

A Chronological Study of the False Door Concept

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Abstract

In Ancient Egypt, the false door was thought to be a threshold between the world of mortals and that of deities; where spirits lived. The deity could interact with the world of the living either by passing through the false door or receiving offerings through. False doors are often one of the striking elements within tomb complexes; they were usually located on the western wall of the chapel's offering room; known as an offering chamber. This was usually the rear wall of the chapel or the mortuary temple. False door was frequently of limestone; however, ones of the elite with close connections to the king were of pink granite. Sometimes pink granite was imitated by painting a limestone false-door stela a mottled pink. This paper aims to discussing the non-royal false door concept, and compares its role from the old Kingdom and till the end of the New Kingdom. It analyzes three non-royal false doors; chronologically dating from the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom.

Keywords: False door, Non-royal, Limestone, Pink granite, Chapel, Mortuary temple

Introduction

False door is one of the common elements within Egyptian tomb complexes. Moreover, it is one of the chief architectural features.¹ In ancient Egyptian language, the false door was termed "*r-pr*" and "*rwt*"², *r*  refers to an opening³, and *pr*  refers to the house. However, the whole name "*r-pr*" , refers to the false door.⁴ the second name "*rwt*"  means false door,⁵ or gate,⁶ perhaps to indicate the false door was the deceased's gate to the underworld. Moreover, it was termed "*K 3* door",⁷ because the "*Ka*" or the deceased's spirit was believed to have the ability to pass through. Therefore, it was the link between the living world and the netherworld for the deceased's *ka* to obtain offering.

The living was convinced he could communicate with the deceased's *ka* through the false door.⁸ The deceased was presumed to move upwards and emerge through.⁹ The false door was typically occupying the west wall of the tomb's main room, known as the offering chamber. Many typological changes affected the false door; the chief elements were nearly always present. The real door is in the center, with a drum, imitating a rolled-up reed mat; above the opening; a panel above the door with a depiction of the deceased seated at a well-supplied offering table, and a single or several sets of doorjambs inscribed with offering formulae, besides, the names and titles of the deceased.¹⁰

Below these inscriptions; there is usually a standing representation of the tomb owner. He often holds a staff, a scepter, and dressed in clothes express his status in life.¹¹ On many false-door stelae, a so-called torus molding; a rounded edge imitating a bundle of reeds tied together with ropes, is added around the door's frame, and above; is the hollow cavetto cornice decorated with stylized palm leaves.¹²

The role of the false door

The false door had two major religious roles; to connect the deceased's spirit to interact with the living world, and to receive offerings.¹³ Offerings were deposited before the false door; a water basin and offering tables were put before the equipment to perform an offering ritual.¹⁴

An inscribed gravestone stele was located in the non-royal tombs from the Early Dynastic Period as an offering stele. By the Old Kingdom, this stone stele had been developed into a form of a false door.¹⁵ This false door stele indicates how the Ancient Egyptian regarded the relationship between the living creatures and the dead, and the physical requirements for each.¹⁶ The spiritual entities needed physical prompts to interact with the living world, while the livings needed places for this interaction.¹⁷ Due to this concept, the dead and the living creatures communicate with each other through funerary practices and texts,¹⁸ where rituals were performed, to enable the deceased partaking the set on the offering table.¹⁹

The offering formula

The principal element of the false door was the offering formula inscribed on its lintel; God Anubis was invoked in the offering formulae inscribed in the oldest mastabas:²⁰  Htp di nswt inpw nb tA Dsr : 'An offering that the king gives, and Anubis Lord of sacred land'.²¹ The name of God Osiris does not occur in the offering formulae until the late fourth Dynasty,²² or the beginning of the Fifth.²³

The earliest false doors were mostly without the cavetto cornice, and the Torus moulding.³³ The Presence or absence of those two features was the obvious dissimilarity between several false doors.³⁴ The fourth Dynasty false-door rose above the surface of the space, where it occurs like a separate stone set in the structure.³⁵ Using unequal length jambs with variant sized figures of the deceased began during this Dynasty, and continued at least to the middle of the fifth.³⁶ At that time, the cornice and torus moulding began to appear on the highest officials doors. These led to the development of even long inscriptions and small figures of the deceased on jambs.³⁷ This latter feature is sometimes found later in the fifth dynasty with neither the cornice nor the torus.³⁸ During the Sixth Dynasty, the false door show changes from the above form: Two or three jambs are used, but they tend to be narrow with only one column of inscription with a similar disposition of texts and equal figures of the deceased.³⁹ A false door set within a recess in the west wall is a monolithic limestone door with a torus moulding, and surmounted by a cavetto cornice. Towards the end of the Old Kingdom; this was the standard type for false doors,⁴⁰ this trend is towards a simplification form of the door.⁴¹ Another renovation at the end of the sixth dynasty was the appearance of the " *wꜥꜣ.t*" eyes" on the decorated false doors.⁴²

False door of the scribe Redines;⁴³ according to Brunner and Wreszinski; it is dated to the fifth dynasty, while most studies dated it to the sixth dynasty.⁴⁴ It was part of his mastaba on the western side of the Great Pyramid at Giza.⁴⁵ This was among the excavations held by the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, and shipped to Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on 1921⁴⁶.



Fig.(3)False Door of Redi-nes, and Texts on the left Jamb: Der Manuelian.P(1994),The Giza Mastaba Niche and full frontal figure of Redi-nes in the Museum of fine arts, Boston ,SAOC(55), The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago,p.61-p.63.

The false door was discovered at the far end of the tomb's western wall.⁴⁷ Picking this limestone false door as a case study of the Old Kingdom, is due to its rare representation of the tomb-owner scribe and royal –priest in a full frontal pose. Besides, the unusual feet which splayed outward in the door's central niche. It was carved in sunken-relief, its unique frontal pose creates a more direct confront with the viewer, where the tomb owner emerges from the land of the dead and accessing the land of the living.⁴⁸ According to Smith; this frontal figure represents an imitation of the false doors which have a statue standing in the inner niche, as though issuing from the tomb.⁴⁹ While Schäfer noted this frontal figure serve as a substitute for a semi-sculpture.

On the top of the door, a scene showing the scribe Rediness seated before a table of fourteen offering loaves, below the table are listed offerings signs for bulls, fowel, geese and oryxes.

The left jamb inscriptions:



*sš Rdi-ns ḏd.f n zp ir. (i) ht ḏw [r] rmt.t
ir.ty.sn ht r nw wn.<f> nḏ(.w) m-'.sn*

“Scribe Rediness says: Never did I do any evil thing against people, those who will do something against this, it shall be protected from them.”⁵⁰

The right jamb inscriptions:



*sš Rdi-ns¹¹ ḏd.f ir.n. (i) nwy(j)
m išt. (i) m?'
in ntr wḏ'f mdw. (i) hnt' ir.t (y) f(y) ht r.s*

“Scribe Rediness says I have constructed my tomb by my own means, it is the God who will judge who does anything against it”.⁵¹



The lintel inscriptions:

imšhw hr ntr '3 w'b nswt sš Rdi-ns

”The revered one before the great God, the royal priest Rediness.

The exterior of the niche, left thickness texts:



*hṗ dī nswt inpw nb t3 dsr l.hp.f
hr w3(t) nfrt i3w nfr imšhw hr ntr sš Rdi-ns*

”A gift which the King and Anubis Lord of the sacred land give, that he might travel upon the beautiful way, having attained a ripe old age, one revered before the God, scribe Rediness”.⁵²

The exterior of the niche, right thickness texts:



hṗ dī nswt inpw qrs m hrt-ntr nb imšh hr ntr '3 nb st imutt sš Rdi-ns

“A gift which the King and Anubis give, a burial in the necropolis, a possessor of veneration, before the great God, Lord of western desert. The scribe Rediness”⁵³.

The two jamb’s inscriptions show how the scribe Rediness was keen to protect his tomb from any evil, while the niche’s exteriors were devoted to offering formula.

False door aspects during the Middle Kingdom

From the early Middle Kingdom, false door was mainly of an offering stela,⁵⁴ which was mostly decorated with the *wḏ3.t* “eyes,  of God Horus.⁵⁵ The eyes’ main purpose was to enable the deceased to look out of the spirit-world into the tomb-chapels to see visitors of the tomb,⁵⁶ and to witness the progress of funerary services performed.⁵⁷

During the Middle Kingdom, tomb chapels can have more than one false door for the deceased. This period’s false doors were of identical design and had distinctive stylistic features; like the identification of the deceased with God Osiris,⁵⁸ the two *wḏ3.t* “eyes on the lintel, and the unusual tall palm leaves on top of the torus molding. In addition, they were characterized by depicting some alabaster jars ,⁵⁹ with sacred oils on the inner jambs,⁶⁰ and the representation of the two forked legs supporting the offering table. Some false doors did not follow the Old Kingdom regulation for the west location in the tomb chapel, they were located on non-west walls.

The false door of “Ankhef”, commander and overseer of the fields, stored in Cairo Museum, will be the case study for Middle Kingdom.

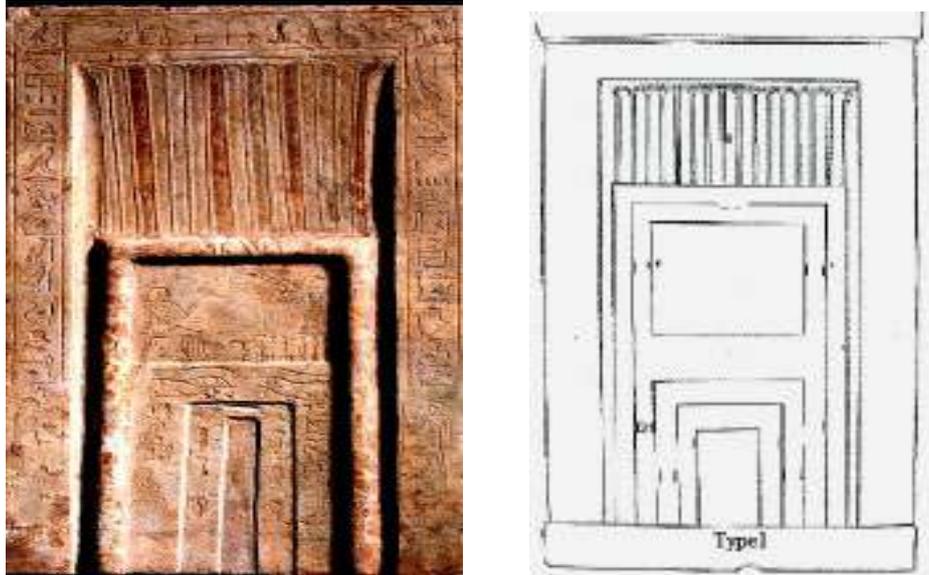


Fig. (4)The False door of“Ankhef”: Jacobus.V.D. (2006) "False-door stela of Ankhef," in *Objects for Eternity: Egyptian Antiquities from the W. Arnold Meijer Collection*, p.42

The False door stelae of “Ankhef” from the cemetery at Ehnasya el-Medina,⁶¹ is one of twenty excavated false doors.⁶² This cemetery false doors were attached to the funerary chambers’ western wall, forming part of a small independent chapel.⁶³ Pérez Die in his research divided the twenty false doors to four types; “Ankhef” false door was classified to one type shown above, this was characterized by its simplicity. However, the other three types are of different; torus molding height, number of jambs, and the dimension of the central niche.

The false door is completely framed by an inscription band; starts in the upper center, and then divides into two symmetrically arranged texts, each containing an offering formula.⁶⁴ The central panel was displayed by the usual funerary meal scene, decorated with a seated figure of the deceased, putting his left arm on his chest, and the right arm is extended towards an offering table.⁶⁵ The” *wḏ3.t*”eyes “are carved on the cross bar above the central niche, through which the deceased looks out to within the world of the living.⁶⁶ The inner jambs are carved by six alabaster vessels containing the seven sacred oils, the outer jambs show the deceased seated on the left facing his wife who smells a lotus on the right.⁶⁷ Traces of paints are still visible on the cornice leaves.⁶⁸



The upper central frame shows the offering formula, divided to two section; the one on the right shows the offering formula dedicated to God Anubis, while the one on the left is dedicated to God Osiris.

False door aspects during the New Kingdom

During the new kingdom, false door was rarely located in the tomb-chapel, and was preferably placed on one of the two side-walls of the transverse hall, most frequently by the left southern one.⁶⁹ The 18th Dynasty invention was the decoration of the false door stela with religious symbols,⁷⁰ the most common symbol: the “*šn*”: symbol of eternity, between the two “*wḏ3.t*”eyes.⁷¹

After the ‘Amarna period, the false door disappeared in Theban Necropolis, and a new form appeared. This is the false door stela,⁷² which was characterized with two representation fields; the tomb owner is in the upper field addresses the Gods, and the mortuary cult is represented in the lower field.⁷³ The main feature of the New Kingdom false doors was the inscribed text below the scene.

The False door stela of “Horemhat” is our case study for the New Kingdom false doors. The monumental object is among the collections of the Egyptian Museum of Turin. It is a limestone round-topped stela of the priest “*hr mh3t*” dating to the 18th Dynasty,⁷⁴ The lunette shows two “*wḏ3.t*”eyes flanking a “*šn*” ring. There are two registers; the upper shows pictorial depictions, while the lower is inscribed with horizontal Hieroglyphic texts.⁷⁵

It represents the priest seated, holding and smelling a lotus blossom ‘symbol of rebirth’. His brother “*mnw*” follows him while standing before two standing ladies; his wife who is pouring a libation with her right hand, and holding a cloth in her left, and her daughter is next to her.⁷⁶



Fig. (5) Stela of Hermhat, Satzinger.H,Stefanović.D.(2009),the Stela of Horemhat at Turin, CdE (134),p.89

Conclusion

In Ancient Egyptian thought, the false door was a main element to ensure and satisfy the deceased's needs deceased in the netherworld, to guarantee the same standard of life he once had during his life time. This element's significance in the tomb's western wall leads to the conclusion that any change on the false door was due to a change in the interpretation of its cultic meaning, or due to architectural considerations. The table below shows the main concept of the false door did not change, while other features did.

	Old Kingdom	Middle Kingdom	New Kingdom
The concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The gate between the living world and the underworld. - The spot where the deceased could come forth to receive offerings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering stele. - Identification of the tomb owner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering stele.
The offering formula	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The most important feature of the door, re- presented on the door panel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The offering formula was inscribed on the false doors jambs and panel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First line of the text, below the figures.
The design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Palace Façade. - Normal decorated door. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Framed by an inscription band, starts in the upper center, and then divided into two symmetrically arranged texts, each containing an offering formula. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mostly round topped stele, where the scene is followed by the text lines.
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - West wall of the Tomb-Chapel in Mastaba Tombs. - West and non-west wall in cut-rock Tombs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - West and non-west wall. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - West and non-west wall.
The Decoration features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A monolith form, absence and presence of the cavetto cornice and the Torus molding was the main difference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The <i>Udjat</i> eyes on the cross bar. - The seven sacred oils. - Smelling a blossom of Lotus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The <i>Shen</i> symbol between the <i>Udjat</i> eyes on the cross bar. - Separating the text from the figures.

Although the motifs on the false doors were mainly identical; the inscriptions on the false doors and their location were varied during different phases. The variations may suggest false doors -in private tombs- have aspects rather than a religious purpose. Some studies suggested; if the false door had a non-religious function, it will be in twofold: social status symbol, or a grave marker. Moreover, the equipping of rock-cut tombs in the provinces with more than one decorated false door demonstrated the tomb owners' fortune, social status, and his post in the social administration. Therefore, the deceased's name and titles were essential in false door's decoration.

Other theories suggested the false doors were mainly of religious function. This is due to the offering formula dedicated to the Gods, and the religious symbols related to the offering rituals, such as the two “*wḏḏ.t*” eyes, the “*šn*” ring, the seven sacred oil, and the smelling lotus scenes employed to decorate the false doors.

As a conclusion, false doors had a religious and a non-religious function as well. Religious function to emphasize the importance of the deceased name as commemorative, and non-religious to keep a connection through this door between the living world and the netherworld.

Endnotes

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دراسة لتطور مفهوم الباب الوهمي

يعد الباب الوهمي من العناصر الرئيسية التي حرص المصري القديم على توافرها بمقبرته، حيث يعد الباب الوهمي بمثابة البوابة التي يمر منها المتوفى من عالم الأحياء إلى عالم الموتى؛ كذلك كانت القرابين تقدم لروح المتوفى عبر هذا الباب. تعرض الورقة البحثية لدراسة تاريخية لمفهوم الباب الوهمي، تطور استخدامه وعناصره المعمارية عبر العصور الفرعونية بداية بعصر الدولة القديمة وحتى عصر الدولة الحديثة، من خلال تناول ثلاث أبواب وهمية (غير ملكية) بالدراسة. يرجع الأول لعصر الدولة القديمة وهو خاص بالمدعو "ردينس"، يرجع الثاني لعصر الدولة الوسطى وهو خاص بالمدعو "انخف"، بينما يرجع الثالث لعصر الدولة الحديثة وهو خاص بالمدعو "حورمحات". تنتهي الورقة البحثية بخاتمة تعرض لأهم السمات التي ميزت الباب الوهمي عبر العصور المختلفة. كما تعرض جدولاً يوضح مقارنة بين الأبواب الوهمية الثلاث موضوع البحث، من حيث شكل الباب ومكانه بالمقبرة، سبب استخدامه، والنقوش الخاصة به من حيث صيغة تقديم القرابين وسماته الفنية الأخرى.

الكلمات الدالة: باب وهمي، حجر جيري، جرانيت وودي، مقصورة، معبد جنازى