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West Saqqara: Excavations, 1998

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WEST SAQQARA

EXCAVATIONS, 1998

Karol Myśliwiec

The Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission continued its work in the area to the west side of the Djoser pyramid from August 17 until October 12, 1998.¹

The main objective of the campaign was the conservation of reliefs and paintings in the tomb of vizier Meref-nebef, unearthed by the mission in 1997.² A report on the conservation work follows.³

¹ Members of the expedition included: Prof. Dr. Karol Myśliwiec, Director; Dr. Zbigniew Szafranski, egyptologist; Mrs. Teodozja Rzeuska, Mr. Kamil Kuraszkiewicz and Mr. Mariusz Jucha, archaeologists-egyptologists; Mr. Zbigniew Godziejewski, Ms. Anna Kłosowska, Mr. Rajmund Gazda and Mr. Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka, conservators; Mr. Tomasz Herbich, geophysicist; Prof. Dr. Elżbieta Mycielska-Dowgiałło and Mrs. Barbara Woronko, geologists-sedimentologists; Dr. Salima Ikram, egyptologist-palaeozoologist; Mr. Marek Puzzkarski, draftsman and architect; Mr. Zbigniew Kość, photographer; Mr. Hubert Chudzio, Mr. Michał Bożek, Mrs. Katarzyna Crivelli and Mr. Giovanni Crivelli, documentalists. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by Mr. Ragab Mohammed Abu Leila, Mission Inspector. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Prof. Dr. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and to Dr. Zahi Hawass, Director of the Giza Antiquities. Their helpful attitude and prompt decisions enabled us to accomplish our tasks properly and without delay. Our work would have been impossible to complete without the cooperation of Mr. Mohammed Hagra, Director of Saqqara District, and Mr. Magdy el-Ghandour, Chief Inspector of Saqqara South, to whom we also address words of thanks.

² J. Leclant et G. Clerc, Fouilles et travaux en Égypte et au Soudan, 1996-1997, *Orientalia* 67/1998, pp. 351-353(r), pl. XXII (15); K. Myśliwiec, *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), pp. 90-99; id., A new mastaba, a new vizier, *Egyptian Archaeology* 13 (1998), pp. 37-39; id., Le vizir retrouvé de Saqqara, *Le monde de la Bible* 115 (novembre-décembre 1998), p. 74; id., Nowe oblicza Sakkary. Rewelacyjne odkrycia polskich archeologów w Egipcie (Tuchów 1998); id., Polskie odkrycia przy najstarszej piramidzie świata, *Alma Mater. Kwartalnik Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* 8 (1998), pp. 35-36; id., "Aleja zasłużonych" po zachodniej stronie najstarszej piramidy - odkrycia w Sakkarze, *Meander* 3 (1998), pp. 231-251; Z. Szafranski, Nieznany wezyr krola Teti, *Archeologia Żywa* 1/6 (1998), pp. 2-8.

³ See the report by Z. Godziejewski in this volume.

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Final documentation of the tomb for publication was the other chief task this year. Practically all of the reliefs and paintings were copied in 1:1 scale [Fig. 1] using a standing frame, which was designed and constructed specially for the purpose and which enabled the extremely friable decorated surfaces to be copied without touching. Photographs of all the texts and scenes have been made as well. The documentation will be completed once the protective wall erected the previous year

to protect the tomb facade is removed. This is planned for the beginning of the next campaign, when a kind of larger kiosk protecting the entrance to the mastaba will be constructed.

Specialist studies were undertaken. Geologists continued a study of the sedimentation in the excavated area,⁴ and a palaeozoologist examined animal bone fragments.⁵ Studies on the pottery, which makes up the biggest part of our finds, were also continued.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

FACADE OF THE FUNERARY CHAPEL OF MEREF-NEBEF

The extreme friability of the relief and painting decorating the niche in the tomb facade was the reason why the facade had not been uncovered in the previous campaign. A meter thick accumulation of soil, stone and brick rubble (which had been left in front of it at the close of the last season and was stayed in place with a solid stone wall shielding the entrance to the tomb) was now removed gradually. Successive parts of the decoration received immediate conservation treatment.

The lower part of the facade appeared to be decorated with texts and scenes in two registers, extending on both sides of the entrance. The upper one is a long text in 51 columns, a version of the "testament" concerning juridical aspects of Fefi's funerary cult. Large parts of the text are missing. The lower register comprises eight large size figures of the vizier walking toward the entrance. They are composed symmetrically,

four figures on each side of the entrance. Representations with long and short wigs alternate. Each figure is accompanied by a line and a column of inscription giving the name of the vizier, some of his titles and the *imlhw*-formula referring to various gods. Two large size representations of the vizier in sunk relief decorate the lateral walls of the niche. Their legends repeat the dead man's titles.

AREA ADJOINING THE CHAPEL ON THE EAST

The area was subject to further excavation aimed at clearing the extension of the tomb and studying the archaeological context in the direction of the pyramid. The expedition concentrated first on completing the exploration of Shaft 1, which is hewn in the rock at a distance of c. 70 cm from the northeastern corner of the chapel.⁶ At a depth of 14.50 m, the shaft opened on the west into a burial chamber containing an unfinished white limestone sar-

⁴ On 1997 findings, see E. Mycielska-Dowgiałło and B. Woronko, Analysis of mineral deposits of the northern wall of Pit I, *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), pp. 106-115.

⁵ See the report by S. Ikram in this volume.

⁶ See *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), p. 91, fig. 1.

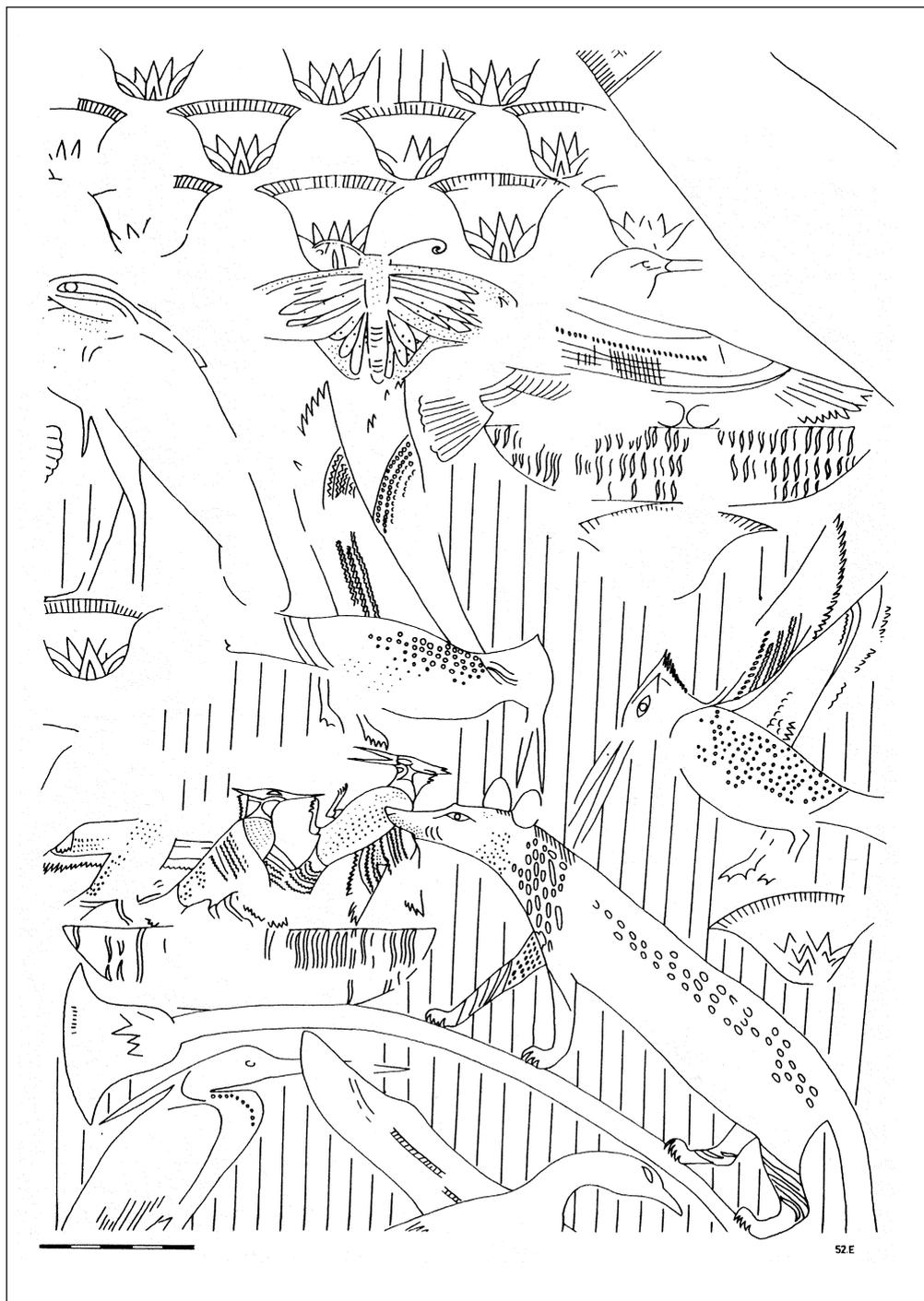


Fig. 1. Fragment of hunting scene on the eastern wall of the funerary chapel of Meref-nebef
(Drawing K. Kuraszkiwicz)

cophagus in the center. One corner of the heavy lid was lifted to reveal an empty interior. Although offering jars set beside the sarcophagus at various levels of the rubble filling testified to repeated visits in the chamber, it seems that the undecorated room was never used for burial purposes.

Our present work made it clear, however, that the mud-brick wall surrounding the court of the shaft's superstructure was later incorporated into the tomb of the vizier Meref-nebef [Fig. 2]. A cult chapel was added to the east side of the eastern wall of the court, i.e., facing the pyramid [Figs 2, 3 and 4].

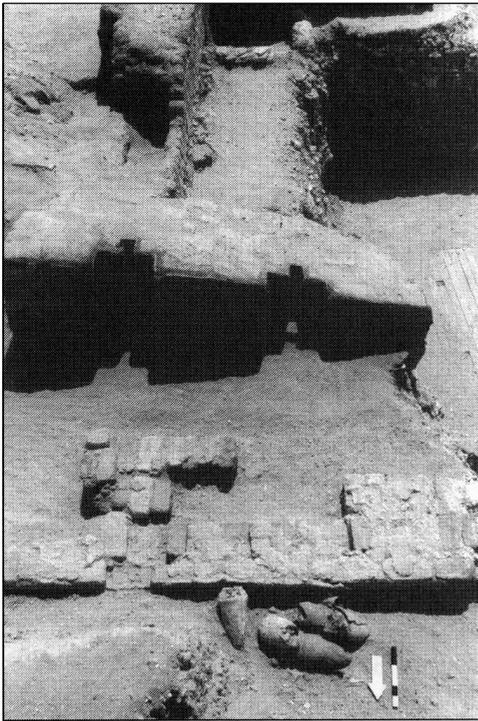


Fig. 2. Old Kingdom mud-brick structures and pottery deposit north of the wall surrounding Shaft 1 (Photo Z. Kość)

A rectangular niche was found cut into the thickness of the recessed mud-brick wall, with but a single brick width of the original structure left in the back of it. The niche, 0.90 m wide and 1.66 m long, is bordered with a thin mud-brick wall on its eastern side. At the point where this addition met the original wall, traces of the original whitewash have been preserved on the surface of both structures. The whitewash of the big wall with recesses is partly covered with bricks of the thin wall, proving that the latter had been added on to the earlier architecture. Thus, the big Shaft 1 with its superstructure appears to be earlier than the tomb of the vizier.

Three decorated stone blocks belonging to this cult chapel were found in front of it: the fragmentary false-door discovered last year (see the report for 1997),⁷ a large trapezoidal offering table [Fig. 3], and a long architrave found lying upside down, i.e., decorated side face down. The

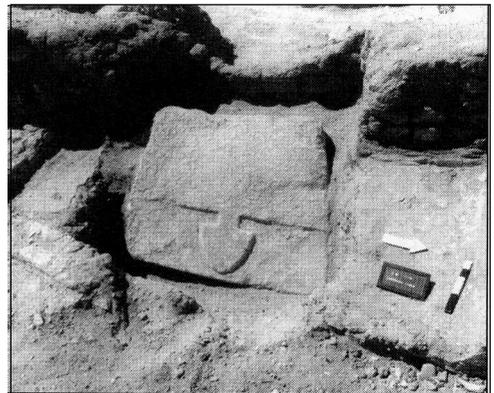


Fig. 3. Remains of cult chapel of Meref-nebef on the east side of the wall surrounding Shaft 1 (Photo Z. Kość)

⁷ PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998), p. 92, fig. 2; see the contribution by K. Kuraszkiwicz in this volume.

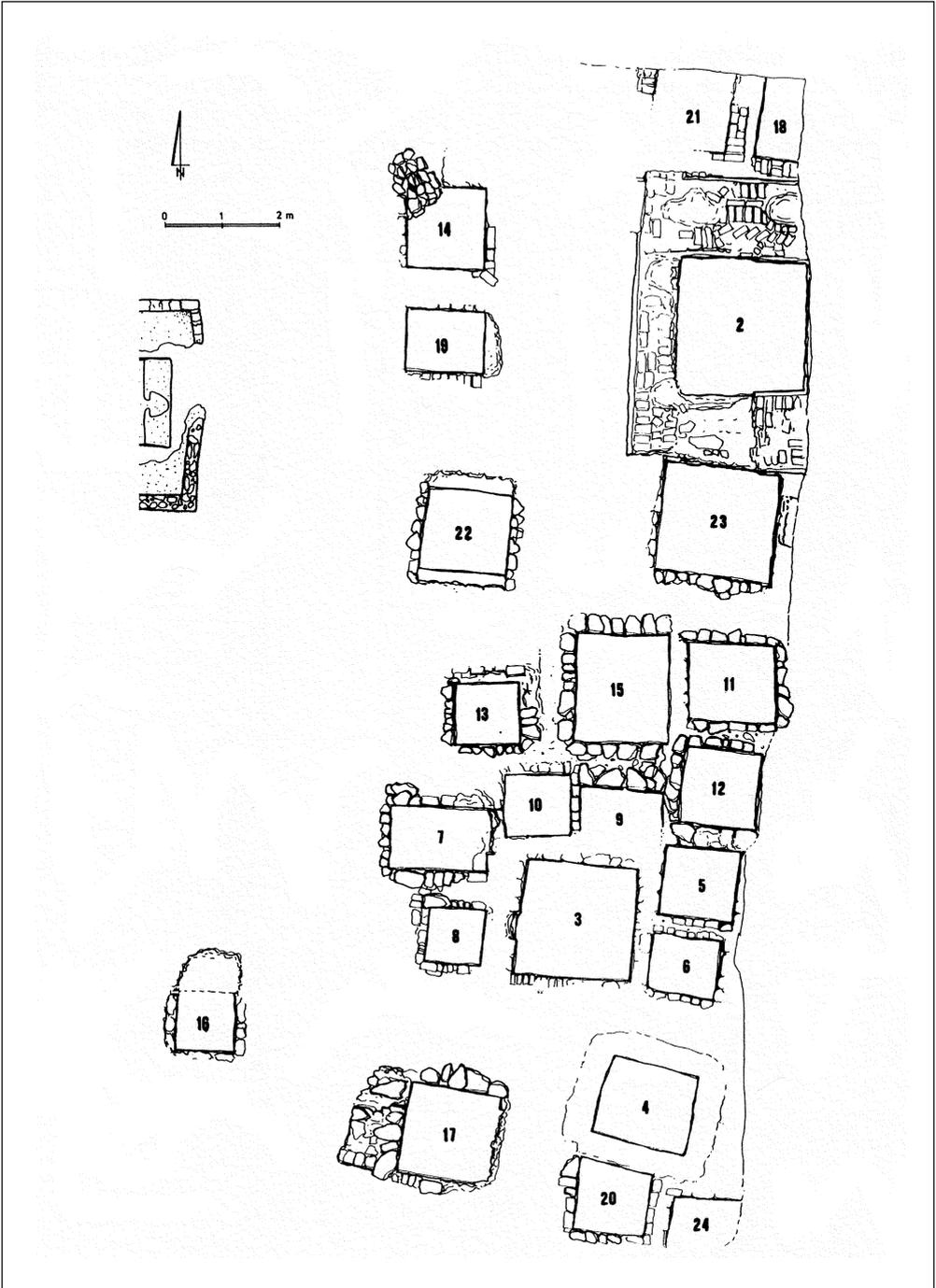


Fig. 4. Plan of Old Kingdom shafts to the east of the tomb of Meref-nebef
(Drawing M. Puzskarski)

first two elements are of a hard white limestone, providing no problems with their preservation; the lintel, however, is of a particularly friable local "mudstone",

which required a long and complicated conservation treatment before it could even be overturned and recorded without danger of complete disintegration.

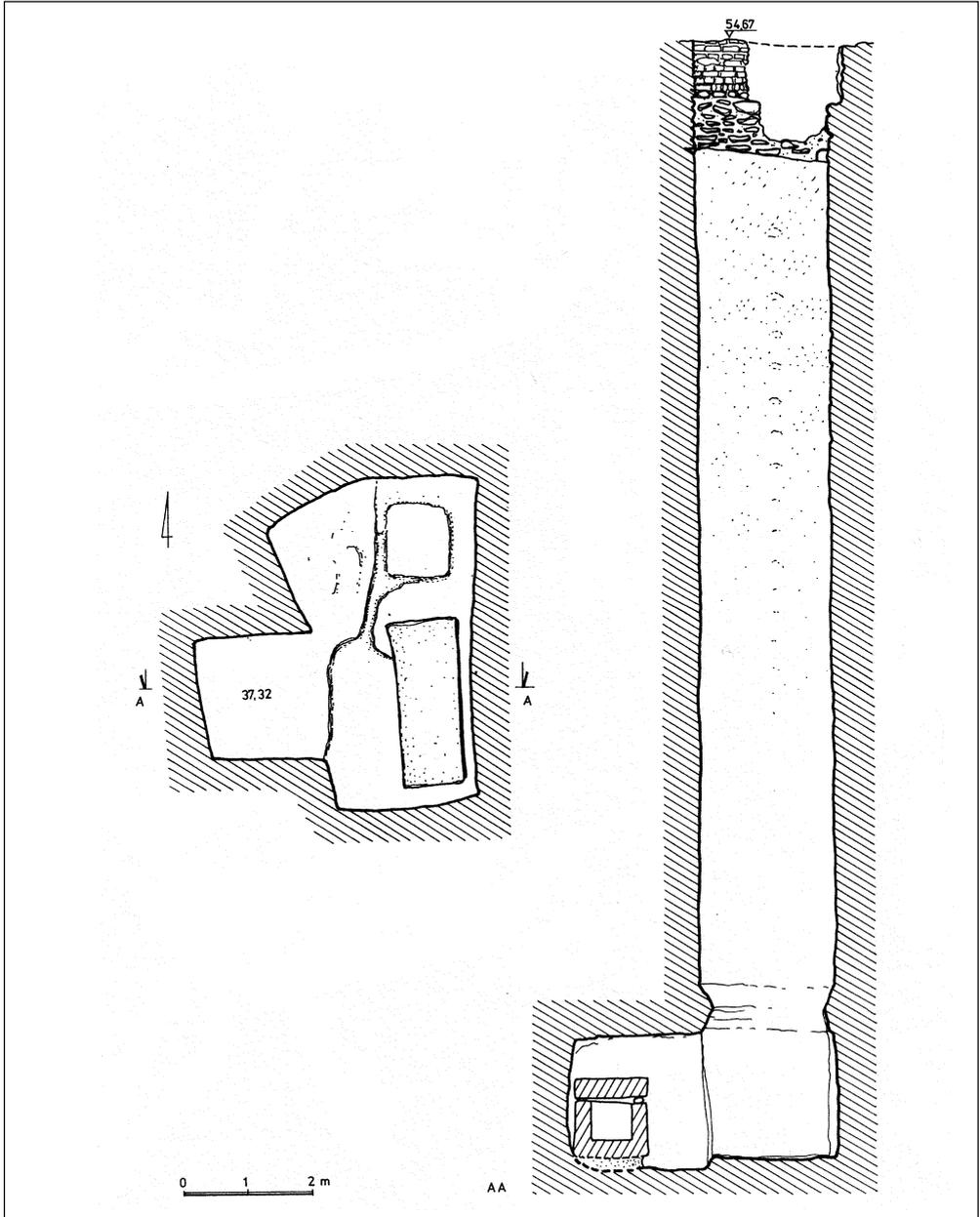


Fig. 5. Shaft 2, vertical and horizontal cross-sections.
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)

Excavations on the eastern side of the tomb (sector G, 20 m N-S, 12 m E-W) brought to light a conglomeration of shafts hewn in rock, always having a superstructure of stone or mud-brick walls. Most of the 24 shafts identified this season have been explored. The shafts vary in size (the deepest one is 17.70 m) and architecture. Usually, there is a burial chamber (never decorated) at the bottom of the shaft, but there are also shafts without this element. One of these (Shaft 2) contains a blank unfinished limestone sarcophagus with a skeleton inside [Fig. 5].

Complete or fragmentary skeletons were also found in some other shafts, but only traces of other objects belonging to their original furnishings accompanied them. Particularly interesting in terms of architecture is Shaft 3, which has a "false

bottom" approximately in the middle of the height. An irregular hole hewn in this "floor" leads to the lower section of this shaft, which ends in a small burial chamber. A rectangular depression in the floor of this space served as a sarcophagus and was found to contain a skeleton. Pottery from these shafts dates this part of the necropolis to the Old Kingdom, although the architectural and topographical aspects do not exclude continued use in the First Intermediate Period.

Some of the objects found in the shafts turned out to be of historical value. These include three false doors: a large size stele of Hetepu, a small stele of the lady Djes-ti [Fig. 6] and that of one Teti-ankh, only half of which survives [Fig. 7]. Although all of them were made of white limestone, their decoration displays various techniques. The thin and shallow hieroglyphs of the first one are in contrast with the clearly outlined signs of the second, and the painted inscription of the third. There are also three fragmentary inscriptions on limestone blocks belonging to door-jamb and lintels. These preserve some titles (without names) and fragments of offering formulas. Seven small stone models of vessels, a boat and other objects were found at the bottom of the burial chamber in Shaft 22, while two beautiful wooden statuettes of squatting men come from the upper part of other shafts. The eastern border of this funeral "quarter" is clearly delimited with the fronts of some small cult chapels cut into the mud-brick walls following an N-S course. Some elements of these simple chapels are made of limestone, and they resemble "false doors" in shape. In this respect, they look like the cult chapel of Meref-nebef described above, which was also situated on the eastern side of an architectural funerary complex.

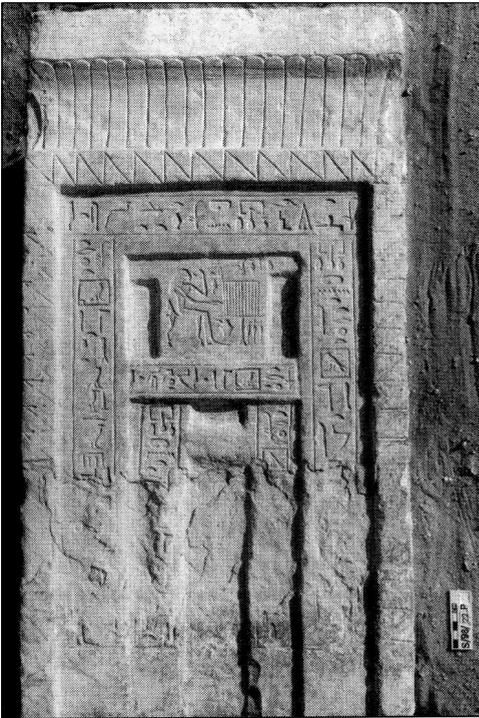


Fig. 6. "False door" of Djes-ti, priestess of Hathor (Photo Z. Kość)

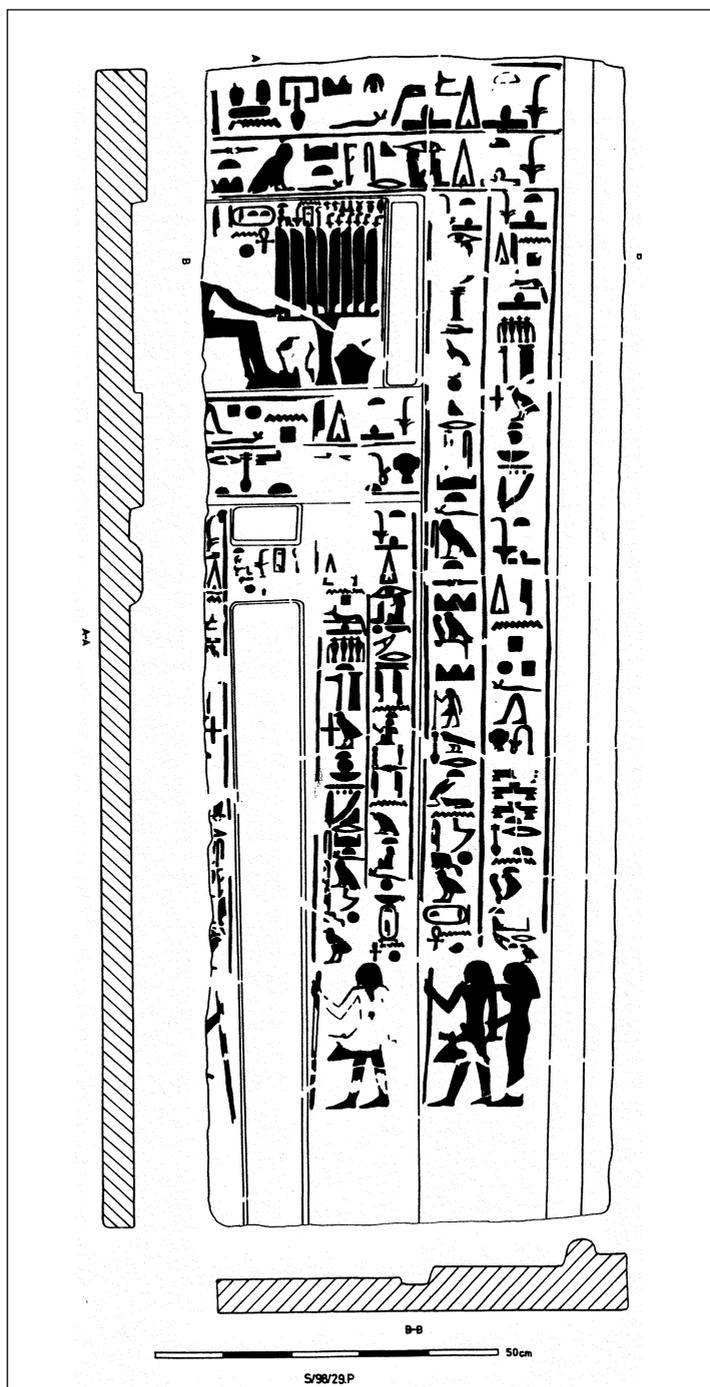


Fig. 7. Part of painted "false door" of Teti-ankh
(Drawing K. Kuraszkiwicz)

The Old Kingdom tombs were found covered with a thick layer of fine sand, in which numerous mummies, skeletons lying on mats, and wooden coffins were buried in Ptolemaic and Roman times.⁸ Three wooden coffins were found this year, two of these of anthropoid shape with painted lids. At least two layers of burials could be distinguished, and some mummies were inserted deep into and under Old Kingdom walls [Figs 8 and 9].

Some of them were covered with limestone slabs which were reused fragments of uninscribed "false doors". Several

pottery deposits found in this stratum contained fragments of large-size amphorae imported from the Greek islands at the turn of the 4th century BC. These have been reconstructed and documented along with a considerable number of Old Kingdom vessels.

A high mud-brick wall visible in the eastern trench wall of sector G proves that important architectural structures should be expected still further in the direction of the pyramid. Research in this area will be one of the objectives of the next campaign.

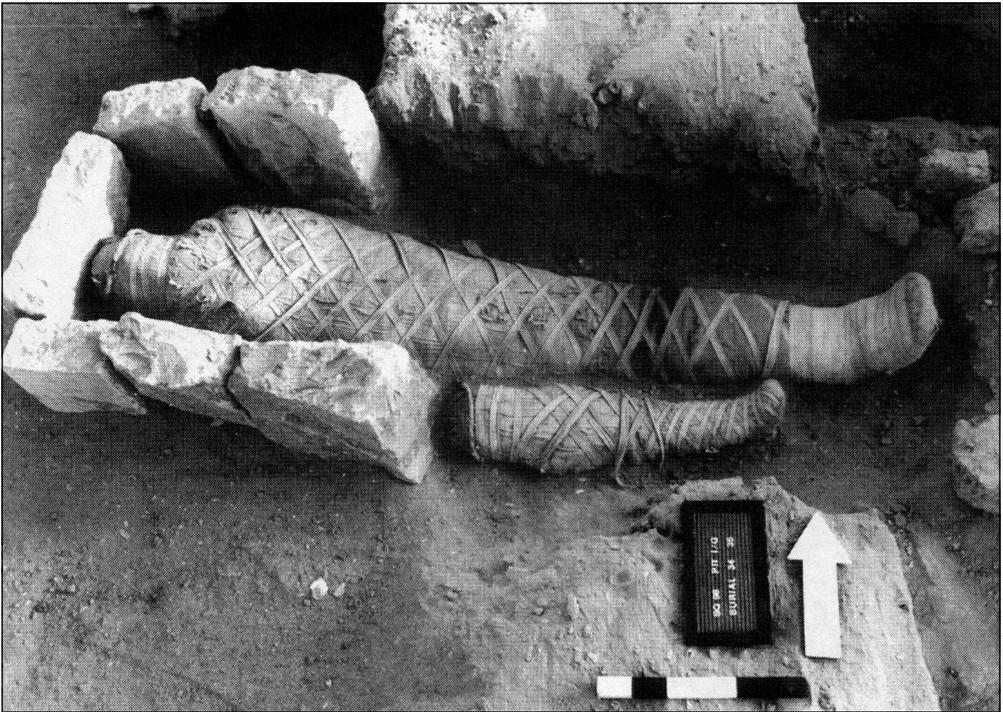


Fig. 8. Ptolemaic/Roman period burials nos 34-55, probably mother and child. Old Kingdom limestone blocks reused in the construction (Photo Z. Kość)

⁸ On a skeleton previously discovered in this area, see Z.E. Szafranski, A case of reassembly of the dead body, Burial 14 (Pit I), *PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998)*, pp. 100-105.



*Fig. 9. Ptolemaic/Roman period mummy under an Old Kingdom wall
(Photo Z. Kość)*