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The History, People and Culture of the Nile Valley

A Two-sided Mummy Portrait



Saqqara
Before the
Step Pyramid



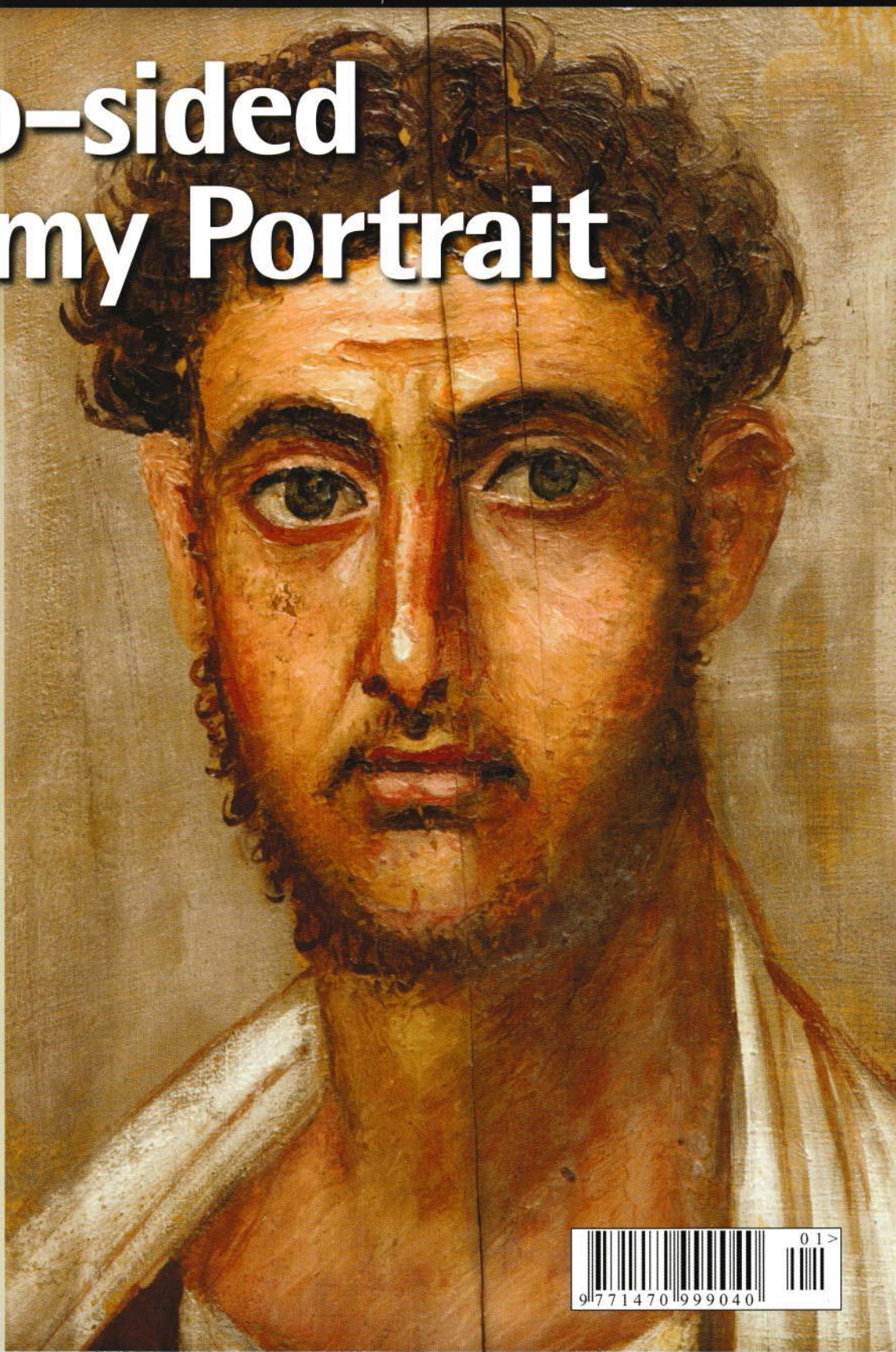
The Last
Ptolemies



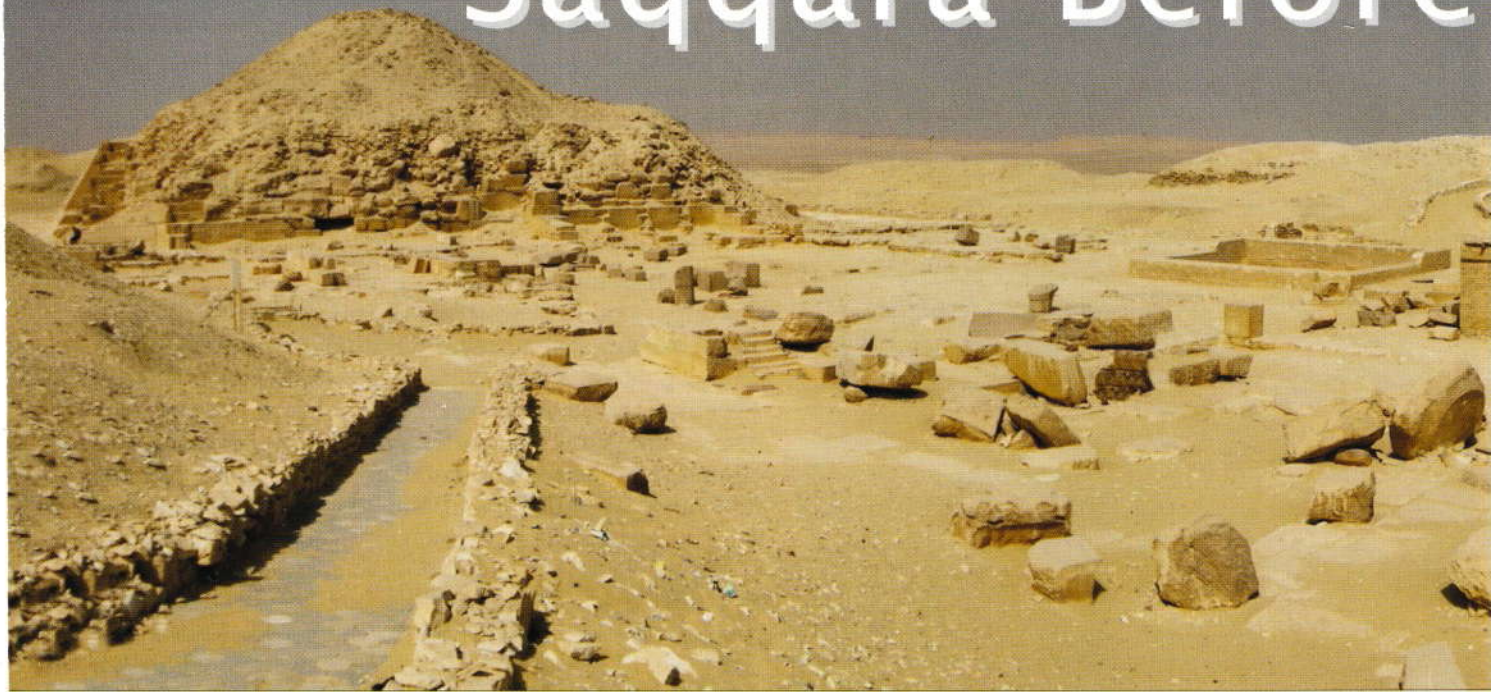
Excavating
in Nubia



The Sky
at Night



Saqqara Before



In the first of two articles exploring the Early Dynastic Period

This article is based on a paper that will shortly be published in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* (see Further Reading) and was inspired by work undertaken at Saqqara by Ian Mathieson and the Saqqara Geophysical Survey Project. The SGSP operated at Saqqara from 1990 to 2009 and over four field seasons I was lucky enough to walk this incredible site, mapping the geology as part of a geophysical ground model that Ian and his team had been developing. Sadly, Ian's death in 2010 brought an end to this extremely important work and although a series of unpublished reports had been produced to summarise the findings of each year's fieldwork, the more comprehensive publication Ian had been working towards was never



completed. I felt compelled to do something to correct this and after checking that key members of the team were happy for me to do so, I assembled a complete set of annual reports in digital format. Not only did this allow a comprehensive record of the project to be made available to the entire team, I was also able to send digital copies of the annual reports to the library of one of the key sponsors of the Project, the National Museums of Scotland.

In 2004, I published a paper in *JEA* called *On Pyramid Causeways*, which had been directly inspired by my fieldwork at Saqqara. In summary, I argued that rather than regard Saqqara from the Nile Valley in the east as we do today, for a significant time during the Early Dynastic Period, the main approach to Saqqara had been from the north along the Abusir Wadi (*outlined in green on Fig. 1, page 36*). The Abusir Wadi had been the focus of Ian Mathieson's concession at Saqqara (see *Fig. 1*) and although appearing generally dry and featureless today (see *left*), it was my view that because of the less arid conditions that existed in Egypt until the end of the Old Kingdom, the wadi would have been extensively vegetated during the earliest dynasties (see *opposite, below*). The southern end of the wadi is defined by a distinct east-west ridge which is formed by an outcrop of durable limestone and in this area there are also a number of important early dynastic monuments, including the Step Pyramid complex of Netjerikhet (Djoser), the pyramid complex of Djoser's less well known successor, Sekhemkhet and the enigmatic Gisir el Mudir. I saw it as no coincidence that these early funerary monuments were clustered around the southern end of the vegetated wadi and I argued that because of the vegetation and dark soil, the wadi would have been regarded by the

The Step Pyramid



At this fascinating site, **Colin Reader** focusses on the Abusir Wadi.

ancient Egyptians as part of *Kemet* – the Black Land – the place of life and of order in which the ancient Egyptian civilisation flourished. At the very fringes of the desert, these dark vegetated wadis will have been surrounded by the Red Land – a place of death and spiritual chaos, which the ancient Egyptians feared. As such, I saw the vegetated Abusir Wadi as a *cordon sanitaire*, providing a safe route through the chaos of the surrounding desert, allowing celebrants from the newly established capital at Memphis to

worship at the cult centres of the Early Dynastic kings. Saqqara is not the only example where landscape may have influenced the development of early Egyptian mortuary sites. At Abydos, other researchers have identified a 'Processional Way' which leads from the inundation, past the traditional royal burial ground at Umm el Qa'ab, to a cleft in the high cliffs that rise in the west, behind the site.

I also suggested that the vegetated Abusir Wadi and other similar landscape features may have influenced the devel-

ABOVE: The Saqqara panorama.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Members of the Saqqara Geophysical Survey Project surveying in the Abusir Wadi. Note the general landscape: generally flat with mounds of excavation debris in the background.

BELOW: Wadi vegetation at Saqqara today is limited to the area referred to as the 'Abusir Lake' at the northern end of the Abusir Wadi. The Abusir pyramids are in the background.





Fig. 1: A topographical map of North Saqqara showing the Saqqara Geophysical Survey Project concession area (red dotted line), the Abusir Wadi area (green outline) and the positions of the Early Dynastic tombs.

opment of the pyramid causeway. Early Third Dynasty pyramids such as those at Saqqara did not include a causeway and it was only at the dawn of the Fourth Dynasty, at sites such as Meidum and Dahshur that the first pyramid causeways appear. In these early examples, the causeways were covered in a layer of mud plaster or mudbrick (*see below*), which I considered to be a symbolic representation of the dark soils of the naturally vegetated wadi. Paved in this

way, as the climate became more arid and wadi vegetation began to recede, the causeways took the place of the vegetated wadi, providing the means of safe access to the pyramid complex.

The conclusion presented in my 2004 paper, was that during the earliest dynasties, the Abusir Wadi was the focus for development within the Saqqara necropolis. Given however, that these conclusions have not been universally



The Fourth Dynasty Bent Pyramid at Dashur, showing traces of mud plaster that once lined the causeway (right foreground).

accepted, I felt it necessary to look more closely at the influence that both the Abusir Wadi, and landscape in general, may have had on the earliest phases of development at Saqqara.

Early Dynastic Nobles' Tombs

According to most accounts, the earliest tombs that can be identified at Saqqara are the great First Dynasty tombs that line the escarpment at the north of the site (see the tombs in red, opposite, top). Initially, these large and elaborate tombs were considered to be royal tombs, perhaps the northern counterparts of the smaller, simpler royal burials at Umm el Qa'ab, Abydos (see page 38, bottom). The consensus today however, is that the First Dynasty tombs at Saqqara belonged to the most elite members of Egyptian society and had been built at such a prominent location in order to look out across the inundation towards the new capital at Memphis. Contrary to what you are likely to read elsewhere, however, visibility from the inundation does not appear to have been a key consideration for the builders of the Second and Third Dynasty tombs in this area. As figure 1 shows (opposite, top), rather than having been built along or parallel with the eastern edge of the escarpment, the later tombs extended to the west across the top of the narrow limestone promontory, with many crossing the western escarpment and down the flanks of the Abusir Wadi. The question was: why this change of emphasis?

The Abusir Wadi

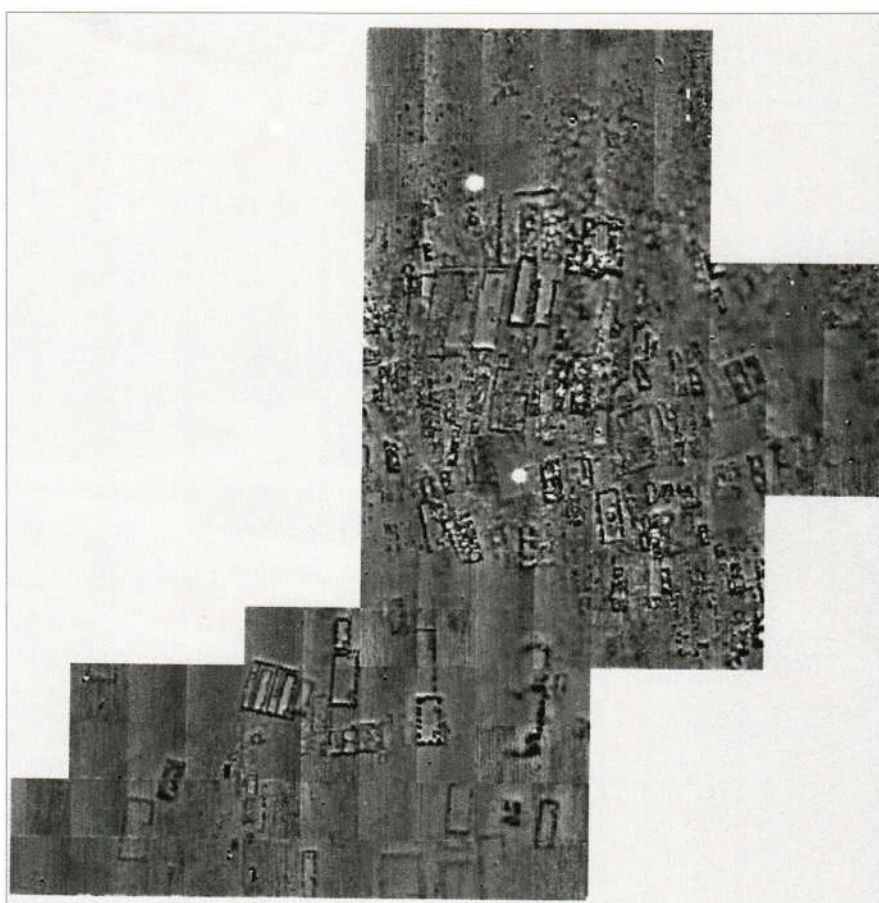
The Abusir Wadi has generally been overlooked by archaeological investigation. It is generally a low-lying barren sandy waste (see page 34, bottom), in which the only features tend to be piles of overburden cast aside from archaeological excavations on the higher parts of the plateau. It would require substantial resources to investigate such a large area with traditional methods of excavation. However, Ian Mathieson had a better idea: by using the latest available geophysics to undertake an initial reconnaissance of the area in a far more cost-effective way. The geophysics data could then be used to prioritise features for targeted excavation. Each evening as the geophysics progressed, the SGSP team would gather around the surveyors' laptop as data was processed and the findings

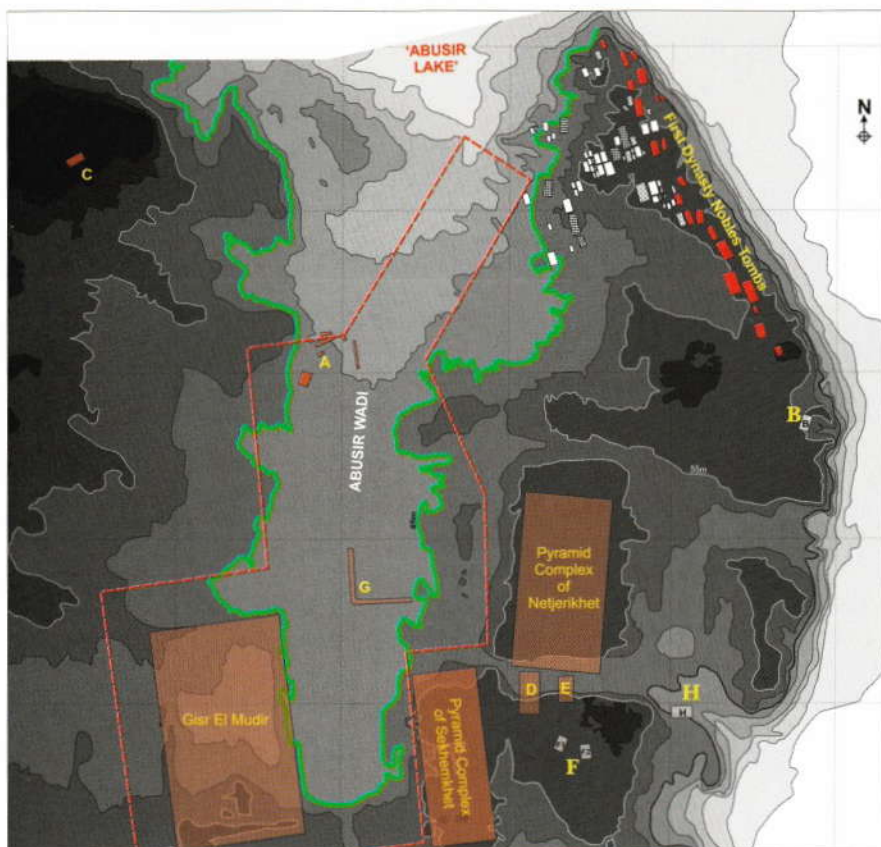


ABOVE
The remains of the Early Dynastic mudbrick elite tombs, with their niched façade, in the north of Saqqara.

were revealed. It was a constant source of surprise to find that apparently featureless areas of the wadi were underlain by ancient structures – mainly built in mudbrick but some appearing to be built in stone. As the results illustrate (below), there are hundreds of buildings lying beneath the drifting sands of the now arid and featureless Abusir Wadi.

BELOW
Results of geophysical survey of the Abusir Wadi showing numerous structures buried beneath the sand.





reassessment of these records shows that while relatively low-status burials are indeed present, there are also a significant number of higher-status burials. The arrangement of the burials in extended ranks reflecting the status of the tomb owner is also of interest, as is the conclusion that the burials appear to be arranged around an open area that may have been the focus of the entire complex. The authors conclude that this site was an important cult centre associated closely with the pharaoh Den; following the pharaoh's death, certain rituals were enacted at this location in the Abusir Wadi, prior to the body being taken to the traditional royal burial site at Umm el-Qa'ab (see below).

The establishment of a royal cult centre such as this may have given the Abusir Wadi a certain prestige that it had not previously enjoyed, which may explain why after the First Dynasty, elite tombs on the northern plateau at Saqqara were no longer built along the eastern escarpment but gravitated to the west, towards the Wadi. A further indication of the increasing importance of the Abusir Wadi in the Second and Third Dynasty may come from a recent discovery in the little-explored area between Saqqara and Abusir. This area is dominated by a low rocky knoll which has long been recognised as a focus for development in the New Kingdom. Recent excavations however, have revealed an enigmatic stone-built structure which has been dated to the Second or Third Dynasty (Fig. 1, C, above left, and opposite bottom). Nestling as it does against the foot of the

higher status burials placed on the elevated plateau. Among the pieces of evidence on which this conclusion was based are excavations published in 1940 in an area to the north of the Serapeum. These excavations identified a large group of what were regarded as low-status burials from the First Dynasty reign of Den (marked 'A' in Fig. 1, above). As was the tendency at this early time, many of these burials were sacrificial, with the individual interments being laid out in closely-spaced groups. However a recent

ABOVE

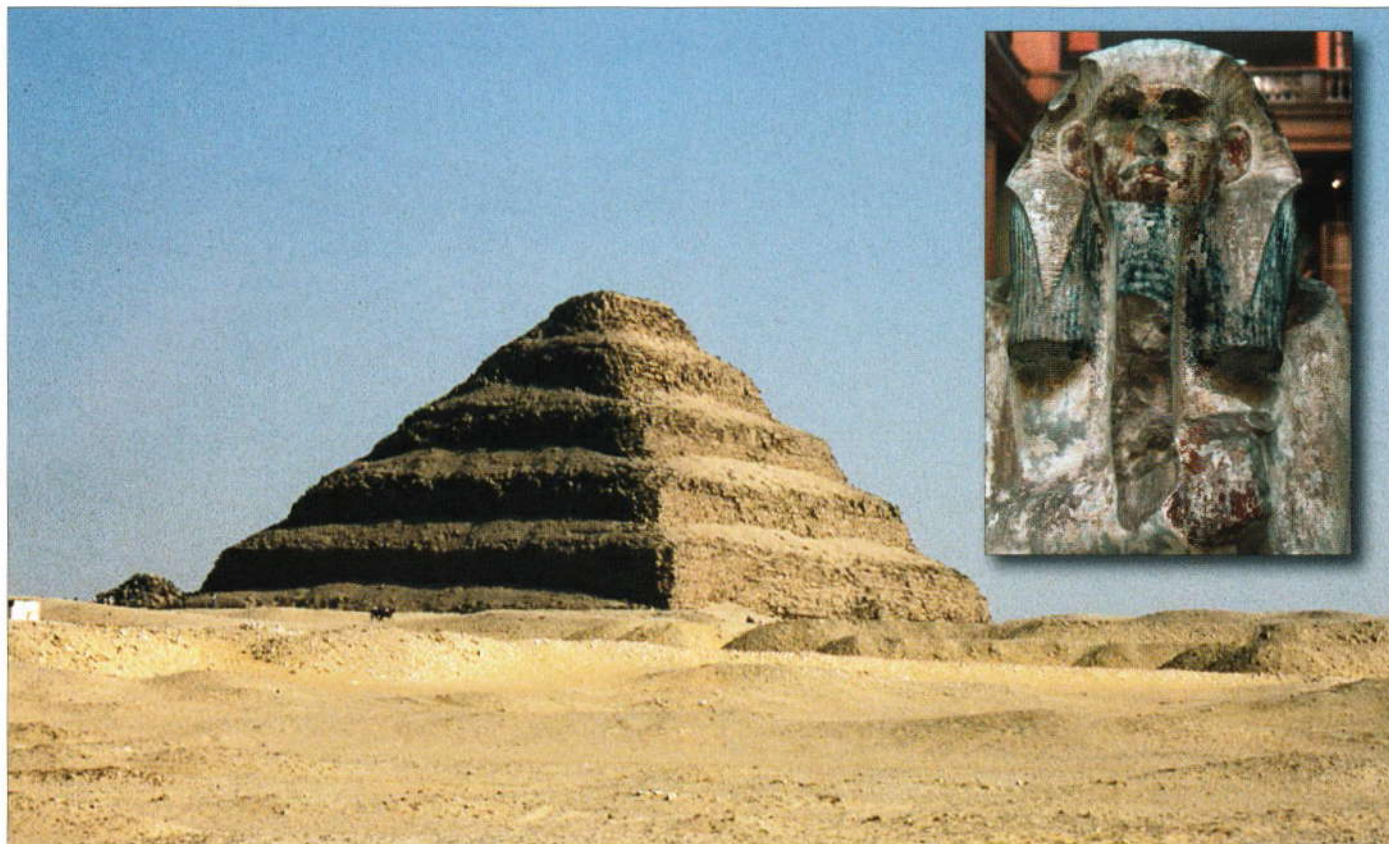
(Fig. 1) Topographical map of North Saqqara. The First Dynasty burials are marked 'A'. The Second or Third Dynasty stone structure shown on the opposite page (bottom) is marked with a 'C' and the tomb of Hetepsekhemwy of the Second Dynasty, lying just south of the later Step Pyramid, is marked 'D'.

RIGHT

The royal burial complex of Den (First Dynasty) with subsidiary burials at the Umm el Qa'ab cemetery, Abydos. Certain rituals may have been carried out for the king in Saqqara at the Abusir Wadi before his body was brought to the Abydos complex.

Photo: RBP





knoll, views from it to the north and west are obscured by the rising topography; however, the orientation of the structure (as well as two openings in the façade) suggests it commanded a vista which extended to the south and east. Today this outlook is dominated by the pyramids of Saqqara; but when this strange structure was built in the period before the Step Pyramid, the only feature of any note will have been the green swathe of the vegetated Abusir Wadi, cutting through the otherwise arid desert landscape.

The First Royal Burials

The Third Dynasty Step Pyramid of Djoser (*above*) is not the oldest royal tomb at Saqqara. Before and during the First Dynasty, kings of ancient Egypt were buried in relatively modest underground tombs at Abydos. However, Hetepsekhemwy, the first king of the little understood Second Dynasty, broke with this tradition and built his tomb in an apparently unremarkable area of Saqqara, a little to the south of where the Step Pyramid was later built (*Fig. 1, D, opposite top*). Excavated in the early 1900s and for some inexplicable reason largely ignored since, links with Hetepsekhemwy's probable successor, Raneb were also discovered in this tomb.

As with the earlier royal tombs at Abydos, it is assumed that Hetepsekhemwy's tomb was intended to represent important elements of the royal palace, together with storage for the king's eternal journey through the after-life. Whereas the tombs at Umm el Qa'ab were excavated as rectangular pits in the in deep sand (and lined with mudbrick), ground conditions at Saqqara dictated that Hetepsekhemwy's tomb had to be rock-cut. This meant that the tomb was

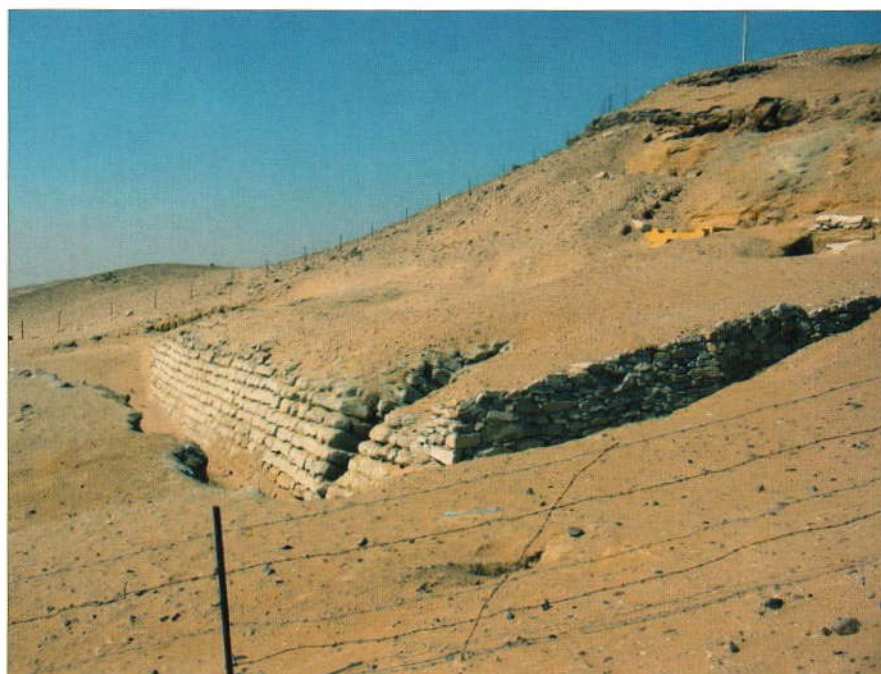
ABOVE

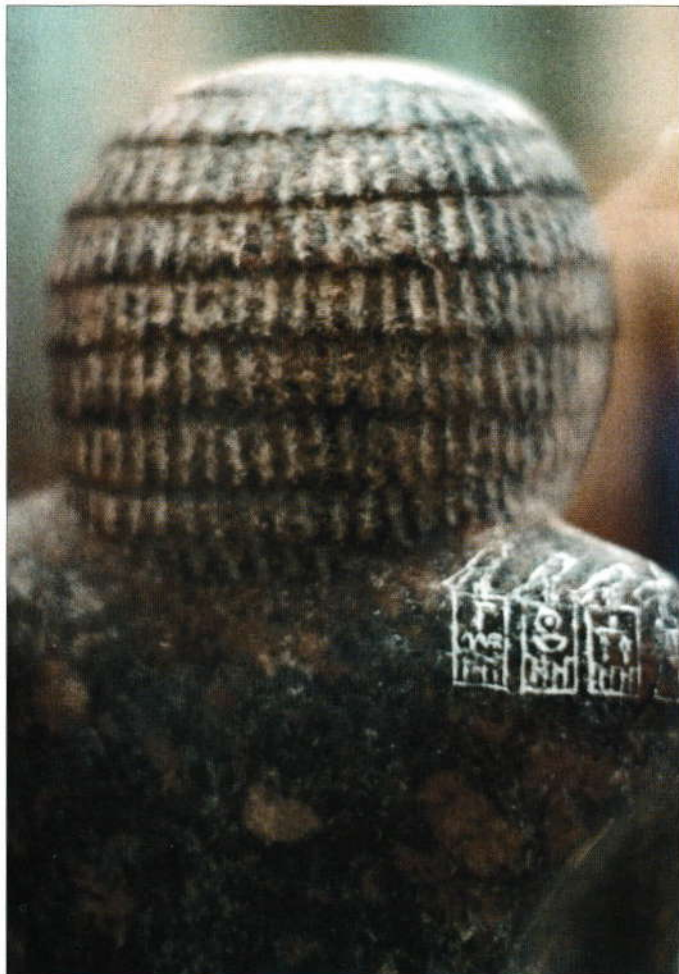
The Step Pyramid of Djoser viewed from the Abusir Wadi, with (*inset*) the *serdab* statue of the king, now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Djoser photo: RBP

BELOW

A Second or Third Dynasty masonry structure to the north of the Abusir Wadi (*marked with a 'C' in Fig. 1, opposite, top*).





of an entirely novel type and a form of royal tomb that turned out to be relatively short lived. The tomb is almost 100m from north to south and follows a very regular almost comb-like layout, with a main north-south corridor leading

from the entrance ramp (*above right*) to a series of chambers in the south. Branching off this main corridor are numerous side passages, each of which leads to further storage chambers. The tomb is about six metres below





ground level, a depth which is likely to have been influenced by the presence of a particularly durable stratum within the layered limestones in this part of Saqqara. The third king of the Second Dynasty, Nynetjer, was buried in a second rock-cut tomb located slightly further to the east (Fig. 1, E). Although slightly smaller and with a markedly less regular layout than Hetepsekhemwy's tomb, recent detailed re-excavation has confirmed that both funerary structures share a number of common features. If either Hetepsekhemwy's or Nynetjer's tomb were built with above-ground elements, no evidence for these has been found.

I often wondered why Hetepsekhemwy selected this unremarkable location for his tomb rather than, for example, build at a more prominent location amongst the First Dynasty nobles' tombs in the north of the necropolis. The choice of tomb location was no less puzzling given that in the early Second Dynasty, there was no extensive development at Saqqara which would have limited the areas available for building. After working with Ian Mathieson's detailed maps of Saqqara, it became evident that Hetepsekhemwy's move from Umm el Qa'ab to Saqqara may not have been the complete break with tradition that it first appears and once again, the clues lay in the landscape. Measured along the Processional Way at Abydos, the Umm el Qa'ab lies some 2km from the edge of the inundation, with the area of royal burials offset some distance to the east of the wadi. We see the same general ground-plan at Saqqara, with the tombs of Hetepsekhemwy and Nynetjer located to the east of the Abusir Wadi, some 2km

south of the inundation. Was it Hetepsekhemwy's intention to re-create the sacred landscape of Abydos at the new royal necropolis of Saqqara, close to the recently founded capital of the Two Lands at Memphis? This remains only a theory, but one that I find very intriguing.

This exploration of early Saqqara will be continued in the second part of this article, when we will explore some of the most enigmatic and little explored structures at Saqqara – the Great Rectangular Enclosures.

Colin Reader

Colin is a Fellow of the Geological Society of London, a Chartered Geologist and regular contributor to *AE Magazine*. He was first attracted to ancient Egypt by the controversy over the age of the Great Sphinx at Giza and what the weathering and erosion of that monument could tell us about its age (you can read about his theory on the age of the sphinx in *AE* 84). Colin then went on to research the geology of Egypt in broader terms, particularly the way the Egyptian landmass and features such as the Nile Valley and the Red Sea Hills, evolved. Colin's paper will be published in *JEA* shortly – see below for details.

All images (except where specified)
provided by the author

Further Reading

Mathieson, P. (ed) (2013) *Seeing Under The Sands of Saqqara: Geophysics in the Service of Egyptian Archaeology*. The Scottish Egyptian Archaeological Trust. [Reviewed in *AE* 83]

Reader, C. (2017). "An Early Dynastic Ritual Landscape at North Saqqara: An Inheritance from Abydos?" *JEA* 103.1 EES.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP LEFT

Detail of a statue of Hetepedief, priest of the mortuary cults of the first three kings of the Second Dynasty. The *serekhs* of Hetepsekhemwy, Ranef and Nynetjer are shown carved into the priest's shoulder.

Photo: Juan R. Lazaro CC BY 2.0

TOP RIGHT

The entrance ramp to the Second Dynasty rock-cut tomb of Hetepsekhemwy (see Fig. 1, D). Unas' pyramid is in the background to the right.

BOTTOM

Ian Mathieson undertaking topographic survey in the north of Saqqara.

THIS PAGE

ABOVE

The Saqqara camp of the Geophysical Survey Project.