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Preliminary Report on the Archaeological survey of Theban Tomb No. 263 by the Bulgarian Institute of Egyptology, seasons 2012–2013

Teodor Lekov, Emil Buzov

The project of the Bulgarian Institute of Egyptology (BIE)¹ at New Bulgarian University for the investigation and the archaeological research of Theban Tomb 263 started at 2010, when a team of the Institute – Teodor Lekov and Emil Buzov – after visiting the site of Ancient Luxor – choose the Tomb of Piay (TT. 263) as a first objective for the future archaeological research of the Bulgarian mission in Egypt. The site was chosen for it was neglected in previous research, the tomb was never fully published, and the team was planning to complete the study of the architecture, the epigraphy – reliefs and texts, the paintings and the decoration of the tomb in order to prepare the complete publication of the whole tomb. The team was also planning to do the restoration and the conservation work where necessary inside the tomb, and to contribute for better preservation of the site. The beginning of the activities was postponed for 2012 due to the outbreak of the Revolution in Egypt in 2011.

I. Location and description

TT 263 is located in the southern part of the Sheikh Abd el-Qurna area located in the Theban necropolis on the west bank of the river, nearby today’s city of Luxor. The tomb belonged to a dignitary called Piay who lived during the rule of Ramses II (19th dynasty, 13th c. BC) (fig. 1).

¹ Bulgarian Institute of Egyptology at NBU is the only Bulgarian organization in the field of Egyptology. It was established and developed by Prof. Sergei Ignatov, the first Egyptologist in Bulgaria, who started to teach Egyptology, and to develop academic studies in Egyptology in Bulgaria for the first time back in 1985.
The tomb is located in the courtyard of TT 125, tomb of Duauneheh, from the time of Hatshepsut – Thutmose III. TT 263 was erected in the southern part of the courtyard prepared by Duauneheh for his tomb. The place was selected carefully, so as not to enter beyond the borders of TT 125.

The nobleman, Piay, occupied the post of “scribe in the granary” in the Amun domain and “Scribe of accounts” in the Ramesseum.\(^2\)

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**II. Previous research on tomb TT 263**

TT 263 has no full publication so far. The tomb is mentioned in PM and other general studies of the Theban necropolis. Separate texts have been published by various authors within studies of a diverse range of problems. Some photographs of the tomb are kept in the archives of the Metropolitan Museum (Photos: T.3090; 3085–88, 3935, 8250–53), of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (Photo: 6994) and the archive of Siegfried Schott (Photos: 3934–5; 8250–3). The song of the harper inscribed on the right-hand (north) frame of the front door has

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been published by Miriam Lichtheim\(^3\) accompanied by a photograph, and the sun hymn has been published by Jan Assmann\(^4\).

Kampp's description\(^5\) of the courtyard is accompanied with a sketch of the courtyard in front of the tomb and a plan of TT263 and TT125 (fig. 2):

Fig. 2: Plan of the courtyard of TT 263 and TT 125 (after Kampp, vol. I, 416)

Unlike Porter and Moss, F. Kampp notes the existence of two shafts in the tomb's interior quarters. She mentions that during her visit to the tomb's courtyard it appeared to have been used as a latrine.

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\(^3\) Lichtheim, Miriam. “The Songs of the Harpers” – *JNES* 4 (1945), Pls. IVa, VIa, pp. 204–205.

\(^4\) Assmann, Jan. *Sonnenhymnen in Thebanischen Graebern*, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein, 1983, 305–308 (The two rows of the right portion of his reproduction of hieroglyphic texts are misplaced, and few hieroglyphs are missing.).

III. Preliminary description

In terms of architecture, the tomb is a typical representative of private tombs from that period, distinct only with its small size. It comprises two almost identical chambers linked by a door and ending with four statues, probably of the owner Piay, his wife, and their son and daughter.

The tomb’s decoration comprises embossed images and texts around the tomb’s entrance, located on the front door frame between the first and second chambers. The text and images found on the walls retain traces of the original and colourful decoration. The ceiling of the second chamber is also decorated and traces of decoration have been discovered on the ceiling of the first chamber. Two types of scenes appear in the tomb: concave embossed relief (tomb facade, around the front door and the frame of the door linking the two chambers), and drawings on gypsum plaster (on the tomb walls and ceiling).

A number of blocks currently stockpiled in TT 125, which bear the inscription of the name of the owner of TT 263, Piay, and cartouches of Ramses II, are also part of the tomb. The blocks are made of sandstone: a type of stone different from those used inside the tomb.

III. Archaeological studies: season 2012

The study of TT 263 lasted from 8th to 22nd March 2012. The team of the Bulgarian Institute of Egyptology was represented by Prof Dr Teodor Lekov (Director of the mission), Assist Prof Dr Emil Buzov (Egyptologist), Chavdar Stoychev (photographer) and Mina Megala (MA student). Shereen Mohamed was the expedition’s Inspector from the Antiquities service. The financial support for the project was granted by the Fund for Strategic Development of NBU.

The season commenced with cleaning the floor and running electricity to the tomb. During the cleaning, two pits were discovered in the second chamber, as noted on Kampp’s map. The left-hand (south) pit has the shape of a stone sarcophagus. Whilst clearing of the first chamber, two additional pits were discovered in the corners of the short walls and the walls to the second chamber. These two pits had not been noted in any of the pre-existing plans of the tomb. The sizes of the openings are, respectively: left-hand (south) pit 90 by 88 cm.; and right-hand (north) pit 86/99 by 86/90 cm. (Figs. 3 and 4).

It is possible that the pits were not made at the same time as the tomb itself, but in the Late period. During the cleaning of the surface of the pits, contemporary objects were found, which shows that the pits have been raided. While clearing the right-hand (north) pit, a relatively well-preserved mummy torso was discovered 10 cm. underground (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3. Entrance to the left-hand (south) tomb chamber in chamber 1.

Fig. 4. Entrance of the right-hand (north) tomb chamber in chamber 1.

Fig. 5: Mummy torso discovered in the right-hand (north) pit in chamber 1.
The tomb was photographed and its two chambers measured, to enable drawing a more precise plan. It was established that the tomb begins with a short atrium 102/105 cm. wide and 81/84 cm. long. The first chamber has irregular angles, especially on the southern side where the ancient builders were probably following the rock face in front of the tomb which would have caused them to substantially alter the angle (Fig. 6).

The dimensions of the first chamber are 475/499 by 202/218 cm. The chamber floor is level, without damage. The chamber ceiling which was probably fully painted, is, however, entirely destroyed. In the south-eastern part of the ceiling one can clearly see the pit dug out by raiders. It is sealed with beams, small stones, and plaster (Fig. 7). The ceiling in this part of the chamber has multiple cracks and several bits (between 3 and 5 cm. thick) are suspended from the ceiling and about to fall. Securing the ceiling is the priority task for the next season.

The approach to the interior (second) chamber was built with a thin (3 cm.) indentation which forms an internal lintel to the front door on which a hymn to Amon-Ra is inscribed. The door linking the two chambers is 83 cm wide. Unfortunately, the ceiling next to it is badly damaged. The dimensions of the second chamber are 390/399 by 272/232 cm. In the middle of the long wall facing the front door is a niche (124 by 121 cm., 63 cm. deep). Inside it are four statues whose faces are entirely destroyed. Unfortunately, there are no inscriptions around the statues. The walls of this chamber are substantially more even than those of the first chamber (Fig. 8).

The images on the left-hand (south) wall are in a better condition. Most of the ceiling, except its middle section, has been preserved. There is some erosion on the floor in front of the statues. During the clean up, no parts of either the floor, or the ceiling, of either chamber, were discovered. They were probably discarded when the tomb was first cleaned.

Fig. 6. View from north to south along the long external wall of chamber 1.
After the cleaning of the tomb’s floor was completed, the walls and ceiling of both chambers were finely cleaned to remove the fine dust that had built up on them. The walls, ceiling and floor of the tomb compartments were photographed by Chavdar Stoychev (the expedition’s photographer), to be used in the redrawing of the preserved parts of the decoration.

The tomb complex also comprises a stele located on the facade cut out for TT 125, north from the entrance to TT 263, as well as a bulky figure of a cow’s head (Hathor) underneath which there once stood a cobra, now almost completely destroyed. The stela is rectangular, its top corner is rounded, and its dimensions are 217 by 108 cm. The stela can be divided into three registers: two with images and one with text. The top one, 83 cm. long, is a depiction of Piay in front of Rahorahiti and Osiris. The second register, 55 cm. long, has a depiction of the opening of the mouth ritual, performed on Piay’s mummy. It depicts female mourners, a priest *hrj-hb* and two other priests who are in the process of cleansing Piay’s statue with water from four vessels. Behind Piay’s statue there can be seen either a priest or a son, the Figure of his wife, and another one belonging to either a daughter or a priest. The third register, 79 cm. long, is filled with horizontal text. Eight lines can be seen clearly and there is space for two more lines which have been entirely destroyed. The text up to line 7 is relatively clear, but line 8 is only partially preserved.

To the left of the stele is a preserved niche with the statue of Hathor with a sun disk. The distance between the stele and the statue is 76/81 cm. The niche containing the statue is 122/123 cm. tall, 90 cm. wide at the bottom and 98 cm. wide at the top.

To the left of the statue, on the facade of TT 263, there is a lintel-shaped niche. It is at the height of the tomb entrance and is 73–74 cm. long and 15 cm. wide. It was probably intended, as Kampp notes, for the end of a beam which would form a roof in front covering the front of the niche containing Hathor’s statue (Fig. 9).
The excavations continued with cleaning the courtyard in front of the tomb. The dirt and dust which had accumulated on the courtyard floor made for TT 125 was cleared away. In the vicinity of the entrance to TT 263, 60 cm. away from the front door and 30 cm. away from the side facade of the courtyard, the entrance of a pit was discovered, which had hitherto not been documented. The pit entrance is oval-shaped, with a diameter of 100/130 cm. It was named as Object B (Fig. 10). The fine sand covering the entrance to the pit shows that it has not been excavated previously. The shape of the opening differs from the shape of the entrances of burial pits from the period of the New Kingdom. It is possible that it was made for preserving ritual objects used during the burial ritual or the mummification. The pit is planned to be opened in the next season.

The clearing of the tomb’s courtyard continued up to the front of TT 125. To its right, 205 cm away from the tomb’s entrance, the rectangular-shaped entrance into a pit was found, measuring 75/80 by 140/160 cm. (Fig. 11).
Fig. 10: The pit discovered in front of the entrance to TT 263.

Fig. 11: Entrance to a pit to the right of TT 125.
The pit, named Object D, probably belongs to TT 125. It has been excavated, as can be seen from the contemporary painted objects found on its surface. In spite of that, it is not marked on existing plans of the courtyard.

The clearing of the courtyard continued in the south-east direction towards the contemporary stone wall. To the left of the entrance of TT 263, after the newly-found pit, an adobe brick wall was discovered, resembling a pillar, sized 14/16 by 34 cm. In width, 9 lines of brick have been preserved, making the total size of the wall 160 cm. and, reaching a maximum height of 70 cm. Directly next to the wall is a plastered tomb entrance which was probably first discovered when the courtyard was first being cleared, when the stone walls surrounding it were erected. The tomb entrance is plastered with gypsum and measures 100 by 110 cm. In front of the entrance to this tomb, named Object C, steps leading into the internal premises were found. The erection of the steps had been necessary due to the fact that the natural stone facade here is only 115 cm. high and becomes smaller further on. In order to reclaim some space for the construction of a tomb entrance the builders were forced to carve out the entrance in the terrain. Towards the left, after the plastered section ends, the wall continues as a brick wall 52 cm. wide and 57 cm. tall made of the same kind of bricks. Above her a partially preserved relief is clearly visible, probably originally belonging to the doorframe or the front door lintel. Therefore, the tomb entrance is flanked by an adobe wall, which gives serious evidence against the idea that it may have been erected as a pillar of TT 125 (Fig. 12).

![Fig. 12. The facade around object C.](image-url)
Object C is probably from a later period compared to both TT 125 and TT 263. It was supposed that is possible that it is a tomb from the Late period. In the next season it was discovered that it was an entrance to unknown tomb (now temporally numbered C2013). The tomb is dated to the second half of the New Kingdom and it is left unfinished.

After clearing the courtyard, the excavations continued with a study of the locking systems used in TT 263. Both the front door and the door linking the first and second chambers have clear signs of the place in which the door latch would have originally fitted. Judging from what we know about the doors of homes in that period, they would normally have been made of wood and consisted of three or four vertical planks connected with three planks going across on the inside. The doors of homes always opened inwards and were painted red. The examination of the front door showed that it also used to open inwards, as well as the door linking the first and second chambers; the interior door also has a doorstep which would have blocked the door from opening outwards. The doors probably had wooden hinges fitting in vents carved out in the floor and ceiling. Traces of such a vent were found on the floor at the door linking the tomb's two chambers. As the ceiling has been destroyed, the extension of the hinge cannot be traced. The latches of both doors originally fitted into a special vent carved out in the rock. The vent at the front door is a 15 cm. by 15 cm. square which has an additional diamond-shaped vent carved into it, 7 cm along each side and 11.5 cm deep. The vent for the latch on the door linking the first and second chambers is more elaborate. The outer vent is again a square, 17 cm. along each side. It is followed by an additional vent carved in the rock which is a smaller 15 cm. by 15 cm. square, and a diamond-shaped vent, 7 cm. along each side at the surface and 4 cm along each side at the bottom, 11 cm. deep (Figs. 13–14).
After clearing the tomb, all measurements of the chambers were taken and a detailed examination of the surviving scenes of the decoration was carried out. It was established that the scenes in the right-hand part of the interior (second), described simply as ‘ritual scenes’ in PM, in fact depict the Opening of the mouth ritual, and that, had they been better preserved, they would have constituted one of the most important pieces of evidence about this ritual in the Theban necropolis. These scenes are not noted in the main edition of the *Opening of the Mouth Ritual* by Otto⁷. It may be possible to partially reconstruct them in the process of future restoration and publication of the tomb.

Detailed notes on the character and purpose of the preserved fragments of scenes were taken which will be used in future studies.

Towards the end of the season, TT 125, the tomb of Duaneheh of 18th Dynasty, which, according to PM, contains a fragment of a cartouches of Ramses II belonging to TT 263, was also opened. Immediately next to the entrance to TT 125, in the first passage, 16 fragments of reliefs of the 19th dynasty were found, some of which bear the name of Piay, the owner of TT 263. These fragments are two types. The first type of unknown sandstone construction with painted relief, amongst which a bloc with cartouches of Ramses II (key evidence for the dating of TT 263) and Piay’s name. The second type are made of limestone and probably originally belonged to the entrance to TT 263. Some of these fragments could be reconstructed in their original place during the restoration of the entrance to TT 263. The fragments from TT 263, found inside TT 125, were separated and described in the interior premises of TT 125 for future study.

The first season of research of TT 263 revealed a promising object for epigraphical study, restoration and conservation which will continue in the following years.

**IV. Archaeological studies: season 2013**

The Expedition of the *Bulgarian Institute of Egyptology* (BIE) of New Bulgarian University, Sofia (Bulgaria) worked at Luxor (West bank) at the Tomb No. 263 from 5th February 2013 to 19th February 2013. The Expedition members were Prof. Dr. Teodor Lekov (Director of the mission), Assist. Prof. Dr. Emil Buzov (Assistant director of the mission), Yordan Chobanov (PhD student), Svetla Ilieva, Velichka Gotskova, Bojena Zamfirova (MA and BA students at New Bulgarian University). The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by inspector Mrs. Nafesa el Azab Mohammad and conservator Mrs. Karima Mohamed Seidik. The

financial support for the project was granted by the Fund for Strategic Development of NBU.

The aim of the project was to continue the scientific research on Tomb No. 263 which started in 2012. The plan of the Expedition for the second season was to investigate and clean the shafts, to prepare actual architectural plan and to investigate the fragments of the Tomb situated in the nearby Tomb TT 125.

The first step of the planned activities was the clearance of the right shaft (Shaft I) in the inner chamber of the Tomb (fig. 15). The Shaft was cut into a bedrock at a depth of 1.20 m. It contains debris of possibly later intrusive burials. The objects found there were: a huge amount of human bones (at least 6–7 persons which is visible from the different skull parts found); linen material from mummy wrapping and clothes; wooden fragments of several different painted wooden objects; one ushebti; parts of several ushebtis, beds, resin; fragments of cartonage and a lot of ceramic fragments. Among the most interesting findings are a piece of the game *senet* made of ebony and a fragment of a small wooden box, presumably from the game *set*, a part of a wooden comb and an amulet of the god Bes. As well as a fragment of alabaster jar with traces of burned material (fig. 16).
Fig. 16. Ushebti, the amulet of the god Bes and part of a wooden comb from Shaft I.

The work continued with the cleaning of the left Shaft at the inner room (Shaft II). The objects found there were several fragments of ushebtis; clay figurines; fragments of wooden boxes or coffins; fragments of cartonage; fragments with decoration of the Tomb’s ceiling; parts of mummies (two legs with wrappings and part of a chest covered with resin), beds and a lot of ceramic fragments (fig. 17).

Fig. 17. Ushebti and clay figurines from Shaft II.

In the upper part of the Shaft the fill consists of large stone blocks and in depth of 50cm it consists of small stones, sand and many parts of torn matting. The fill
of Shaft II does not differ from that in Shaft I. Among the artefacts found in Shaft II is a part of a bracelet or necklace of beads with traces of burning which fully matches the burned substance of beads and resin found in Shaft I. This shows that the artefacts from both Shafts are identical and possibly from the same time. Furthermore, their last burial should be at the same time. Among the debris was found a large number of paper packs of cigarettes and a piece of modern paper, dated to 1938. This probably indicates the time of the last visit to the Shafts and their filling.

Among the stone blocks found in the Shaft were two limestone fragments with the original decoration of the Tomb bearing hieroglyphic signs (fig. 18). These two fragments can be restored at their original places, one of them at the left side of the entrance of the tomb and the other at the left side of the door leading to the inner room. These two limestone fragments were the most important findings of the season, because they could be fixed at their exact position. That will contribute to the future restoration of the Tomb and its inscriptions. Two fragments with hieroglyphic inscriptions were also found – one of them with the name of the Tomb owner – Piay, and the other probably with his titles. Their original position still cannot be confirmed.

Fig. 18. Fragments with hieroglyphic text from Shaft II.

The Shaft obviously goes deeper, but when the clearance reached the level of 2.10m the work was stopped. At this level were discovered two passages leading to the right and to the left. The right passage (section B) leads to three rooms (fig. 19).
The first of them is 2.30m x 3m, the second – 2.10m x 2.20m and the third 2.40 m x 1.50 m. The walls and the ceiling of the rooms were plastered with traces of fire burning. The floor of the first room was partly covered with debris, while the second one was relatively clean. This passage and the rooms are probably built in the later period.

To the left the second Shaft goes into a passage (section A) leading to a deeper level of the underground structures and another passage leading to a decorated Tomb that is unnoticed in literature and has no number in the TT register (temporary numbered by the expedition C2013). This Tomb could be approximately dated to the period between the second half of the XVIII Dynasty and the end of the XX Dynasty. The decoration of the Tomb was left unfinished and although the scenes are relatively well-preserved the spaces for the inscriptions were left blank. The only visible clue to the name of the owner of that Tomb is an inscription at the second door of the tomb cut in limestone. There are two rooms at the Tomb the first of which is approximately 5.50 m x 1.90 m. The second room (the inner room) contains well-preserved decoration on the left side. There are four passages leading to shafts or some deeper underground structures that are probably cut in later periods. The entrance of that Tomb was sealed with bricks by the staff of SCA in the time between 1995 and 2000. The discovery of the connection between TT 263 and these underground chambers and passages indicates the need of future investigation, clearance and securing of the site.

All objects of the two shafts of the inner room of TT 263 found by the Expedition were stored in the inner room.
During the season, the fragments situated in the next tomb TT 125, which according to Porter and Moss contains part of the decoration of TT 263, were observed and studied. The fragments from the tomb of Piay (16 fragments of the XIX dynasty reliefs, some of them with the name of Piay, the owner of TT 263) were photographed and measured. The fragments of TT 263 were separated and deposited in the inner room of TT 125 for future research.

A huge amount of work remains to be done in the forthcoming campaigns. The clearance of the shafts and the connection between the shafts of TT 263 and other tombs make the situation very complex and intriguing.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude and indebtedness to Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim, The Minister of State for Antiquities and Dr. Mohamed Ismail, Director of the Foreign Missions Affairs (at that time). We are also especially thankful to the former directors of the area – to Dr. Mansour Buraik, Director of Luxor area, Mr. Mohamed Abd Eazez Ahmed, Chief of inspectors of West bank (Luxor), Mr. Fathy Yasen Abd el Karem, Director of the Middle area (West bank), Mr. Aez Aiden Kamal el Nuby, Mr. Ramadan Ahmed Ali – inspectors at MSA, and to our inspectors at the site, Shereen Mohamed (who was with us in 2012), and inspector Mrs. Nafesa el Azab Mohammad (who was with us in 2013) for their invaluable assistance and support. We would also like to thank Andrew Bednarski and Oli Moran – protector archaeologists from ARCE (Luxor), working on the project for ARCE at that time, for their help in the process of removing the debris from the site.