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Introduction

The New Kingdom necropolis in the southern part of Saqqara has been the subject of intensive study since 1975 (Fig. 1). Today, the area is under investigation by a joint mission of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities and the Department of Egyptology of Leiden University. The present article does not deal with the site's New Kingdom tombs, but focuses on a much earlier period of use, accidentally stumbled upon by the Dutch expedition. After a short introduction to their initial discoveries, more recent fieldwork undertaken by the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo will be discussed. Then follows a brief re-assessment of contemporary evidence in the area worth reconsidering in the light of this new evidence.

In 1991, the Dutch team excavated a secondary shaft from the Late Period next to the south wall of the tomb of the high official Maya (Shaft V: Fig. 2; Schneider et al. 1991; Raven et al. 2001, 64, pl. 3). At a depth of roughly 9.10 m, a burial chamber of the same period was investigated, but an adjacent complex behind a breakthrough leading to the west was then left unexplored. The latter complex appeared to be much older and was first ascribed to the Old Kingdom on the basis of a few stone vessel fragments found in the fill of the passage. This date had to be reconsidered in 2002 when a comparable complex was discovered below the tomb of Meryneith (Raven et al. 2001–2002; van Walsem 2003). In this case, the archaeological material clearly suggested an Early Dynastic date (c. 3150–2575 BC). Given the close resemblance to the complex below the tomb of Maya, a similar date for both substructures seemed probable. In addition, these underground discoveries were complemented by sporadic finds of Early Dynastic stone vessel fragments immediately below the desert surface in different parts of the site (Raven et al. 2001–2002, 98).

The presence of Early Dynastic material in this part of Saqqara is significant and constitutes a major addition to the current state of knowledge. In contrast to later periods, the bulk of Early Dynastic material is concentrated around only a few sites. From the first rulers onwards, the dynastic elite had two large cemeteries: the royal tombs of Umm el-Qa’ab/Abydos in the south, and another elite cemetery at Saqqara, in the vicinity of the state capital at Memphis. The cemetery of Umm el-Qa’ab/Abydos continued to grow after the northward expansion of the Naqada culture and, thanks to inscriptions and the quality of surviving burial goods, this cemetery has been identified as the burial place of the first rulers of dynastic Egypt (Engel 2003; Wengrow 2006, 227–28; Hendrickx 2008). At North Saqqara, a series of great tombs provided texts mentioning the same kings from Aha onwards, and these provide solid evidence that a ruler buried at Abydos controlled the northern end of the Nile Valley as well as Upper Egypt. These tombs belonged to the highest officials in the country (Bestock 2007; Hendrickx 2008; Köhler 2008). The site of Saqqara became a royal necropolis at the beginning

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1 I would like to thank Kim Duistermaat, Amber Hood and Gwen Jennes for their useful comments on the content of this article.

2 For the history of research, see http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/saqqara/homepage.htm.
of Dynasty 2 when royal tombs were constructed about 1 km to the south of the already existing elite necropolis in the north (Van Wetering 2004; Dreyer 2007). Only the tombs of the first and third kings, Hetepsekhemwy and Ninetjer respectively, could be identified on the basis of inscriptions (Höber-Kamel 2005; Engel 2006; Lacher 2008). The tomb of Ninetjer is currently being re-investigated by the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo (Dreyer 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007). The burial of the second king of Dynasty 2, Raneb, in the area is rendered likely by seal impressions mentioning his name (Barsanti 1902, 183; Maspero 1902, 187; Engel 2006), and a stela probably found in the Memphite region (Goedicke 2000, 399). Nonetheless, his tomb has not yet been located.

Many questions remain with regard to the nature of this royal necropolis, which is situated just north of the Dutch concession area. For example, it is unclear how much further this necropolis extends and how many other tombs are still buried below the rubble or later tombs. Later king lists provide evidence for at least a few more kings after the reign of Ninetjer. There is evidence for rulers with the names of Nebunefer (von Beckerath 1984, 43) and Sened (Kaiser 1991, 49–55), but their exact position within the sequence of Dynasty 2 is uncertain (Kahl 2006, 99, 104; 2007, 15–7). According to Helck, Sened would be the northern counterpart of Peribsen, who probably only ruled in the south (Helck 1987, 104–105), whereas Kaiser sees him as the last king to reign over Upper and Lower Egypt before Khasekhemwy (Kaiser 1991, 49–55). King Nfr-kA-ra mentioned in the king lists is identified as Senerferka by Ryholt (2008). These ephemeral successors of Ninetjer are almost completely unknown from contemporary sources and their tombs have not yet been identified. The period after the reign of Ninetjer has therefore been interpreted as one of instability (Goedicke 1988, 138–39; Gilbert 2004, 32; Dodson and Hilton 2004, 44). The record of Ninetjer’s thirteenth year on the Palermo Stone as one of “hacking up of the fortress of Shemra” and “hacking up the fortress of Ha” (Wilkinson 1996, 350; 2000, 125) perhaps also hints at internal unrest (Goedicke 1988, 138–39). It is therefore uncertain whether his successors received a proper burial at all.

In this respect, the newly discovered Early Dynastic complexes south of the already known royal necropolis seem to promise answers to these questions. Given their geographical location, they had been attributed to one of those Dynasty 2 kings and thus the “missing link between the Ninetjer monument and the substructure of the original mastaba under the Step Pyramid” (Raven et al. 2001–2002, 97, 100). Further exploration of these substructures was therefore considered to be advisable.

Further investigations of the Early Dynastic complex below the tomb of Maya

In cooperation with the Dutch expedition, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo organized a short excavation season with the following aims:

1 For example in the tomb of Hetepsekhemwy, suggesting that Raneb closed the tomb of his predecessor.

4 The fieldwork took place from 5–17 February 2008, and the team consisted of Kim Duistermaat, Claudia Lacher and the author. This work was carried out in close collaboration with Usama Abd es-salam el-Shimy (Director of Saqqara) and was supervised in the field by the Inspector Adel Ragab Ali Basuyu. We wish to express our gratitude to Maarten Raven and Harold Hays for their technical assistance and their pleasant...
• To establish the size and character of the early complex below Maya’s tomb.
• To establish a more specific date for the complex.
• To investigate the technical possibilities of excavating the structures extending below the New Kingdom tombs.

The substructure below the tomb of Maya could be reached through the above-mentioned Shaft V outside the south wall of the tomb of Maya (Fig. 2). The shaft and the adjacent chamber, both dating to the Late Period, were excavated in 1990–91 by the Dutch expedition (Fig. 2, indicated in blue). At the north-western corner of the chamber, a breakthrough leads into a large adjacent room. The latter was the focus of our excavation (Fig. 2, indicated in red).

The first and largest room of this complex is orientated from north-east to south-west and is almost 8 m in length, with an average width of 2.50 m and a maximum height of 1.88 m (Fig. 3). Two pilasters, one at the west end and another at the east end, divide room A into two parts. Beside the westernmost pilaster, corridor A300 (4.85 m long) leads to the west. After 4.85 m, a connecting corridor A301 runs south for a length of about 2.75 m. Probably in the Late Period or even later, corridor A301 was reused as a burial chamber for perhaps as many as three mummies, as shown by some bones, potsherds and faience beads. Two other corridors, A100 (west, 3.32 m long) and A200 (east, 3.18 m long), are situated at the northern end of room A; both are unfinished. All corridors display remarkable hemispherical recesses in the side-walls. The main access to the tomb seems to be in the north, but this entrance is completely filled with sand descending through a later shaft that intersects with our structure (Fig. 3). To the south, a corridor (B100) leads into a second Early Dynastic room (B), which was re-used as part of another Late Period tomb. This room and the connected niche (B200) were left unexplored during the 2008 season.

Room A was filled to the ceiling with mixed debris comprised of fine sand with occasional taffi inclusions, limestone flakes, pebbles (Fig. 4) and archaeological material. The work therefore largely consisted of clearing out this rubble and making an architectural plan. The fill yielded almost exclusively Early Dynastic material. Only the upper layer of the debris in room A and corridor A301 yielded bones, pottery sherds and faience beads connected to later burials. In corridor A100 a small amount of Coptic pottery was found on top of the fill under shaft ‘d.’ An Old Kingdom stela fragment of a man called Masekhem and an offering basin must also be intrusive. The Early Dynastic finds consisted of fragments of pottery and stone vessels, and a few seal impressions. In addition, some fragments of corroded copper, charcoal, bone and a small fragment of gold leaf were discovered.

Despite the fragmentary and disturbed nature of the material, Early Dynastic ceramic material was recovered and many fragments were reconstructable. More than two-thirds of all pottery fragments were from so-called beer jars made of coarse Nile clay with organic inclusions (Fig. 5), while there were very few (c. 5%) other vessels made of Nile clays. About 30% of all fragments were made of marl clays. Only six vessels were preserved from rim to base and one lid was found. Many large sherds of large jars (and occasionally also beer jars) cooperation in the field. The project had the financial support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Cairo.
had been used in antiquity as digging tools, presumably by tomb robbers. Many of these re-used sherds could be refitted with other fragments from the original pots. Several jars had been covered in a thick layer of unfired mud. One more or less complete ‘wine’ jar was found bearing a potmark, and two body sherds also bear potmarks. Several bowl fragments were recovered, including one burnished bowl with direct rim made of Nile silt with sand inclusions. A preliminary assessment dates the pottery firmly to the end of Dynasty 2.5

The stone vessels showed a large variety of forms and materials, including travertine, breccia (Fig. 6), diorite, schist, anorthosite gneiss, and different kinds of limestone. The majority of the diagnostic fragments are bowls, but a considerable number of small travertine jars and dummy vessels were also found (Fig. 7). In addition, five fragments of a plate and many pieces of a large offering plate were discovered. Only two bowl fragments carried inscriptions, written in black ink on the interior of the vessel (Fig. 8). An exact reading still awaits further analysis, but they probably refer to personal names. In addition, the writing style resembles the palaeography of many of the ink inscriptions discovered among the deposit of stone vessels below the Djoser pyramid (Lacau and Lauer 1965). The latter have recently been dated to the end of Dynasty 2 (Regulski 2004).

Some fragments of tafl clay sealings were found, but only three bore seal impressions. One of them clearly displays the name of King Khasekhemwy, the last king of Dynasty 2 and predecessor of Netjerikhet/Djoser (c. 2600 BC; Fig. 9). The sealings are very fragile, but many of the backsides show a smooth regular pattern suggesting that they were attached to boxes, or at least to a flat surface. Knotted cord and palm leaf impressions with fragments of carbonised fibre are sometimes preserved. Bag sealings were also found, but large vessel sealings were completely absent or not preserved as such.

Interpretation

Both the architecture and the finds provide strong indications for dating the substructure below Maya’s tomb. The corridors, pilasters, and the hemispherical recesses in the walls are typical of Dynasty 2 underground gallery tombs. For example, Room A resembles corridor F of Ninetjer’s tomb (Dreyer 2004, 19–22; 2005, 15–18; 2006, 9–20; 2007, 130–38), and the arrangement of the narrow corridors is also similar. In both cases the main access is in the north. However, the plan of the substructure below Maya’s tomb is smaller and more compact when compared to the royal tombs to the north. This could be either a functional or a chronological difference, the latter being older. A first brief assessment of the pottery, and especially the Khasekhemwy seal impression, narrows the possible date range down to the end of Dynasty 2. A similar date may be proposed for the substructure below the tomb of Meryneith, but this will be investigated further during a more extensive excavation season in 2009.

The discovery of the royal name of Khasekhemwy is significant. Since his royal tomb is identified with certainty at Umm el-Qa’ab/Abydos, the Saqqara tomb probably belongs to a high official or a member of the royal family. This is a fascinating result: rather than dealing

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5 Personal communication D. Raue and J. Smythe, Spring 2008. A more detailed study of the pottery will be undertaken by Amber Hood during the 2009 season.
with the continuation of the already known royal necropolis, we have revealed a new cemetery that was hitherto unknown. This discovery raises interesting questions regarding the nature of this part of the Saqqara necropolis, and particularly its relation to the elite cemetery in the north. Who was buried here at South Saqqara and what was the social status of the tomb owners? As Köhler (2008, 398) has recently pointed out, Early Dynastic society at Memphis was highly structured and complex, and mortuary data suggest that there were a number of discrete social strata. We may assume that the cemetery at South Saqqara represents a different social stratum than that of its northern counterpart.

In addition, the tombs at South Saqqara put other Early Dynastic remains in the area into perspective. There are two further unfinished royal monuments to the south of the Step Pyramid complex that may be Early Dynastic in date: an east-west ‘trench’ excavated by Saad, and three deep shaft-like cuts, also on an east-west alignment, visible amongst the Old Kingdom mastabas (Tavares 1998, 1137). Early Dynastic material has also been found by the Japanese expedition further to the north, about 1.5 km north-west of the Step Pyramid (Yoshimura et al. 2005, 369–76). More interesting with regard to the new evidence in question, however, is a possible relationship with the enigmatic funerary enclosures to the west (the Gisr el-Mudir and the ‘L-shaped’ enclosure; Mathieson and Tavares 1993, 27–28; Stadelmann 1996, 790–91), and the deposit of stone vessels below the Step Pyramid. Both the latter deposit and the Gisr el-Mudir have been tentatively dated to the reign of Khasekhemwy (cf. infra). This date now seems more plausible in light of the presence of contemporary activity in the area.

Other evidence of late Dynasty 2 activity in South Saqqara

The Gisr el-Mudir (Arabic for ‘enclosure of the boss’), situated just west of Sekhemkhet’s pyramid complex, was located in the early 20th century, but not investigated until the mid-1990s (Mathieson and Tavares 1993, 28–31; Mathieson et al. 1997; 1999, 36–47; 2000). It consists of masonry of roughly hewn limestone blocks in layers, making it potentially the earliest known stone structure in Egypt. Its builder is unknown, but suggested dates have shifted from Dynasty 3 (Swelim 1983, 33–35; Porter and Moss 2003, 417) to the Early Dynastic period (Tavares 1998, 1136), and in particular to Dynasty 2 (Stadelmann 1985, 306). Others have tentatively ascribed the Gisr el-Mudir to Khasekhemwy (Mathieson et al. 1997, 53; Davies and Friedman 1998, 67). Pottery discovered during the 1995 season can be dated to the end of Dynasty 2 or beginning of Dynasty 3 (Mathieson et al. 1997, 36, 44–45, figs. 15–16.1). Consequently, it has been suggested that these empty precincts are the counterparts of the Abydene enclosures built in mud brick (Mathieson et al. 1997, 53).

If the Gisr el-Mudir is indeed a stone version of the late Dynasty 2 funerary monuments at Abydos, then we may also connect this monument with the great funerary enclosure at Hierakonpolis, built by Khasekhemwy (O’Connor 1989; Friedman 1999; Adams and O’Connor 2003, 78–85; Wengrow 2006, 245–50; Friedman 2007). The Khasekhemwy enclosures at Abydos and Hierakonpolis in particular have been attributed to a phase of dynastic rivalry that caused a temporary fragmentation of the state (O’Connor 1989, 84). In the early part of his reign, when only the Horus falcon wearing the White Crown surmounted his serekh.
Khasekhem seems to have shown particular interest in, and reverence for, Hierakonpolis, the ancient Predynastic capital in the south of the country. It has been suggested that Khasekhem first ruled from Hierakonpolis, given the number of fine objects bearing his early name found at the site. Khasekhem is generally thought to have constructed the Hierakonpolis enclosure in anticipation of his burial there (but see Friedman 2007, 328). Campaigns against the north ultimately resulted in Khasekhem’s victory, through which he was able to reunite Egypt. To commemorate this achievement, he changed his name to the dual form to which he added the epithet ‘the two lords are at peace in him,’ demonstrating that peace and harmony had returned after the period of unrest (Wilkinson 1999, 91–92). In addition, he built another enclosure and tomb at the ancestral site of Abydos. By analogy, one could imagine a similar celebration in the north, symbolizing the reinstatement of the central administration at the capital city of Memphis. Could the Gisr el-Mudir have played a role in Khasekhemwy’s reappearance as the embodiment of central power?

Although the interior spaces of these enclosures have yielded few clues as to their function (Mathieson et al. 1997, 53; Friedman 2007, 323–28; Raue 1999, 2007), a link to the establishment and performance of mortuary cults is generally accepted (Kemp 1966, 16; Kaiser 1969, 17; O’Connor 1995, 328; Alexanian 1998; Wengrow 2006). However, recently a second use of such enclosures as “arenas where ritual ceremonies promoting royal power were celebrated” has been illustrated by McNamara (2008). He suggests that the temple enclosure with revetted mound at Hierakonpolis could be “the remains of a sed-festival court in which the king could make a ritual appearance, perhaps in order to receive offerings or to stake his claim on the territory of Egypt” (McNamara 2008, 931). Numerous links can be made between the objects found within the latter enclosure and the festivals of kingship, particularly the sed-festival. The two statues of Khasekhem wearing the bed-sed robe (Cairo JE 32161; Quibell and Petrie 1900, 11, pl. 41.1; Quibell and Green 1902, 44; Oxford Ash. E. 517, Quibell and Petrie 1900, 11, pl. 31; Quibell and Green 1902, 44) perhaps demonstrate McNamara’s case best. While rituals connected with the “eternal pageantry of kingship” may have been performed in the mortuary enclosures at Abydos, their living counterparts were perhaps enacted in enclosures like that at Hierakonpolis (McNamara 2008, 932). As McNamara states, “this is unlikely to have been an exclusive location for such ceremonies…” (McNamara 2008, 932). One could imagine, therefore, the existence of a similar arena at Saqqara, the cemetery closest to the state capital. Without claiming that the Gisr el-Mudir was built to host Khasekhemwy’s sed-festival, it may nevertheless be suggested that its presence was related to the reinstatement of his centralized authority.

Following this scenario, the deposit of inscribed stone vessels below the Step Pyramid can be mentioned again. Of the 40,000 stone vessels that were discovered in the subterranean galleries VI and VII under the eastern side of the Step Pyramid, more than a thousand bear inscriptions written in ink (Gunn 1928, 153–74; Lacau and Lauer 1965; Helek 1979, 120–32). They refer to individuals, provenances or destinations, and accounts, and sometimes specify the contents of the vessels, referring mainly to bread and beer. Finally, there are references to the ceremonies in which these vessels obviously played a part; a large number of ink inscriptions can be linked to the sed-festival (Regulski 2004; Hornung and Staehelin 2006, 15). The recent discovery of similar ink inscriptions on stone vessels in the Royal Museums of Art

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6 There is evidence that Khasekhemwy also built a temple at Hierakonpolis (McNamara 2008, 912, 916).
and History in Brussels (De Putter et al. 2000; Hendrickx et al. 2001) and a reinvestigation of
the entire group of inscriptions has resulted in a revision of Helck’s proposal to date most
of them to the reign of Ninetjer (Helck 1979, 120–32). Instead, it is more likely that these
vessels were provided with ink inscriptions during the preparations for Khasekhemwy’s sed-
festival (Regulski 2004). Supporting evidence is provided by seal impressions carrying his
royal name, discovered in the same context as the vessels (Lacau and Lauer 1965, 93–94).
The backs of these impressions show clearly that they were applied to linen bags, suggesting
that Khasekhemwy was responsible for packing the vessels and sealing the bags containing
them. The fact that the vessels were handled in this way during his reign probably means that
the bags containing the vessels were meant to be distributed shortly thereafter. Obviously,
this did not happen; for unknown reasons, the distribution of these vessels, which were
already provided with ink inscriptions, was abandoned. In this hypothetical scenario, all the
preparations for Khasekhemwy’s festival were made, but due to his sudden death the festival
was never celebrated and the vessels were left in the royal stores. His successor Netjerikhet
was then responsible for the interment of the vessels, which were still packed in the bags.

It has been suggested that the Netjerikhet complex incorporates earlier monuments
(Stadelmann 1985, 295–308; Tavares 1998, 1137) as Khasekhemwy impressions have also
been found in the northern galleries below the pyramid. Stadelmann even suggested that the
cult installation of the western magazine was the Saqqara tomb of Khasekhemwy, which
was integrated later into the north-western extension of the Djoser complex (Stadelmann
1985, 298–99). In a nearby shaft Mariette discovered two lion-shaped offering tables made of
alabaster (CG 1321: Mariette 1885, 83–86), which, according to Stadelmann, belonged to a
funerary temple of Dynasty 2 (Stadelmann 1985, 303). This temple would have been located
to the north of the Step Pyramid, but disappeared after the incorporation of the northern
‘Massiven’ into the pyramid complex.

Although these assumptions cannot be proven with certainty and have, therefore, been
criticized in the past (for example, see Kaiser 1994), it is clear that the entire area attests to
intensive building activity during the reign of Khasekhemwy. When Khasekhemwy died, his
successor (probably his son) fulfilled the role of heir by overseeing the dead king’s burial
(Dreyer 1998, 31–34; Kahl 2006, 106; Seidlmayer 2006, 118). Once his tomb had been sealed,
Netjerikhet abandoned the Abydene cemetery, choosing the Memphite necropolis for his
imposing funerary complex. He did not choose a pristine spot, however, but an area of
great prominence, and its previous sanctity may have been an important factor in conferring
legitimacy.
Bibliography


1. Elite cemetery at North Saqqara
2. Djoser pyramid
3. Royal tombs from the 2nd dynasty
4. Dutch concession area
5. Gisr el-Mudir

Fig. 1: Google Earth map of Saqqara indicating the main Early Dynastic features.

Fig. 2: Plan of the tomb of Maya with the Dynasty 2 structure indicated in red.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_13/regulski.aspx
Fig. 3: Early Dynastic Room A below the tomb of Maya.

Fig. 4: Profile of the filling of Room A.
Fig. 5: Beer jar from Room A (SAK 2008 AII-602).
Fig. 6: Breccia bowl from Room A (SAK 2008 432-11).

Fig. 7: Travertine dummy vessels from Room A.
Fig. 8: Bowl fragment with ink inscription (SAK 2008 428-1).

Fig. 9: Seal impression from Room A yielding the royal name of Khasekhemwy (SAK 2008 472).