EVIDENCE FOR LATE THIRD MILLENNIUM WEATHER EVENTS FROM AN OLD KINGDOM TOMB IN THE TETI CEMETERY AT SAQQARA

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Introduction

The Teti Cemetery is a multi-phase site featuring built tombs, the remains of other monuments and many minor burials spanning over two millennia. Over two seasons in 1995 and 1996, excavations by the Australian Centre of Egyptology (ACE, Macquarie University) uncovered the mastaba of Inumin. Inumin is a previously unattested Sixth Dynasty high official who served Kings Teti, Userkare and Pepi I. He held a number of roles including that of vizier, before his death early in the reign of the latter (Kanawati et al. 2006).

Deposits in the subterranean burial chamber revealed evidence for a period when the shaft was open and much windblown sand was deposited, followed by sustained rainfall event. Evidence elsewhere at Saqqara places this in a wider context of environmental change in the Late Old Kingdom-First Intermediate Period.

Excavation of the main shaft and burial chamber

Although Inumin's tomb was robbed in antiquity, the main shaft was sealed by a cemetery of minor burials dating to the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty (Sowada forthcoming). Beneath this phase was evidence of earlier re-use of the OK complex (Sowada in Kanawati et al., 2006). This included mudbrick structures on the flagstone floor of the courtyard and additional shafts around the tomb perimeter. The mouth of the main shaft had been re-configured with stone and mudbricks to create a new subsidiary shaft leading to a minor burial chamber under the floor of the courtyard (figs 1 & 2). This post-dated the original burial but it could not be dated more precisely: elsewhere at Saqqara this type of re-use is associated with the First Intermediate Period.

The shaft was excavated to reveal the remains of a mudbrick wall 5m from the surface (fig. 1, Section C-C). This wall narrowed the shaft to half its width and would have originally extended all the way to the surface. The upper shaft deposits contained nothing more recent than the FIP, including a small false door of Ikeri from this era. The bottom of the shaft opened onto the decorated main burial chamber and contained the limestone sarcophagus. Inumin's body was not present and there was no evidence of later interments.

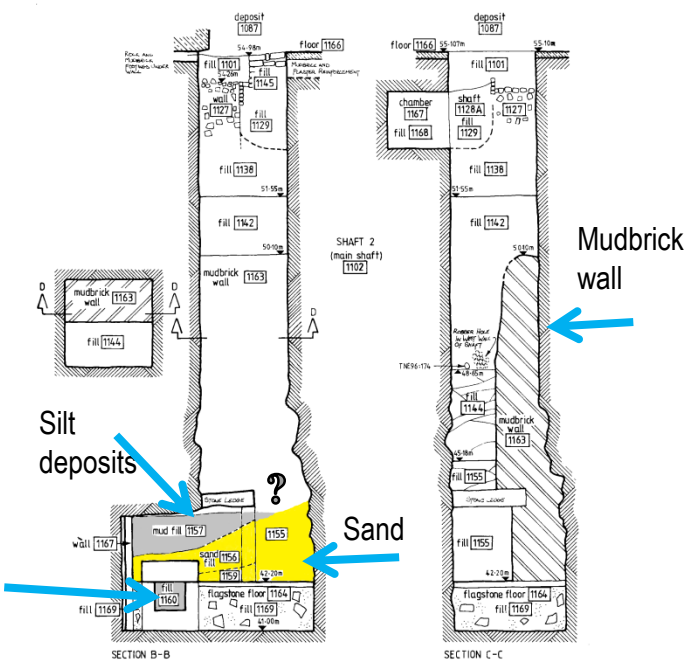

Fig. 1 Sections through the shaft and burial chamber Section B-B looking N, Section C-C looking W

References

N. Kanawati, A. McFarlane and K. Sowada et al., *Excavations at Saqqara VIII. The Tomb of Inumin* (ACE Reports 24, Oxford, 2006).

K. Sowada et al., *Minor Burials from the Teti Cemetery at Saqqara. Revealing the Ordinary Egyptian*, forthcoming.

J. Trzciński , K.O. Kuraszkiewicz, F. Welc, 'Preliminary report on geoarchaeological research in West Saqqara', *PAM* 19 (2007), 194-208.

Fig. 2 Post-OK features of Main Shaft, looking N

Fig. 3 Chamber, SE wall, showing 'tide mark' of sand and silt

Photos: K. Sowada

Inside the burial chamber

The burial chamber contained two main deposits: yellow sand (Contexts 1155, 1156 & 1159) and grey silt (Context 1157) (fig. 1, Section B-B). The sand had spilled into the chamber and sloped down towards the opposite wall (figs 1 & 3). This fine loose wind-blown sand also contained OK sherds and sealed many original objects, which along with ceramic digging tools, indicated continued robbing and sand infiltration. Above the sand were compact layers of fine laminated silt (1157) over 1m thick, comprising alternating layers of grey and dark grey silt containing small white stone fragments, but no objects or pottery. This filled the chamber to the ceiling (figs 4 & 5). Sediments had also entered the sarcophagus through a robber's hole (Context 1160). In the humid tomb environment, ceiling plaster had fallen onto the top of the deposit, as the stagnating mud slowly dried out.

Discussion

Some point early in the tomb's history, the shaft was open and wind-blown sand entered the chamber from above, during which time there was further robbing. While the shaft was still open, water-borne silt was deposited by rain which occurred as a series of closely-spaced rainstorms, between which no other material was deposited and the silt did not dry out between inflows. The rain 'melted' the missing upper section of the shaft mudbrick wall, and dissolved other mudbrick features from the surface. The sand and silt deposits pre-date later constructions at the mouth of the shaft which sealed the shaft contents (figs 1 & 2). There was no debris inside the upper shaft later than the FIP. One of the lower shaft deposits (Context 1144) contained late OK pottery in a grey rubbly deposit; the laminated silt deposits pre-date this.

Conclusion

Both the sand and the silt deposits point to a general state of neglect of the tomb and cemetery environment. This probably occurred little more than several generations after Inumin's burial, once he had passed out of living memory, and official supervision of the necropolis had weakened at the end of the Sixth Dynasty. The sand deposits point to a period of windy, dry weather during which time the shaft was open. The subsequent rains are dated on stratigraphic grounds not later than the Late OK or early FIP. This accords well with evidence for a period of humid weather and high rainfall during this period, observed elsewhere at Saqqara (Trzciński et al 2010). It is proposed that the evidence from the burial chamber of Inumin belongs to these same weather events.

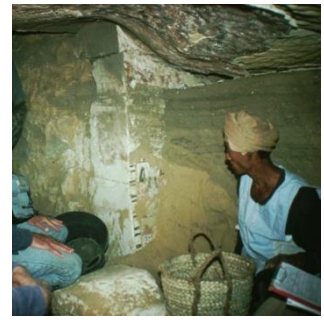

Fig. 4 Silt and sand deposits during excavation, SE wall

Fig. 5Silt deposit looking S; note settled ceiling plaster (top).