tomb by the Australian team.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> For the chronology of the Fifth Dynasty cf. von Beckerath, 1997: 153–155; Verner, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Baer, 1960: 232.

<sup>36</sup> Strudwick, 1985.

<sup>37</sup> Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003 13.

<sup>38</sup> Kanawati – Abder-Raziq, 2003 37.

## Conclusion

The Tomb Owner was a high official serving Unis, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty. He died early in the king's reign at the age of 30–35, before reaching the climax of his career. The highest office he attained was that of *overseer of Upper Egypt*. His title *the King's son* was of a titular or fictive character.

Unisankh was buried in a large, multi-roomed, non-royal tomb mastaba constructed of Maasara limestone blocks in the Unis Cemetery NW. Its superstructure includes five roofed rooms, four of them being decorated mostly in low relief, and an open courtyard.

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### **Abbreviations:**

Ä&L	Ägypten und Levante
ACER	Australian Center for Egyptology Reports
ArOr	Archív Orientální
ASAE	Annales du Service des Antiquités Égyptiennes
HÄS	Hamburger Ägyptologische Studien
MÄS	Münchener Ägyptologische Studien
MDAIK	Mitteilungen des Deutschen Ägyptologischen Instituts in Kairo



Fig. 5: Unis Cemetery NW from the west (Photograph by Pavel Onderka)



Fig. 6: Unis Cemetery NW from the east (Photograph by Pavel Onderka)



Fig. 7: Room IV, west wall: presenting the Scroll (FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448; Photograph by Jen-Yu Wang)



Fig. 8: Room V, west wall – south: the Tomb Owner (FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448; Photograph by Jen-Yu Wang)



Fig. 9: Room V, east wall: butchery cycle scene (FMNH, Inv. No. A 24448; Photograph by Jen-Yu Wang)