

Report on

“The Pyramid Complex of Djedkare-Isesi at South Saqqara and its Decorative Program”

by Mr. Mohamed Megahed

presented as Ph.D. thesis to the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, Prague.

The pyramid complex of Djedkare-Isesi at Saqqara-South is not only one of the most enigmatic structures of the Old Kingdom but suffered numerous setbacks since the first scientific investigations. These started only in the middle of the 40ies of the last century and shared almost identical fate: The archaeological investigations were brief, the documentation inferior and almost nothing was published for the scientific community. On top of this, most of the meagre documentation is lost or irretrievable today. Thus, although in a comparable well-preserved state of preservation, the precinct remained a “white spot” in the scientific discussion of pyramid complexes of that period.

The doctoral dissertation “The Pyramid Complex of Djedkare-Isesi at South Saqqara and its Decorative Program” by Mohamed Megahed seeks to remedy this unsatisfactory situation. As indicated in the title the study deals with the pyramid complex *and* its decorative programme alike, albeit the main focus of the candidate’s research lies on the assessment and discussion/evaluation of the many thousand relief fragments found in the precinct, which remained unpublished. As a research goal for a Ph.D. this is a huge enterprise considering the almost non-existing documentation of the previous excavations. The candidate has ventured the following steps.

After the introductory chapters one and two on a general outline of the state of research on the decoration of royal funerary monuments, a historical outline of Djedakare’s reign and position within the 5th Dynasty is attempted. It becomes clear that his reign is a historical and cultural turning point after the reign of the Abusir-kings (mid-5th Dynasty). In these pages the author puts together all the available puzzle stones in reconstructing the king’s reign, his achievements and family relationships. Set in broader context of recent research in the field, especially in Abusir and Saqqara, the author clearly demonstrates how meagre our understanding of that period still is. Nevertheless, the collection and through discussion of the material not only tries to offer solutions, but forms a solid basis for future research. The chapter plainly demonstrates that the only way of achieving answers is further fieldwork to gain new material.

The third chapter targets the first major issue of this dissertation: the description and assessment of the pyramid complex as a structure. It also includes a concise and useful compilation of the exploration of the site since the 19th century. Mr. Megahed’s description of the architectural remains (III.3) is careful and evaluates the documentation carried out by former scholars - in

essence the plans and description by Vito Maragioglio and Celeste Rinaldi (1962 and 1977). Based on recent observations by Mr. Megahed himself he can demonstrate that the temple's ground plan must be rectified in many parts and still offers new insights. His documentation is further supplemented by valuable information from other more recent work by Salah el-Naggar and Audran Labrousse. One of the most enigmatic rooms is the so-called *antichambre carrée* ("square antechamber"), which yields enough traces to demonstrate that it was not square but rectangle (like in the "Queen's" temple). This is an intriguing deviation from the standard of other temples and has not found a satisfactory answer thus far. Further research on this matter is definitely required.

One of the major concerns of this chapter is to allocate the original position of the many relief fragments found in the previous excavations, since this constitutes the basis of a correct evaluation of the precincts "*Bildprogramm*". During Ahmed Fakhry's work "hundreds" of relief fragments were collected from the king's temple as well as from the adjacent smaller complex of an anonymous owner (generally assumed to be Djedkare's queen). The presently known number of fragments amounts to almost 3000 pieces! Thus, the fragments of both sites were not only not recorded properly, but eventually mixed when they ended up in the magazines and store rooms of the Antiquities Organization.

As the author rightly observes, this makes it almost impossible for any proper evaluation since no reliable documentation or description exists regarding the relief fragments original find-spot during the excavations. In consequence, a major source of information in reconstructing the "*Bildprogramm*", which was used extensively by the author, are the existing decorations of pyramid temples of previous and later periods.

Chapter four constitutes the core of this thesis amounting to 175 pages of careful description of the individual fragments and almost 200 plates with drawings and photos. From the vast mount of reliefs of almost 3000 pieces of different size and preservation the author has made a careful selection of several hundred for his study. Furthermore, since the context of the fragments is lost the author has decided to group the reliefs according to subject themes, thus following the procedures of other scholars working in that field (A. Cwiek).

From the careful study of the reliefs (every sub-chapter dealing with a certain corpus is followed by a thorough "discussion" of the evidence) it becomes clear that many fragments conform to the standard decoration scheme found also in other pyramid temples (the king in the presents of gods, the king subduing enemies, the king receiving offering etc.). Thus the attribution of these scenes to particular rooms of the temple can be accomplished with a certain amount of confidence. Among them, certain scenes pertaining to the *hebsed*-ceremony raise the question, if Djedkare deliberately

included them in greater number since he stopped building a sun-temple. Other scenes are unique - like the circumcision scene (see cat. no. 40). The effort to identify the original place of that particular block must remain mute, however, since no comparable scenes are thus far attested from other pyramid temples. The closest parallels – as demonstrated by the author - can be found only in the New Kingdom. But the author correctly raises the question if this type of scene might be connected to the royal birth theme and the concept of the divine triad, which is well attested for the 5th Dynasty (especially in Niuserre's sun temple). Scenes of this particular kind, are important since they show that our knowledge about the decoration of pyramid temples is still incomplete and hampered by missing links. Any future excavation and especially in depth studies will close our gap of ignorance a bit further. And the present thesis is certainly a major contribution to this step.

To sum up the many details and valuable results presented in this thesis, one has to acknowledge that the obstacles and difficulties with which the author met during his research and writing this thesis must be considered enormous and time consuming. It becomes clear to the reviewer why this gargantuan enterprise has caused scholars in the past to refrain from dealing with Djedkare's pyramid complex in detail. Thus, the present thesis is not only a first step (as the author modestly describes), but a major leap in understanding Djedkare's eternal abode. The research gathers old material and puts together what laid apart. At no point, the reviewer got the impression the author loses control of the amount of material to be processed. Mr. Megahed has accomplished a fine piece of scholarly work and proofed worth of conducting academic research. His thesis is a promising enterprise that will instigate future research and offers new perspectives on this still little understood period of the 5th Dynasty.

In every respect his thesis meets the standards and requirements of a Ph.D thesis. The candidate has proofed capable of collecting, describing and discussing in depth his material thereby offering new solutions and strategies. I, therefore, strongly recommend Mr. Mohamed Megahed's thesis and kindly advice the bodies involved in the doctoral process to accept his work as a Ph.D. thesis at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, Prague. The thesis passes with excellence.

Vienna, 18th November 2016



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