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## Saqqara: A Case of Reassembly of the Dead Body Burial 14 (Pit I)

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## SAQQARA

### A CASE OF REASSEMBLY OF THE DEAD BODY BURIAL 14 (PIT I)

Zbigniew E. Szafrąński

In the late Ptolemaic and Roman Period the funerary function of the mastaba of vizier Meref-nebef was revived. In its area, a densely crowded burial-ground of commoners gradually came into being.<sup>1</sup> The simple burials, found in upper strata (around and above the tomb), with or without coffins and with but humble funerary equipment point to the relatively poor inhabitants of what will have been an agricultural settlement not far away.

Stratigraphically, the deepest (level: 9.04) in Pit I, and chronologically probably the earliest, was the burial containing a painted cartonnage (Burial 4). It was found in an anthropomorphic case hewn in the rock of the early court. The cartonnage is dated to the late Ptolemaic Period.<sup>2</sup>

Interesting observations could be made on the skeletons. The first part of an anthropological analysis has been prepared by Henryk Rysiewski.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. Myśliwiec and T. Herbich, with contribution by A. Niwiński, Polish Research at Saqqara in 1987, in: *Et Trav* xvii, Warsaw 1995, pp. 186-195; K. Myśliwiec, Saqqara, Excavations 1996, in: *PAM* VIII, 1996 (1997), p. 109. See also K. Myśliwiec, Saqqara, Excavations 1997, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> After A. Niwiński, in: K. Myśliwiec *et alii*, o.c., 195, Figs 15-17. See also color photographs (by K. Myśliwiec) of the cartonnage, in: Z.E. Szafrąński, Na zachód od najstarszej piramidy świata w Sakkara, *Archeologia Żywa* (=AZ) 1/1997, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Skeletons from Burials 5-20, 22-28 and 32-33, Pit I, have been examined, cf. H. Rysiewski, *Sprawozdanie z pobytu naukowego w Arabskiej Republice Egiptu w miesiącach wrzesień - październik 1997 roku*, [Warszawa 1998], an unpublished report (in Polish) deposited at the Polish Centre of the Mediterranean Archaeology. I thank Henryk Rysiewski for his kind help and information.

### BURIAL 14 AT SAQQARA (PIT I/C)

The burial was located c. 10 m to the southwest of the entrance to the vizier's tomb (level: 8.04). It was a skeleton burial placed in clean, wind-blown desert sand. Orientation from west to east with the head to the west (Fig. 1).

Length of the preserved body: 1.40 m. The skeleton from the pelvis downwards is missing; however, the head of the right femur<sup>4</sup> is preserved. There were no traces of disturbance in the burial area.

The skeleton of an adult male stretched out on his back, with arms alongside the body. The ribs were found dislocated (Fig. 1). The body was wrapped in linen. Fragments adhered to the whole skeleton and the weave was especially well observable on the skull (Fig. 2).

A perforation was attested in the right humerus, in its lower part (*fossa ulnaris ossis humeri*).<sup>5</sup> The skull was found with a swab in the left eye socket (figs 1 and 2), and a wooden stick, perhaps a midrib of a palm leaf, c. 15 cm long, inside the spine where it joined the skull (*foramen magnum*). The stick was inserted inside at least four cervical vertebrae (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

If these details bear witness to an intense medical treatment, they would also explain why the lower part of this body is missing. However, perhaps there could also be another explanation of the reassembly of the dead body.

### BURIAL I 407/1 AT ABUSIR

Interesting observations have been made on a skeleton found in the secondary cemetery around the mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir.<sup>7</sup> The body of a juvenile male, buried in a wooden coffin,

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<sup>4</sup> After Rysiewski, o.c., Table 1.0, observation 37.

<sup>5</sup> Rysiewski, loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> See also Szafranski, o.c., 31.

<sup>7</sup> E. Strouhal and L. Bareš, *Secondary Cemetery in the Mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir*, Prague 1993, pp. 28, 47, 52, Plan 6, Pls 15:3 and 26:1.

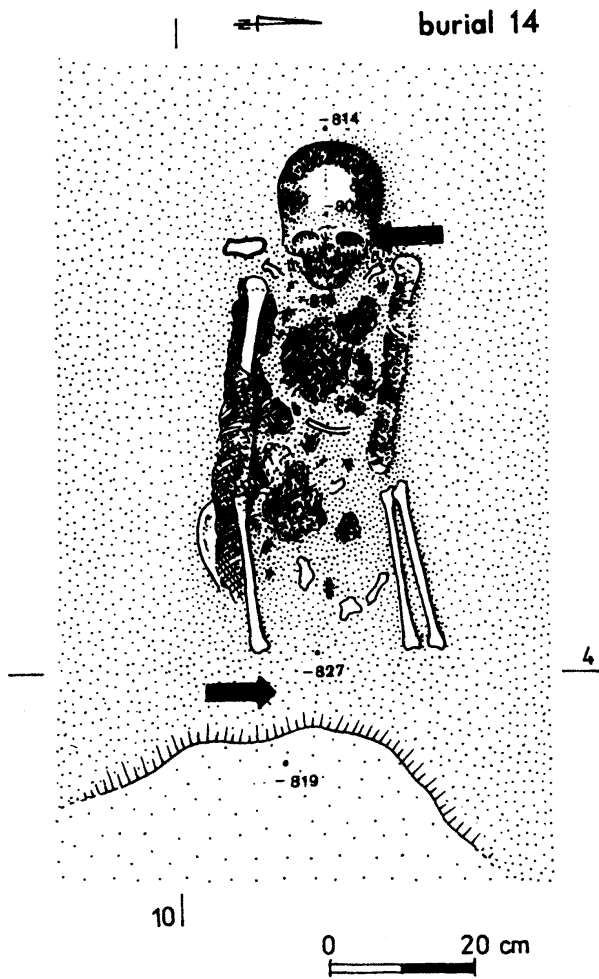


Fig. 1. Saqqara 1996. Pit I/C, Burial 14. Arrows point to a swab in the left eye socket and to the missing parts of the skeleton. Early Roman Period.  
Drawing M. Puzkarski.

rested on plant stalks. It had the same orientation, that is, west to east, as the skeleton found in Burial 14 at Saqqara. The thorax of the young man from Abusir was turned with the spine upwards and the bones of his right arm were pushed inside it. Two wooden sticks were found through the thorax.

In the opinion of L. Bareš it might have been a case of cutting up the body and its fixation with the aid of sticks for fear of return. Such a practice he calls "vampirism".<sup>8</sup>



*Fig. 2. Face of the skull of Burial 14 showing the swab in the left eye socket and linen preserved on the skull.  
Phot. R. Meszka.*

### **A CASE OF CUTTING UP THE DEAD BODY IN ROMAN TIMES**

There are differences and similarities attested in the treatment of the dead body in the two cases. The bodies were found cut up. In both cases the separate parts of the body were fixed with the aid of wooden sticks, i.e., the head of the man from Saqqara and the thorax, the spine and perhaps the right arm of the young man from Abusir. It is rather clear that the fixation took place after

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 28 note 4.



*Fig. 3. Wooden stick placed inside the hole (foramen magnum) at the bottom of the skull.  
Phot. R. Meszka.*

the death of the two persons. It is not clear, however, whether the cutting up of the bodies of the two men occurred after their death.

The causes of death and the conditions of the bodies at the time of death are unknown. In the case of the man from Abusir, as the excavator suggests, the dead body was cut up and its fixation with wooden sticks might have been due to fear of the person's return.

A case where a dead body was stiffened with plant stalks is known

from North Saqqara.<sup>9</sup> Beside Burial I 407/1, three other burials, where the body rests on plant stalks, are reported from Abusir.

The stalks were most probably used to stiffen the dead bodies.<sup>10</sup> Similar cases are also known from our area at Saqqara,

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<sup>9</sup> Midribs of palm leaves have been used there, cf. J.E. Quibell and A.G.K. Hayter, *Teti Pyramid. North Side*, Le Caire 1927, p. 2.

i.e., Pit I. As before, we do not know condition of the bodies at the moment of their burial.

Burial I 407/1 from Abusir is dated to the Roman Period,<sup>11</sup> perhaps to early Roman times. There are several reasons for such a dating. The above mentioned skeleton from North Saqqara and three other burials from Abusir are also dated to the Roman Period.<sup>12</sup> The early Roman Period fits stratigraphically the time of burial of the man in question at Saqqara.

#### **BURIAL 14 AND OTHER BURIALS OF THE SAME LEVEL**

As it has been said, the graves from Abusir and Saqqara have the same orientation. From the same level and of the same orientation are other tombs at Saqqara (Pit I). They are, in order from south to north, remains of Burial 11 (level: 8.08, Pit I/B), four mummies of Burials 10 (9.96, I/B), 8 (8.13, I/B), 2 and 1 (7.72, I/A, two child mummies). The basic orientation of the burials in this area was the direction with the head to the west and feet to the east. The skeleton of Burial 3 (7.98, I/A) was oriented E-W, with the head pointing to the east.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it comes from the same level, which may be dated to the early Roman Period.

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<sup>10</sup> Strouhal and Bareš, o.c., p. 52, and: p. 28, plan 8 (skeletal burial I 397: four plant stalks (2-4 cm were placed lengthwise under the skeleton); p. 31, plan 9, pl. 16:1 (skeletal burial I 414: stalks are not reported); p. 42, pl. 16 (burial in a coffin J 1973: two plant stalks were placed lengthwise under the skeleton).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 51f., 54.

<sup>12</sup> Quibell and Hayter, o.c., p. 3; Strouhal and Bareš, o.c., p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> As for Burials 1-3, see Myśliwiec *et alii*, o.c., 186, fig. 8.