

Fabian Welc

Saqqara: Exploration of an Archaic(?) Funerary Structure in Sector 2002

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 17, 176-181

2007

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

EXPLORATION OF AN ARCHAIC (?) FUNERARY STRUCTURE IN SECTOR 2002

Fabian Welc

The eastern boundary of Sector 2002 is formed by the wall of the funerary complex of Netjerykhet's step pyramid. A passage in the rock, cut to a width of c. 1.80 m and following a north-south course, was uncovered in the western part of the sector in 2004 and about 4.50 m of its length excavated at the time.¹ A shaft (no. 70) was discovered under a layer of bricks in the northern part of the passage, built into its structure in late Old Kingdom times. The south and west walls of the shaft were constructed of mud-brick, while the other two sides were constituted by the rock-cut walls of the passage. The excavators then enlarged the trench to the south, leaving a baulk by the outer face of the south shaft wall. Explorations desisted at a depth of 2.60 m below the top edge of the passage when the southward sloping rock floor was achieved. Further sections of the passage were uncovered in the 2005 season.² It turned out that a mere 2 m further to the south the structure terminated in a vertical rock wall [cf. *Figs 8, 9* on pp. 164-165 above]. A section of the fill directly in front of this rock face, 1.77 m E-W by

1.55 m N-S, was explored with the purpose of verifying stratigraphical evidence and the relative chronology and function of the passage.

The topsoil in this area consisted of sand with mud and ashes, minor chips of limestone mixed with potsherds, *tafl*³ and loose pebbles. About 1.60 m below the top edge of the passage at the southern rock face, irregular blocks of white limestone and *tafl* limestone were found. Two of these bore traces of red paint (stonemasons' marks?). Some 20 cm further down, fragments of beer jars appeared together with less numerous sherds of well-profiled thin-walled vessels.⁴

A compact layer of pottery mixed with *tafl* chips started 2.40 m below the top edge of the passage. Many dark concentrations of ashes combined with beer-jar sherds were also recorded.⁵ The layer can be interpreted as an extensive deposit of offering vessels, the predominant form among these being beer jars of red clay. The bottom of the deposit was recorded at a depth of 2.70 m. Much less pottery was noted at this level, but concentrations of ashes and accompany-

1 See K. Myśliwiec, *PAM XVI, Reports 2004* (2005), 152.

2 For the present report and a detailed description of this feature, see K. Myśliwiec in this volume.

3 Arabic term for soft, not very solid yellowish-brown rock present everywhere in Saqqara, intercalated with the Eocene limestone beds predominant in this region. On the geological structure of Saqqara, see Bonnie M. Sampsell, *Geology of Egypt* (The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, New York 2003), 99-100; S. Rushdi, *The Geology of Egypt* (Amsterdam - New York 1962), 99, 322.

4 Cf. T.I. Rzeuska's report on the pottery from the Saqqara excavations in this volume.

5 On beer jars filled with ashes from the Saqqara necropolis, cf. T.I. Rzeuska, "Beer jars with ashes from Saqqara. Preliminary Report", *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 153.

ing sherds of beer jars continued to be present in the western part of the fill. At 3-m depth, the pottery deposit ran out altogether, the layer below being homogeneous sand with only a trace content of ceramics.

The top of an entrance to a rock-cut corridor was discovered at a depth of 3.60 m. The ceiling of this unit falls back sharply in a southerly direction. Further excavations were concentrated in the northern part of the fill leaving a baulk 0.50 m wide N-S directly in front of the



Fig. 1. The baulk on the level of the top edge of the entrance to the corridor with sloping ceiling (Photo F. Welc)

entrance [Fig. 1; cf. also Fig. 8 on p. 164 above]. Level with the top edge of the entrance, the fill consisted of a homogeneous layer of *tafl* debris with some animal bones,⁶ fragments of *tafl* bricks⁷ and a few intact beer jars. Below it was a compact layer of fine *tafl* with the bottom resting on a concentration of big pieces of white limestone coated in some places with mud mortar. A large fragment of beer jar was found in this context (0.80 m below the top edge of the entrance). It was standing and filled with dried mud [Fig. 2]. The surface of the mud, flat and slightly glossy, suggests that the vessel must have remained in this position in standing water for some time. The compact mass of *tafl* mixed with limestone chips observed in the central and bottom part of the fill also seems to be the outcome of a humid environment. The entrance and rock-cut corridor beyond it must have been left open to the water. Heavy rains would have resulted in rainfall flowing naturally down the *gebel* slope, carrying fine rock detritus and small pieces of pottery right inside the entrance. Soon the accumulated deposit inside the entrance must have formed a barrier that left water standing outside the doorway. This indicates that the sloping ramp and the entrance leading to the rock-cut corridor remained uncovered and at the mercy of varying weather conditions for a long but indeterminable time.

Exploration of the top of the fill inside the corridor beyond the entrance revealed faunal matter and numerous beer jars with

6 On faunal remains from Polish excavations at Saqqara in previous seasons, cf. S. Ikram, *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 106; id., *PAM XII, Reports 2000* (2001), 127-132; id., *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), 131-132.

7 The bricks found in the fill of the feature are all of similar size (L. 26-29 cm; W. 11-14 cm; Th. 6-7 cm) and fabric, which consists of powdered *tafl*, crushed ceramics, sand and organic substances. This is typical building material used in the Late Old Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara. Similar bricks were found, for example, in the funerary complex of Merefnebef, see K. Mysliwiec et al., *The Tomb of Merefnebef, Saqqara I* (Warsaw 2004), 53ff.

well preserved content in the form of dark mud mixed with ashes and burnt pieces of wood. One of the finds near the jars was an upturned red plate [Fig. 3]. Its interior appears to have been intentionally white-washed and it belongs undoubtedly to the white-painted funerary cult pottery category.⁸

Three principal layers were distinguished in the section through the fill in this corridor [cf. Figs 4,5]. The upper part consisted of loose sand mixed with stone-and-*tafl* debris and potsherds of various size, including intact beer jars (layer 1 in the section). The layer was least compact in structure by the east wall. Pebbles dominated, next to *tafl* debris and limestone chunks of various size. About 0.60 m below

the ceiling, the next layer became evident. It was formed of compacted *tafl* and insignificant amounts of sherds, pebbles and small limestone chips (layer 2 in the section). This layer was also observed to be "loose" in structure by the east wall. The evidently alluvial arrangement and obvious differences in compactness suggest that both layers were the effect of water penetrating inside the empty space. It must have flowed in from the east or northeast, carrying the lighter material to the west side and leaving the heavier and bigger pieces by the east wall, constantly washed out by inflowing water.

About 1 m below the ceiling of the chamber, a layer of limestone *tafl* blocks formed a substructure of sorts for mud



Fig. 2. Beer jar filled with dried mud. The flat and slightly glossy surface of the mud indicates deposition in standing water for some time (Photo F. Welc)



Fig. 3. White-painted cult pottery plate found on top of the fill inside the corridor with sloping ceiling (Photo F. Welc)

8 Cf. T.I. Rzeuska's report on the pottery from the Saqqara excavations in this volume. More on vessels of this kind, T.I. Rzeuska, "Some remarks on the Old Kingdom white-painted funerary cult pottery from West Saqqara", in: Proceedings of the Second Central European Conference of Young Egyptologists. Egypt 2001: Perspectives of Research. Warsaw 5-7 March 2001 (Warsaw 2003), 125-134.

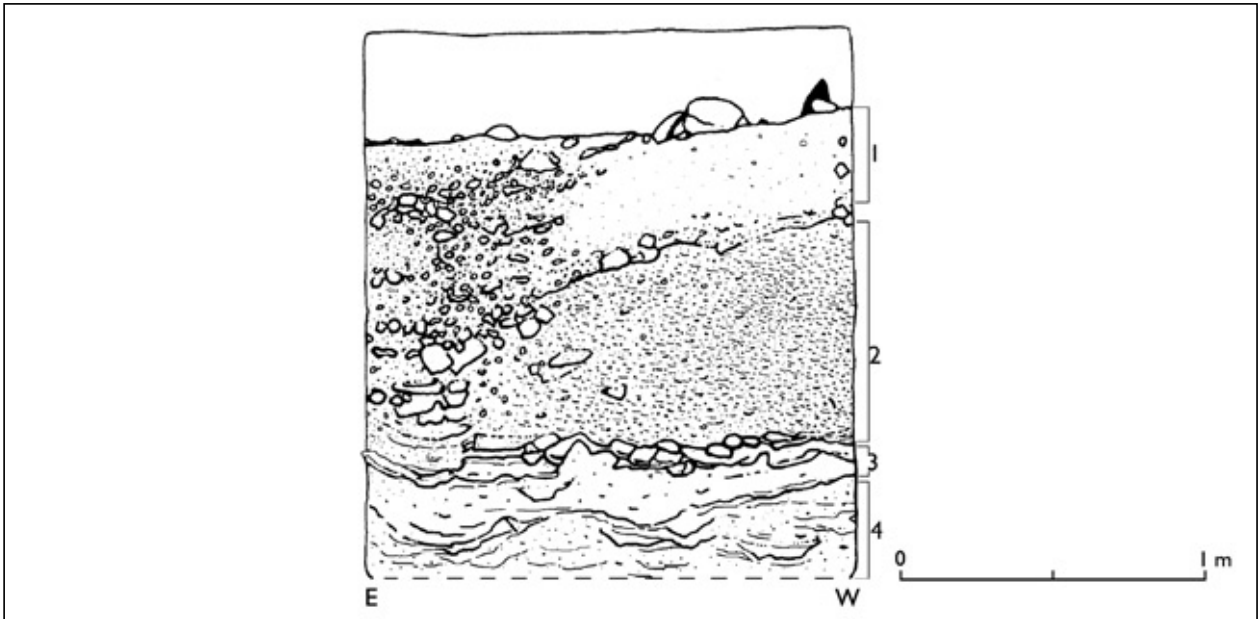


Fig. 4. Section drawing through the fill in the entrance to the corridor with sloping ceiling: 1 - Sand mixed with debris, including tafl rock, sherds, intact beer jars; 2 - Compact mass of fine tafl, sherds, chips of white limestone; 3 - Mud pugging and substructure of flat limestone blocks; 4 - Limestone chunks of various size mixed with sand and sherds (Drawing and interpretation F. Welc)



Fig. 5. Section through the fill in the entrance to the rock-cut corridor with sloping ceiling (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

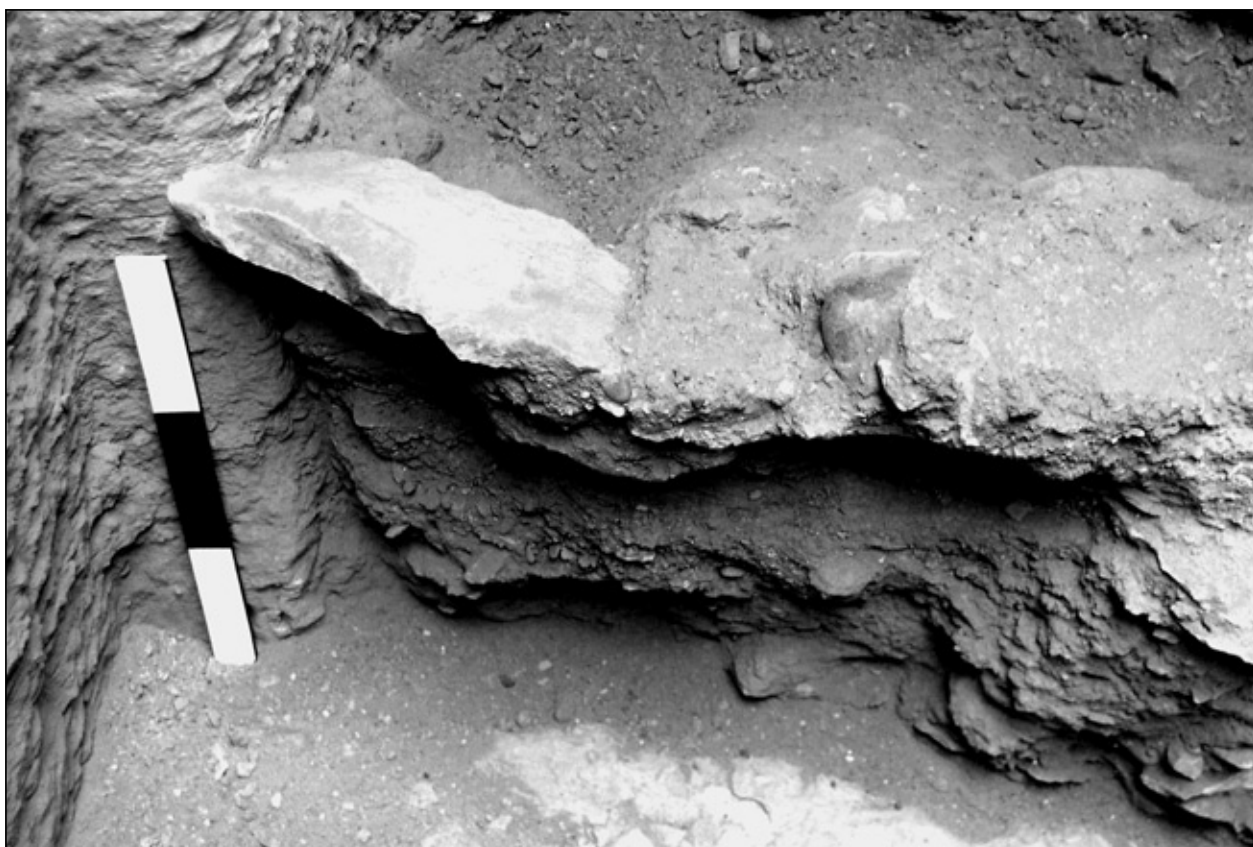


Fig. 6. Layer of limestone blocks functioning as substructure for the mud pugging floor, seen in the entrance to the corridor with sloping ceiling (Photo F. Welc)



Fig. 7. Section through the fill in the back of the corridor with sloping ceiling (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

pugging, which was in fact a primitive kind of floor (layer 3 in the section). This structure was undoubtedly later compared to the primeval rock-cut corridor, as the blocks and pugging reach the side walls of the corridor, but are not connected with them [Fig. 6]. It definitely reduced the entrance, but at the same time facilitated access to the space behind it. This specific form of "threshold" was also noted in front of the entrance where it served to cover up and level the oblique hollow cut originally at the bottom of the sloping passage. The floor rested on big fragments of *tafl* limestone mixed with sand, limestone powder and insignificant quantities of pottery (layer 4 in the section).

Fill structure inside the chamber, 2.20 m further to the south, was largely unchanged as regards the stratigraphy. The upper part yielded intact and fragmentary beer jars mixed with *tafl* and limestone debris. Underlying this was a layer of loose sand, *tafl*, limestone, potsherds and loose stones [Fig. 7].

The above stratigraphic analysis of the fill leads to some conclusions concerning the phases of functioning of the feature

from square 2002. The complex as a whole, comprising passage, entrance and corridor with sloping ceiling, remained out in the open for a relatively long time, threatened constantly by changing weather conditions, including rainfall which led to the accumulation of the deposit in front of the entrance and inside it. This process can be seen as taking place already in the late Old Kingdom, considering that the pottery found on top of the fill originates from this period.⁹ Once the entrance had been blocked with accumulated debris, large quantities of offering pottery, mostly beer jars, appear to have been deposited nearby, forming in the end effect an extensive pottery deposit more than half a meter thick.¹⁰ The big limestone-*tafl* blocks with traces of red paint found in the surface layer of the baulk, may have come from the stone structure discovered to the south of the described feature.¹¹ Their presence in the fill should perhaps be linked with the last chronological phase corresponding most likely to the devastation of the necropolis at the very end of the 6th Dynasty and in the First Intermediate Period.¹²

9 Although it is not to be excluded that some possibly ritual intentional activities took place here even before the late Old Kingdom period, as indicated by the white-washed mud floors in the immediate neighborhood of the tomb, see K. Myśliwiec, in this volume.

10 See contribution of T.I. Rzeuska in this volume.

11 See K. Myśliwiec, report in this volume.

12 K. Myśliwiec et al., The Tomb of Merefnebef, op. cit., 39.