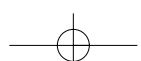
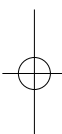
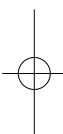


Karol Myśliwiec



SAQQARA





Regular excavations by various foreign archaeologists in Saqqara in the past 150 years have unjustifiably avoided the part of the site extending to the west of the enclosure of the world's oldest pyramid, the Step Pyramid of Djoser. Not the least among reasons for this state of affairs was the opinion, prevalent among scholars as well, that the area at the back of the structure could be little more than a rubbish heap or quarry-site at best.

This view was given a dramatic turnaround in 1987 when a team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University, directed by the author of the present contribution, surveyed the site with geophysical methods and then tested it to verify the results of the prospection. Not only did the area prove not to be a rubbish heap, but it turned out to be part of the royal necropolis, witnessing intensive use for more than 3000 years, from the Archaic period through the Byzantine Age. Despite

hugely promising results of the first season, the work could not proceed for another few years due to unexpected and non-scientific circumstances, but once resumed in 1996, it has been carried out annually ever since.

Upon returning to the site, the mission concentrated on extending the verifying trial pit that had been dug earlier on the imaginary axis of the pyramid extended westward. Already in the next year, digging just 100 m west of the west side of the pyramid revealed the tomb of a most important dignitary from the beginnings of the Sixth Dynasty. Vizier Merefnebef's mastaba proved exceptionally important as a historical source for the study of a twilight period preceding the first fall of the pharaoh's well organized state, but it also merits attention as a veritable masterpiece of Ancient Egyptian art from this period. The walls of the rock-cut funerary chapel preserved painted relief decoration, unique in content and astounding in its formal sophistication.

The vizier had all of three names and four wives, who were repeatedly represented on the tomb walls as a quartet of harpists. What more infallible sign of the highest dignitary usurping a king's prerogatives? Other scenes in the chapel depict the vizier participating in fowling and partaking of a sumptuous banquet where semi-nude dancers are engaged in acrobatics.

The fowling scene is a masterpiece of Egyptian painting, composing in reduced form a colorful kaleidoscope of Egyptian fauna in a scene full of dramatic power. It is indeed a veritable zoology encyclopedia from Pharaonic times. None of the known Old Kingdom hunting scenes have the colors preserved with such freshness, providing students of ancient Egyptian painting with a unique opportunity not only to admire the rich palette, but also to appreciate the refined shading that ancient painters used to render the tiniest of details of Egyptian nature. This is a painter's workshop revealed in previously unimagined aspects.

There is also drama hidden behind the uncovered reliefs and inscriptions. After the vizier's death and interment, someone had all of the representations of Merefnebef's sons destroyed with the exception of one where the son bore the same names as the father. It must have been this son who was responsible for the iconoclastic vandalism, which also concerned some of the inscriptions, especially the parts that referred to one of the pharaohs. As the king's name was discreetly passed over by the authors of the texts, we can only assume that it was Userkare, the usurper and alleged assassin of the first king of the Sixth Dynasty, Teti. Thus did the decoration of the vizier's tomb record for posterity the turbulent times of political, religious and social strife in the land

of the Pharaohs, leading in consequence to the fall of the Old Kingdom.

Next-door to Merefnebef's mastaba the excavation team uncovered a rock cut tomb belonging to yet another dignitary of the Sixth Dynasty. His name, not recorded in any other known Egyptian source, is read as "He-who-is-the-life-of-Nefertum" (Nyanhnefertem). It identifies the priest buried in this tomb with the youthful god of the Memphite triad, symbolized by the lotus flower. Therefore, one is not surprised to see the priest in one of the most important scenes in the tomb depicted in the company of his priestess-wife, smelling a lotus flower. This scene is important otherwise as well, for it appears not to have been finished, perhaps due to the untimely death of the tomb owner. As the work on this huge relief was curtailed when the different parts were still in various stages of completion, in its present shape it has become a static form of documentary illustrating the successive phases of the artist's creative effort. The carefully smoothed rock surface of the wall in the upper register of the scene still preserves traces of the original drawing that was to guide the sculptor's chisel. The rich polychromy that was ultimately to enhance the scenes was completed only in the northern part of the chapel, on the huge false door, for example, which was the place where the world of the living was supposed to meet the realm of the dead.

Many other noblemen of the Late Old Kingdom, whose mastabas are now being uncovered by Polish archaeologists, chose the area between these two tombs and the pyramid of Netjerykhet to be buried. Most were plundered already in antiquity but even so, the rubble of the brick superstructures and the rock-cut burial

shafts, some reaching a depth of 10 m, have provided much new and important information about the dead. The burial chambers at the bottom of the shafts yielded the mummified bodies of these dignitaries, whose names and titles are carved on stone false doors ripped from their original place by robbers and thrown down the shafts. Rich is the surviving assemblage of objects belonging to the tomb inventory, including wooden figures of the deceased and miniatures of objects needed in the afterlife, but primarily vessels of all kinds and materials. The most numerous are ceramic pots used in burial rites during the funeral, as well as later in cult practice connected with the worship of the dead. Meticulous research on this category of finds has permitted a reconstruction of the funerary rites in much greater detail than afforded hitherto by a study of surviving hieroglyphic texts.

At the extreme western end of its sector, the Polish team traced a section of the so-called Dry Moat, a monumental ditch cut into the rock, 40 m wide and up to 20 m deep. Both facades of this feature, which in the explored section west of the Step pyramid runs from north to south, were excavated to a depth of c. 5 m. Yet, what proved truly sensational were the rock-cut structures of differentiated character found in the uppermost tier of both facades. Most of these were tombs, but a few remain a mystery. One subterranean corridor cut in the eastern facade led to a chamber of undoubtedly ritual importance during the Sixth Dynasty. Lying under a deposit of animal bones bringing to mind the god Seth was a huge wooden harpoon with carved decoration that must have played a significant role in the worship of both Horus and pharaoh. Was this then a crypt belonging to a sacral structure

connected with the cult of a dead ruler, similar to those recorded in the "Pyramid Texts"?

At the opposite, eastern edge of the investigated area, by the huge enclosure wall of Netjerykhet's pyramid, archaeologists have explored the remains of older structures destroyed by the builders working on Imhotep's unique pyramidal project. The foundations of this wall turned out to be based on the ruins of a big mud-brick building of unquestionably Second Dynasty date. Even more surprising was the discovery of a funerary structure, deceptively like the royal tombs from the first half of the Second Dynasty located just a few hundred meters to the south. This mysterious structure with its sloping ramp from the north, lying a few meters west of the pyramid's enclosure wall, turned out to be a "false tomb" with a chamber terminating immediately behind the entrance, constructed perhaps intentionally in an effort to draw attention away from the tomb proper which would be located a little further to the south. The vast platform of mud-brick that covered the whole area in later times could be an indication of the presence of such a tomb in this spot. Particularly diagnostic is the fact that the northern edge of the platform is in line with the rock-cut entrance to the "false tomb", even though the constructions are found on different levels. Further investigations will help to determine the date and function of these structures.

Yet another mystery is associated with what is found in the upper layers of the site. Immediately under the surface of a thick layer of drifted desert sand there lies the Upper Necropolis, as referred to by the excavators. It includes burials from the Ptolemaic and Early Roman periods. What is truly surprising is that this important part

of the necropolis appears to have been “forgotten” for the whole period from the end of the third millennium BC to the beginning of the Ptolemaic period. For two thousand years there appear to have been no burials in this to be carried out, assuming the few displaced New Kingdom sherds are disregarded. What caused the sudden and intensive return to burial practices in this area in the late 4th century BC? The answer to this question may be forthcoming from excavations cemetery in the northern part of the area, closer to the Serapeum and especially the Ptolemaic exedra.

The Upper Necropolis with its more than 400 burials uncovered to date has

yielded important homogeneous material for the study of Memphite society in the Ptolemaic period. Skeleton inhumations appear to have been just as frequent as mummy burials furnished often with richly painted cartonnages and interred in coffins made of various materials. The contribution to anthropological studies, as well as research on the burial practices of the period is immeasurable. Multidisciplinary research, which has covered this entire material, will soon be published as volume III in the Saqqara series. Volume I (2004) concerned the tomb of the vizier Merefnebef, while volume II (2006) constitutes a study of Late Old Kingdom pottery from the necropolis.

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*The Old Kingdom necropolis in the morning shadow of the Step Pyramid. In the foreground, a fragment of the pyramid's enclosure wall and a mud-brick platform (New Kingdom?) covering this part of the necropolis
(Photo J. Dąbrowski)*



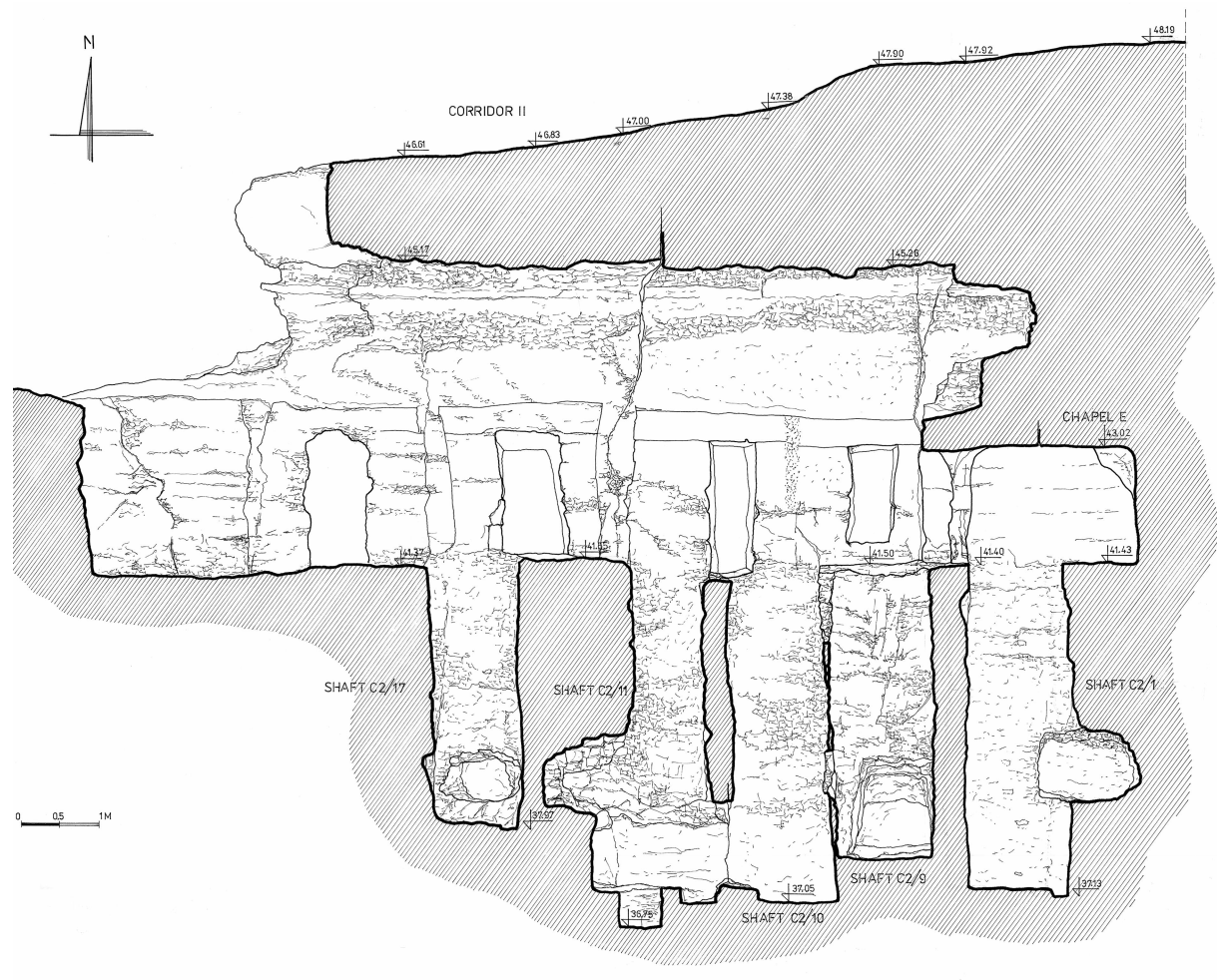


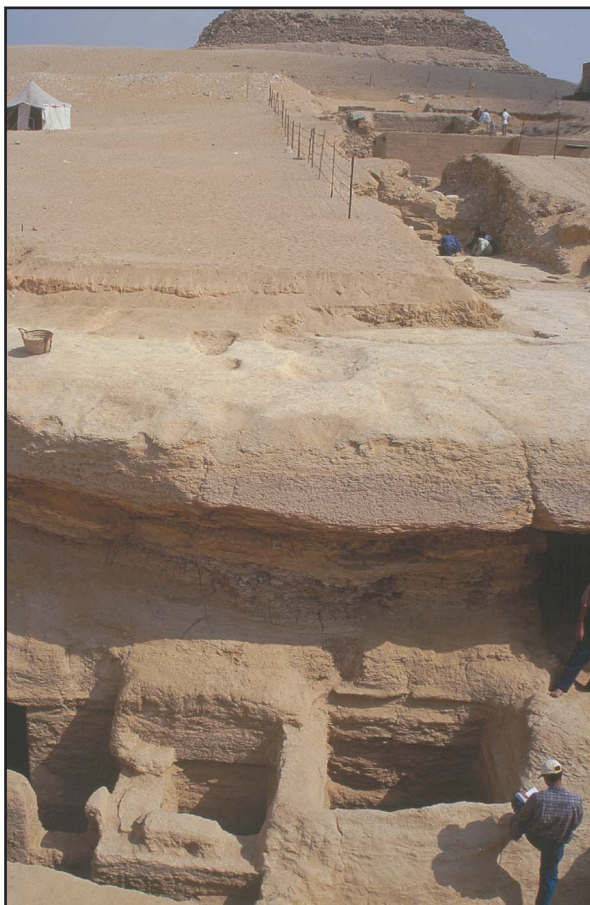
North edge of the mud-brick platform (New Kingdom?)
in line with the rock facade of a funerary structure from
the Archaic period (Second Dynasty?)
(Photo J. Dąbrowski)

Entrance to a pseudo-tomb of Archaic date
(in the center), enclosure wall of a brick mastaba
of the Sixth Dynasty (on the right) and mud-brick
platform (New Kingdom?) superimposed on
tombs of the Old Kingdom (in the background)
(Photo J. Dąbrowski)



Vertical cross-section through collective tomb (Corridor 2) cut in the rock of the eastern facade of the Dry Moat west of the Step Pyramid.
(Drawing Beata Błaszczuk)





*Eastern façade of the Dry Moat on the west of Netjerykhet's pyramid
(Photo M. Jawornicki)*

*Excavations by the western facade of the Dry Moat, west of the Step Pyramid
(Photo M. Jawornicki)*





Fragment of polychromed relief showing dancers in a banqueting scene from the south wall of the cult chapel in the tomb of the vizier Mererhebef (Photo S. Sadowski)

Mummy cartonnages from the Ptolemaic period (Burial 406)
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

