

THE FUNERARY COMPLEX
OF HORUS NETER-KHET

(The Step Pyramid of Djoser, Sakkara)

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Horus Neter-Khet was the first king of the third dynasty (2700 B. C.) and the founder of the Old Kingdom; his name is exceptionally written in red ink¹ on the Turin Canon of Kings (a genuine papyrus chronicle in hieratic, dating to the early Ramesside period). He was better known to the later generations of antiquity as Djoser.

His funerary complex stands at the edge of the Western Desert, near Sakkara, 25 Kilometres to the South of the Great Pyramid. It incorporates many successive phases in the development of ancient Egyptian architecture. This complex with its fine, smooth polished outer facings, fluted columns, recessed panelling, papyrus capitals, niches, temples, shrines, underground galleries and sculpture has been admired by visitors across the ages; a scribe of the 18th dynasty, Ahmose, son of Iptah², who came to see the temple of Djoser, wrote : « I found it as though Heaven were within it, RA rising in it. »

* The text of a lecture delivered to the Archaeological Society of Alexandria on 13th. April 1971.

(1) A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, Oxford 1966. p. 72.

(2) Leonard Cottrell, *The Mountains of Pharaoh*. Pan Books, London 1963. p. 36.

Another visitor of the same dynasty writes, « Let loaves and oxen and fowl and all good and pure things fall to the KA of the justified Djoser, may Heaven drop fresh myrrh, may it drop incense. »

Imhotep, the engineer, designer and builder of this funerary complex, was famous for his knowledge in other branches of science. After the Sixth Century B. C., he was deified and often took the place of Nefer-Tum, son of Ptah and Sekhmet in the Memphis Triad³.

The religious significance and the philosophic interpretation of the complex are not dealt with here, only apparent observations which link archaic mastabas with true pyramids, is our subject.

Protodynastic kings built mastabas at the Abydos archaic necropolis. They were excavated by Sir Flinders Petrie at the close of the last century ; those kings also built mastabas at the Sakkara archaic necropolis, a little to the North of our complex. The late Walter B. Emery⁴, who unearthed the Sakkara cemetery, declared it to be the actual resting place of those kings, and those mastabas at Abydos, to be cenotaphs.

Djoser and his father Horus-Seth Kha-Sekhemui also built cenotaphs at Bet-Khallaf not far from their predecessors' at Abydos. They were all built of sun-baked mud-brick.

Up till very recently, it was believed that stone was used for building the complex for the first time in history. As a royal tomb this mutation is very true, but Mr. Ali El-Khouli

(3) M. Broderick and A. Morton, A Concise Dictionary of Egyptian Archaeology, 1922, p. 77.

الدكتور احمد نغرى : الأهرامات المصرية ومؤسسة فرانكاين (القاهرة) ١٩٦٦ -
(4) W.B. Emery, Archaic Egypt, Pelican Books, 1963; A. Gardiner, op. cit., p. 409; W.B. Emery, Hor Aha, Cairo 1939, p. 1.

working at Tura El-Asmat (1963-64)⁵ discovered a tomb dating to the First Dynasty, entirely built in lime-stone! The Archaic cemetery at Helwan has many similar examples.

Whatever the case may be, the wise Imhotep proved great skill and produced a masterpiece, never rivalled during 3500 years of ancient Egyptian civilization. The KA of his king was to dwell in the monuments he erected, Djoser's mummy would be preserved for resurrection. In his eternal life Djoser would still be King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the title Nekhet and Edjo, (Nebty), the two ladies, would still be his.⁶ The living Horus, the great Pharaoh, his palaces, temples and Heb Sed⁷ monuments, were to be built within the complex. He was greater than his predecessors. Not only his personal belongings were to be represented, but also Memphis, the capital of the kingdom.

Imhotep, the genius, built the outer enclosure to represent the walls of the city, a colossal high wall decorated on the outer and inner sides by the palace façade recessed panning. In this way it shares the main feature of the archaic mastabas at Sakkara (a mark of Mesopotamian influence)⁸, but a hundred times larger; principally speaking, this rectangular enclosure is a giant mastaba; from North to South it measures 545 m., and from East to West 277 m. The impression it gives to-day is that of a huge fortress.

(5) Ali El-Khouli, A Preliminary Report on the Excavations at Tura, 1963-64, *Annales de Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*, T. LX, 1968, pp. 73 f.

(6) A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 73.

(7) For the Heb Sed see: P. Montet, *Eternal Egypt*, Mentor Books, U.S.A. 1968, pp. 76 f.; M. Murray, *The Splendour that was Egypt*, pp. 166 f.

(8) Emery, *op. cit.*, Fig. 110.

Like the royal palace at Memphis, the enclosure had 14 entrances. Since the KA and the BA could penetrate through stone, all these entrances were dummy, false doors, except one. The only entrance to the complex, used by the priests in the ancient times and by visitors to-day, is to the South of the Eastern side of the enclosure wall, a narrow corridor, roofed by stone slabs to look like palm logs, this leads to a great half-opened double door, amazingly not of wood as expected: it is a stone door, another dummy. Proceeding through a shorter but broader corridor, another door is built but single in this case. Now we stand at the beginning of the famous colonnade, here Imhotep for the first time built columns, never before were they erected. Could a stone column stand by itself? Could it support the heavy roof? No doubt he asked himself! He had no example to follow. Construction then of bricks, wattles and reed bunches, inspired the architect. Here the fluted engaged column was produced, confidence lacked in a column standing on its own, so it was connected to the wall behind it; yet in this magnificent hypostyle the columns are inclined to the outer sides, the spaces between them equal to the number of Egyptian nomes (provinces) with a partition separating Upper from Lower Egypt.

Here, the visitor is face to face with the prototype of all columns he may see in later times in Egypt, Greece, Rome and the modern buildings of to-day.

The remains of a royal statue of Djoser found among the ruins of the colonnade, had the name of Imhotep inscribed, a great honour and divine gratitude.

Stone doors, engaged columns and roofs of stone slabs imitating palm logs are very common in the buildings to be visited. Small blocks of limestone mark contrast with the

gyptean masonry favoured by the Fourth Dynasty. At the end of the colonnade, eight peculiar columns are engaged in four pairs.

Stepping into the great court, there is much to see. Over a deep well, Imhotep built a mastaba very similar to those at the Abydos necropolis, where the palace façade was absent. Many changes of plan resulted in a Pyramid of six steps, the first pyramid ever built. It must be noted here that the close examination of two forerunners at Sakkara⁹ the tomb of Queen Her-Nit, the supposed wife of Hosur Djer (early first dynasty) and the tomb of Horus Enezib (late first dynasty), show that over their burial chambers some sort of stepped monument was built. No doubt this gifted architect elaborated but surely did not invent.

Djoser was buried in a granit chamber at the bottom of the deep well, his mummy was admitted through a hole covered by a large plug in the ceiling which weighs three tons.¹⁰

A maze of underground galleries in all directions. Some of them decorated with blue faience tiles imitating the mats hanging on the walls of the king's palace. From these galleries came thousands of splendidly shaped vases and dishes of alabaster, breccia, schist and other fine stones. The sculpture to be seen is a perfect example of Old Kingdom art. For the historian came fragments with the name of King Weneg of the Second Dynasty, and others¹¹.

This hypogeum is another elaboration by Imhotep on the

(9) Ibid., Fig. 85 .

(10) I.E.S. Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt*, Pelican Books, London 1964 pp. 53 f.

(11) A Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 415.

tombs of the Second Dynasty kings which were cut in the native rock beneath their mastabas!¹² The access to these galleries is by an entrance at ground level in the mortuary temple, North of the pyramid.¹³

A pyramid was a private tomb for the king. In it he would lie alone in splendour. Djoser, unlike all kings, had his family buried under the pyramid in 11 shafts, connected to the hypogeum. An access to the first of these shafts is found East of the pyramid¹⁴. In the Sait period, a third entrance was hewn under the pyramid from the Southern side, but this only led to the upper part of the well.

An attractive cornice of sacred cobras is found over the recesses of the problematic mastaba, known as the Southern tomb. In it, there is much in common with the subterranean galleries, the sculpture, imitation of matting and also an identical deep well. The purpose of the Southern tomb is uncertain. Scholars have only guessed, some of them consider it the forerunner of the equally mysterious subsidiary pyramid found south of most of true pyramids, others suppose it to be for burying the canopic jars, a third group name it as a substitute to the Abydos cenotaphs, putting the mastaba at Bet Khallaf in a very vague position¹⁵. However many kings have built more than one tomb, creating an unsolved problem.

Although the Turin Papyrus gives Djoser's reign only 19 years, in his life time the Heb Sed was celebrated three times. This jubilee, though not clearly understood, dates to pre-

(12) Emery, op. cit., p. 94.

(13) Edwards, op. cit., p. 57, fig. 7.

(14) Ibid.

(15) احمد نفري : الأهرامات المصرية ، ص. ٥١ .

historic times; the ruler had to be killed after ruling 30 years; however by the First Dynasty this became a religious ceremony and, naturally, the killing ceased¹⁶. The king ran round certain monuments, danced and wore special gowns; he had to perform all this twice—once as King of Upper Egypt and again as King of Lower Egypt. Then he was supposed to rejuvenate and prolong his reign! It was also believed that fertility of the fields depended on the physical agility of the king. The fine sculpture mentioned above illustrates Djoser performing this rite.

A major part of the complex is connected with the Heb Sed. In the great court two mysterious «B» shaped monuments are found, but a more complex and elaborate multi-chapel wonder is to be seen, at the Heb Sed Pavillon, where the chapels are solid, but for a niche where a divine statue once stood, an arched roof and three engaged columns with an extinct plant capital represent another splendour.

Homage must be paid to Imhotep the learned, for his king can celebrate other Heb Seds after resurrection, the shrines, chapels and even the pavillons in which he was to retire between various episodes, or change his vestments, were there¹⁷. Three fluted columns stand engaged in the walls for spectators to hear them say: «We were built by Imhotep».

At the Northern end of the Heb Sed Pavillon, one can see a pedestal with feet of four persons: Djoser, his wife and two daughters.

An erroneous suggestion assuming two almost identical buildings as the tombs of Princess Entakas and Princess Hetep

(16) See Note 7.

(17) Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

Her Nepty, the daughters of Djoser, was rectified by J. P. Lauer. He named them, House of the South and House of the North¹⁸. They resemble the Chapels of the Heb Sed, except for being much larger, having four columns engaged in their façade, and a row of « Khekers » across, (they are the knots forming the fringe of a mat). Like the Heb Sed Chapels the houses are of solid masonry, except for an entrance to niches where the graffiti inscribed by Ahmon son of Iptah, quoted at the beginning of the lecture is preserved.

A cast of the noble seated statue of Djoser (among the treasures of the Cairo Museum) can be seen through two holes in the Serdab joined to the Northern side of the pyramid and to the East of the mortuary temple, this temple is a reminiscent of an earlier one within the mastaba of Horus Qee (the last king of the First Dynasty), and differs from later mortuary temples always built at the Eastern side of pyramids¹⁹. Its plan shows two symmetrical halves that contain basins probably where certain ceremonies were attended.

That was a brief account of the monuments hitherto excavated ; for more than 37 years of patient reconstruction and rebuilding the French architect and Egyptologist, Jean-Philip Lauer, has carried on the remarkable work he had started with Firth and Quibell. But there is much more to be excavated, the vast areas to the North and to the West of the Step Pyramid within the enclosure, await the archeologist.

The successors of Djoser, built step pyramids : Horus Sekhem Khet, Nubha, Kha'-Ba and Huni. Then a big step was taken, Senefru, the greatest of all the pyramid builders, prob-

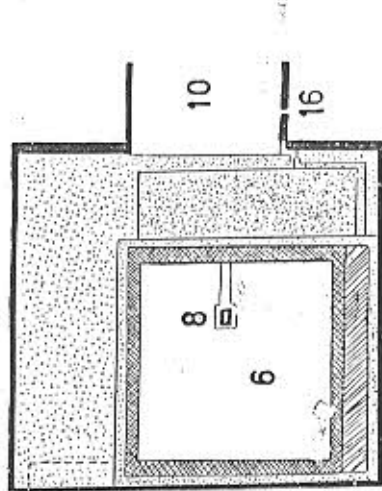
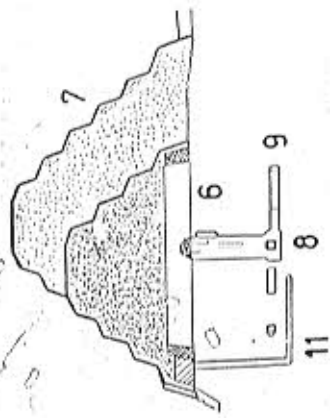
(18) احمد نثرى : الأهرامات المصرية ، ص. ٥٦ .

(19) Emery, op. cit., p. 90.

ably built three pyramids : the Step Pyramid at Meidoom (altered to look like a true pyramid), the Bent Pyramid at Dahshoor and the first true pyramid North of the Bent one—the last two are impressive giants.

To end this lecture, one must realize the importance of the attempts made to find the tomb of Imhotep. For eight years Professor W.B. Emery has searched. He discovered important caves : that of the Ibis, the Baboon and the Isium, all signs of getting close to where Imhotep lies. The sudden death of this great Egyptologist is a great loss to Humanity, and the tomb of the real hero of our subject still remains undiscovered.

THE FUNERARY COMPLEX OF HORUS NETER-KHET :



- 1: The outer enclosure
- 2: Dummy entrance
- 3: The true entrance
- 4: Entrance colonnade
- 5: Great court
- 6: First mastaba
- 7: Step Pyramid
- 8: Burial chamber
- 9: Underground galleries
- 10: Mortuary temple
- 11: Royal family burials
- 12: Southern tomb
- 13: Buildings connected with the Heb Sed
- 14: House of the South
- 15: House of the North
- 16: Serdab
- 17: Areas awaiting excavations

