

AN OLD KINGDOM AUTOBIOGRAPHY FROM SAQQARA¹⁾

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An inscribed limestone block found during the 2001 campaign of Polish-Egyptian excavations at West Saqqara (field inv. no. S/01/20) has turned out to bear a text that can be identified as a real and not conventional autobiography.

It was found between the northern “bastion” of Netjerikhet's enclosure wall and Shaft 51, on a thin layer of *dakka* over the foundation level of the enclosure wall; it appears to have been connected with the last phase of the destroyed mastaba of Shaft 51.²⁾

DESCRIPTION

The form and the decoration of the block suggest that it was the left jamb of a niche once containing a false door.³⁾ It is carved in a single block of hard, white limestone and has the form of a slab, 110 cm high, 12 cm wide and 30 cm thick. It has not survived intact – much of the upper part of the decorated front has been destroyed and the lower part has been crushed, probably by blocks falling from the enclosure wall of the step pyramid. While the lower part of the jamb has been reconsolidated, the missing parts of its decorated surface could not be restored (*Fig. 1*).

Only the carved front of the jamb was dressed, the other sides being left unworked. The decoration consists of two

columns of text and a figural representation below them, executed in shallow sunken relief, c. 3 mm in depth. The inscription and figural representation, both turned to the right, are framed with incised vertical lines. The block bears no trace of polychromy.

The initial part of the first column of the text, as well as final part of the second one, is missing. In addition, the standing figure of the deceased is badly damaged, the sole preserved elements being his left hand holding a long stick and part of the *hrp*-sceptre held in his right. The text in the second column can be considered as a direct continuation of the one in the first.

1) The author would like to thank Mr. Dariusz Niedziółka for inspiring discussions on the subject of this text.

2) Cf. contribution by K. Myśliwiec in this volume.

3) Several objects of this kind have been discovered by the Mission, but so far none has borne a biographical text; cf. K. Kuraszekiewicz, “Inscribed objects from the Old Kingdom necropolis west of the Step Pyramid (with remarks on their white coating)”, *Archiv Orientalni* (forthcoming).

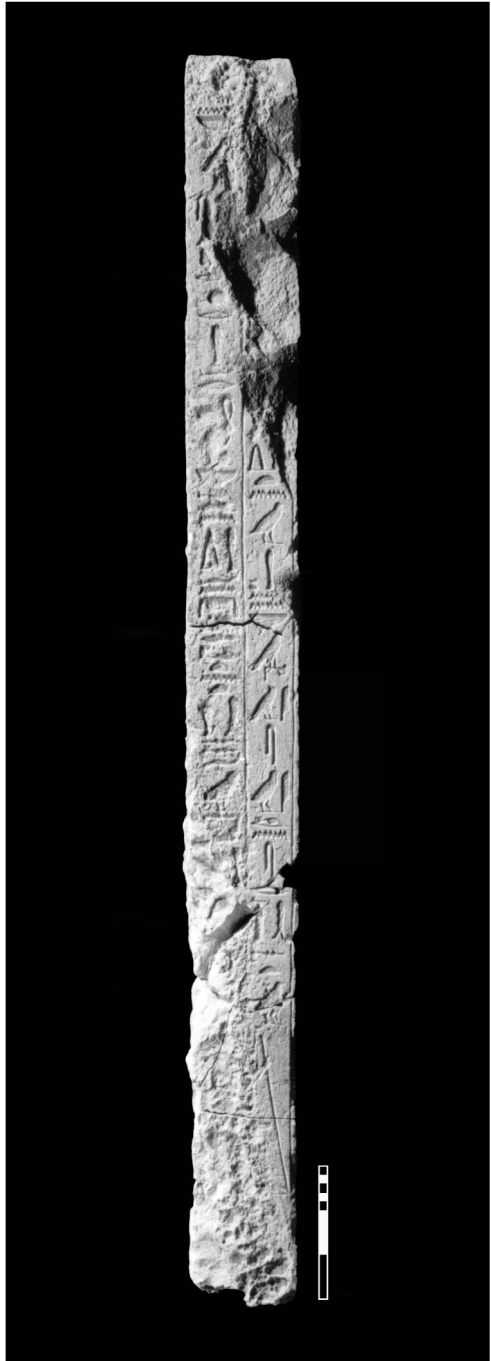
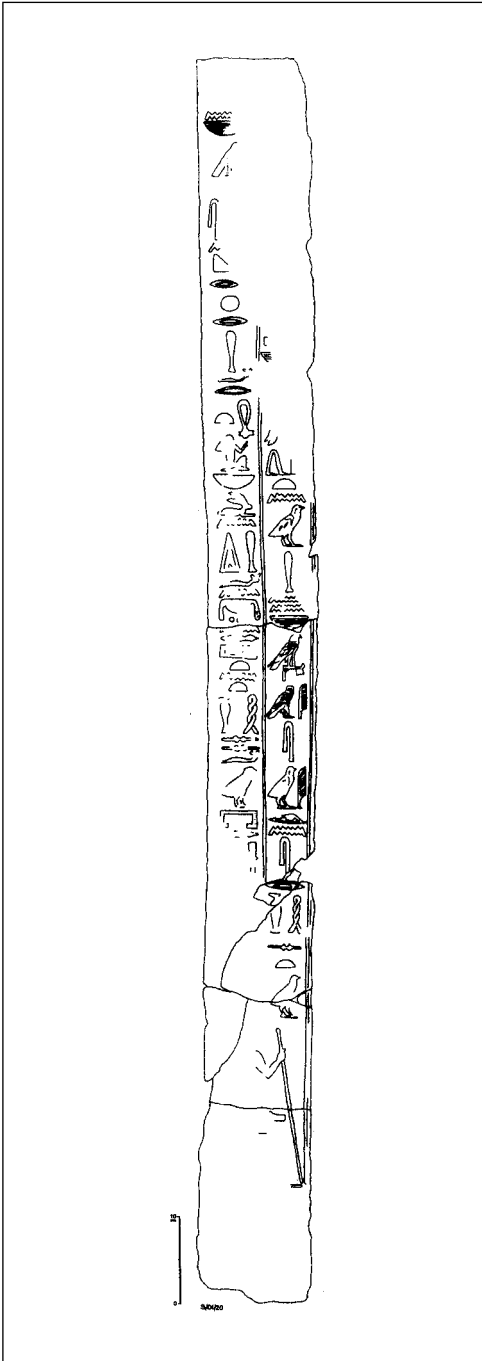


Fig. 1. *Inscribed limestone jamb (S/01/2)*
(Drawing K. O. Kuraszkievicz; photo M. Jawornicki)

TEXT

(1) [...]t.n^a w(j) hm n nb.(j)^b jm.s jw jr.n.(j) s(j)^c r hz.t wj^d (2) nb.(j) [hr].s n^e [j]qr.(j)^f hr hm.f r mjtj.(j) nb wn hm.f dj.(f)^g n.(j) nbw n ʕt nt hzz.f^h w(j) hrp [...] pr-ʕ [...]ⁱ

[...] the Majesty of my Lord has [...] me (in it ?)^k. I have done this that I would be praised by My Lord [for] this, because I was [per]fect by His Majesty, more than everyone equal to me^l. His Majesty used to give me gold because he has praised me. Director of [...] of the Great House [...]

COMMENTS

a. A *sdm.n.f* form of a verb of motion (as suggested by its determinative) should be expected in this place. It is impossible, however, to ascertain either the exact form of the verb used or its meaning. It seems that *t* is to be identified as the last consonant of the verb.

b. The phrase *hm n nb.(j)*, see e.g. Urk. I, 134.13. On the graphy *nb* with phonetic complement, see: Wb II, 227; cf. E. Doret, *The Narrative Verbal system of Old and Middle Egyptian* (Geneva 1986), 14-15, n. 24.

c. On the perfective form *jw sdm.n.j*, see: E. Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik, Analecta Orientalia* 34/39 (Rome 1955-1964), § 170; Doret, op. cit., 98-102.

d. On the *sdm.t.f* form after the preposition *r*, see: Edel, op. cit., § 734. (On the other interpretation of the phrase: *jr hztj wj nb.j* as a prospective relative form, see: Doret, op. cit., 25, n. 108, 110).

e. Cf. eg. Urk. I, 100.11.

f. A tall and narrow sign should precede the signs *q* and *r*, as they are narrower than the width of the column. Only *jqr* would make sense in this place.

On the *sdm.f* form after the preposition *n*, see: Edel, op. cit., §§ 503, 510.

g. On the compound form *wn.f sdm.f*, see: Edel, op. cit., § 895; Doret, op. cit., 111-112. Apparently, suffix *.f* should be read twice, although it is written only once for graphic reasons.

h. On the active *hzz.f* after *n ʕt nt* as the object of a preposition, see: Edel, op. cit., § 777; Doret, op. cit., 55.

i. Several titles are known to be composed of the two elements, *hrp* and *pr-ʕ*, see: D. Jones, *Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom*, BAR International Series 866 (Oxford 2000), nos. 2551 (*hrp jr-w-ʕn*), 2567 (*hrp jdt*), 2597 (*hrp wtjw*), 2621 (*hrp msw nʕd*), 2684 (*hrp zh*), 2725 (*hrp stjw*). However, after *hrp* a tall narrow sign should be expected, as e.g. *w* (*hrp wtjw*) or F29 (*hrp stjw*). It is possible that the owner of the present monument was a supervisor of the embalmers or the necklace stringers of the Great House.

k. The translation of the preposition depends on the meaning of the predicate.

l. Cf. Wb II, 40.1.

CONCLUSION

The inscription on the present monument does not conform to the standardized autobiographical texts occurring in Old Kingdom tombs; hence, it should be recognized as a real life story.⁴⁾ It is impossible to ascertain whether this biography of the tomb owner was inscribed on only the left or on both jambs of the false door, although it seems that the final

part of the inscription is indeed the end of the text. The reconstruction of the initial part and the lost verbs poses a number of difficulties because of the unconventional character of the text. To judge by the graphy and phraseology, the monument should be dated to the Sixth Dynasty, but textual and stylistical data alone do not warrant a more precise dating.

4) Concerning biographical texts, see, e.g. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies, Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom* (Freiburg-Göttingen 1988), 5-21; A.M. Gnirs, "Die Ägyptische Autobiographie", in: *Ancient Egyptian Literature. History and Forms*, ed. A. Loprieno (Leiden 1996), 191-241. On the phraseology of such texts: E. Edel, "Untersuchungen zur Phraseologie der ägyptischen Inschriften des Alten Reiches", *MDAIK* 13 (1944), 1-90.