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Saqqara: Remarks on the Development of the Old Kingdom Necropolis

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REMARKS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OLD KINGDOM NECROPOLIS

Kamil Omar Kuraszkiewicz

Exploration of the extensive, multi-phase necropolis west of Netjerykhet's funerary complex¹ has brought evidence of three periods of activity, starting with the Old Kingdom (see *infra*), continuing during the New Kingdom² and then in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.³ The present paper contains some observations on the structure and development of the necropolis during

the late Old Kingdom, warranted by the present state of research.⁴

One of the few securely dated constructions in this necropolis is the tomb of Merefnebef built in the early Sixth Dynasty, probably during the reign of Teti.⁵ It is also one of the earliest tombs here, therefore it may provide a convenient reference point for the relative chronology of the site.

TOPOGRAPHY

Topographically, the presently known Old Kingdom necropolis extending west of Netjerykhet's funerary enclosure can be divided into four parts, significantly differing in their characteristic [Fig. 1].⁶

The first part comprises rock-cut tombs hewn in the sides (both east and west) of the Dry Moat.⁷ None of the presently known

tombs here can be dated to a period earlier than the very end of the reign of Pepy I.⁸ The structures on the western bank of the Dry Moat seem to be slightly earlier (dating from the middle Sixth Dynasty) than those on the eastern bank (late Sixth Dynasty to the First Intermediate Period).⁹ It must be remembered, however, that only a small

- 1 Since 1987; for previous bibliography, see: K. Myśliwiec, K. Kuraszkiewicz et al., The Tomb of Merefnebef, *Saqqara I* (Warsaw 2004), 31-36; excavation reports published in *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), *PAM XVI, Reports 2004* (2005) and in the present volume.
- 2 The enigmatic mud-brick platform seems to date from this period, cf. report by K. Myśliwiec in this volume.
- 3 See K. Myśliwiec, "The Ptolemaic period cemetery in West Saqqara", in: T. Bacs, ed., *A Tribute to Excellence. Studies Offered in Honor of Ern Gaál, Ulrich Luft and Láslo Török, Studia Aegyptiaca 17* (Budapest 2002), 349-359. The late necropolis will be published in the third volume of the Saqqara series.
- 4 The present paper is intended as a continuation and update of earlier studies on the stratigraphy of the site: Z. Szafranski, "Observations on stratigraphy", *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 91-96 and A. Ćwiek, "The stratigraphy of West Saqqara. Preliminary remarks", *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 109-117.
- 5 Myśliwiec et al., The Tomb of Merefnebef, op. cit., 246-250.
- 6 Ćwiek, *PAM XI*, op. cit., 111-113.
- 7 K. Myśliwiec, "West Saqqara. Excavations 2000", *PAM XII*, op. cit., 111-119; id., "West Saqqara in 2002", *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 121-125.
- 8 With the possible exception of Corridor 1, cf. K. Myśliwiec, *PAM XII*, op. cit., 112-116; S. Ikram, "Preliminary zooarchaeological report, 2000", *PAM XII*, op. cit., 127-132; K. Kuraszkiewicz, "Remarks on Corridor 1", *PAM XII*, op. cit., 133-137; T.I. Rzeuska, "The pottery", *PAM XII*, op. cit., 138-140; K. Myśliwiec, "Zwischen der Stufenpyramide und dem 'Trockenen Graben': Neue Entdeckungen in Sakkara", *Ma'at 1* (2004), 7-23.
- 9 Rzeuska, *PAM XII*, op. cit., 141-145; id., "The pottery, 2002", *PAM XIV*, op. cit., 133-140; id., "Pottery 2003", *PAM XV*, op. cit., 133-140.

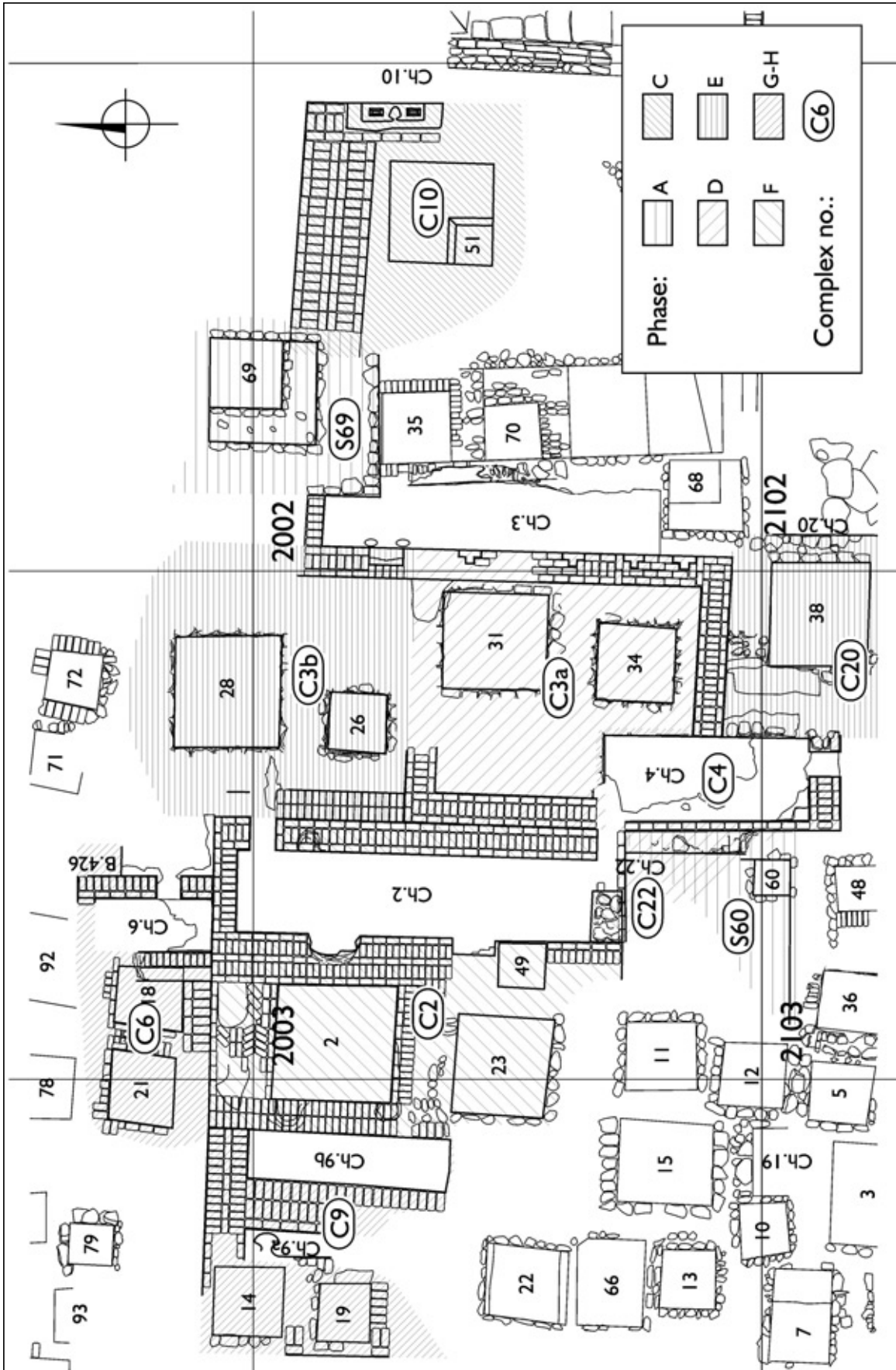


Fig. 1. Plan of the northeastern part of the excavated area (squares 1903, 1904, 2002, 2102, 2103) showing tomb complexes and construction phases (B is a destruction phase) (Drawing B. Błaszczuk)

section of the Dry Moat has been excavated and future research may change the general dating of the area.

The second area extends between the eastern bank of the Dry Moat and the tomb of Merefnebef. Remains of at least two Old Kingdom tombs have been found here (Chapels 7 and 8, Shafts 37 and 50), apparently brick mastabas with rock-cut burial installations.¹⁰ These mastabas and possibly other structures that existed here were destroyed, probably by natural processes, after the Old Kingdom and before the Late Period. The excavated area (only a narrow strip, c. 7 m wide) is too small to be considered representative of this part of the necropolis. Thus, any valid conclusions on the structure and the history of this area will be possible only after further excavations.

The third group of rock-cut structures is located in the central part of the excavated area, comprising the tomb complexes of Merefnebef, Nyankhnefertem and the Chapels 16 and 17.¹¹ It seems that this group of tombs continues northwards, perhaps incorporating also the structures found in 1987 in Trial Pit II (situated in squares 1906 and 1006 of the present square grid).¹² Tombs of a similar type can be expected also south of the tomb of Merefnebef.

The fourth of the areas extends between the mastaba of Merefnebef and the temenos

wall.¹³ This part of the necropolis consisted of mastabas, significantly differing in size, apparently most of them built of mud brick, but occasionally also of local stone. Some of the mastabas were furnished with offering places constructed of fine limestone. Due to the poor state of preservation of the mastaba superstructures, it is difficult to ascertain the precise spatial structure of the necropolis, as well as the chronological sequence of the tombs. Because of lack of relevant textual data, the main dating criteria come from ceramological analysis and site stratigraphy.¹⁴ Only a few mastabas are preserved in a state that permits a reconstruction of plan or even just the outline. In most cases, the superstructures of the mastabas are completely destroyed and only the substructures survive. Some of these shafts were evidently cut between earlier ones, but in most of the cases it is not possible to establish their chronological sequence. The shafts are generally arranged in N-S rows, but so close to each other, especially in the southwestern part of the area, that individual funerary complexes can hardly be distinguished. The tomb superstructures are much better preserved in the central part of the area (squares 2002, 2003 and partly 1903, 2004, 2102, 2103), which was subject to several construction and destruction episodes (probably both intentional and natural).

10 K. Myśliwiec, "West Saqqara. Excavations 2001", *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 128-129.

11 Myśliwiec et al., The Tomb of Merefnebef, op. cit.; id., "West Saqqara. Archaeological activities, 2003", *PAM XV*, op. cit., 111-122.

12 K. Myśliwiec, T. Herbich with contribution by A. Niwiński, "Polish research at Saqqara in 1987", *EtTrav XVII* (1995), 195-201.

13 K. Myśliwiec, "West Saqqara. Excavations, 1998", *PAM X*, op. cit., 81-89; id., *PAM XII*, op. cit., 108-111; Z. Szafranski, *PAM X*, op. cit., 91-95.

14 The author would like to express his gratitude to Dr. T.I. Rzeuska and Ms B. Błaszczuk for inspiring discussion on these issues.

TOMB COMPLEXES

Among numerous above- and underground structures discovered between Netjerykhet's enclosure and the tomb of Merefnebef, nine funerary complexes can be discerned. The complexes, most of them being anonymous, have been denoted with the chapel numbers or, when a chapel is not preserved, with the number of the main burial shaft. Below, the complexes are described in a chronological sequence.

- a) Complex of Chapel 10 (henceforth: C10). It comprises Chapel 10 and Shaft 51. The complex is built close to Netjerykhet's temenos wall, at its foundation level. According to ceramological data, it is approximately contemporary with the tomb of Merefnebef.¹⁵ Only the northeastern corner of this, probably quite large mud brick mastaba has been preserved. Most of it was dismantled at a later date and the bricks were reused in the brick platform situated south of it.¹⁶
- b) Complex of Shaft 69 (henceforth: S69). Only the southwestern corner of this tomb has been unearthed, its eastern part being situated under Complex 10. The mastaba was constructed of irregular blocks of local rock. In the burial chamber of the shaft, the skeletal remains of a female were found, the body covered with plaster and the facial features modeled in it.¹⁷ A deposit of more than a meter high covered partly the destroyed walls of this stone mastaba. It consisted of layers of sand, limestone chips and brick fragments, accumulated before Complex 10 was constructed atop of it. This suggests an early date for Complex S69, perhaps in the Fifth Dynasty. Thus, we may conclude that there was at least one significant destruction phase during the late Old Kingdom (see *infra*, comments on the Complex of Shaft 60).
- c) Complex of Chapel 3, comprises Chapel 3 and Shafts 31, 34, 26 and 28. It was built in two stages: the initial mastaba with Shafts 31 and 34 (Complex 3a) was extended by adding the northern part (Complex 3b, with Shafts 26 and 28). Complex 3b belonged to an official named Pehenptah/ Pehi.¹⁸ According to ceramological data, the tomb was built during the reign of Pepy II.
- d) Complex of Chapel 20, comprising Shafts 38 and 62 and Chapel 20. It was built directly to the south of the already existing Complex 3, as evidenced by traces of whitewash visible on the south wall of Complex 3, where the north wall of Complex 20 adjoined it.

15 T.I. Rzeuska, "West Saqqara. The pottery, 2001", *PAM* XIII, op. cit., 153-156.

16 Myśliwiec, *PAM* XIII, op. cit., 135-142; id., "Eine geheimnisvolle Rampe und Plattform an der Westseite der Pyramide des Djoser", *Sokar* 11 (2005), 6-7.

17 Myśliwiec, "Saqqara 2004", *PAM* XVI, op. cit., 157.

18 K. Kuraszkiwicz, "Inscribed objects from the Old Kingdom necropolis west of the Step Pyramid", *ArOr* 70 (2002), 360-361.

19 Cf. Ćwiek, *PAM* XI, op. cit., 113.\}

20 As indicated by pottery data (T.I. Rzeuska, personal communication).

- e) Complex of Chapel 2, comprising Shafts 2, 23, 49 and Chapel 2. It was added to the west wall of Complex 3,¹⁹ at a later date than Complex 20.²⁰
- f) Complex of Chapel 4. Chapel 4 was cut into the southwestern corner of Complex 3, but it seems to have been an adaptation of an earlier structure (Chapel 22), partly incorporating its walls. The earlier construction was situated further west (the west wall of Chapel 4 being the eastern perimeter of the earlier chapel) and the lowermost brick course of its walls is still visible directly under the foundation level of Complex 2. Thus, it seems that the northern part of Chapel 22 was destroyed or dismantled before Complex 2 was built, and then Chapel 4 was added. It was impossible to establish whether Chapel 4 replaced, or only supplemented Chapel 22.
- g) Complex of Shaft 60. The unearthed part of this complex is situated directly south of Complex 2 and west of Complex 4, more than 1 m below their foundation level. Only the southeastern corner of this mastaba is visible with a small ritual shaft (no. 60). The mastaba was built directly upon bed-rock; what is preserved is only the lowermost part of the walls. The east wall continues under Complex 2, and the remains of its chapel (assuming any have actually survived) are concealed under Chapel 4. No burial shaft can be attributed to this structure with any certainty. Complex S60 must have been ruined before Complex 2 was built. It is not certain, however, if it was the same event that destroyed the complex of Shaft 69 and complex of Shaft 60, or even if the destruction was intentional.
- h) Complex of Chapel 9, comprising Shafts 14 and 19 and Chapel 9, was added to the west wall of Complex 2. A false door found in the filling of Shaft 14 indicates that the tomb may have belonged to a priestess of Hathor named Kheti.²¹ Two building stages are clearly visible in the structure of Chapel 9, both postdating Complex 2. More precise dating, however, is not possible.
- i) Complex of Chapel 6, comprising Chapel 6 and Shafts 18 and 21, was added to the north wall of Complex 2. A precise chronological relationship between complexes 6 and 9 cannot be established. According to pottery data, they should be approximately contemporary. Shortly after completing Complex 6, a small, apparently mastaba-like structure was added on its eastern side, north of the entrance. This miniature mastaba, constructed of mud brick, was only one-brick-layer high; its walls, as well as its upper surface, were plastered with mud and whitewashed. Under this superstructure, there was the burial of a child (B.426), laid in a shallow depression.

21 K. Myśliwiec, K. Kuraszkiewicz, "Two more Old Kingdom Priestesses of Hathor in Saqqara", in: *Les civilisations du bassin Méditerranéen. Hommages à Joachim Śliwa* (Krakow 2000), 152-153. However, it must be remembered that limestone architectural elements were moved and the contexts in which they are found are not necessarily original. A good example of such case is the false door of Khekeret which was discovered in the burial shaft belonging to another person, cf. K.O. Kuraszkiewicz, "Inscribed material from Saqqara, 2004", *PAM XVI*, op. cit., 165-168.

PERIODIZATION

The evidence discussed above indicates that eight occupational phases (with subphases) can be discerned in the history of the Old Kingdom necropolis, spanning the period from the late Fifth Dynasty to the early First Intermediate Period [Fig. 2]:

Phase A: Construction of Complex S69, possibly also Complex S60;

Phase B: Destruction of Complex S69, occurring before the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty. Complex S60 may have also

been destroyed approximately at that time;

Phase C: Construction of the tomb of Merefnebef, Complex 10, tomb of Nyankhnefertem (probably in this sequence);

Phase D: Construction of Complex 3a. Complex 22 can also be attributed to this phase;

Phase E: Construction of Complex 3b and Complex 20;

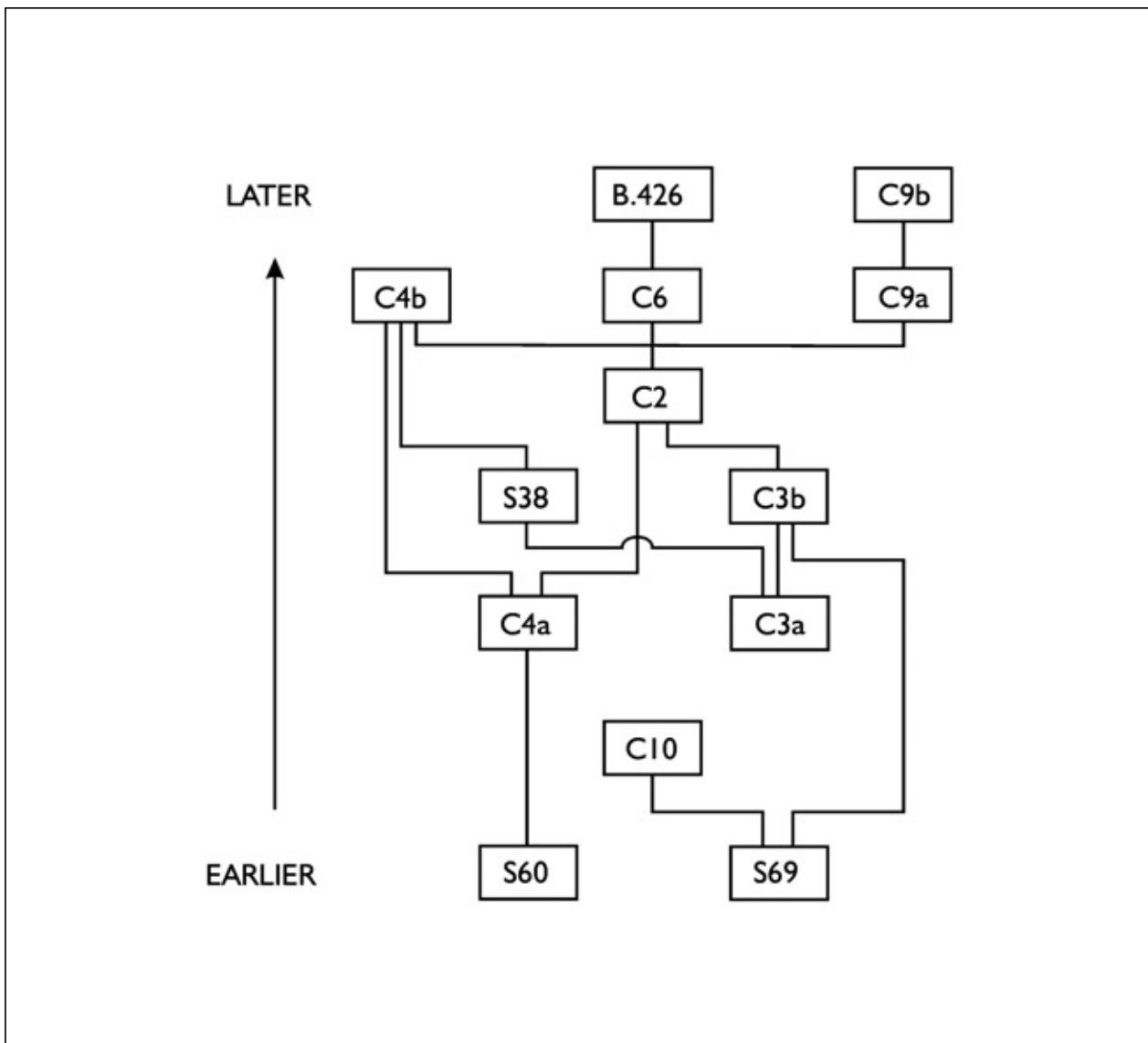


Fig. 2. Stratigraphic sequence of the discussed tomb complexes

Phase F: Construction of Complex 2;

Phase G: Construction of complexes: 4, 6, 9a (sequence not established);

Phase H: Construction of Complex 9b and miniature mastaba of Burial 426;

Occupational phases (A-H) can be correlated with the periodization of the pottery material (phases I-IV) established for the site:²²

Phase C corresponds to pottery phase I (late years of the reign of Teti and the reign of Weserkare);

Phases D-E correspond to pottery phase III (first half of the reign of Pepy II);

Phases F-H correspond to phase IV (from the second half of the reign of Pepy II, into the 8th Dynasty).

The data suggest that there were Fifth Dynasty tombs in the excavated part of the necropolis, but these were destroyed (intentionally or not) before the reign of Pepy I (that is, before Complex 10 was built). It seems that in the early part of the Sixth Dynasty the area between the temenos wall and the Dry Moat was occupied by relatively large tombs arranged in widely spaced N-S rows. Subsequently, smaller structures were added among them.²³

22 T.I. Rzeuska, *Pottery of the Late Old Kingdom. Funerary Pottery and Burial Customs, Saqqara II* (Warsaw 2006).

23 A similar situation can be observed in the Sebekemhenet group, situated further north, also in close proximity to Netjerykhet's western wall. There, a Fifth Dynasty tomb, almost adjacent to the temenos wall, was overbuilt with Sixth Dynasty and later tombs, cf. E. Drioton, J-Ph. Lauer, "Un groupe de tombes à Saqqarah", *ASAE* 55 (1958), 207-251.