

The Evolution of Funerary Architecture from the Pre-Dynastic Pit-Grave to the *Mastaba* Tomb (including Djoser's Step Pyramid)

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Introduction

In order to provide a useful review of the evolution of funerary architecture one needs to also cover the development of social and religious ideas that inform the functionalities of funerary structures. I will attempt to do so.

When dealing with death, societies in general seek to fulfil a number of requirements: (i) physical disposal of the dead body itself; (ii) disposal of the property of the deceased and (iii) making arrangements for the relationship between the living and the dead and the needs (if any) of the deceased person following death (Snape 2011: pp. 1-2)

Burial as a Means of Physically Dealing with the Dead

Some societies elect to burn dead bodies (e.g. Hindu rituals); others leave them to be devoured by vultures (e.g. Parsi rituals). Burial underground is one method of physically dealing with a dead body. It is not possible to determine with precision why ancient Egyptians in the prehistoric period (before 5300 BCE) as hunter gatherers in the African savannah elected to bury their dead. It may have been to protect the bodies from scavenging animals. Wilkinson asserts that the semi-nomadic cattle herders during this period were more advanced than the Nile valley dwellers (Wilkinson 2011: pp.23-24). When forced to migrate to the Nile valley during the period around 5000 to 3600 BCE (as a result of increasing desertification) these nomadic people had a considerable impact on the social

and cultural customs of the Nile valley dwellers leading to a gradual increase in social complexity. One such influence was increased personal adornment (Wilkinson 2011 *ibid*).

Burial in pit-graves with some items presumably belonging to the deceased became the norm in early pre-dynastic agricultural communities along the Nile valley (Badarian, Nagada I, II and III etc.). Gabalein Man (circa 3500 BCE) at the British Museum provides a good example of a pre-dynastic pit grave and tomb:



(Tyldesley 2016: Module 1.2(3): p.2)

The Tomb as a House for the Dead

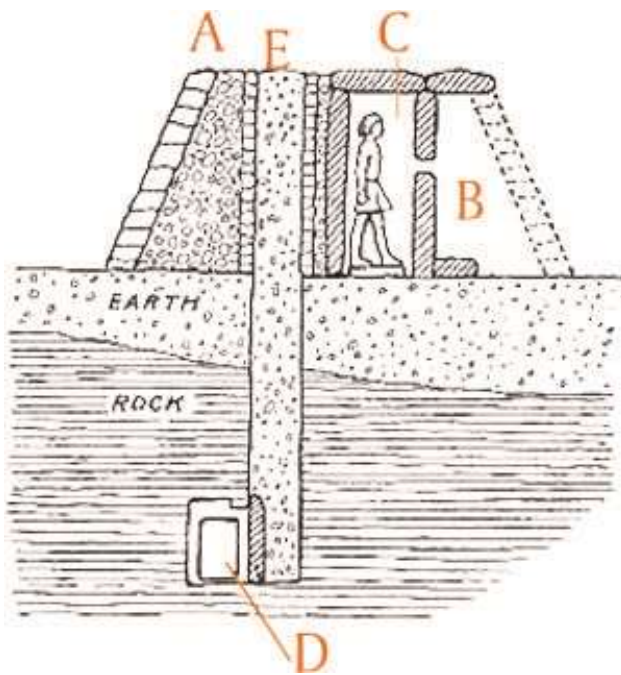
It is not clear when exactly the ancient Egyptians belief in an afterlife arose and became such an important aspect of social and religious life. We know from Old Kingdom theology (the Pyramid Texts at the 5th Dynasty King Unas' Pyramid at Saqqara) that the dead King was to be guided on his journey to an eternal afterlife by a set of spells and incantations, but it is unclear to what extent we can extrapolate this back to pre-dynastic times (Tyldesley 2016 Module 1.2(3): p.4). Life after death, may have been inspired by the cycle of annual

Nile inundation in summer when the agricultural land was covered with Nile water that is then followed by planting and harvesting and so on... Similarly, the rising of the Sun every morning in the East and the setting in the West inspired the idea of Ra's journey from birth to death to re-birth. The myth of Osiris and his magical resurrection may have also been foundational in the belief in life after death.

The basic tenants of that belief were based on the various aspects of which a person is formed. Apart from the actual body (living called the *khet* – dead called the *khat*), we have the name (*ren*), the shadow (*shuyet*), the life-force (also called the 'double' – the *ka*), the personality (*ba*) and the spirit (*akh*) (Ikram 2015: p.24). According to Ikram, the *akh* resulted from the union of the *ka* and *ba* after death creating an eternal being of light (Ikram 2015: p.31).

The *ka* following death was linked to the *khat* and the tomb and required sustenance (food and drink). The *ba* could travel from and to the tomb (initially for royalty only – but then at later periods for non-royals). However, the *ba* required the physical body as an anchor to which it could return (Ikram: p.29). All these elements informed the development of more complex funerary architecture evolving from the original simple pit grave.

The Bipartite Tomb and the Early *Mastabas*



(Toledo Museum of Art n.d.)

A: The above ground *mastaba* like structure; B: Chapel; C: Hidden room (*serdab*) holding one or more statues of the tomb owner; D: Underground burial chamber and E: Shaft (Toledo Museum of Art n.d.)

The need to provide sustenance to the *ka* and other needs of the dead person according to Snape led to a more complex tomb design (Snape 2011: p.11). The next development following the simple pit-grave was an oval shaped grave surrounded by a mudbrick rubble filled rectangular structure (hence the name '*mastaba*' meaning bench in Arabic) with an

attached tiny room outside the *mastaba* where food and drink offerings may be made for the deceased *ka*.

The Tomb as a Status Symbol: Tomb U-j at Abydos

According to Dreyer tomb U-j at Abydos is the largest and most extensively equipped tomb discovered for a pre-dynastic ruler (Dreyer 2011: p. 128). The tomb contains twelve chambers. Dreyer describes the arrangement of the rooms and passages that divide the tomb into an entrance, reception rooms and private rooms. Dreyer states that there was an attempt to 'relate the layout of the tomb to a small residential palace' (Dreyer 2011: p.131).

While the tomb was probably robbed in antiquity, there is ample evidence that it contained large quantities of highly valuable grave goods. Jewelry, cosmetic utensils, clothing, weapons, furniture, game pieces and other goods (Dreyer 2011: pp. 131-132). As Tyldesley notes large quantities of grave goods were placed in the tombs of the early dynastic elites (Tyldesley 2009: p.22).

Snape describes the elite *mastaba* tombs at Saqqara throughout Dynasty 1:

“...They were designed to be strikingly impressive, with a superstructure consisting of a huge *mastaba* made of mudbrick, whose external appearance was embellished by decorative brickwork...”
(Snape: p.14)

We can see then that as we move from the pre-historic to the early dynastic period, tombs in addition to pure functionality have started to reflect the social status of the deceased with the royal tombs at Abydos providing clear examples in the early dynastic period (Dynasties 0, 1 and 2) of more and more grandiose and elaborate tombs, designed to reflect a palatial dwelling for the dead King.

Divine Kingship and Subsidiary Burials

According to Snape the nature of kings by the end of the predynastic period had evolved whereby, unlike ordinary people, kings had some divine attributes allowing them, among other functions, to interact with the gods (Snape 2011: p. 25). Retainer burials around the tomb of the king may have been a reflection of this special status. There is evidence that the so-called subsidiary burials around the tombs of kings of Dynasty 1 such as the tomb of Den result from the sacrificial burial of the king's retainers. Den's tomb, for example, contained 318 additional burial chambers (Tyldesley 2016: Module 1.2(4) at p.3).

Divine Kingship and Mortuary Enclosures

**“Archaeologically speaking, our most impressive evidence for the role divine kingship played in transforming Egypt into a single, national society is the great royal tombs of the First and Second Dynasties”
(Hoffman 1979: p.267)**

One important development in the early dynastic period was the creation of ‘funerary enclosures’ around the royal tombs. Close to the *Umm el Qa'ab* 1st dynasty tombs the kings built rectangular enclosures (Tyldesley 2016: Module 1.2(4) p.3). One such enclosure, at *Shunet ez-Zebib* (Abydos North Cemetery) belonged to King Khasekhemwy, the last king of Dynasty 2. Excavations have shown that the enclosure included an offering chapel and open spaces (Tyldesley 2016: Module 1.2(4) at p.3). Bestock points out that elements of this tomb are similar to Djoser's Step Pyramid complex (Bestock 2011: p. 144). Hoffman sees the end of the second dynasty and the death of Khasekhemwy and his unique tomb as a transition from prehistory to a dawn of a new order (Hoffman 1979: pp.348 – 349). Thus

perhaps the influence that his tomb had on the 3rd Dynasty funerary architecture and Djoser's complex at Saqqara.

Khasekhemwy's historical importance also lies in the fact that he reunified Egypt after fighting northerners. He changed his original name Khasekhem (the power rises – meaning Horus rises) to Khasekhemwy (the two powers rise – meaning Horus and Seth rise) accompanied by the phrase 'The Two Lords are at peace in him' (Tyldesley 2009: p.28).

According to Hoffman these grandiose royal tombs were propaganda tools advertising the emergence of the new centralized and unified state (Hoffman 1979: p. 267).

Eternal Glory: Djoser's Step Pyramid Complex



(Djoser's step pyramid with remedial works being performed by the Egyptian Antiquities Department – author 2014)

Djoser the second king of the 3rd Dynasty (c.2667 BCE) will always be remembered and celebrated on account of his mortuary complex and step pyramid at Saqqara. The first striking element of this magnificent complex is that for the first time in history a large monument was built using stone. The mortuary enclosure is as mentioned earlier reminiscent of Khasekhemwy's enclosure at *Shunet ez-Zebib*. But this was clearly a quantum leap forward., not only in terms of scale (545 x 277 meters), use of stone; but of equal importance the vision that somehow Egypt would be maintained and ruled by Djoser for eternity within this complex. As explained by Tyldesley the open spaces and structures within the complex had their own functions that went beyond the mere functionality of previous royal tombs. The complex served as a royal palace (Tyldesley 2016 Module 1.3(1) at p.7) with a 'palace-façade style limestone wall equipped with fourteen false doors plus one true entrance' (Tyldesley 2016 *ibid*).



(Djoser complex external wall - author 2014)

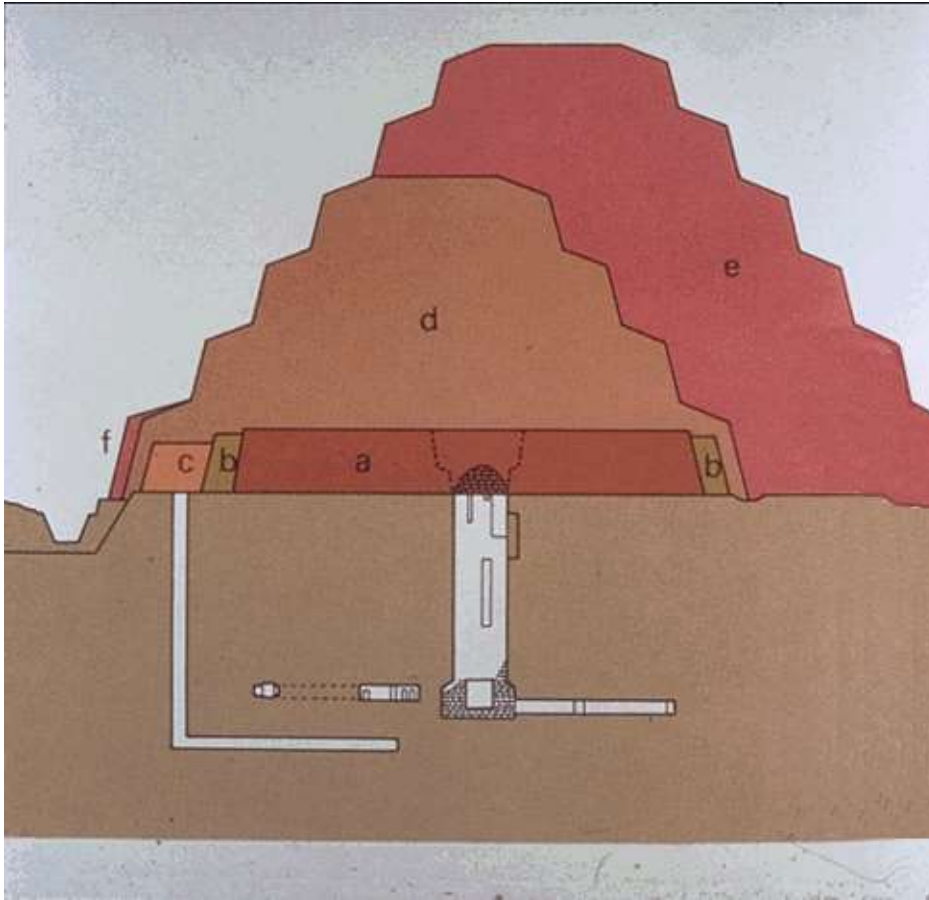
Snape (2011: pp.28-29) describes the elements within the enclosure:

“Many of its features can be seen in earlier buildings, including the rectangular, ‘palace façade’ enclosure-wall itself, which appears to be heavily influenced by mudbrick enclosures such as the Shunet es-Zebib at Abydos. The buildings within Djoser’s enclosures are frustratingly lacking in explanatory texts, but a large open court to the south of the pyramid seems to be a *heb-sed*, or jubilee, court containing two pairs of symbolic cairns; the *heb-sed* was a festival which was connected to the rejuvenation of the king and the renewal of his kingship. To the east of the pyramid are a series of solid, dummy buildings which might represent important shrines in different parts of Egypt. Immediately to the north of the pyramid is a mortuary temple which could have been used for offerings to the dead king within the pyramid, and which included a small chamber, sealed apart from two eye-holes, which contained a life-size seated statue of Djoser. These different elements and others within the complex, seem to hint at a variety of possibilities for the afterlife of the king, which might include the creation of a symbolic ‘mini Egypt’.

The complex thus involved a functionality that went beyond merely providing a home for the dead king. In some respect it may be regarded as an attempt to immortalize Egypt itself and the institution of divine kingship.

From a *Mastaba* to a Pyramid

As for the pyramid itself it is believed that it was not designed initially as a pyramid, but rather as a *mastaba* type tomb. With the outer cladding of polished limestone removed by ancient thieves, the multi-stage development of the design from a *mastaba* tomb to pyramid was revealed (Tyldesley 2009: p.34).



Schematic drawing of successive pyramid construction stages (University of Pennsylvania - SAS 1994)

As explained by Tyldesley:

“It had started life as a square mastaba topping a subterranean burial shaft. This was extended on all four sides to form a two-stepped mastaba, then extended again on the eastern side to make a rectangular mastaba. This mastaba then became the bottom step of a four-step pyramid. Finally the base was extended to form a six step pyramid standing 60 metres (197 ft) high.”
(Tyldesley 2009: p.34)

Imhotep and the Leap to the Heavens

Why was the original *mastaba* design changed to a step pyramid? Tyldesley views step pyramids as ancient Egyptian ‘stairways to the stars’ (Tyldesley 2009: p.32). She explains that the name for pyramid in ancient Egyptian was *Mer* which could be translated as a

‘Place of Ascension) suggesting that a pyramid may provide the deceased king with a means of ascending to heaven (Tyldesley 2016: Module 1.3(1) p.6). It has also been suggested that the pyramid shape itself may be a representation of the mound of creation implying resurrection after death (Snape 2011: p. 30). It is also suggested that the pyramid shape may represent the rays of the sun. The northern sun god Re of Heliopolis became Egypt’s most important deity during the Old Kingdom (Tyldesley 2009: p.34).

The tremendous vision and symbolism behind the pyramid design was recognized and revered. Imhotep the architect who designed Djoser’s complex was deified and worshiped during the Late Period as ‘Imouthes’ son of the god Ptah, and was linked to the Greek god of medicine Asclepius (Tyldesley 2009: p.35).

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