The Book of the Dead in Djehuty’s burial chamber

A Spanish-Egyptian mission has been working in the central area of Dra Abu el-Naga since January 2002 (see EA 25, pp.38-40 and EA 35, pp.32-35). José M Galán reports on the recently discovered painted burial chamber of the tomb-chapel of Djehuty (TT 11).

The tomb-chapel of Djehuty, Overseer of the Treasury and Overseer of Works under the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III, is located in the central area of Dra Abu el-Naga, at the northern end of the Theban necropolis. When a Spanish-Egyptian mission started working there in January 2002 the inverted T-shape funerary chapel was cleared only as far as half-way along the central corridor. The innermost room was filled almost to the top with debris that had fallen through two large holes in the ceiling, connecting with two tomb-chapels hewn into the hillside less than a metre above Djehuty’s, at the second level of tomb-chapels.

In 2007 we were finally able to excavate the innermost room, which is decorated in high quality raised relief displaying the most significant moments of Djehuty’s ideal funerary rituals. The right side is entirely occupied by a funerary shaft which descends vertically 8.15m to a broad chamber which was filled with debris up to 1m high. The walls are well cut, although not smooth, and most of the surface has been blackened by smoke from one or more extensive fires lit inside, probably before or during the Twenty-First Dynasty. At the rear end there is a second shaft, 3m deep with well-cut walls, which show no signs of fire. It had about 1m of debris at the bottom, and, contrary to what would have been expected considering that the chamber had been reused at least in the Twenty-first Dynasty and that it was cleared at the end of the campaign sponsored by the Marquis of Northampton (January 1899), seven gold earrings of early Eighteenth Dynasty style were found, together with six spacers of a girdle (four carnelian, one turquoise and one made of gold).

At the southern shorter side there is an entrance to a second chamber measuring 3.65m x 3.50m x 1.55m. It was originally designed to be smaller, 2.70m x 2.60m, with the entrance centred in the north wall, but at some point the rear/south wall and the left/east wall were pushed back almost 1m. The stonemasons never finished the extension, leaving the surface of the two new walls rough, a pile of small limestone chips in the corner, and two pots with mortar lying on the floor. The other two walls, the west and the north, which were part of the first design, as well as the original area of the ceiling, remained untouched, coated with a layer of mortar and a layer of gypsum stucco, and totally covered with passages from the Book of the Dead.

The text is written in cursive hieroglyphs, in columns from left to right and following a retrograde direction. The composition began at the eastern and southern walls, but this first section was completely destroyed when the extension started to be cut, so the preserved text starts from the left end of the west wall, continues on to the north wall, and finally jumps up to the ceiling. The first set of preserved chapters consists of the so-called ‘transformation spells’, BD 78-86-81A-88-87, which are accompanied by vignettes. They are followed by chapters referring to Djehuty’s aspirations to join the solar barque on its journey, with the last one, BD 102, including a vignette showing Djehuty already on board the barque and standing behind the falcon-headed sun god.
Eighteen parts of Djehuty’s body listed in BD 42, written on the ceiling.

The burial chamber of Djehuty as found in 2009.
BD 102 vignette, showing Djehuty on the solar barque behind the falcon-headed god, Re-Horakhty

Above and below: vignettes accompanying the ‘transformation spells’ of BD 86–81A–88–87

The night sky goddess Nut represented in the centre of the ceiling

Layer of stucco pushed out from the wall’s surface by the limestone salts
Chapter BD 149, the list of the fourteen mounds of the Netherworld, is written in the lower register of the walls to be spatially closer to the underworld, revealing a meaningful location for at least some of the chapters, an intention that can also be appreciated on the ceiling. The original area of the ceiling was divided into five registers. After BD 42, which includes the division of the body into eighteen parts from top to bottom, come the chapters concerning the ‘knowing the souls/powers’ of the holy towns of Hermopolis, Pe and Nekhen, and the Westerners and Easterners in the sky (BD 114-112-113-108-109). Following them is BD 125, in which the deceased enters the Hall of Justice. BD 125 tends to be written towards the end on papyri, while here it occupies the most important spot in the chamber, the middle register of the ceiling, on both sides of the large size central figure of the goddess Nut. As far as we can tell, the burial chamber of Djehuty is one of the earliest preserved compilations of the Book of the Dead that includes this chapter, which soon after would become very popular.

The figure of the night sky goddess Nut (see front cover), wearing a tight dark blue dress, takes up the very central part of the ceiling. She has her arms raised and stretched open in a protective pose, as if embracing Djehuty’s coffin and mummy lying beneath her. The texts at either side of her body express Djehuty’s wish that this situation will actually happen:

(A) Words spoken by the overseer of the Treasury of the King, Djehuty: ‘[Oh mother] Nut, spread yourself over me, may you place me among the imperishable stars which are in you, as I shall not die.

(B) Raise me up. I am your son. Remove the weariness from me. Protect me from he who shall act against me.

These two brief petitions are written on a yellow background and are not retrograde. In fact, they are not taken from the Book of the Dead (written here on a white background), but from formulae written on coffins, as is also the case for the embracing figure of Nut.

The number of scribal mistakes would indicate that the text was written in haste. The loose brush strokes with which the vignettes’ figures were depicted - the lack of detail, precision and later corrections - also indicate hasty work. Moreover, the extension of the burial chamber was left unfinished. Djehuty probably died between year 17 and year 20 of the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III, which makes his burial chamber one of the earliest Eighteenth Dynasty decorated burial chambers that has been preserved. It is probably dated a few years after Senenmut’s lower tomb (TT 353), but slightly before that of Amenemhat (TT 82), who seems to have been partly responsible for the text written in Useramun’s burial chamber (TT 131). Djehuty’s composition also predates that of Nakhtmin (TT 87) and Amenemhab called Mahu (TT 85).

The Book of the Dead of Djehuty (TT 11) preserves a total of thirty-six chapters and is one of the earliest long compilations of spells. Its significance is increased by its archaeological context, its three-dimensional display and its precise dating. Percy Newberry was inside the burial chamber for at least three days in February 1899, copying the text, according to his notebook now kept at the Griffith Institute, Oxford. Why he never published a word about it is an intriguing question.

Djehuty’s burial chamber, 12m below ground level, is very close to the water table. The high humidity inside (80% when we first came in, and 27°C) has caused the reactivation and migration of limestone salts to the surface of the walls, pushing out the layer of stucco in certain areas, particularly in the lower level of the walls. To maintain stable environmental conditions, the burial chamber is kept closed and it is opened only when a specific task needs to be conducted inside. Moreover, the ceiling has a serious structural problem with a large gap in its central area. Vibration, perhaps produced by human activity outside, in the area around the monument, or by an earthquake, is the main danger to the stability of the chamber’s structure. To prevent more of the ceiling from collapsing, an iron support has been set up inside the chamber.

Was Djehuty ever buried in his tomb? Unfortunately, it remains uncertain, since no object bearing his name has been found. The burial chamber contained no trace of a coffin, linen or funerary equipment, and there is no sign of robbers moving things around or fire having been lit. The early Eighteenth Dynasty material was found in the antechamber (painted pottery and fragments of a black coffin) and at the bottom of the second shaft (earrings and girdle spacers), indicating that if he was ever buried in his tomb he was probably deposited in the antechamber, where his burial was later looted and burned.

Carlos Cabrera.