



Sohag University



Journal of Abydos



Faculty of Archaeology

Issue No.6, (2024), pp. 27- 40

## An Unpublished Old Kingdom False Door of the Priestess of Hathor Nub-Hotep

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the textual inscriptions and the depiction of an unpublished false door of a lady who served as a priestess of Hathor in the funerary temple of King Unis in Saqqara. She is called Nub-Hotep, and her beautiful name is Bby. This false door was recovered by Zaki Saad during his excavations in the area between the causeway of the pyramid of Unis and the step pyramid in Saqqara between 1939 and 1940. It was found, among other finds, thrown out of its original place. The tomb could not be located. The false door is made out of fine limestone. It dates back to the Sixth Dynasty. It is now on display at the Kafr Elsheikh Local Museum. The false door herein described provides numerous administrative titles and funeral formulas, which sheds light on the status of the elite women who occupied important religious jobs during the late Old Kingdom.

**Keywords:** Old kingdom, false door, Offering Formula, Nub-Hotep, Khenu, Saqqara.




### المخلص:

تدرس هذه الورقة البحثية النصوص الكتابية والتصوير على باب وهمي غير منشور، يخص سيدة شغلت وظيفة كاهنة للمعبودة حتحور في معبد أوناس الجنائزي بسقارة. وتدعى هذه السيدة نوب – حتب، واسمها الجميل (المختصر) هو ببي. اكتشف هذا الباب الوهمي على يد زكي سعد خلال حفائره بالمنطقة الواقعة بين الطريق الصاعد لهرم أوناس والهرم المدرج بسقارة فيما بين عامي 1939 و1940. وتم العثور عليه ضمن

مكتشفات أخرى ملقاة خارج أماكنها الأصلية. ولا يمكن تحديد موقع المقبرة. الباب الوهمي مصنوع من الحجر الجيري الجيد. يعود تاريخه للأسرة السادسة. والباب الوهمي حالياً معروض بمتحف كفر الشيخ. وهذا الباب الوهمي يمدنا بألقاب إدارية وصيغ دينية تلقي الضوء على نموذج لسيدات الطبقة الأرستقراطية التي شغلت وظائف هامة خلال عصر الدولة القديمة.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الدولة القديمة، باب وهمي، صيغة القرابين، نوب حتب، خنو، سقارة

## Introduction:

The false door was a distinct feature found in ancient Egyptian private tombs, which started from the third Dynasty. Unlike real doors made of wood and reed matting, false doors were crafted from stone. They could be carved directly from the rock surface or constructed using a single stone slab or individual building blocks in separate chapels. While false doors could be made from different materials like wood, granite, and sandstone, limestone was the most commonly used.<sup>1</sup> The false door was referred to by two terms. The first was “*r-pr*” ,<sup>2</sup> while the second was “*rwt*” <sup>3</sup>. False door, together with funerary stelae and statues, depicted the Ka as an exact representation of the deceased person, capturing their gender and physical appearance accurately. The offering formula referred to the individual's image who received the boons as his Ka “*n.k3.n* + the individual's name”.<sup>4</sup> This structure functioned as a means of communication between the tomb owner and the living to make offerings. Additionally, it allows the deceased's Ka to access the tomb from the outdoor space in order to receive the offerings on his behalf. Moreover, the tomb structure is considered to be the house of the Ka <sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Wiebach, S., (2001). “False Door”, in Redford, D., (ed.), The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt, I, The Oxford University Press, Oxford : 498–501; Bárta, M., (2011). Journey to the West the world of the Old Kingdom in Ancient Egypt, Charles University in Prague, Prague: 85, 249; Anderson, J., (2000). “The Tomb owner at the offering table”, in Donovan, L. & Mc Corquodale, K. (eds), Egyptian art: principles and themes in wall scenes, Foreign Cultural Information Department, Guizeh: 129 – 130.

<sup>2</sup> Wb II, 397; Faulkner, R., (1991). A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian, The Oxford University Press, Oxford: 146; Haeny, G., “Scheintür”, LÄ V, 360.

<sup>3</sup> Wb II, 403; Faulkner, R., (1991): 147; Wiebach, S., (1981). Die Ägyptische Scheintür: morphologische Studien zur Entwicklung und Bedeutung der Hauptkultstelle in den Privat-Gräbern des alten Reiches. Hamburg: 72.

<sup>4</sup> Bolshacov, A., (1999). Royal Portraiture and Horus Name; in Ziegler, C., (ed.) L'arte de l'Ancien Empire Egyptien, Musee du Louvre, Paris: 313; Stradwick, N., (1984). Some Remarks on the Disposition of Texts in Old Kingdom Tombs, GM 77: 35-49; Teeter, E., (2011). Religion and Rituals in Ancient Egypt, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 128, 129; Demidchik, A., (2015). “Eleventh Dynasty Written Evidence on the Relationship between the Ka and the Cult Image”, ZÄS 142/1: 28.

<sup>5</sup> Bárta, M., (2011): 80, 81; Snape, S., (2011). Ancient Egyptian Tombs: The Culture of Life and Death, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester: 20, 21; Brovarski, E., (2004). “False doors & history: the Sixth Dynasty” in Bárta, M., (ed.), The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology, Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague: 71 - 117; Nyord, R., (2013). Memory and Succession in the City of the Dead: Temporality in the Ancient Egyptian Mortuary Cult, in Christensen, D., and Willerslev, R., (eds), Taming Time Timing Death: Social Technologies and Ritual, Routledge, London: 198; O'Neill, B., (2015). Sitting the Scene: The Deceased and Regenerative Cult within Offering Table Imaginary of the Egyptian Old to Middle Kingdom (c 2686 – c 1650 BC), Archaeopress and B O'Neill, Oxford: 6; Assmann, J., (2011). Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt, Ithaca and

The false door is often comprised of several distinct components. These included a stone drum that resembled a rolled-up reed mat, a crossbar positioned above the door, a panel supported by the crossbar featuring a depiction of the door's owner seated in front of an offering table, and pairs of jambs. These jambs were often inscribed with offering formulae and titles of the deceased. These elements remained consistent across various periods, although the false door structures underwent evolutionary changes.<sup>6</sup>

## Decoration and Texts:

### 1.1. Description

This false door was discovered by Zaki Saad during his excavations in Saqqara between 1939 and 1940 in the area between the step pyramid and the causeway of the pyramid of Unis. It was displaced from its original place.<sup>7</sup> Now, it is on display in the Kafr El-Sheikh Local Museum. It is in satisfactory condition, aside from two damaged spots; however, these spots have no impact or consequence. It has an upper palm tree cornice, a lintel marked off the jambs surmounted with a cavetto cornice, and two pairs of jambs; the inner pairs are stepped back. Reliefs and scenes are manufactured in high-quality sunk reliefs. At the bottom of each jamb is a figure of the standing lady with long hair, wearing a long tight dress, and sniffing a lotus flower. They are of the same size and facing inwards. The lady served as a priestess of goddess Hathor at the enclosure of King Unis in Saqqara. The false door is made by her husband, who is called Khenu.

**Registration Number:** (KE 134) Kafr El-Seikh Museum

**Material:** Fine limestone

**Measurements:** Height: 115 cm; Width: 45 cm; Thickness: 17

**Patina:** Medium

**Date:** Sixth Dynasty

**Provenience:** Saqqara, between the pyramid of Unis and the step pyramid

**State of Preservation:** quite good, somewhat eroded by natural processes

**Scenes:** The panel is destroyed on both sides with no considerable impact. The remaining part at the center depicts the deceased as a slim young woman wearing a tight dress above ankle length, a long wig hanging to the front of the shoulders, an exposed ear, and a large collar. She sits on a

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London, Cornell University Press, London: 210, 211; Blackman, A., (1916). The Ka - House and the Serdab, JEA 3/4: 250, 251.

<sup>6</sup> Brovarski, E., (2006). 'False doors & History: the Sixth Dynasty', in Bárta M., (ed.) The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology, Proceedings of the Conference, Prague, May 31– June 4, 2004, Prague, Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic: 71–118; Strudwick, N., (1985). The Administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom, KPI Limited, London: 9- 27.

<sup>7</sup> Saad, Z., (1940). "A Preliminary Report on the Excavations at Saqqara 1939-1940", ASAE 40: 675, 683, fig. 72; PM, III, 652.

bench without a back or armrests with bull legs raised above the ground by pedestals, sniffing a lotus flower with her left hand. The right arm reaches the table of half loaves of bread, and her hand touches the first loaf. In front of her, there is an offering table reaching knee height, abundantly filled with various offerings of food and drink. Above and directly on the right of the table, a small ideographic list is inscribed. It depicts the number of offerings that the deceased requested from the living people, including a thousand beer, a thousand loaves of bread, a thousand alabaster vases, etc. Beneath the offering table lies a vase that serves the purpose of hand washing. The scene is surmounted by a hieroglyphic text arranged in two lines in sunk relief running from right to left.

## 1.2. Transcription, Transliteration and Translation:

### 1.2.1. The panel

#### Line 1:



*irt.n špst-nswt Hnw*

Made by the king's acquaintance, Khenw

#### Line 2:



*n hmt.f nwb htp rn.s nfr Bby*

To his wife Nub-Hotep, her beautiful name (is) Bby

### 1.2.2. The drum and lintel

The drum and the inner jambs are in one plane, with hieroglyphic inscriptions reading as follows:

Right:



*im3hwt hr Wsir*

the honoured one before Osiris



*hswt rmt*

Praised (by) the people

Middle:



*Mryt h3i.s Bby*

Beloved of her husband, Bby

### 1.2.3. The jambs

Right outer jamb 1.A:

It has a vertical line of hieroglyphic inscription, and at the bottom stands a figure of the false door owner sniffing a lotus flower. The inscription runs as follows:



*hꜥp di nswt hꜥp di Wsir hꜥi.s hr w3wt nfr(w)t nt imnt, Bbi*

An offering given by the king, an offering given by Osiris, she may travel upon the beautiful roads of the west, Bby

Right inner jamb 1.B:

It has a vertical line of hieroglyphic inscription, and at the bottom stands a figure of Beby sniffing a lotus flower. The inscription runs as follows:



*hꜥp di nswt hꜥp di Wsir kꜥs.s nfr m hꜥrt-nꜥr Nwb-hꜥp*

An offering given by the king, an offering given by Osiris, (maybe) her beautiful burial in the Necropolis, Nub-Hotep

Left outer jamb:

It has a vertical line of hieroglyphic inscription, and at the bottom stands a figure of Beby sniffing a lotus flower. The inscription runs as follows:



*rꜥt nswt, hm-nꜥr hꜥwt-hꜥr, m mrt Wnis, im3hꜥwt hr nꜥr 3 Bbi*

Royal acquaintance, priestess of Hathor, in the temple (called) Meret- Unis, the revered one before the great god, Bby

Left inner jamb:

It has a vertical line of hieroglyphic inscription, and at the bottom stands a figure of Bby sniffing a lotus flower. The inscription runs as follows:



*h̄tp di nswt h̄tp di Inpw prt.n.s prt hrw t h̄nkt n im3hwt Nwb-h̄tp*

A boon that the king gives, an offering that Anubis gives, a voice offering of bread and beer to the revered one Nub-Hotep.

## 2. Commentary:

### Offering formulas:

- “*h̄tp di nswt*” is one of the popular funerary formulas from the Fourth Dynasty onward. It described the origin of the funerary offerings. It follows the traditional Old Kingdom pattern, which adopted two parallel opening statements; one introduced the king and the other introduced the deity.<sup>8</sup> Usually, the formula consisted of four parts: the first, known as the king’s formula “*h̄tp di nswt*”, handled the real privileges acquired by the individuals from the King.<sup>9</sup> The second part was the sacred formula attributed to deities of the afterlife, such as Osiris and Anubis. It referred to the offering given by the god; The third part was the required offerings; The fourth part referred to the tomb’s owner as a receiver of the offerings.<sup>10</sup>

- The statement “*im3hwt hr Wsir*” was popular and had a strong connection with the “*h̄tp di nsw*” offering formula,<sup>11</sup> first attested during the second Dynasty,<sup>12</sup> pertained to the enduring connection between the deceased women and the god Osiris, which dates back to the Old Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

- “*h̄mt-ntr h̄wt-hr*” was often and generally held by women engaged in religious service of the goddess Hathor during the Old Kingdom. It was seldom held by men except in instances where men held this title “*shd h̄mt-ntr h̄wt-hr*”; they were merely overseers of the priestesses of

<sup>8</sup> Leprohon, R., (1990). “The Offering Formula in the First Intermediate Period» JEA 76: 163; Gardiner, A., (1915). “The Meaning of the Formula Htp dj nswt”, in Davies, N. & Gardiner, A. (eds.), The Tomb of Amenemhat, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, 79-93.

<sup>9</sup> Satzinger, H., (1997). “Beobachtungen zur Opferformel: Theorie und Praxis”, LingAeg 5: 177–188; Franke, D., (2003). “The Middle Kingdom Offering Formulas – a Challenge”, JEA 89: 40; Allen, J., (2006). “Some aspects of the non-royal afterlife”, in Bárta, M., (ed.) The Old Kingdom Art and Archaeology, Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, 14, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Bárta, M., (1986). “Aufbau und Bedeutung der altägyptischen Opferformel”, AgFo 24; Glückstadt: 55; Franke, D., (2003). “The Middle Kingdom Offering Formulas – a Challenge”, JEA 89: 40.

<sup>11</sup> Abd El Sattar, I., (2023). “Old Kingdom Stone Block of *šsm-nfr* from Saqqara: Study in his Family Prosopography”, SHEDET 12: 6.

<sup>12</sup> Khal, J., (2002). Frühägyptisches Wörterbuch, vol. 1, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden: 33.

<sup>13</sup> Fischer, H., (2000). Egyptian Women of the Old Kingdom and the Heracleopolitan Period, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: 17; Fischer, H., (1963). ” A Stela of the Heracleopolitan Period at Saqqara: the Osiris `Iti”, ZÄS 90/1: 35, 41; Jones, D., (2000). Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom, I, Archaeopress, Oxford: 11:42.

Hathor.<sup>14</sup> The title “*ḥmt-ntr ḥwt-ḥr m mrt Wnis*” suggests that there was likely a chapel within the funerary temple of Unis that was dedicated to the goddess Hathor.<sup>15</sup>

- The statement “*ḥpi.s ḥr w3wt nfrwt nt imnt*” discussed the deceased individual’s transit towards the necropolis to be buried with an elaborate ritual ceremony and funeral procession.<sup>16</sup>

- “*Mrt-Wnis*”, during the fifth Dynasty, was a common practice to name the royal funerary temples using this phrase. Such a name involved adding the “*mrt*” to the name of the king for whom the temple was constructed.<sup>17</sup>

- The statement “*ḳrs.s nfr m ḥrt-ntr*” was part of the king’s formula “*Htp- di- Nswt*” which referred to the king who delivers his own property to the individuals. However, this formula indicated real privileges acquired by the individuals from the King.<sup>18</sup> During the Middle Kingdom, royal names were included within this formula as granters or it could be meant as the necessary royal and divine approval for the individual to be buried within the royal cemetery and transferred into the afterlife.<sup>19</sup>

### **Elite titles and philological structures:**

- The title “*špwst nswt*” king’s acquaintance, referred to a high-rank person who was near the king; it was also held by women during the end of the Old Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

- The statement “*mrt ḥ3i.s*” indicated a strong and positive relationship between the deceased individual and her husband throughout her life.<sup>21</sup>

- The feminine title “*rḥt nswt*” referred to a high social status person and was common during the Old Kingdom, meanwhile its masculine counterpart became unattested at the End of the Old Kingdom in Upper Egyptian tombs.<sup>22</sup>

### **Personal names:**

- The formula “*rn.s nfr*” preceded the second name of the same individual. During the Old Kingdom, it was customary for individuals to possess two names: an official name and a secondary name known as “*rn-nfr*” or beautiful name. The beautiful name was often a shortened

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<sup>14</sup> Ward, W., (1986). Essays on Feminine Titles of the Middle Kingdom and related Subjects, American University Press, Beirut: 10; Mariette, A., (1885). Les Mastaba de l’ancien Empire, F. Vieweg, Paris: 195; Fischer, H., (2000): 24.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, D., (2000). Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom, II, Archaeopress, Oxford: 440:1634.

<sup>16</sup> Wb, I, 227, 237.

<sup>17</sup> Wb, II, 108.

<sup>18</sup> Satzinger, H., (1997): 177-188; Franke, D., (2003): 40; Allen, J., (2006):14, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Allen (2006): 15.

<sup>20</sup> Wb, IV, 449; Fischer, H., (2000): 30.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, D., (2000): 445:1665.

<sup>22</sup> Fischer, H., (2000): 15.

version of the official name. However, throughout the Middle Kingdom, the usage of the beautiful name declined. It experienced a resurgence during the late period.<sup>23</sup>

- The personal name “*Nwb-htp*” was attested during the Old Kingdom as a feminine name and during the Middle Kingdom as a masculine name.<sup>24</sup>

- The personal name of the deceased’s husband, “*hnw*”, was prevalent during both the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The tomb of the husband could not be identified as several tombs in Saqqara contained the same name.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Artistic comments:**

- The false door had sunk relief, which was used starting from the second half of the fifth Dynasty and became common during the Sixth Dynasty. It is assumed that the purpose was to finish the inscriptions quickly, or it was used for the parts of the tomb of high importance.<sup>26</sup>

- This false door illustrated the artistic developments during the late Old Kingdom: The torus and palm tree cornice, which were first attested during the second half of the Fifth Dynasty and became popular during the Sixth Dynasty. It was common in the late Old Kingdom that false door depicted the deceased’s figures and the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the jambs of the same size. In addition, the elongated panel contained the deceased figure before the offering table.<sup>27</sup>

- The offering table reached the tomb owner's knee height, which was typical of the late Fifth Dynasty.<sup>28</sup>

- The bench with no armrests or back was typical of the Old Kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

- It is supposed that the term “*hswt*” which means the “rewarded one” probably designated the weaver; this interpretation was supported by the scenes that showed the women being given costly ornaments in payment for their services. They were not known to have enjoyed such particular esteem during later periods, and, significantly, this designation was no longer applied to weavers after the Old Kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Günter, V., (2013). Personal Names: Function and Significance, *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 1 (1):3.

<sup>24</sup> Ranke, H., (1935). *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen, I*, Druck von J. J. Augustin in Gluckstadt, Holstein: 192:1; Katrin-Scheele S., (2014). *Die Personennamen des Alten Reiches*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden: 458: 1818.

<sup>25</sup> Ranke, H., (1935): 270: 4.

<sup>26</sup> Strudwick, N., (1985): 24.

<sup>27</sup> Strudwick, N., (1985): 15, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Swinton, J., (2014). *Dating the Tombs of the Egyptian Old Kingdom*, Archaeopress, Oxford: 68.

<sup>29</sup> Swinton, J., (2014): 74.

<sup>30</sup> Fischer, H., (2000): 21.



### 3. Conclusion:

This study sought to provide transliteration and translations of the texts on a false door that was previously copied but without translations of the texts or commentary on the epithets and titles. The aim was to translate these texts and offer commentary on the religious and administrative titles together with an artistic debate.

Determining and defining the tomb of this lady based solely on her husband's name was inadvisable. Given that multiple individuals shared the same name during this period, attributing a tomb definitively requires additional context and evidence.

Throughout the titles held by the owner of the false door, including “*im3ḥwt ḥr Wsir*”, “*rḥt nswt*”, “*mrt ḥ3i.s*” and “*ḥmt-ntr Ḥwt-Ḥr*”, it seems that the relevant false door belonged to a high-ranking lady of the Sixth Dynasty.

The title “*ḥmt-ntr ḥwt-ḥr m mrt Wnis*” referred to a chapel within the funerary temple of Unis. It reflected the high status of the goddess Hathor during the Fifth Dynasty. Additionally, it provided the nomination of royal funerary temples during the Old Kingdom.

The phrase “*n ḥmt.f*” indicated that the false door was erected by her spouse. It referred to the role of the husband in securing a safe arrival into the afterlife for his wife. It conveyed several social statements, including the strong bond between the deceased wife and her husband. Additionally, they alluded to funeral beliefs regarding the role of women in afterlife rituals and their connection to the deities of the afterlife, such as Osiris.

The artistic features on this false door included the palm tree cornice and the torus, together with the small figures of the deceased of the same size and the elongated panel, which contained the depiction of the deceased. It could be assumed that this false door had been made during the Sixth Dynasty.

In conclusion, the false door's style and inscription are typical of false doors produced for middle-class officials of the late Old Kingdom. A preliminary analysis of the false door's structure, offering formula, and titles suggests a date in the Sixth Dynasty; further examination would be needed to refine this proposed date. The same applies to the social standing and career of the tomb owner. Analysis of other finds and archaeological contexts and a search for her tomb would provide a much clearer picture of her career and social standing.

### Acknowledgment:

I would like to thank the Permanent Committee and its head for kindly allowing me to photograph and study this false door.

**Illustrations:**



Fig. 1 False door of Nub-Hotep

Photography by the Author

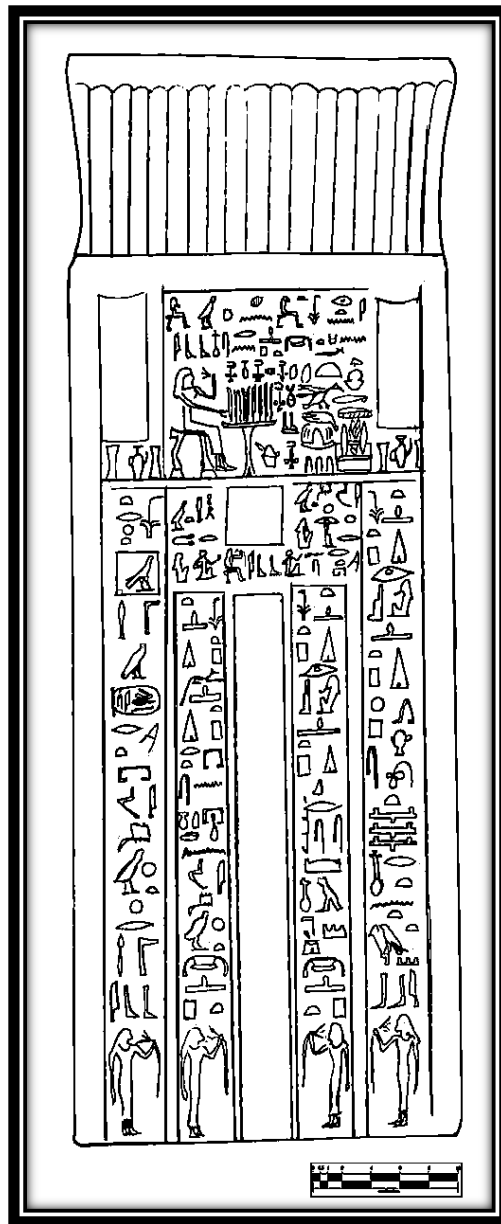


Fig. 2 False door of Nub-Hotep

Facsimile by the Author

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