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Tomb Painting of Woman with Offerings

Edna Russmann: During the New Kingdom, when this scene was painted, one of the most important Egyptian cities was Thebes, in southern Egypt. Kings had their own cemetery on the west side of the Nile at Thebes that we today know as the Valley of the Kings. Their officials, their nobles, their priests were buried nearby, in a part of the land where the limestone into which these tombs were carved was mostly of very poor quality—so bad they couldn't carve reliefs, so they had to make do with painting.

This offering scene was in one of these tombs. It shows a woman kneeling on a green mat and sniffing a blue lotus, that is, a blue waterlily. The blue waterlily was apparently fragrant.

I've always wanted a chance to sniff one, but I've never had the opportunity. But it was also a symbol of rebirth, because the blue lotus closes at night when the sun goes down and then opens its petals again to greet the rising sun.

In front of her is an offering stand with a pile of food. The stand consists of a tall pottery cylinder with a flaring base on which is a tray of some kind, and the food is all balanced on the tray.

There are round and oval loaves of bread, which are white, with some kind of yellow decoration. Above the bread, that oddly shaped reddish object is a cut of meat. Below the tray of the offering stand are three pottery jars. Jars like this would have contained various kinds of liquid: perhaps wine, perhaps beer, perhaps milk, perhaps water.