

SAQQARA

EXCAVATIONS 1997

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The Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission continued its work on the western side of the Djoser pyramid from 6 September until 16 October 1997.¹

The objective of this campaign was to continue work carried out previously in Trial pit I, which had been opened in 1987 and enlarged in 1996.² This pit is located more or less in line with the pyramid's E-W axis. The area excavated in the previous campaign was now extended 10 m eastwards and 5 m northwards. On the eastern edge of the present excavations (N-S axis), a row of large white limestone blocks was found lying almost directly below the surface. The blocks vary in shape and dimension. The biggest is 0.68 m long and 0.40 m high. They are set directly on a thick layer of pure sand. An oblong stone ending this structure at the northeastern corner of the excavation, cut in extremely soft yellowish limestone unlike the rest, seems to be a reused architectural element.

Adjoining these blocks on the west are two parallel E-W oriented walls, made of mud brick. Together with a transversal wall

¹ The Mission comprised: Prof. Dr. Karol Myśliwiec, Director; Dr. Zbigniew Szafrański, egyptologist; Dr. Willemina Wendrich, Ms Teodozja Rzeuska, archaeologists, Ms Ewa Parandowska, conservator; Mr. Marek Puzkarski, artist; Mr. Tomasz Herbich, geophysicist. The SCA was represented by Mr. Zaki Awad Hussein, inspector.

The Mission would like to express herewith its deepest gratitude to Dr. Zahi Hawas, Director of Giza district, and Mr. Mohamed Hagra, Director of Saqqara District, as well as Mr. Magdy el-Ghandour, Chief Inspector of Saqqara South, for their profound understanding of our problems, and for their invaluable, friendly and efficient help, without which our work would have been impossible to complete.

² K. Myśliwiec, *PAM VIII*, 1996 (1997), pp. 103-109; K. Myśliwiec, T. Herbich, with a contribution by A. Niwiński, *EtTrav XVII* (1995), pp. 177-203.

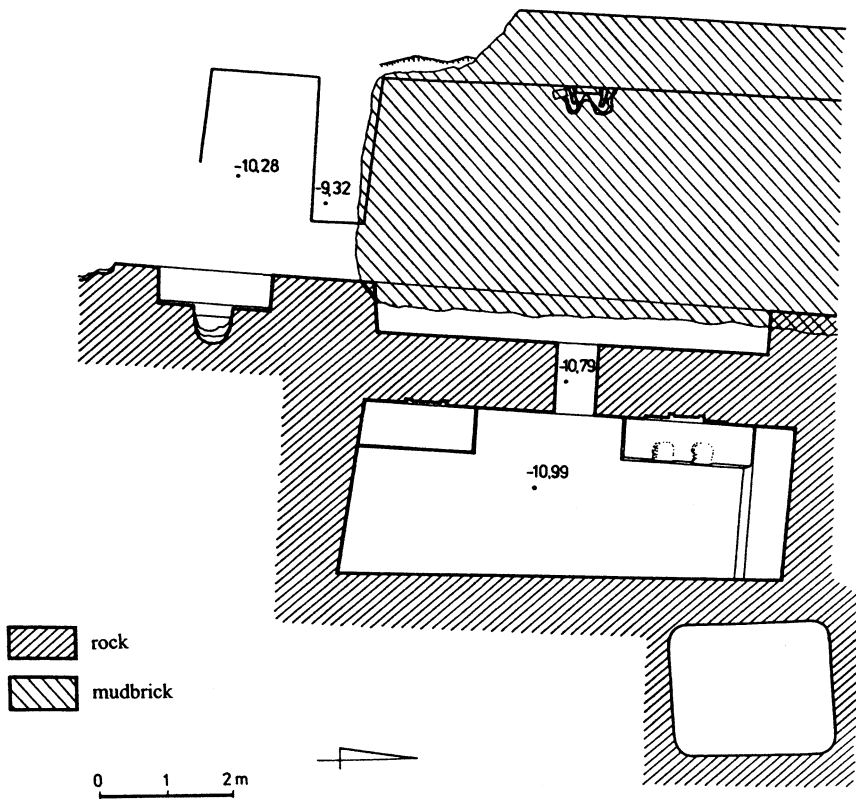


Fig. 1. Plan of the tomb of Meref-nebef. Drawing M. Puzkarski.

linking them at their eastern end, they border a rectangular court on three sides (east, south and north), a fourth wall having possibly closed the court on the west. The brick dimensions are (for the most part): 30 x 15 x 7 cm. All of them belong to the "sandy bricks" group.

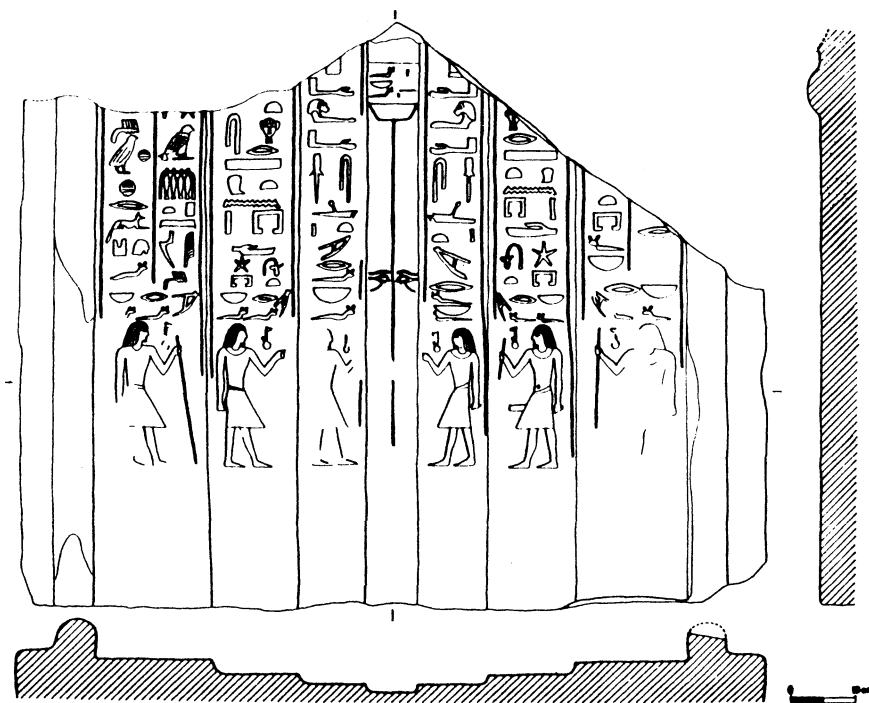


Fig. 2. Fragment of false door stela of Meref-nebef.
Drawing K. Kuraszkiwicz.

The brick walls have a characteristic shape, which betrays either their archaic date or a late Old Kingdom imitation of archaic designs. The outer face is broken by a series of recesses, supposed to imitate a palace facade. The wall plastering consists of a layer of mud c. 1-2 cm thick, followed with a superimposed 1-1.5 cm layer of sandy cladding and another 3-5 cm layer of mud facing. Some of these layers may be secondary, witness to later reparations. Wall thickness, slightly varying from wall to wall, goes from a minimum of 0.68 m to a maximum of 1.10 m.

Further excavations have shown that these walls, as well as the rubble filling the space between them and the mud covering on top, constituted a kind of camouflage for a large shaft found at the court's northern wall. The top of the shaft was visible as a square space filled with pure sand. Only some disturbed mummies of uncertain, but undoubtedly late date came to light in the shaft's upper part, in context with Archaic Period pottery. The upper part of the shaft is built of irregular stone blocks (of local yellowish limestone), the lower is hewn in the rock. The upper part reaches a depth of c. 2.5 m. It is square in cross-section, measuring c. 2.3 m to the side. The rock-hewn part reveals rounded corners and surfaces that alternately protrude and recede.

The shaft has been explored down to a depth of 7 m, at which point the mission had to concentrate its efforts on a late Old Kingdom mastaba found to the west of the shaft.

An extension of the previously discovered allegedly archaic structures was unearthed in the northwestern section of the present excavations.

A necropolis of Ptolemaic and Roman times appears to overlie the Archaic and Old Kingdom architecture, with almost twenty late burials being found on top and inside the much earlier structures. In some cases, archaic bricks were reused in primitive casing walls around these burials.

In similarity to previous campaigns, three types of burials could be distinguished:

1. Skeletons laid out on a mat made of rushes and covered with another mat. Both the mats and the remains of cloth found on the skeletons were studied by Dr. Willemina Wendrich, a specialist in the field. Only one of these burials (no. 24) contained funerary gifts in the form of 41 amulets and other necklace beads made of a variety of materials.

2. Mummies without any decoration.



Fig. 3. Names of the deceased in the inscription on the lintel. Tomb of Meref-nebef (Sixth Dynasty), Saqqara.

3. Burials in simple coffins made of either clay or wood. A terracotta coffin with a summarily worked human mask on the lid was found superimposed on the western wall of the archaic tomb's superstructure, on top of an earlier skeleton burial in this place. The coffin contained an intact mummy inside a painted cartonnage with gilded face. Both the paleography of the painted hieroglyphs and the style of the religious designs prove that the burial is of Roman date. A simple wooden coffin was found in a pit in the northwestern corner of the excavated area.

The excavations in the eastern part of the court of the archaic tomb revealed that the huge brick vaulting unearthed during the previous campaign extends to the north and east. It seals the entrance to the tomb of Meref-nebef, a vizier of the Sixth Dynasty, apparently unknown so far. It is for the construction of this tomb that the eastern part of the superstructure of the archaic tomb was destroyed.

The tomb of Meref-nebef is hewn in a soft and very fragile yellowish limestone rock. It has a monumental facade located to the east of the two "shafts" unearthed last year under the brick vaulting. The facade itself looks west. It consists of a niche 5.89 m long, which is crowned with a 0.60 m high lintel. The height of the niche, from the bottom of the entrance to the lower edge of the lintel, is 2.47 m, and its thickness 0.68-0.72 m. The lintel, lateral walls, and heavy frame of the niche are decorated with large-size sunken-relief inscriptions hewn directly in the rock. The texts contain the names and titulary of the deceased. The rear wall of the niche has a more complicated decoration, comprising a lintel that is 5.89 m long and 0.48 m high, surmounting long inscriptions in 26 vertical columns on each side of the entrance. On this wall, the surface of the rock is overlaid with a thin layer of white plaster used to model the hieroglyphs. These are carved in a 0.4 cm deep sunken relief on the lintel, and modeled in raised relief on the wall.



Fig. 4. "False door" in the tomb of Meref-nebef at the moment of discovery.

The interior of the signs in sunken relief is filled with a dark bluish paint which is preserved only fragmentarily in a few of the hieroglyphs. The background of the signs in raised relief is bluish-gray, and the hieroglyphs themselves are polychrome. The bottom part of the outer lintel bears substantial traces of reddish paint, probably in imitation of granite.

The four lines of inscription carved on the inner lintel comprise offering formulae and invocations to the visitors, as well as the titulary and the names of the vizier. Three different names are listed: Meref-nebef, Anch-Unis, and his "beautiful name" Fefy. The inscription accompanying a small representation of the vizier at the northern end of the lintel informs that he was a priest of the cult of king Teti attached to his pyramid, which implies that he had lived most probably after this king's death. His social rank may be deduced from such titles as "prince", "the sole companion" and "vizier".

In the middle of the facade, there is an extremely narrow entrance (0.60 m) leading to a rectangular chamber hewn in the rock. The entrance is 1.99 m high and 1.04 m deep. On both sides of the passage the tomb owner is represented with his wife, and on the southern face additionally with their "beloved son" Fefy. These representations are executed in bas-relief on plastered rock, and their polychromy is well preserved. A remarkable feature of these two parallel scenes is the absence of a god's name in the place above the head of the deceased. This name, originally modeled in raised relief, was eventually scratched out and replaced with the name of Tatenen which, painted in black, is practically unreadable. These retouches betray a religious and, consequently, political conflict which also had an impact on the decoration of the tomb. The entrance leads to a rectangular room extending N-S, 6.46 m long and 2.43 m wide. The painted red decoration with black dots on the tomb ceiling imitates red granite. Such is also

the facing of the two "false doors" which are carved in the rock on the chamber's western wall, on either side of the entrance. Both "false doors", which are dedicated to Meref-nebef himself, are remarkably well preserved. This is not the case, unfortunately, with the other painted reliefs. Executed in the white plaster covering the rock surface, they are extremely fragile and tend to peel. Large parts of the paintings are missing.

The facade of the tomb extends southwards, where framing the niche there is a big projection (1.47 m wide), the front of which is decorated in relief. Large-size hieroglyphs, arranged in four columns followed by a horizontal line, repeat the names (Meref-nebef, Fefy) and titulary of the deceased. Two male figures of comparable size are carved in the lower part of this panel. Unfortunately, only their legs and aprons have been preserved. The rock is particularly fragile in this place, much more so than near the entrance. Its fragility is even more in evidence inside a large "false door", never completed, abutting the projection on the south. The craftsmen had started on the "false door" from the top but abandoned their work once the rock's fragility had become obvious. To conceal their aborted effort, they covered the lower part of the rock in this place with a layer of mud, traces of which are still visible on the framing projection to the south.

A fragmentary "false door", found out of any logical context in the northeastern corner of the present excavations, may indicate such an eventuality. Carved in the same kind of grayish-white limestone as the unfinished block found beside the projection, it is inscribed to Meref-nebef. The dimensions of the fragment are: height 0.85 m, width 1.10 m, thickness 0.48 m.

Concurrently with the digging, Polish and Egyptian conservators with Ewa Parandowska in charge concentrated their efforts on the conservation of the reliefs and paintings. Human skeletons and mummies were subjected to anthropologi-

cal examination. Also, a geodetic team mapped the area between the Djoser temenos and the hills running south of the mastaba of Ptah-hotep.