

SOME REMARKS ON THE WESTERN MASSIF IN THE STEP PYRAMID COMPLEX

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The Polish excavation in Saqqara abuts the western side of the enclosure wall surrounding the funerary complex of the pharaoh Netjerykhet. A section of this wall and its foundation was uncovered and documented in 2001 (Myśliwiec 2002: 138). In 2007, a larger section, close to 24 m long, was documented. This wall is part of a monu-

mental stone structure referred to in topic literature as the Western Massif, which is integrally connected with the Step Pyramid complex (on the Western Massif, Firth and Quibell 1935: vol. I, 17; Lauer 1936: vol. I, 181–182, Fig. 206; vol. III, Pl. XXII; Lauer 1962: Pl. 14b; Swelim 1983: 62; Wilkinson 1999 [2003]: 251).



*Fig. 1. Part of the western face of the Western Massif, view looking south
(Photo F. Welc)*

The western face of the west wall of the Western Massif was uncovered in three of the easternmost squares in the Polish concession: 1901, 2001, 2101. The preserved height ranges from 2.50 m in the central part to 0.60 m at the northern and southern edges [Fig. 1]. There are ten courses of stones discernible in the central part [Fig. 2]; most of these are of local Eocene limestone designated as the Saqqara Member of the Maadi Formation. The stones are of varied shape and size, bearing no traces of regular dressing, which suggests that they could have been taken from layers of the limestone intercalated with marls (so-called “rock

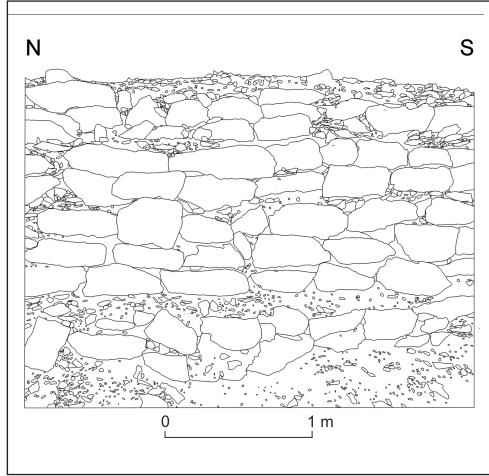


Fig. 2. Section of the western face of the Western Massif uncovered in Polish excavations and close-up view in drawing at top right (Photo and drawing F. Welc)

sandwich”; for the geology of Saqqara, see Said 1962: 99, 322; Handbook 2003: 192). The smallest are irregular rocks barely a few centimeters long, medium-sized blocks reach from 15 to 30 cm in height and from 30 to 45 cm in length, while the largest can be up to 45 cm high and 60 cm long. Fine limestone detritus, crushed bricks and sand fill the spaces between particular stones. A similar structure of the wall has been observed also in other parts of the Western Massif, for example, in section II (Firth and Quibell 1935: vol. II, Pl. 92, Phot. 1–3).

The outer layer of stones forming the face of the wall was bonded with grayish-green grout composed of limestone, sand, small pebbles and fragmented pottery. This last, somewhat curious component of the mortar has now contributed importantly to a debate of long standing concerning the dating of the Western Massif.

Numerous diagnostic fragments belonging to two types of vessels have been recorded among the sherds recovered from the mortar. Only one piece can be attributed to an ovoid jar, while the majority represents *slender jars*

(referred to as ‘beer jars’ in archaeological studies) with a collar under the rim [Figs 3–4].

The latter type comes in two sub-types, one with a sharply finished collar and deep undercutting, and the other with a gentle collar and shallow undercutting. Vessels of this type were handmade of Nile B2 or C fabric (designation of the clay according to the *Vienna System*), the upper parts by coiling, the bottoms by hollowing and pinching. No surface treatment is in evidence, but then the surface of the sherds from the Western Massif wall structure is covered with grout. Parallels to the beer jars are known from the Memphite necropolis, including the funerary complex of Netjerykhet, which yielded a deposit of 300 such vessels near the northern temple (Firth and Quibell 1935: Pls 25, 102, nos 18, 20), and the nearest vicinity of the complex (Ghaly 1994: 66–69, Pl. 5), covering also the necropolis in the Polish sector (Rzeuska 2002: 151–153, Fig. 1) as well as Dahshur (Alexanian 1999: 130–138, Pl. 54, nos M32–M33, M39). The parallels from Elephantine found in contexts dated to the

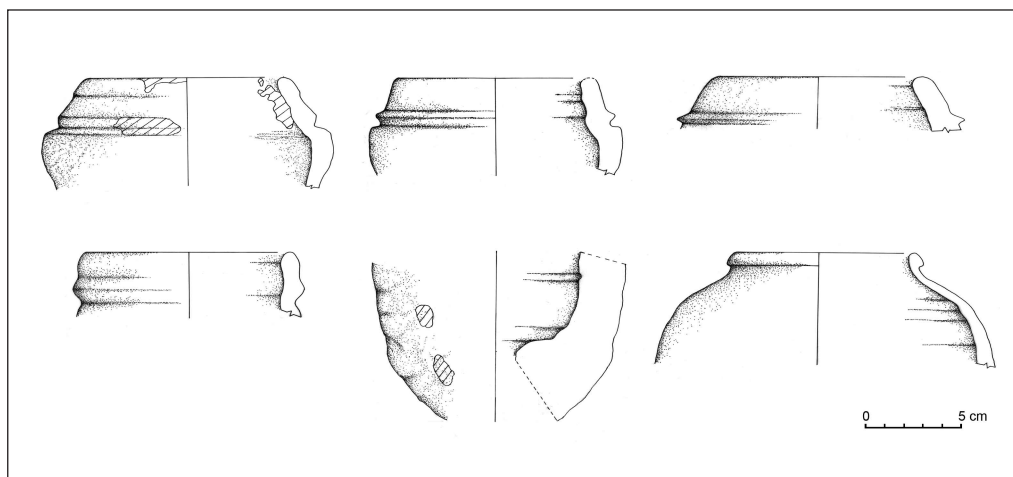


Fig. 3. Pottery found in the mortar bonding the stones of the Western Massif wall face (Drawing T.I. Rzeuska, inking M. Orzechowska)

reign of Netjerykhet are of particular importance, as they are the only ones precisely dated to the reign of this ruler (Raue 1999: 182–185, Pls 38.3, 39.12. The Memphis parallels mentioned earlier are mostly from mixed contexts, hence impossible to date precisely, or somewhat later than the reign of Netjerykhet. It is not even clear whether the jars from Netjerykhet's complex should be dated to his rule or possibly later times). Vessels of this type appear primarily in archaeological contexts dated to the Third–Fourth Dynasties (Alexanian 1999: 131), although they are

rooted traditionally in the very end of the Second Dynasty (Raue 1999: 181–182, parallels from el-Kab and Abydos).

Taking into consideration the pottery presented here, one is forced to question the view accepted by some scholars that the Western Massif is the superstructure of a royal tomb built in the times of the Second Dynasty, incorporated into the funerary complex of the pharaoh Netjerykhet (cf. Stadelmann 1985. See discussion in: Wilkinson 1999 [2003]: 251–252; Smith 1997: 381–382; Dodson 1996: 24; Kaiser 1994: 113–123; Stadelmann 1987: 252ff;

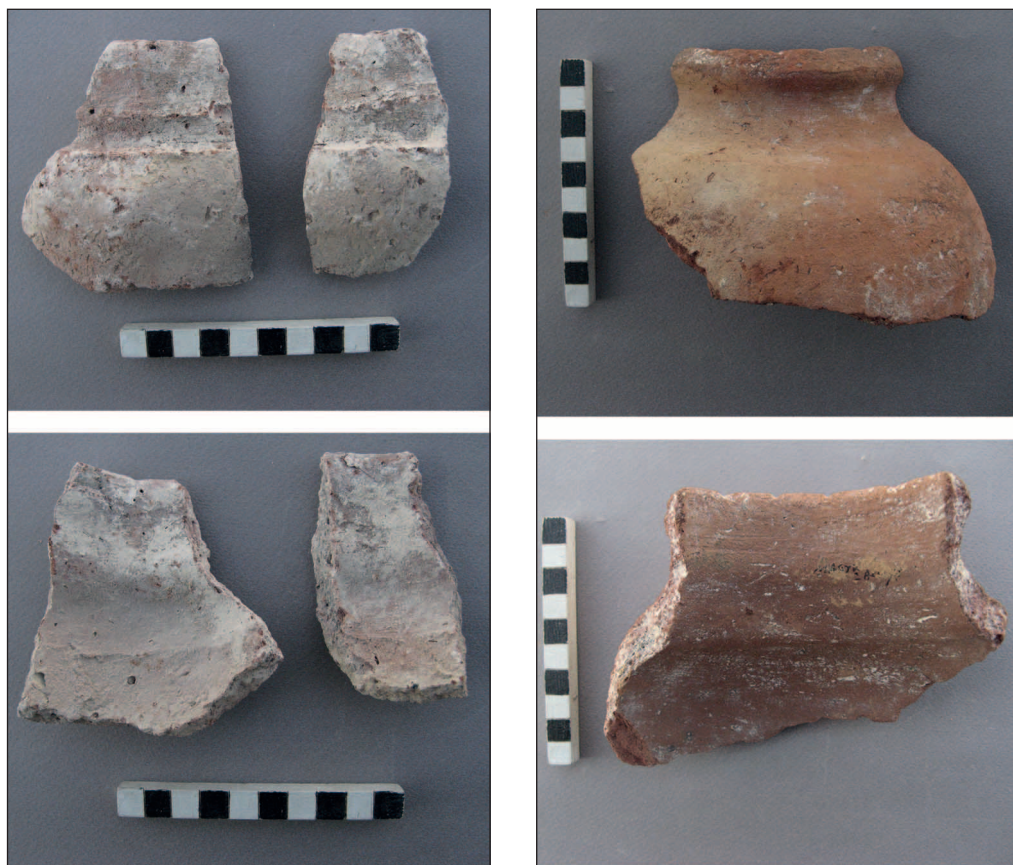


Fig. 4. *Examples of pots found within the structure of the Western Massif*
(Photo T.I. Rzeuska)

Stadelmann 1996: 795; Stadelmann 2007: 373; Walsem 2003: 13ff.; Wengrow 2006: 229). The Third Dynasty pottery found in the structure of the Western Massif suggests a slightly later date for the erection of this enigmatic feature or at least this particular section of the superstructure abutting the Polish sector of excavations, which would have been in view of the pottery evidence, either raised or reconstructed in the times of Netjerykhet.¹

Sherds of identical pots, also smeared with mortar, have been found in the late Old Kingdom necropolis. Of particular signifi-

cance are fragments from the fill of funerary shafts 94 and 95, sealed by a mud-brick platform erected in the Eighteenth/Nineteenth Dynasty (Myśliwiec 2007: 168; Rzeuska 2007: 185), which abuts in turn the western face of the enclosure wall of Netjerykhet's complex. The fact that these sherds were found in late Sixth Dynasty shafts, which were plundered soon after the funeral and then, sealed by a structure of New Kingdom date, leads us to suppose that the Massif, from whence they could have originated, was gradually falling into ruin even before the platform was erected.

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1 Such a dating of the Western Massif has been confirmed by geoarchaeological examination of strata adjoining the foundations of the Step Pyramid enclosure wall already in the Polish sector of excavations, cf. contribution of J. Trzciński, K.O. Kuraszkiewicz and F. Welc in this volume.

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