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Saqqara: Excavations 1996

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SAQQARA

EXCAVATIONS 1996

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The Polish-Egyptian mission worked at Saqqara from September 1 until October 13, 1996.¹ The area in question, which corresponds to the territory that was subject to research in the previous campaign, extends between the Djoser pyramid enclosure in the east, the top of the sandy hill located between the Gisir el-Mudir and the tomb of Ptahhotep in the west, the gafir's abode in the north, and the line extending from the southern border of Djoser's enclosure westwards. Three trial-pits excavated revealed that the area west of the pyramid at Saqqara had been used as a necropolis from the Archaic to the Byzantine Period.² Current archaeological work concentrated on trial pit I, which is located c. 100 m west of the pyramid's western edge.³ The pit was enlarged 10 m to the south, 2 m to the north and 5 m to the east, in order to uncover the further course of a thick Early Dynastic wall found traversing it. At its southern end the wall joined up with a similar wall, but not of the same construction, running generally E-W in the

¹ The mission comprised: Prof. Dr. Karol Myśliwiec, director; Prof. Dr. Ahmed Gouda Hussain, director of the geophysical team; Dr. Zbigniew Szafranski, Mrs. Teodozja Rzeuska, egyptologists; Mr. Marek Puskarski, artist; Mr. Rafał Meszka, photographer; Mr. Tomasz Herbich, Dr. Helmut Becker, Dr. Jorg Fassbinder, Mr. Hatim Hamdy Odah, Mr. Tareq Fahmy Abd el-Latif, Mr. Mahmud Mikawy, geophysicists. The Supreme Council for Antiquities was represented by Mr. Kazzafi Abd el-Rahim, the inspector.

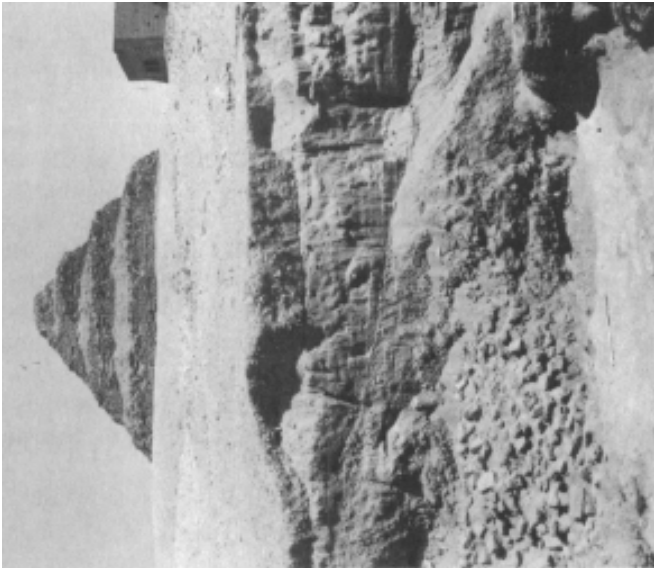
We should like to express our deepest gratitude to the authorities of the Supreme Council for Antiquities, both at Cairo and Saqqara, for their friendly and efficient aid throughout the season.

² K. Myśliwiec and T. Herbich, with a contribution by A. Niwiński, Polish research at Saqqara in 1987, *EtTrav*, Warsaw 1995, pp. 177-203.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 186-195.



*Phot. 2. Archaic court and early Old Kingdom shafts in pit I, seen from northeast.
Photo R. Meszka.*



Phot. 1. Polish-Egyptian excavations to the West of the Djoser pyramid. Eastern section of pit I. Mud brick roof over shaft II. Photo R. Meszka.

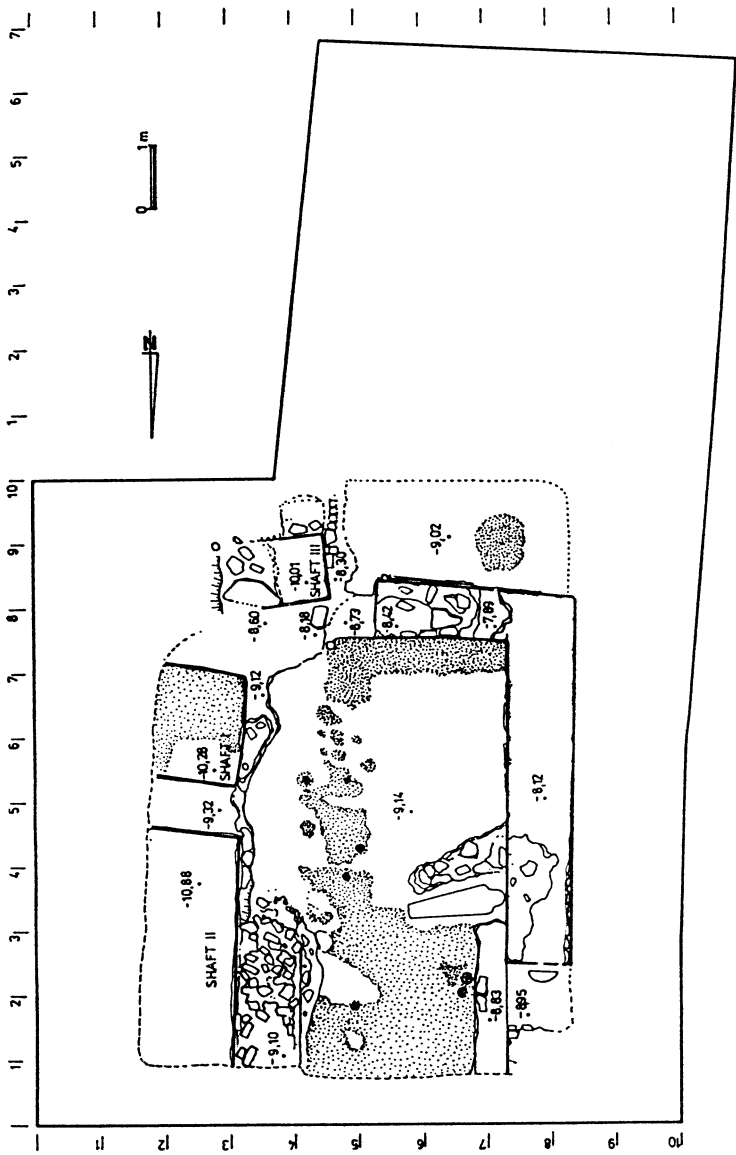


Fig. 1. Archaic and early Old Kingdom structures in pit I on the west side of the Djoser pyramid.
 Drawing M. Puzkarski.

direction of the Djoser pyramid. To judge by the joining, the latitudinal wall was most probably built somewhat later (Fig. 1).

The N-S wall looks like a compact conglomerate of stone blocks that are almost oblong in shape as far as can be observed. Larger white limestone and yellowish slate blocks, mostly of irregular shape, are part of this masonry as well. The mortar used in this wall is a dark, grayish-black Nile silt with many organic and mineral inclusions.

The E-W wall is quite different. It is 0.85-0.90 m thick, c. 1.60 m long in the western part and preserved up to 1.15 m above the leveled rock, upon which it stands. The visible blocks are of less regular shape and the masonry betrays a mediocre quality: slate, rarely limestone fragments, alternating with less compact gravel and a yellowish-gray sandy mortar, full of inorganic inclusions. Both the inner and outer face of the wall were plastered with a 0.5 cm layer of dark Nile silt, with another 0.5 cm layer of partly preserved finely polished white plaster on top of it.

In spite of technological differences, the two walls seem to be related in chronological terms. It is possible to distinguish phases of occupation in the two layers of clay covering the southern face of the E-W wall. The original layer covers the masonry down to the rock, while the lower edge of the secondary layer follows the outline of a diagonal ramp which descends eastwards on the wall's southern side.

Two large but shallow rock-hewn shafts were uncovered in the eastern section of the area excavated this year. The shafts are situated on either side of a rock-hewn wall, extending away from it and explored until the edge of the currently excavated pit. The partition wall, which is 0.72 m thick, goes on toward the Djoser pyramid; the rooms on either side may have been the subterranean galleries of a large tomb. Only their western parts have been explored, while the eastern ones are still covered with a 5.30 m high deposit of sand, gravel and stone (Phot. 1). The southern shaft (No. I) is 1.10 m deep

and the northern one (No. II) 1.60 m, measured from the upper edge of the rocky platform on which the original enclosure was built. Both shafts were roofed over with mud bricks, but the roof over shaft I consists, surprisingly, of just one layer of bricks. Since this shaft was found filled with irregular stones (mostly yellowish slate), it seems that this roof was a false one, just to cover the fill. Whether the shaft was meant as protection, camouflage or an impediment in reaching the tomb, or simply as a decent store of stone waste, remains an open question.

Speaking against its provisional character is the structure of the plinth upon which this simple roof rested. The filling consists of three layers of quite regular oblong stones, set in a recess hewn in the edge of the rock platform. One should note a dark coating of clay on the rocky surface of the shaft's western wall, the same kind as that which covers the rocky bottom of both shafts.

The shaft II roof structure is much more sophisticated (Phot. 2). It consists of many layers of bricks, the inner one forming what is most probably a "corbelled roof"⁴ (suggested by the recessed position of subsequent bricks in a reasonably well preserved place), which seems to have supported an oblique layer of bricks, covered with a thick coat of dark mud (2-5 cm), remains of which are still visible in its original position in the northern side of the excavation. On top of this was a mass of bricks resting on a broad offset, i.e. a stratum of bricks lying immediately on the rock platform. The lower part of the roofs' outer surface, covered with a thin coating of dark clay, is partly preserved on the western side of the pit. There are three large bricks (31x11x8 cm) lying one upon the other, immediately on the rock bottom of shaft II, at the northwestern edge. They seem to be

⁴ Cf. N. Swelim, A reason for the corbelled roof in Dynasty III and IV Pyramids, *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities*, XIV, pp. 6-12.

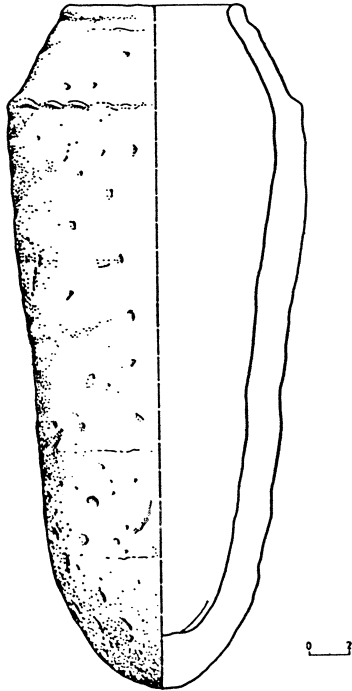


Fig. 2. Archaic jar found in pit I.
Drawing M. Puzkarski.

the remains of another roof and just behind them there is an empty space.

Pottery found in the stratum covering these structures indicates that the enclosure and shafts were used mostly in the times of the 2nd and early 3rd dynasties. A limited number of sherds may belong to the later Old Kingdom. Simple handmade Nile-silt jars, sometimes betraying poor workmanship, predominate here (Fig. 2). Finer plates and bowls with a red-burnished slip are much less numerous. Pottery sherds of later date, right down to the Byzantine period, were found in association with the later burials uncovered in the upper strata.

Deserving special attention is a category of objects which occurs in context with the early pottery, but is also found in the higher strata: small, rectangular faience tiles analogous to those used in the decoration of some walls in the subterranean galleries of the Djoser complex.⁵ The better preserved examples usually have a rectangular protrusion on the back. Some bear incised marks, most frequently three or four

⁵ *EtTrav*, pp. 186, 188-189, figs. 11-12.

parallel strokes; one preserves part of a figure which may be a hieroglyphic sign (scorpion ?). Some of these fragments were found near the bottom of shafts I and II, thus confirming their dating to the early 3rd Dynasty.

It seems that the sepulchral complex of the Old Kingdom was respected (or forgotten ?); anyhow, it was not reused for over 2000 years, the next intrusions, the simple burials in the upper strata, coming at the beginning of the Ptolemaic Period. The deepest in terms of stratigraphy, and chronologically probably the earliest, was a burial containing a painted cartonnage, found in an anthropomorphic grave hewn in the rock surface of the early court. It was covered with a mat, like some other bodies buried in a slightly higher stratum, on the surface of the mud brick roof of shaft II. These are not mummies, but skeletons wrapped in mats made of papyrus rush, laid in simple cases constructed of reused brick and stone fragments. The only mummy to be found in this group of burials is the one buried inside the E-W wall; it was completely carbonized inside.

A geophysical survey⁶ was carried out of the whole area and the section extending to the south, concentrating on the depression which runs N-S on the western side of the pyramid and begins near the tomb of Ptahhotep in the north.

⁶ The survey was carried out by a joint team of geophysicists from the National Research Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics, Helwan (Cairo), the Bayerische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Munich, and the Polish Centre of Archaeology in Cairo.