

Egyptian elite tombs accessible for all

A number of elite tombs from Ancient Egypt are now accessible to all thanks to the launch of the Mastabase. The Mastabase is a CD-ROM containing descriptions and hieroglyphic inscriptions of scenes of daily life from 337 Mastaba tombs. This resource will make research into these elite tombs a lot easier. On 13 May 2008, Dutch Egyptologist René van Walsem will officially present the MastaBase in Leiden, Netherlands.

A Mastaba is an elite tomb from the Memphite area in Ancient Egypt (2600-2150 BC). The tombs contain scenes depicting daily life, often accompanied by inscriptions. Elite tombs are extremely complex works of art. They contain various main themes, which are further divided into sub-themes. Main themes are, for example, scenes depicting offerings, farming, fishing, et cetera. The theme fishing, for instance, can then be broken down into various sub-themes, such as fishing with a dragnet or seine, the transportation of fish and the processing of fish.

An in-depth analysis of the tombs can only be realised if use is made of all available published material on the tombs. This aim has been achieved through the creation of a digital archive for each of the 337 published elite tombs, the so-called Leids Mastaba Project (Leiden Mastaba Project). Part of the solution (created in Leiden) for this aim is based on the use of colour codes for the main themes. Abbreviations of the sub-themes are listed within the coloured fields of the main themes. Thus the thematic layout (dimension and place on the wall) can be seen at a glance. Comprehensive search options enable users to obtain a quick and efficient overview of these tombs.

MastaBase makes it easier to obtain answers to research questions, such as 'How often do offering scenes occur in the tombs?'. Obtaining an answer to this kind of question requires a comparison of different tombs. In total, 337 extremely detailed tombs have been published. A more abstract, simplified kind of research tool such as the MastaBase is very useful for conducting this kind of research. A quick answer to many different questions can be obtained, and time-consuming, haphazard ploughing through publications has become a thing of the past.

Source: Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research

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