

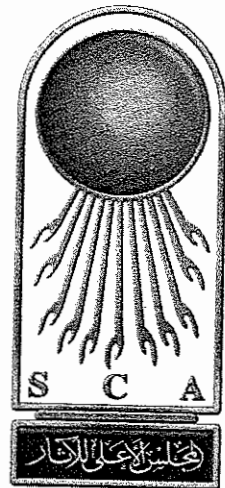
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On the Ownership of the Saqqara Mastabas and the Allotment of Political and Ideological Power at the Dawn of the State

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In his recently completed manuscript, "The ownership of elite tombs at Saqqara in the First Dynasty," David O'Connor (in press) argues that mastaba 3505 may not have belonged to a high official named Merka, contrary to current consensus. Gathering together numerous lines of evidence, he marshals a strong case that the stele bearing Merka's name and titles in fact memorialized the occupant of the monument's sole subsidiary tomb, as the archaeologist who excavated the stele had originally believed (EMERY 1958). This conclusion, if correct, has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the constellation of power in First Dynasty Egypt.

David O'Connor has reached the pinnacle of his profession over his long, multifaceted career due in part to his willingness to challenge accepted paradigms, to offer innovative alternative interpretations, and to thereby encourage his colleagues to view old problems with renewed interest. Certainly, in the case of his article for Dr. Ali Radwan's Festschrift, this is exactly what he has done. Merka is one of several officials that bore names incorporating the noun "ka"—an aspect of the Egyptian soul—to whom the massive First Dynasty mastabas at Saqqara are now routinely assigned (e.g., KEMP 1967; HELCK 1984: cols. 394–399; WILKINSON 1999: 146–149; TAVARES 1999). To suggest that not only was Merka *not* the owner of the largest tomb of his day but rather that he was *sacrificed* at the death of the true owner of that monument is bold and potentially of great importance.

Obviously the issue of just who was buried in the largest, wealthiest, and most visually prominent tombs of the First Dynasty is crucial to resolve, or at least to explore thoroughly, if we are to have any sense of the political dynamics operative at the dawn of the Egyptian state. I am therefore on this occasion honored to add my voice to that of my professor, mentor, and scholarly hero of sorts in suggesting that the Saqqara mastabas do not belong to the officials to whom Egyptologists have long handed over their deeds. To mount my own argument, I will utilize mastaba 3504 as a case study. Ownership of this tomb, the nearest neighbor to the north of mastaba 3505, which Dr. O'Connor took as the focus for his own investigation, is usually

attributed to an official named Sekhemka. In this essay I will introduce the reader to this opulent mastaba, highlight the reasons I believe its assignment to Sekhemka to be misguided, widen the frame to demonstrate the relevance of the case study, and finally introduce a tentative alternative hypothesis as to what category of people owned the Saqqara mastabas and why their identities may have been to some extent intentionally subsumed in that of the reigning king.

The Case Study: Mastaba 3504

At the time mastaba 3504 was built, three massive niched mastabas already dominated the steep escarpment that overlooked the newly established capital of Memphis (see Fig. 1). Although heavily plundered, copious sherds, stone shards, and broken equipment demonstrated that the tombs had once been lavishly equipped. The earliest mastaba (3357), which dated to the reign of Hor-aha, encompassed in its precinct a 19 m boat-grave and an elaborate complex of model buildings and granaries (EMERY 1939).¹ Within the tomb itself, Emery found the bones of four women. Whether this suggests that one woman was buried together in the tomb with three subordinate females, that four royal females were buried in the tomb together, or that robbers had anciently dragged the corpse of the male owner outside the tomb to search for valuables is unknown. The other two mastabas (3471, 2185) stood side by side, as often occurred at Saqqara when more than one mastaba dated to the same reign. While this spatial twinning of monuments may have reflected purely practical considerations on the part of the planners, the proximity may also have acted to emphasize especially close ties of blood or marriage.

Despite numerous inscribed jars, jar sealings, and labels, no names save those of Hor-aha (3357) and Djer (3471, 2185) were discovered in the three mastabas—as was also the case in the contemporary royal tombs at Abydos. This and other intriguing parallels between the two cemeteries led Brian Emery (1939: 2–3) to suggest that both were royal, and his view has been followed by a vocal minority of respected scholars (e.g., LAUER 1956; HOFFMAN 1979; AUTORI 2002). For those sceptical of the thesis that the northern tombs belonged to the First Dynasty kings and their nearest and dearest, however, the names of various officials discovered in many of the mastabas that postdated Djer's offered a welcome opportunity to lay the issue of ownership to rest. Mastaba 3504, the only mastaba at Saqqara that dates to the reign of King Djet, contains numerous attestations of "Sekhemka,"² and on this basis Sekhemka is commonly assigned ownership of this tomb. It is this easy equation that I wish to problematize.

The mastaba attributed to Sekhemka (Fig. 2), at 49.5 by 20 meters in area, is one of the largest tombs First Dynasty architects created. Like its antecedents at Saqqara, it possessed elaborate niching—an ornamentation otherwise discovered only on serekhs and on the walls of the royal funerary enclosures at Abydos. The superstructure boasted a white lime wash except for the central panels of the largest niches, which were instead painted bright red. These red niches are strongly reminiscent of a series of red painted recesses within Djet's burial chamber at Abydos, and in both instances there is little doubt that the red "false doors" were the portals through which the spirit of the honoured dead could enter and exit the tomb (PETRIE 1900: 10). Prior to this time, such a feature had only been discovered within the burial chamber of Djer's tomb at Abydos. The differential placement of the false doors in the superstructure of mastaba 3504 and in the burial chambers of the Abydos tombs almost certainly reflects the lack of any known masonry superstructure in the latter.

The exterior of mastaba 3504 possessed yet another decorative flair. A small bench that wrapped around the outside of the tomb served as the platform for 300 or so life-size "bull's" heads. The symbolism of the bull in early Egypt—as is clear from imagery on the Bull and

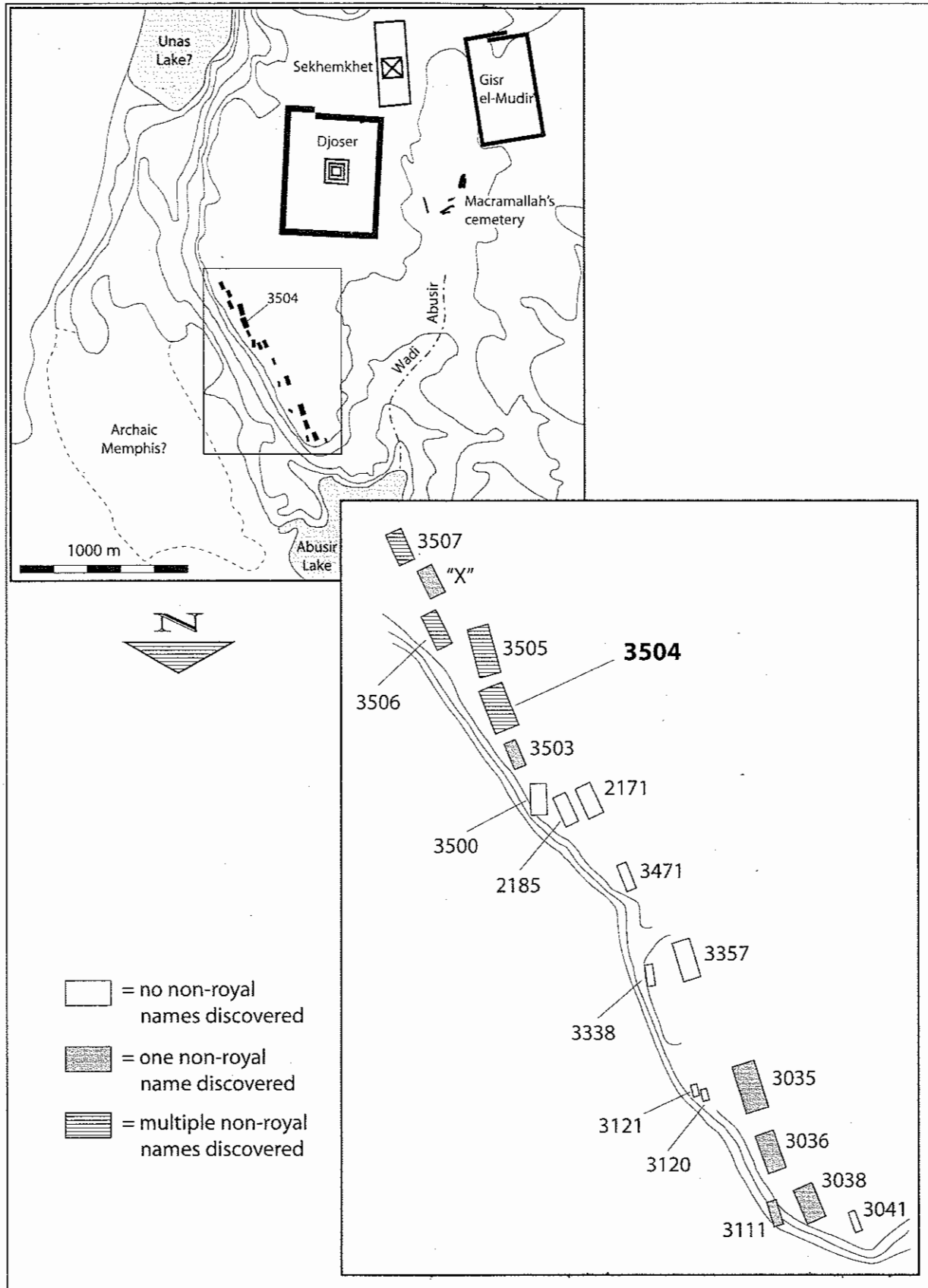


Fig. 1: First Dynasty mastabas in North Saqqara (after HELCK 1984: 387-388).

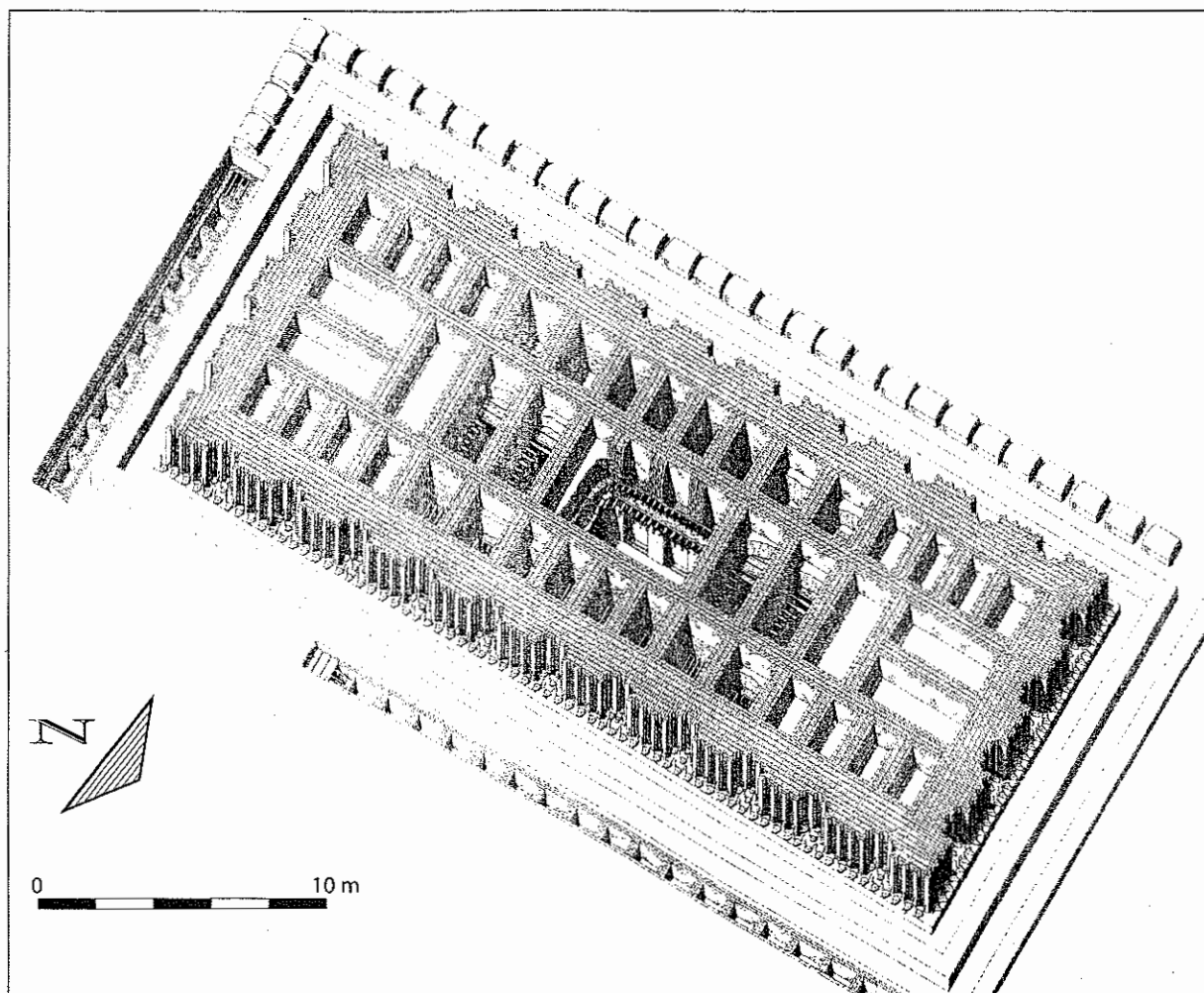


Fig. 2: An isometric view of mastaba 3504 (after EMERY 1954: pl. I).

Narmer Palettes—had everything to do with royalty, and it is likewise apparent from the latter monument that the cow-goddess had already assumed her position as royal protector. Indeed, the cow's intimate association with royal regeneration, as reflected in Hathor's prominence in Old Kingdom pyramid temples, may already have been well established in the First Dynasty. Whether the bucrania arrayed around mastaba 3504 and other Saqqara mastabas was intended to evoke metaphors linking kings and bulls or linking cow-goddesses and rebirth, the connotations were clearly sacrosanct.³

Whatever religious associations they evoked, however, the bucrania may also have served to memorialize for the benefit of later visitors the awe-inspiring wealth expended at the funeral of the mastaba's owner. Although the skulls of the animals had been fashioned in clay, the horns of each were real, and Mark Lehner (1997: 79) has suggested that these models served as less gruesome stand-ins for the whole heads of slaughtered animals. The presence of a whole ox skull below the floor of a niche of mastaba 3038 bolsters this idea (EMERY 1949: 92). Such large-scale slaughter at or just before the funeral may have been intended both to provision the soul on its journey to the afterlife and to provide a throng of mourners with a suitably lavish funerary repast. If this theory were correct, the extravagant act of butchering 300 or so head of cattle for one event would have represented a stunning outlay of resources. And this touches upon one

of the themes I'd like to emphasize particularly before turning to issues of ownership—namely the prodigious expenditure of human energy, human life, and quite probably animal life as well, that went in to the building and provisioning of this tomb and, by extension, the First Dynasty Saqqara mastabas as a whole.

A related theme, and one which is often highlighted by proponents of the theory that many of the Saqqara mastabas were the Lower Egyptian tombs of the Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt, is that by many yardsticks the expenditures involved in the construction and provisioning of these tombs appear to exceed such expenditures at Abydos. Worn though it may be, the critique certainly holds true for mastaba 3504. With respect to sheer size alone, this tomb dwarfs tomb Z, the contemporaneous tomb of King Djnet at Abydos (see Fig. 3). The substructure of the Saqqara monument is roughly 1.4 times larger than that of the Abydos tomb (PETRIE 1900: 8). Its greater area and the addition of a massive mud-brick superstructure enabled mastaba 3504 to incorporate up to 68 internal storerooms, as opposed to only twenty in Djnet's tomb at Abydos. Unless continued explorations in and around the Abydos funerary enclosures reveal as yet unattested chambers or magazines, the ability of the Saqqara mastabas to house significantly more wealth—even when utilizing only a fraction of their potential storage space—cannot be contested.

The wealth once interred in mastaba 3504 must have been wildly extravagant to judge from the material that remained even after repeated robberies over the course of five millennia. Emery and his team, for example, discovered in storerooms the remains of some 2,500 ceramic vessels. This represents a particularly staggering accumulation when one considers that the majority of these jars and pots would likely have been filled originally with wine or other highly valued consumables. As a case in point, fully 870 of these vessels belonged to EMERY's category A, thought to have been employed primarily for the storage of large quantities of wine! A further 127 jars belonged to his category B, of large storage vessels. Thus roughly 40 percent of the preserved assemblage was dedicated to bulk storage. When pondering this great cache of pottery, it is particularly important to remember that only three generations back, just prior to the advent of the First Dynasty, tombs possessing even a hundred pottery vessels were virtually unknown. Tomb U-j constitutes the exception that proves the rule.

Pottery vessels and their contents were only the beginning of mastaba 3504's stored wealth, as despite rampant plundering the tomb still contained approximately 1,500 stone vessels. These had been made of alabaster, limestone, basalt, breccia, granite, diorite, dolomite, schist, serpentine, marble, quartzite, crystal, and porphyritic rock. In order to determine just what constitutes a prestige good in any given society, archaeologists rank among the most important cross-culturally relevant factors: the distance from which the raw materials had to be procured, the method used to transport the materials to their destination, the manner of extraction, and the hardness of the material (RICHARDS 2005: 109–110). In Egypt most varieties of stone had to be quarried from the Wadi Hammamat or other desert locales by organized expeditions of men and then transported overland for substantial distances. Given the arduous process of extraction and that only trained professionals had the tools and skills necessary to fashion fine stone vessels, some of these items have been ranked equivalent to or even higher than gold in a wealth index tabulated according to effort expenditure.⁴ Indeed, even alabaster, which was a softer stone than most to work and was found relatively close to the valley, was deemed so prestigious that vases of this material were sent abroad by Old Kingdom kings as high status diplomatic gifts.

As with the pottery assemblage, the vessels themselves represented one form of wealth but one that must be considered in conjunction with the value of the materials originally stored within them or, indeed, served upon them—for many of the dishes in mastaba 3504 were included

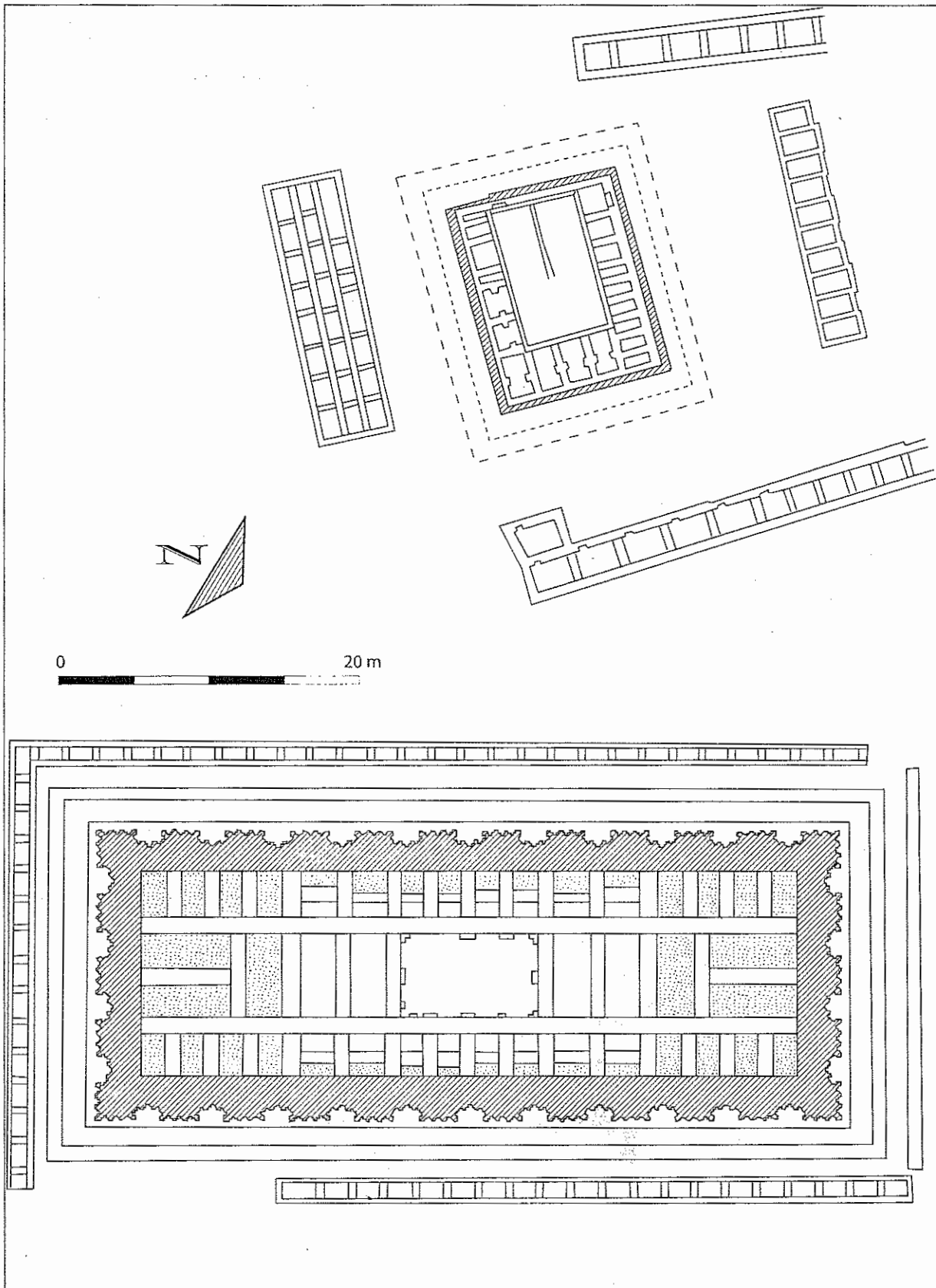


Fig. 3: King Djet's Tomb Z at Abydos and Mastaba 3504 (after EMERY 1961: 70, 72).

among the burial goods as high status serving ware. Emery discovered diagnostic fragments from over 400 stone bowls of his type S-alone, which would have equipped the owner of the monument with more than enough table settings to host a sumptuous state banquet in the afterlife.

The stone and pottery vessels interred within mastaba 3405 survived remarkably well. Other burial equipment, however, proved far less durable or perhaps far more portable. Yet despite problems of preservation and plundering, there were still indications from the burnt, crushed, and decaying pieces of furniture that many of the chairs, beds, and game boxes stored therein had once possessed the same sort of ivory bull's leg finials as those discovered in the royal tombs at Abydos and that others had been overlaid in gold. Gold also had also been used extensively to ornament the burial chamber itself! The panels of wood that once lined the walls of the owner's final resting place had been inlaid at 1 cm intervals with strips of gold plate embossed in an imitation of bound reeds. The expense involved in such a decorative scheme is readily apparent.

At some point prior to the end of the First Dynasty, the central portion of mastaba 3504 was plundered and set aflame, and King Qa'a subsequently refurbished and resealed the tomb. In addition to the burial chamber, Qa'a appears to have restored seven subrooms (RA, RB, PP, QQ, W, N, P). With the exception of a few items inscribed with Qa'a's own name, however, much of the burial equipment appears to have been original and unaltered. Because the fire raged in the uppermost levels, close to the roofing material, the wood floor of the burial chamber was preserved along with an ivory wand or throwstick inscribed with Djet's name, a clay jar sealing also bearing his name, and a number of other wood and ivory objects. Equally uncharred were the scattered bones of a man who must have been around 26 or so when he died. Emery stated that there was "no evidence to show if these disturbed remains are those of the original owner replaced by the restorers and later replundered, or the remains of a later occupant who suffered the same fate" (EMERY 1954: 20).

Emery's assessment of the evidence is perhaps overly pessimistic, as it does not take into account a number of interesting parallels to the burial in mastaba 3504, which would seem to argue that the bones in this tomb belonged to the primary interment. Fragments of gold foil from the original décor of the burial chamber, for example, were intermixed with the human remains in mastaba 3504 just as they were in mastaba 3503 (EMERY 1954: 141), a context in which no restoration or reburial occurred. Certainly, if the body of the owner of mastaba 3504 had been rifled on the tomb's floor during the first plundering—as the remains in mastaba 3506 indicate may have been common practice (EMERY 1958: 44–45)—and had later been covered with debris from the penetration, decay, or collapse of the tomb, it would have survived the blaze as uncharred as the wood floor. The four bodies discovered in mastaba 3505, briefly discussed above, also provide an excellent analogy for the proposed situation in mastaba 3504 in that here Emery (1958: 12) also discovered the corpses from the original interment below the level affected by the plunderers' arson.

If the human remains in mastaba 3504 were indeed those of its first owner, King Qa'a's restoration of the monument is perhaps most convincingly treated as a pious act towards one of his ancestors. Certainly it strains credibility to envision a king restoring the burial of a bureaucrat who had exercised his duties four reigns prior. Regardless, mastaba 3504's size, location, and primary burial furnishings provide more than enough evidence to suggest that the individual for whom the mastaba was originally built would have been deserving of great respect from Qa'a—a king whose own tomb covered 35 percent less ground and whose burial was complimented by the deaths of 36 *fewer* sacrificed retainers (PETRIE 1900).

Sixty-two corpses of men, women, children, and even a dwarf were carefully and respectfully

deposited in subdivided trenches around the perimeter of mastaba 3504. This number of sacrificed retainers, though often discounted by Egyptologists as anaemic in comparison to some of the royal Abydene burials, was in fact greater than the number of retainers associated with the first and last kings of the First Dynasty. Further, more people perished at the funeral of the owner of mastaba 3504 than laid down their lives for the vast majority of the Mesopotamian rulers at Ur or the Shang monarchs at Anyang. Burials of sacrificed retainers have also been discovered in association with Saqqara mastabas 3503, 3506, 3505, 3500, and 3111, and the "extra" bodies in the burial chambers of mastabas 3357 and 3505 also likely signify the presence of slain companions. Rizkallah Macramallah's (1940) discovery during salvage excavations of a further 231 burials—all apparently dating to the reign of King Den and arranged in tidy rows and clusters around a roughly rectangular interior space in the Wadi Abusir at Saqqara—should also be mentioned in this context. Aside from the mortuary complexes at Abydos and Saqqara, First Dynasty subsidiary burials have elsewhere been discovered only in association with Mastaba V at Giza. On analogy with "Neithhotep's" Nagada mastaba, both Petrie (1907: 2-3) and Emery (1954: 2) suggested that the tomb at Giza originally belonged to one of King Djet's particularly high-ranking queens.

In societies both ancient and modern, capital punishment for even heinous crimes was and is a fraught topic, and rulers often reserved the exclusive rights to condemn a citizen of their own country to death. Retainer sacrifice is even more dangerous an act than sentencing a criminal to death in that the individuals sacrificed earned their fate simply due to their own subordinate role to another human being. If the point of retainer sacrifice was to surround oneself in death as in life with loyal Egyptian servants, the occupant of mastaba 3504 must have had to convince his employees and their kin networks that such a sacrifice would be worth it. To do so, he must have been able to call upon a shared ideology that substantiated this claim. In ancient Egypt, it is hard to imagine just who, aside from the divine king or his closest relatives, possessed such a powerful aura. Indeed, if a mere mortal could command such loyalty, this individual would likely have been in danger of obscuring any divisions that the fledgling theocracy had attempted to erect between gods and men.

Sekhemka

The time has come, then, to focus attention on the personage of Sekhemka—the official whose name appears numerous times in mastaba 3504 on labels, cylinder seal impressions, an ivory wand, and a cache of 69 identical pottery jars all stored together in a single chamber.⁵ This is exactly the genre of inscriptional evidence that has been employed to assign mastaba 3035 to Hemaka, mastaba 3036 to Ankhka, mastaba 3503 to Seshemka, mastaba "X" to Neska, mastaba 3038 to Nebitka, and mastaba 3505 to Merka. The earliest attestation of Sekhemka's name, significantly, appears at Abydos on a wooden label from the tomb of Djet's predecessor, Djer. Here Sekhemka's name is wedged between Djer's serekh and the hieroglyphs "*hwt kd-htp*"—which in all likelihood designated an estate established in order to supply the crown with a particular class of goods, such as cattle or natron (PETRIE 1901: pl. 12.3; WILKINSON 1999: 118, 123-124). This particular funerary estate may have been relatively long-lived, as Macramallah discovered its name etched onto a stone bowl along with the designation for "*hm*-servant" in one of the most well-to-do tombs of King Den's sacrificed retainers at Saqqara (MACRAMALLAH 1940: 22, 67).

His close association with King Djer and his experience managing royal property appear eventually to have resulted in Sekhemka's appointment as administrator (*d mr*) of Djer's funerary domain: *hr-shnti-dw*.⁶ Domains, whose names were written in crenulated ovals, seem to have

been royal land-holdings that belonged to specific kings and were used to support their activities in life, to supply their tombs at death, and to support their funerary cults thereafter (WILKINSON 1999: 118–123). Because of the importance of the royal mortuary cult, First Dynasty funerary domains continued to produce revenue and to be administrated as distinct entities generations after the death of their founder. Given that the only sealings documenting Sekhemka's role as supervisor of Djer's funerary domain have so far been found in Djet's tomb at Abydos and in mastaba 3504—tombs postdating Djer's own—it is quite likely that Sekhemka ascended to this position only after the funeral for his patron had passed into memory.

Sekhemka's name is also occasionally found in association with Djet's serekh (EMERY 1954: cat. nos. 379, 394), and this may have been due to his position as administrator (both *ḏ mr* and *hrp*) of Djet's own funerary domain—*w3ḏ-hr*. It was in his capacity as administrator of Djet's funerary domain that Sekhemka sealed most of the jars that bore his impression in mastaba 3504 and in Djet's tomb at Abydos. Further, Sekhemka sealed many, if not most, of the items in mastaba 3504 during the reign of Djet's successor, Den. This is clearly evidenced by the sealings that bore Den's serekh, which had been impressed in the wet clay at the same time as Sekhemka's own seal (EMERY 1954: 116, 119). Aside from his administrative positions in the funerary estates of Djer and then Djet, Sekhemka possessed only two known titles: *nḥn(w)* and *nbi*, neither one of which appears to have been particularly vital to the functioning of the country.⁷

There are, then, two conclusions to be drawn from the fact that the most important role that Sekhemka held in his life was administrator of Djet's funerary domain. The first is that it was perfectly acceptable for the administrator of the king's funerary domain to include more burial equipment in his own tomb than he interred in that of his sovereign. The other conclusion that might be drawn, however, is that Sekhemka's name appears in mastaba 3504 numerous times because he was in fact responsible for equipping it—either for a northern burial of the king, as Emery supposed, or for a burial of a member of the royal family. The notion that Sekhemka equipped mastaba 3504 with royal property on someone else's behalf is not only easier to swallow logically than the alternative hypothesis, but there is further evidence to support it.

First, this scenario neatly explains why identical and virtually identical sealings applied by Sekhemka are discovered in Djet's own tomb at Abydos (see Fig. 4). For, as the administrator of the king's estate, Sekhemka would certainly have been responsible for equipping the royal burial. Second, if Djet's tomb at Abydos and mastaba 3504 at Saqqara had both been equipped out of the stores of the royal domain, this would also explain why so many other aspects of the material culture were virtually identical, such as cylinder seal impressions that did *not* include Sekhemka's name. This similarity in repertoire is true of the pottery corpus as well, and even of a large percentage of individual potmarks. The examples I highlight in Figure 5 are some of the most peculiar and distinctive, but they do not begin to exhaust the remarkable parallels encountered in the material culture of these two monuments—parallels that strongly suggest that the funerary equipment for both was drawn from the same source and disbursed by the same official.

Widening the Frame: Mastabas with No Name, Mastabas with Many Names

In this paper I have singled out Sekhemka and the tomb ascribed to him in order to provoke a questioning of common assumptions as to the ownership of the Saqqara mastabas. This case, however, is not unique. Of the Saqqara tombs that are now generally assumed to be the resting places of officials, over half do not contain the names of the men to whom they should be assigned (mastabas 2171, 2185, 3120, 3121, 3338, 3357, 3471, 3500) or contain the names of more

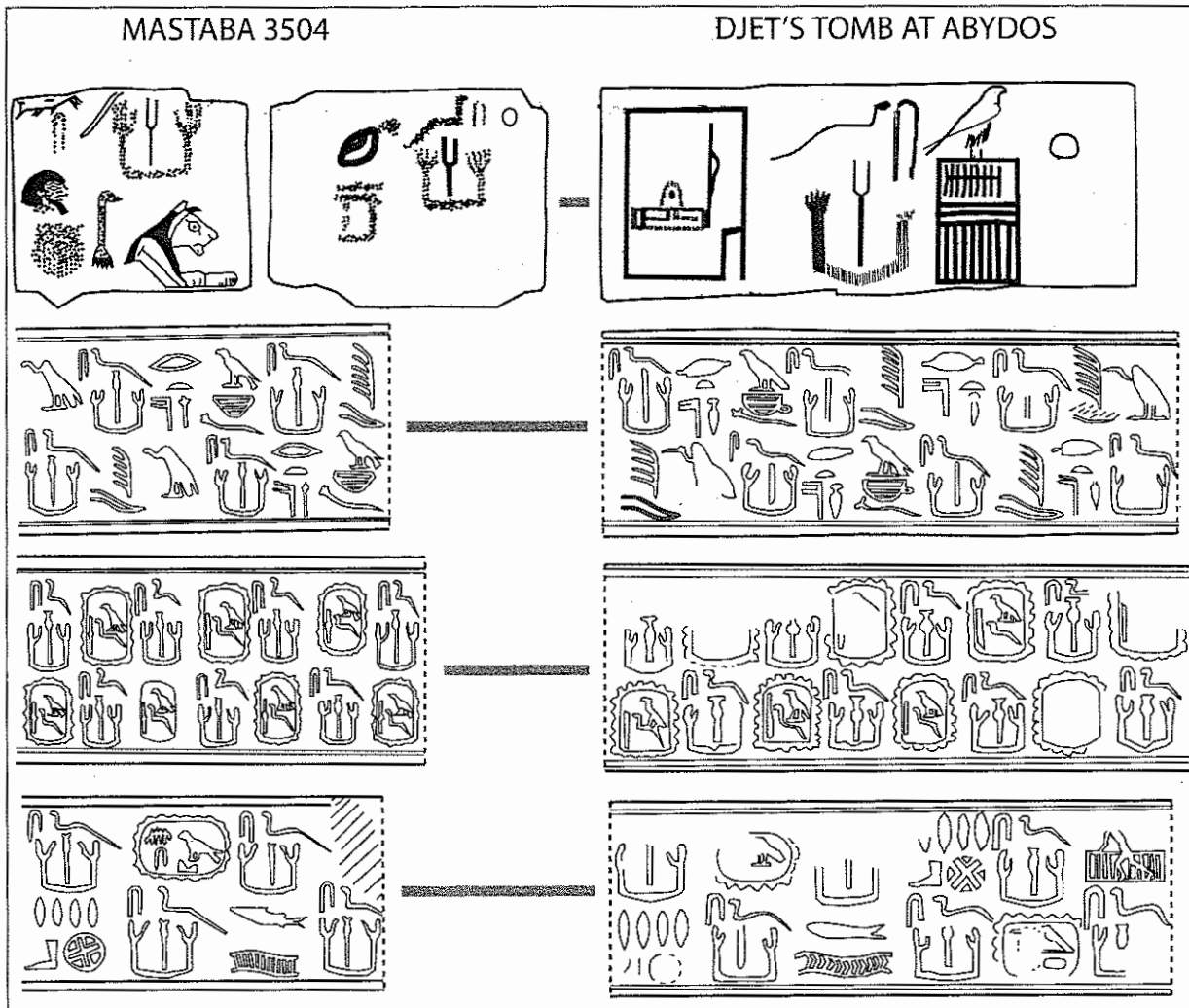


Fig. 4: A comparison of labels and seal impressions naming Sekhemka at Saqqara and Abydos.

than one official (mastabas 3504, 3505, 3506, 3507). The latter category, into which our own case study fits, is important to examine further.

Mastaba 3507. Constructed in the reign of King Den, mastaba 3507 contained ivory and stone items that bore titles associated with royal women and also the name of Queen Herneith, “foremost wife of King Djer” (EMERY 1958: 93–94, pl. 107). This first rank queen, who at the time of her death may have been Den’s grandmother, would have held a status worthy of the mastaba’s many impressive structural and decorative features, such as a wrap-around “bull’s” head bench, a stone lintel carved with lions, and an internal tumulus.⁸ While the fragmentary human remains discovered inside the tomb were unsexable, Emery (1958: 79) did note that they belonged to a person who died at a “considerable age.”

This same tomb, which might be comfortably assigned to Herneith, also contained the seal impressions of three officials: Inpw-ḥtp(w), Wahka, and Sekhka.⁹ The names of the first two men are otherwise unattested in First Dynasty sources, though Inpw-ḥtp(w) appears to have served as an administrator of the treasury (*pr-ḥd*). Sekhka, on the other hand, is witnessed in Mernaith’s tomb at Abydos on virtually identical seal impressions to those found in mastaba 3507 (see Fig.

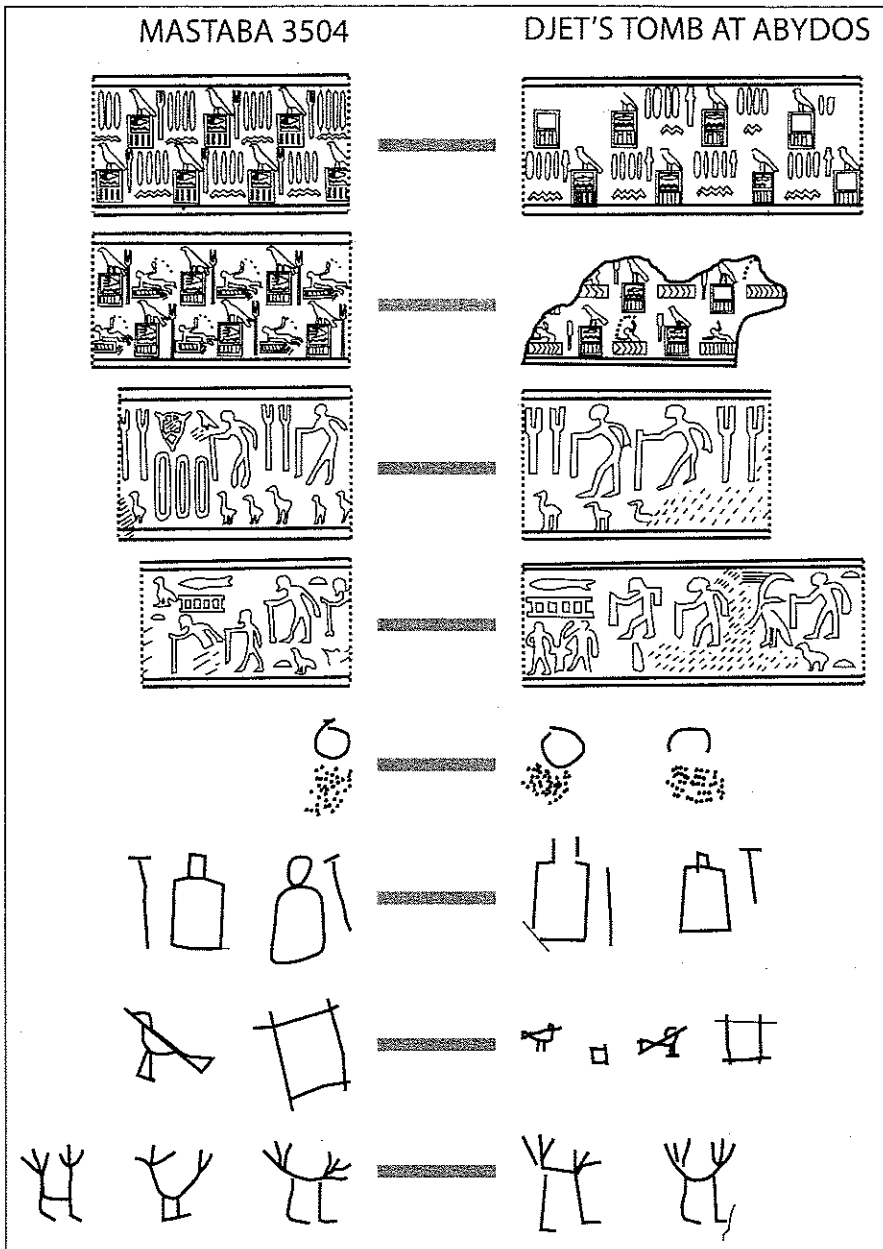


Fig. 5: Other parallels between the inscriptions discovered in mastaba 3504 and Djjet's tomb at Abydos.

6). Interestingly, Sekhka bore the title sm-priest, or funerary priest. This title also appears on the stele of Merka, which will be discussed at length below.

Mastaba 3506. Mastaba 3506, which also dated to the reign of King Den, housed the seal impressions of five separate officials, each of whom bore a name that ended in the element "ka." Like mastaba 3507, this was one of Saqqara's most elaborate First Dynasty tombs, boasting an associated boat burial, a "bull's" head bench, a garden, and a tumulus over the burial chamber. Even more importantly for our argument, however, the tomb was equipped with ten graves for sacrificed retainers. As with mastaba 3504, then, knowing the identity of its owner would greatly illuminate the political and ideological power dynamics prevalent in First Dynasty Egypt. Aside from the bones of an elderly male, who Emery believed to have been the owner of the mastaba, the only clue as to its sponsor was a somewhat enigmatic inscription on a lintel that led to the

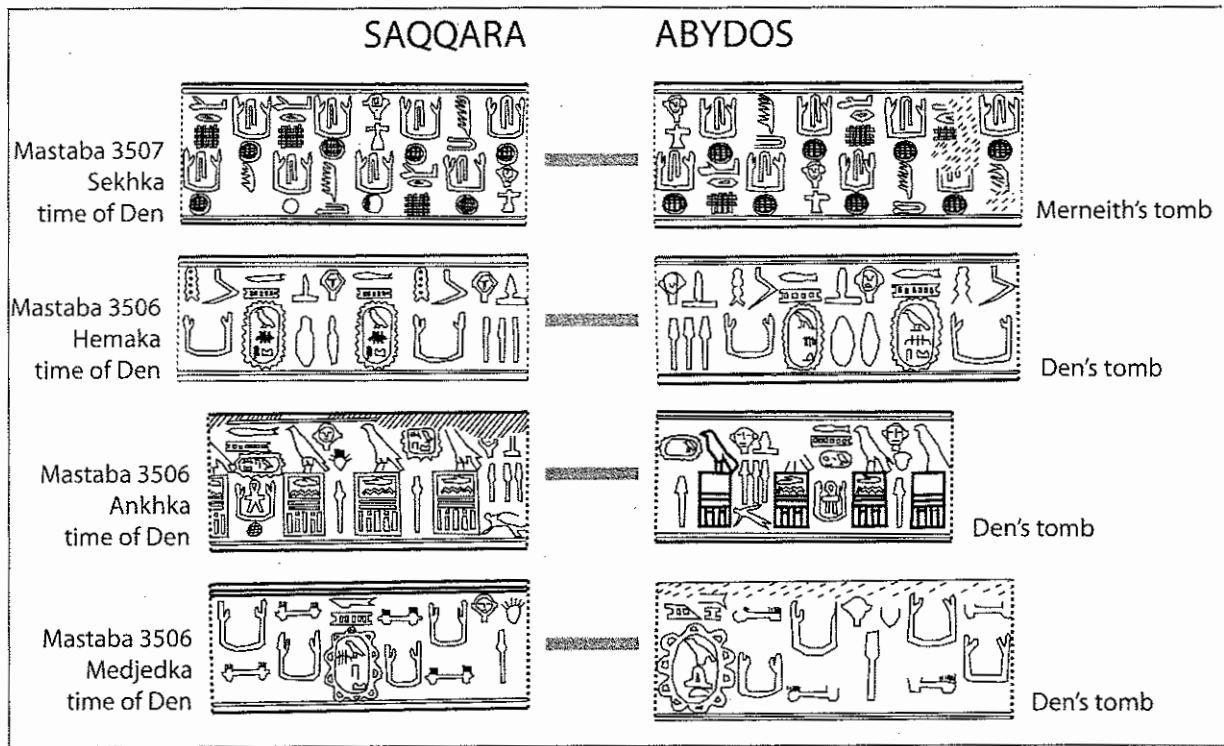


Fig. 6: Seal impressions of officials discovered at Saqqara and Abydos, part 1.

burial chamber. The lintel read: *iry-p't nsw ds h3ty(-)*, which could perhaps be translated “Family member of the king himself, foremost one” or, perhaps something along the lines of “Hereditary noble of the king himself and count” (EMERY 1958: 44–45, 60).

The five “ka” officials (Niyka, Setka, Medjedka, Hemaka, and Ankhka), on the other hand, are all witnessed exclusively on seal impressions. Niyka (*n(y)-k3*), whose name graced impression number 46, may perhaps have been female, given that the same name bears a female determinative on a stele belonging to one of Djer’s sacrificed retainers.¹⁰ Setka too bore the same name as a sacrificed retainer—in this instance a “controller of the palace” buried at Abydos in the reign of King Djet (PETRIE 1900: 31 and 33, no. 8). Setka impressed four different seals on jar lids from mastaba 3506 (EMERY 1958: 71, pl. 81, nos. 36–37; 82, nos 38–39), perhaps in his capacity as royal sealbearer (*htmty-bity*) or administrator (*'d-mr*) of Den’s *hwt*-estate *zmti-gstw(?)*. A sealing of Setka’s is perhaps also discovered in mastaba 3505 (see the discussion of this mastaba below). Certainly it is of great interest that Hemaka (EMERY 1958: 69, 72; pl. 80, nos. 21–25; pl. 82, no. 50) also bore the title *htmty-bity* and served as *'d-mr* of a funerary domain. In fact, Hemaka, Ankhka (EMERY 1958: 68, 70; pl. 79, no. 16; pl. 80, nos. 26–29; pl. 81, nos. 30–32), and Medjedka (EMERY 1958: 70–71; pl. 81, nos. 33–35) all at one time or another during the long reign of King Den served as administrators (*'d-mr* and/or *hrp*) of Djer’s funerary domain *hr-shnti-dw*—the same domain that Sekhemka of mastaba 3504 once directed!¹¹ Like Sekhemka as well, all three of these officials employed identical or virtually identical cylinder seals to impress storage jar lids at Saqqara (in mastaba 3506) and at Abydos (in Den’s own tomb—see Fig. 6).

Given that these five officials are all attested on cylinder seal impressions used to seal jars in mastaba 3506 and not on other media, it would appear strange to privilege one over the others with respect to theories of ownership. Further, there is the complicating issue that one of Hemaka’s jar sealings was discovered in a subsidiary tomb of mastaba 3506 that belonged to a

young female retainer (EMERY 1958: 47)—a personage with whom Hemaka certainly should not be identified! Additionally Hemaka's seal impression types 22 and 23 from mastaba 3506 are identical or virtually identical to examples discovered on the lids of vessels from Den's tomb at Abydos but *also* from mastaba 3035.¹²

Despite the profligate manner in which Hemaka employed his seal, mastaba 3035 is often attributed to him because of these impressions. Similarly, mastaba 3036 is assigned to Ankhka on the same grounds, despite this official's attestations on jar sealings elsewhere at Saqqara and at Abydos.¹³ The great size, associated boat burials, and the use of stone portuculli in the entrance corridors of mastabas 3035 and 3036 marks their owners as people of the highest social class. The multiple seal impressions of Hemaka and Ankhka in these tombs, in the tomb of Den at Abydos, in mastaba 3506, and elsewhere at Saqqara and Abydos, however, strongly implies that the aforementioned seal impressions of these two men should be interpreted as the stamp of industrious administrators rather than as indicators of the ownership of the tombs in which they appear.

Mastaba 3505. Mastaba 3505 is the final mastaba that contained the name of more than one official. The largest exemplar of its kind in North Saqqara, this monument possessed a substructure that resembled that of King Qa'a's tomb at Abydos and a superstructure that had been niched in much the same manner as the walls of Merneith's funerary enclosure (EMERY 1958: 5; KEMP 1966: 17).¹⁴ The names of five individuals were discovered in association with it: Merka, Setka, Sekhemka, Nefermerib, and Sneferka. Constructed at the end of Qa'a's reign, the mastaba was equipped with a "bull's" head bench and also—uniquely among the First Dynasty mastabas at Saqqara—a northern funerary temple! This latter structure, which is often compared to the mortuary temple discovered to the north of Djoser's step pyramid complex, originally contained two nearly life-size statues of striding males (EMERY 1958: 10, 13; 1961: 90; LEHNER 1997: 80). Inside the mastaba, the bones of four different adults were recovered, including a rather robust young man and a much older male (EMERY 1958: 12). In addition to the cultic facility, the mastaba's complex also incorporated a single subsidiary grave, placed unusually close to the main burial and constructed with an unprecedented amount of stone for such a structure. It is this subsidiary grave that Dr. O'Connor suggested should be reassigned to Merka in accordance with the opinion of the original excavator. This grave, like the main burial, encased the remains of an elderly male (EMERY 1958: 13).

Merka's stele, found in a secondary context, is the longest and most detailed of the extant First Dynasty private inscriptions (EMERY 1958: 30–31; pl. 23, 39). Although its workmanship is rough, the stele enumerates a great number of titles, which imply that Merka held significant offices—both administrative (e.g. *hrp 'h*, *hrp wib-nsw*) and cultic (e.g. *sm3*, *hm-ntr nt*)—and also served in funerary contexts as a *sm*-priest. The title of *sm*-priest, significantly, is the one most often attested in Merka's other sealings and inscriptions, and so it must be viewed as his most important title in the context of mastaba 3505. Sekhka of mastaba 3507, discussed above, had likewise borne the title of *sm*-priest in the reign of King Den, and this title is witnessed also on two stone vessels from the tomb of King Qa'a (PETRIE 1900: pls. 8, no 5; 9, no. 12).

The size of the stele, the numerous titles listed upon it, and the presence of Merka's name on seal impressions and on three stone bowls found in the main burial prompted Barry Kemp (1967) to argue that Merka's stele had originally designated the owner of mastaba 3505 instead of the inhabitant of its single and very large subsidiary grave. The position of the stele, displaced outside the mastaba, but relatively near to the subsidiary tomb, cannot be used to argue for or against Kemp's hypothesis. Emery's (1958: 13) assessment that stele was "of identical character and working of the stone with that embodied in the (subsidiary) grave structure", however, can.

In his article, Dr. O'Connor raised this last point of workmanship and also the fact that the dimensions, level of artisanship, and even the rather impressive nature of the religious and administrative titles detailed within the stele were closely mirrored in the stele of Sabef, who was one of 26 retainers to accompany King Qa'a to the next world.¹⁵ Indeed, both Merka and Sabef—who lived during the same reign—held the title *hrp sh* (controller of the hall) and included in their resumes at least one title that invoked Anubis! Further, Sabef's stele also specified his authority over two royal estates: *hwt s3 h3-nb* and *hwt p-hr-msn*. The name of *hwt s3 h3-nb* was frequently attested both at Saqqara and Abydos but was especially common in Anedjib's tomb at Abydos and in mastaba 3038 at Saqqara (see EMERY 1958: 32). By now, the connection between the "ka" officials under discussion and the oversight of royal property should hardly be surprising, and Sabef should certainly therefore be included within this cadre as an honorary member. While Merka did not demonstrably exercise authority over royal domains or estates, he did serve as an administrator (*'d mr*) of two localities that may also have provided revenue towards royal funerals in the reign of Qa'a. Certainly, the similarities between Merka's and Sabef's careers suggest that the two men shared important aspects of both class and destiny.

If the steles of Merka and Sabef are indeed both memorializations of particularly high status officials—as the titles and depictions of their owners proclaim them to be—the custom of interring retainers in the country's most important tombs had undergone a change in philosophy in the late First Dynasty. By this point, it appears that it was no longer the quantity of sacrificed retainers that mattered but rather the quality. Thus one finds higher status retainers buried in larger tombs but in smaller numbers—a trajectory similar to that observed from the Late Shang to the Eastern Zhou Period in China (CHANG 1974: 6–7). Whereas the owner of mastaba 3505 might earlier in the First Dynasty have been honored by the deaths of sixty some retainers, his or her importance was now showcased by a 600 sq. m funerary temple and the provision of an upper class sm-priest to undertake its rites for all eternity.

Three of the four other individuals whose names were discovered in association with mastaba 3505 are attested only on seal impressions (EMERY 1958: 34–35; pl. 37, nos. 9–11). Setka, whose name is orthographically very different from mastaba 3506's "Setka," is otherwise unattested, as is Nefermerib, but a sealing bearing the latter individual's name lists religious and political titles. Of more interest, however, is Sekhemka (also orthographically distinct from his like-named predecessor), who possessed one of the same titles as did Merka—namely *hrp 'h* (controller of the palace). In addition, this man served as an administrator (*'d mr*) of a particular district and as an overseer of property (*iry-ht*). Either of these latter two duties would account for an administrative oversight of storage jars.

The poorly attested King Sneferka (or perhaps Neferka-es), is the last individual to discuss, for his name was found scratched in a Horus-less serekh on a stone bowl found in association with, but not in, mastaba 3505 (EMERY 1958: 31, pl. 38). This ephemeral monarch seems to have immediately post-dated King Qaa, which may indicate that mastaba 3505 should actually date to a period roughly coinciding with Qa'a's death. Significantly, excavations in North Saqqara in 1995 uncovered a massive new mastaba provisionally assigned to Sneferka because of stone vessels bearing his name (YOUSSEF 1996: 105–106). Conclusions as to the veracity of this claim will have to await final publication of the mastaba.

Single "Owner" Mastabas

Thus far we have focused upon our case study, mastaba 3504, and upon the three other Saqqara mastabas in which more than one individual's name was discovered. It remains only to address

the mastabas that contained the name of a single official, an official on whose behalf a potentially strong case for ownership might therefore be marshalled. Mastabas 3035 and 3036—which contained, respectively, Hemaka and Ankhka's seal impressions—have been discussed above in conjunction with mastaba 3506, where seal impressions belonging to the two men were also discovered. The functionaries that necessitate examination, then, are only those attested in mastabas 3503, "X", 3038, and 3111.

As will be demonstrated, these men resemble their previously discussed colleagues in a number of important ways. First, the names of these officials ended in the element "ka" in three out of four cases. Second, each official is known exclusively or almost exclusively from his seal impressions, which were found upon containers that stored sustenance for the honored dead. Third, Petrie recovered identical or virtually identical impressions of two of the four officials in the contemporary royal tomb at Abydos along with other seals of these same officials that did *not* appear in the Saqqara tombs! And, fourth, where it was possible to ascertain, the main duty of the seal-bearers was invariably to oversee the disbursement of royal property.

Mastaba 3503. Mastaba 3503, with its boat burial and 22 sacrificed retainers, is generally ascribed to an individual perhaps named Seshemka; the reading is uncertain. While there is a possibility that "Seshemka" is in fact not a name but rather two closely associated titles or epithets, the point is to some extent moot, as an exact parallel for the seal bearing this sign-group in mastaba 3503 is discovered in the contemporary tomb of Merneith at Abydos (see Fig. 7). Further, "Seshemka" is also witnessed on at least three other sealings in this same royal tomb (PETRIE 1900: pl. 20, nos. 12, 13, 18). The Abydos material indicates that this individual also served as the administrator (*'d mr*) of the *hwt*-estate "*hwt ihw*," which likely supplied cattle to the crown. In this case, as in so many others, then, an official in charge of a royal estate had disbursed storage vessels to his monarch's tomb and also to an extremely important contemporary mastaba at Saqqara.

Mastaba X. In mastaba X, which likely dates to the reign of King Den, Neska's name appears on a label detailing various provisions and on bag sealings (EMERY 1949: 107; 109, fig. 61A; 115, fig. 65). This official is otherwise unattested but seems to have served, in the same capacity as Hemaka, as one of Den's seal-bearers.

Mastaba 3038. Yet another "ka" official, Nebitka, is attested on seal impressions from mastaba 3038 (EMERY 1949: 82, 85). This tomb is best known for the elaborate stepped tumulus discovered over its burial chamber, which is often viewed as an architectural precursor to the Step Pyramid. Interestingly, the stepped tumulus may be specifically referenced in depictions of a stepped enclosure with the words *s3-h3-nb/hr*—the name of the royal estate that Sabef would later oversee—written on a stele-shaped structure just above the tumulus and often directly adjacent to Anedjib's serekh. Examples of this composite sign-group have been discovered on stone bowls, potmarks, and ivory labels both in Anedjib's tomb at Abydos and in mastaba 3038 (PETRIE 1901: pl. 55, nos. 16–23; EMERY 1949: 82, fig. 47).

Nebitka's seal bore no titles, and its impression was discovered only on bag sealings and on the outlets of grain bins in mastaba 3038. Given Egyptian administrative practice, one would expect that the official named on the seal impression should have been the person under whose authority the bins were sealed. If so, this would imply that Nebitka should have been alive and well during the final, quite mundane preparations for the burial.¹⁶

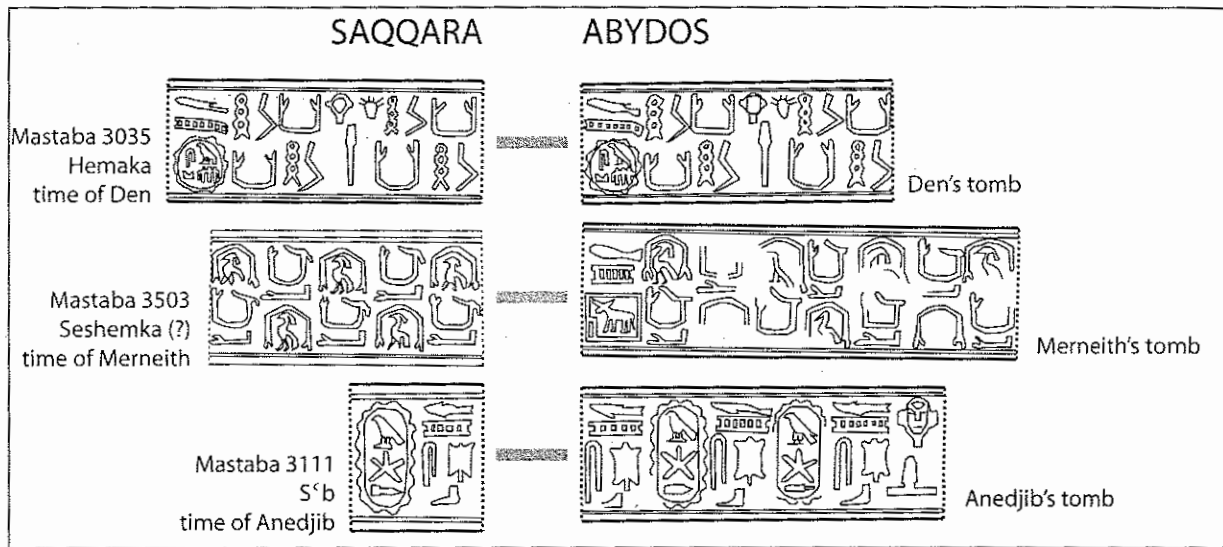


Fig. 7: Seal impressions of officials discovered at Saqqara and Abydos, part 2.

Mastaba 3111. The ownership of only one mastaba at Saqqara remains to be discussed, and this last mastaba, which also dates to the reign of Anedjib, is in many respects extremely informative. For instance, mastaba 3111 was unique among the mastabas at Saqqara in that it remained reasonably intact, providing excavators with a clear sense of the original distribution of items in the burial chamber, such as ivory boxes, arrowheads, boxes of flints, pottery and stone vessels, copper toilet implements, and cuts of ox meat. Further, the body of the adult male owner of the mastaba was found lying in his original coffin more or less in his original position, as was the body of the handsomely equipped adult male in the mastaba's sole subsidiary burial (EMERY 1949: 98–99).

For our purposes, the primary burial in mastaba 3111 is particularly interesting, because it serves as the exception that proves the rule. Its owner is universally believed, even by Emery, to be Sab (*s3b*)—an official whose name did not end with a “ka”. It is therefore notable that Sab, whose name is surely closely related to that of Sabef, fits the profile of a “ka” official perfectly. Sab has been assigned ownership of mastaba 3111 on the basis of a single seal impression, which is identical or virtually identical to the impression of one of the *four* seals that Sab rolled on vessels sent to Anedjib's tomb at Abydos (Fig. 7—see also PETRIE 1900: 44, pl. 27, nos. 65–67). Further, it is clear that Sab sealed the jars found at Abydos and at Saqqara in his capacity as administrator (*'d mr*) of Anedjib's funerary domain *hr-sb3-ht*. Finally, like many of the so-called owners of the Saqqara mastabas—including our own Sekhemka of mastaba 3504—this man also held the office of *nbi*.

Conclusions

By virtue of this investigation into the ownership of the First Dynasty mastabas at Saqqara, I hope that I have furthered the project Dr. David O'Connor has already begun of problematizing the commonly held assumption that these monuments belong to the officials whose names have occasionally been found within them. As argued above, there are numerous reasons this easy equation is unsatisfying. Summarized succinctly, nearly half of the mastabas at Saqqara do not contain the names of any officials, and four of the largest and most elaborate mastabas contain the names of numerous officials. The vast majority of the officers found in this cemetery are attested on seal impressions that marked provisions, presumably sent to the mastaba(s) as

funerary equipment from the royal estates and domains that each official oversaw. Certainly this explains the reason why the names of well over half of these men were also attested on sealings discovered in the royal tombs at Abydos, sometimes in equal or greater numbers! Further, the royal tombs at Abydos on occasion also contained seal impressions from officials who served in similar capacities, and whose names were also formed with the element “ka”—such as Amka, Henuka, and Saka (*s3-k3*)—proving that the mere presence of sealings of such officials in a tomb should not be taken to indicate ownership. Instead, the presence of identical sealings, and indeed tomb equipment, at Abydos and Saqqara suggests that in any given reign monuments from both cemeteries had been equipped from the same sources by the same official(s).

If it is accepted that the officials to whom the mastabas are currently assigned were not the owners but rather the men who oversaw the equipping of these great structures, then who inhabited them? The answer to this question remains elusive. The notion that at least some of the mastabas were symbolic Lower Egyptian tombs for the King of Upper and Lower Egypt is doubtful, given that Emery frequently discovered human remains within them. With the exception of the forearm in King Djer’s tomb, human remains were absent at Abydos; however, the hallowed location of these tombs, their limited numbers, the serekh-bearing stele, the associated funerary enclosures, and the thousands of sacrificed retainers interred in the cemetery over the duration of the dynasty strongly suggest that the royal tombs at Abydos did not serve as cenotaphs.

It makes sense, then, to view the architecture and equipment of the Saqqara mastabas as boons that the king gave, but the question remains: to whom did he give them? The names of Herneith in mastaba 3507 and Neithhotep in the massive mastaba at Nagada may provide a model of ownership for at least some of the tombs, as neither woman appears to have served in an official capacity as the manager of a mortuary estate. Queens (whether consorts, dowagers, queen mothers, or all of the above) are well attested in early inscriptions, and it is likely that their marriages had served to cement diplomatic unions between the king and powerful families or polities within his new realm. Certainly Merneith’s celebrated turn as regent speaks volumes about the crucial role women played in politics, to say nothing of any bonds of sentiment that linked queens to the rest of their royal family.

Assigning at least some of the mastabas at Saqqara to queens resolves the quandary of how a king could allow another individual to be interred with such a vast quantity of provisions, prestige goods, and sacrificed retainers. The highest-ranking wives of kings had an investment in promoting the interests of their husband and of their eldest son, for their own power depended upon the power of these men. For this reason, the fiscal, ideological, and political capital bestowed upon such women by kings was to some extent inalienable from them, for any such expenditure both reflected and projected the kings’ own halo of authority.

Brothers, uncles, cousins, and even sons posed a much greater threat in traditional monarchies. The royal blood in their veins could and often was utilized by such men to martial a competing claim for kingship, a claim that might emerge victorious if bolstered by the proper application of violence. Throughout the vast majority of dynastic history, the male kin of the ruler are virtually invisible in monumental inscriptions, leading to the speculation that they may therefore have been excluded from positions of real political potency (DODSON and HILTON 2004: 25). The strategy adopted by kings in the Fourth Dynasty, however, was to embrace nepotism in order to keep power closely guarded within their own family but also, as a consequence, to keep their relatives on short but gilded leashes.

The Eastern Cemetery at Giza may well provide a fitting parallel for the line of the North Saqqara mastabas. Here in pyramids for his wives and in outsized mastabas for his children,

Khufu bestowed tombs upon the immediate royal family. These individuals—as well as the brothers, cousins, in-laws, and other relatives who were to be interred in more modest resting places to the west of his pyramid—had their tombs built and decorated for them by the state. Such largesse at once highlighted the generosity of the king, rendered his relatives dependent upon him for a burial befitting their status, and shrewdly undercut the ability of these royals to self-aggrandize in their own tombs.

Could it be, then, that by providing monumental mastabas, copious grave goods, and occasionally even slain retainers for high ranking members of the royal family—who were too close to the king to be buried as mere mortals without somehow tarnishing the gloss of royalty—the First Dynasty kings both honored those encompassed in their divine aura and also deftly subverted any autonomous assertion of identity and influence? Such a scenario has the potential to answer the quandary of why, in a newly literate high culture that memorialized its dead with monuments and equipped them with sumptuous burial goods, the names of the male owners of the largest tombs in the country should remain unwritten. Perhaps these tombs, set against the skyline of the new capital, then, were intended from the start to function less as tributes to their individual owners than as eternal reminders to the population of the new state of the power and glory of its holy family.

Notes:

- 1 Burials of similarly massive boats (between 14–22 m long) have been discovered in association with mastabas 3503, 3506, and 3036 at Saqqara. The fleet of 14 boats buried just west of the Western Mastaba at Abydos were also 19 m long (WARD 2006, 123).
- 2 Sekhemka's name can also be read Sekhemkasedj, according to whether "sedj" is viewed as a title or as an otherwise separable element (EMERY 1954: 103). All information regarding Sekhemka's mastaba stems from Emery's (1954) excavation report.
- 3 Although the heads are specifically stated to belong to bulls in the excavation reports (EMERY 1954: 7), it is more likely that the horns came from bulls, cows, and oxen—as was the case at Kerma. Similarly decorated benches have been discovered in association with Saqqara mastabas 3505 and 3507, and bovid bones have been recovered from many of the most impressive tombs of the First Dynasty. For the early and close connections between kings, bulls, and Hathor, see BAINES 1995; HAWASS 1995.
- 4 Richards (2005: 111) ranks the following materials on a scale from 1 (straw) to 19 (lapis lazuli): quartzite—14, gold—13, stone—13, serpentine—12, alabaster—9. Pink granite, the hardest of all stones and one that had to be quarried from the First Cataract region, would certainly have been rated higher than gold if included in the list.
- 5 For the labels, see Emery's (1954) cat. nos. 378, 379, 386, 388–392, 396; for the seal impressions, see numbers 8–18; for the ink inscriptions on the jars, see 1–69; for the wand, see cat. no. 394. The labels and ink inscriptions tend to mention various types of foodstuffs. The names of three other "ka" officials are also attested among the seal impressions found in mastaba 3504 (EMERY 1954: 120, sealings 24–25; 126, sealing 52).
- 6 PETRIE 1900: pl. 18.6; EMERY 1954: 116–117, sealings 9–10; see similarly sealings 11 and 13.
- 7 See PETRIE 1900: pl. 18.6; 1901: pl. 17.129; EMERY 1954: 119–120, sealings 22 and 23. The career of this official is specifically discussed by KAPLONY 1963, I: 85–89, 111–118 and WILKINSON 1999: 146–147. Wilkinson believes that Sekhemka achieved his position as '*d-mr* of Djer's domain following his tenure as

- administrator of Djef's funerary estate, yet this is effectively disproven by the countersealed serekhs.
- 8 The presence of a tumulus above the burial chamber of 3507 was paralleled in mastabas 3471, 3111, and 3038. This feature, especially when stepped, has led to much speculation about the origins of royal pyramids (LEHNER 1997: 80–81).
 - 9 For discussions of these officials and their seal impressions, see EMERY 1958: 96–97; pl. 106; PETRIE 1900: pl. 22, nos. 30–34; 1901: pl. 17, no. 130.
 - 10 EMERY 1958: 72, pl. 82. The same name may also appear on a seal impression in mastaba 3504 (EMERY 1954: 120, sealing 25). For the like-named retainer, see PETRIE 1901: pl. 27, no. 112. Quite likely this name, like many Egyptian names, could be used for either sex.
 - 11 The administration of this funerary estate is discussed in WILKINSON 1999: 121. The office is specifically attested in Hemaka's sealings 21–22, 50; Ankhka's sealings 16, 27–31; Medjedka's sealings 33 and 34—see EMERY 1958: 69–72, pls. 80–82. Ankhka's sealings 26–28 also identify him as a *nbi*, an office Sekhemka had fulfilled. Hemaka, at some point in his career, assumed oversight of Den's own funerary domain *hr-tpi-ht*, and this office is attested in sealings 23 and 24 (see KAPLONY 1963, I: 113).
 - 12 For the parallels to sealing 22, see EMERY 1938: 62, fig. 19; PETRIE 1901: pl. 20, no. 161 (the latter two sealings are depicted in figures 6 and 7). For the parallels to sealing 23, see EMERY 1938: 63, fig. 23; PETRIE 1900: pl. 25, no. 53. Hemaka is witnessed in Den's tomb on three ebony labels and on multiple jar sealings, for which at least seven different types of cylinder seal design bearing his name had been employed (PETRIE 1900: 22, 25, 41, pl. 15, no. 16, pl. 25, nos. 53–56; 1901: pl. 20, 161–163).
 - 13 Ankhka's sealings are well attested in Merneith and Anedjib's tombs at Abydos (PETRIE 1900: pl. 21, no. 29) as well as in Den's tomb (PETRIE 1901: pl. 19, nos. 149, 153).
 - 14 EMERY 1958: 5; KEMP 1966: 17. Qa'a's funerary enclosure, if one existed at Abydos, has never been located.
 - 15 For Sabef's stele, see PETRIE 1900: 44–45, pl. 30. As Dr. O'Connor points out, the difference in the dimensions of the two steles (173 × 54 cm for Merka and 44.4 × 35.4 for Sabef) is not great in absolute terms and may well reflect the spatial restrictions of the architectural settings into which the steles would have been inset.
 - 16 For a discussion of Egyptian sealing practices, see WILLIAMS 1977. Williams (1977: 136) states that in the Old Kingdom cylinder seals were impressed almost solely on goods that had been sent from royal storehouses to private graves and to government installations.

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