

# An intact (?) Old Kingdom burial from Saqqara



**Abstract:** An Old Kingdom rock-cut tomb, discovered by the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission in Saqqara in the Dry Moat of the Step Pyramid complex, is discussed. Although the tomb was unfinished and robbed in ancient times, it nevertheless contained an intact burial of a Fifth Dynasty official.

**Keywords:** Saqqara, Old Kingdom, Fifth Dynasty, non-royal tombs, funerary architecture, burial practices

The funerary chapel No. 32 is hewn in the west bank of the western section of the Dry Moat [Fig. 1], on the lower level of tombs, approximately 5.40–7.15 m below the present ground surface, beneath the tomb of Ikhi/Mery (Kuraszkiewicz 2014; Myśliwiec 2015: 50–52).<sup>1</sup>

The façade is almost square — 2.20 m wide and 2.00 m high — with a 0.50 m-wide entrance situated in its center [Fig. 2]. The façade is strikingly narrow (as is the entire chapel), giving the impression that the tomb was fitted between pre-existing structures.

<sup>1</sup> The tomb was identified in 2012 but explored in 2015, while the exploration of its burial apartment had to be postponed until 2017 due to technical and logistical reasons (cf. Myśliwiec 2015: 52–54; Kuraszkiewicz 2018).

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The tomb owner remains anonymous. The only inscription in the chapel was carved above the entrance; however, due to heavy erosion, only faint traces of the decoration are visible. These include vestiges of the offering formula in at least two horizontal lines spanning almost the whole width of the façade, and the remains of two standing human figures (a male and a female) at its left (southern) end [Fig. 3]. Neither the name nor any titles of the owner are legible.

The chapel itself is a quasi-rectangular room oriented east–west (cf. Kuraszkiewicz 2021: 212–213), measuring approximately 5.90 m (E–W) by a maximum of 1.90 m (N–S), and up to

1.60 m high [Fig. 4]. Its walls are rough and irregular, with no trace of decoration. The local rock is extremely soft and brittle, with multiple deep, intersecting fractures and numerous large fragments detached from the ceiling and walls. Considering its quality, no decoration would have been possible without first plastering the walls or lining them with higher-quality stone — as was done or planned in the tomb of Ikhi/Mery, hewn in the same section of the bedrock (cf. Kuraszkiewicz 2021). However, no evidence of such treatment is preserved, nor is there any trace of an offering place, even in a rudimentary form (Kuraszkiewicz 2013: 232–233), although one would be expected in the

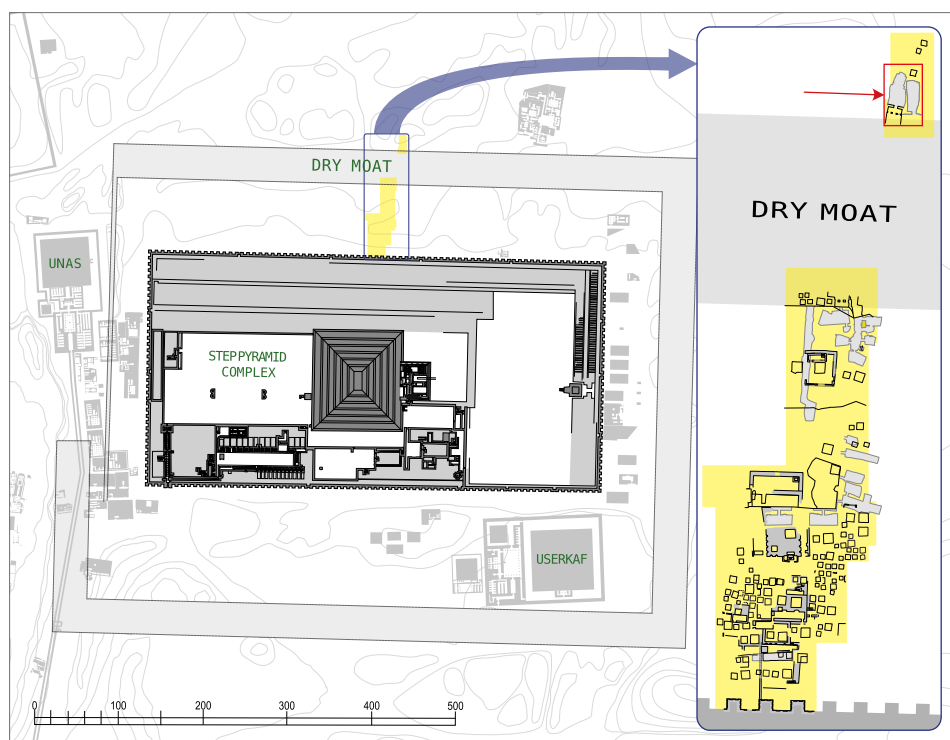


Fig. 1. Location of the described site on the central Saqqara plateau and the area investigated by the expedition (Drawing K.O. Kuraszkiewicz)

middle of the west wall (Kuraszkiewicz 2021: 212–213). Approximately 4.20 m from the entrance, remains of a wall built across the room are preserved. It consists of irregular fragments of *tafl* and white limestone bonded with *tafl* mortar [Fig. 5]. At the western end of the chapel's south wall, a large breach opens into a neighboring chapel — created when workers hewing Chapel 32 accidentally broke into an adjacent room. It appears that the crosswise wall might have been intended either to separate the damaged part of the chapel from its accessible section or to serve as an additional security measure to protect the burial apartment.

The entrance to the burial chamber occupies a large part of the chapel's rear wall [see Fig. 5]. It opens into a sloping corridor (Reisner 1942: 150–155), 5.10 m long and descending at an angle of approximately 20 degrees [Fig. 6]. The entrance was blocked with a wall built of re-used worked limestone blocks and irregular fragments of local stone, bonded and plastered with *tafl* mortar. A similar, though unplastered, wall was built at the other end of the corridor, at the entrance to the burial chamber; remains of both walls were preserved upon discovery. The corridor was filled with debris between these two blocking walls.



Fig. 2. Façade of Chapel 32; above it, a modern wall protecting the tomb of Ikhi (Chapel 14) (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

The burial chamber itself is situated about 0.40 m below the floor level of the corridor. It measures approximately 3.20 m (N–S) by a maximum of 2.30 m (E–W) and is about 2.20 m high.

The burial apartment was entered in ancient times, probably more than once, from three different directions. Both walls blocking the corridor, as well as the debris fill between them, had been partly removed — an event that must have occurred while the chapel was still accessible via its main entrance. At a later date —when the tomb of Ikhi was being constructed, that is, during the reign of Pepy I/Merenre—workers hewing Shaft 14/2 stumbled upon the sloping corridor, evidently unaware of its existence beforehand [see *Fig. 6*].<sup>2</sup> This not only confirms that Chapel 32 predates the tomb of Ikhi, but also that by the time of the latter's construction, Chapel 32 had already become inaccessible, buried under debris accumulated within the Dry Moat (Kuraszkiewicz 2021). Additionally, a large breach resulting from the fragility of the rock, is visible in the north wall of the burial chamber, connecting it to Shaft 54 (Myśliwiec 2003: 121, 124, *Fig. 13*), located north of Chapel 32. While the first breach along the sloping corridor clearly testifies to a robbery likely committed soon after the funeral, the other two were most probably accidental — though this does not

exclude the possibility of further intrusion into the burial chamber once access had been gained.

Apart from human factors, the burial chamber suffered significant damage due to natural phenomena. A thick layer of hardened, cracked mud covering the floor serves as clear evidence of the presence of stagnant water. This evidently resulted from floods caused by torrential rains that occurred in the terminal phase of the Old Kingdom (Trzeciński, Kuraszkiewicz, and Welc 2010; Kuraszkiewicz 2011; Myśliwiec, Welc, and Trzeciński 2012). One or more earthquakes —the effects of which can be seen in the tomb of Ikhi— further contributed to the damage, causing large fragments of rock to collapse (Kuraszkiewicz 2021).

It is impossible to ascertain the original contents of the burial chamber. The only item of funerary equipment left in the chamber was a rectangular base (approximately 20 cm × 40 cm; Inv. No. S/17/9) of a wooden statuette of a striding man, found in the southwest corner [*Fig. 7*; see below, *Fig. 12*]. The base has been severely damaged by prolonged exposure to humid conditions, and the figure itself was not preserved, except for the heavily weathered remains of feet with tenons that fixed them to the pedestal. Funerary goods may have been



*Fig. 3.* Façade of Chapel 32 — lintel with traces of an inscription (J. Dąbrowski, K.O. Kuraszkiewicz)

<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the shaft must have been entered again and re-filled with secondary material, which included three limestone offering tables of a later date (Kuraszkiewicz 2018: 174).

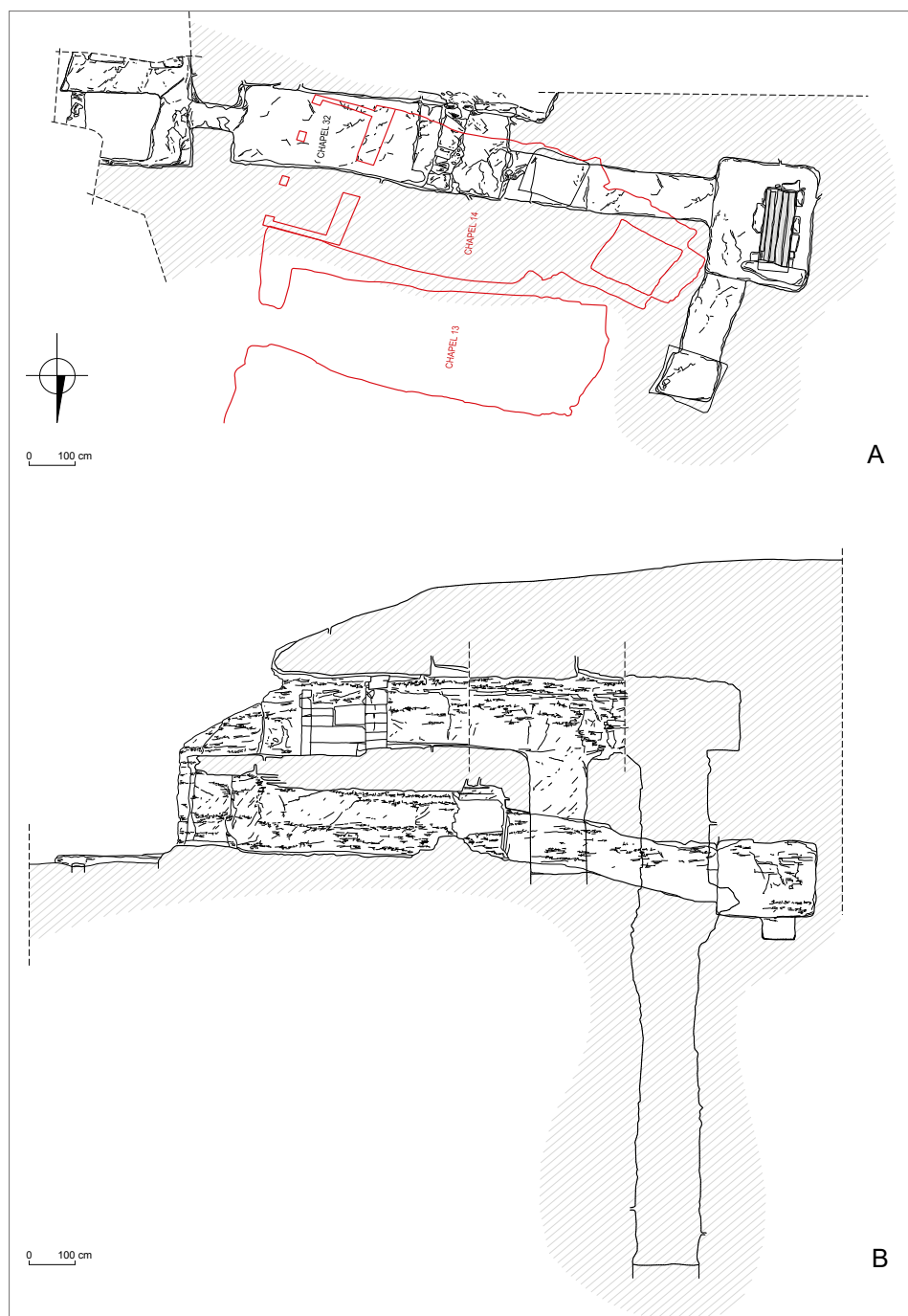


Fig. 4. A – plan of the chapels hewn into the west bank of the Dry Moat. Structures on the upper level (Chapels 13 and 14) are marked with a red line (Drawing K. Kocyla); B – east-west cross-section of Chapels 14 (upper level) and 32 (lower level) (Drawing K. Kocyla)



stolen or destroyed by water and/or falling rocks. However, some items typically placed in burial chambers were neither attractive to robbers nor especially susceptible to decay; thus, for example, the absence of canopic jars or the scarcity of pottery remains puzzling.<sup>3</sup> It seems, therefore, that only a limited number of items may have originally been placed in the burial chamber.

In the western part of the chamber, a burial pit—about 2.20 m long (N–S), approximately 0.60–0.75 m wide (E–W), and approximately 0.60 m deep—is partly hewn into the floor and partly constructed of irregular stones bonded

with *tafl* mortar to compensate for irregularities caused by the fragility of the rock. The pit was covered with roughly cut slabs of hard, grayish local limestone (about 1.70 m × 0.60 m × 0.19 m), supplemented with smaller blocks at the head and feet [Fig. 8].

Upon discovery, the lid was slightly shifted toward the west. It seems possible that the intruders who entered the burial chamber tried to move the lid toward the back wall, creating a gap along the east side of the pit. Inside the



Fig. 5. Western part of Chapel 32: 1 – remains of the wall separating the rear section of the chapel; 2 – breach into a neighboring chapel; 3 – entrance to the sloping corridor with remains of the original blocking (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

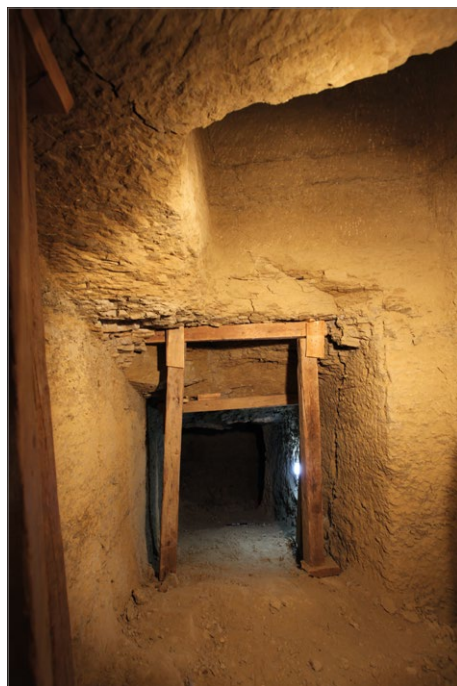


Fig. 6. Sloping corridor with wooden supports installed. Shaft 14/2 cuts through the front part of the corridor (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

- 3 The cemetery west of the Step Pyramid complex offers a unique opportunity to trace the activities of ancient robbers in a systematic way. Of over one hundred shafts explored so far, none was found intact: robbers had entered the burial chambers, opened coffins, and destroyed wrapped bodies. However, they generally seem not to have been interested in taking inexpensive or cumbersome objects such as wooden implements, pottery vessels, or heavy limestone canopic jars (cf. Kowalska 2013b. See also Roth 1995: 19; Bárta 2011: 184, 251–252).

depression, a rectangular wooden coffin was placed, constructed of planks approximately 0.12–0.15 m wide, joined with pegs and cord threaded through drilled apertures [Fig. 9]. The coffin was approximately 0.60 m wide and approximately 1.94 m long; the lid was longer (2.04 m) and fitted with transverse slats to secure it in position. There is no trace of decoration on the inner or outer surfaces of the coffin (cf., e.g.

Donadoni Roveri 1969: 40–55; cf. Kowalska 2013a). Despite the apparent robbery attempt, the contents of the coffin were not disturbed, as indicated by the fact that the lid—though collapsed and weathered—was still preserved, with the relative position of its elements generally unchanged. The body buried in the coffin (Burial 702), however, was severely damaged by stones falling through the gap and by stagnant water.

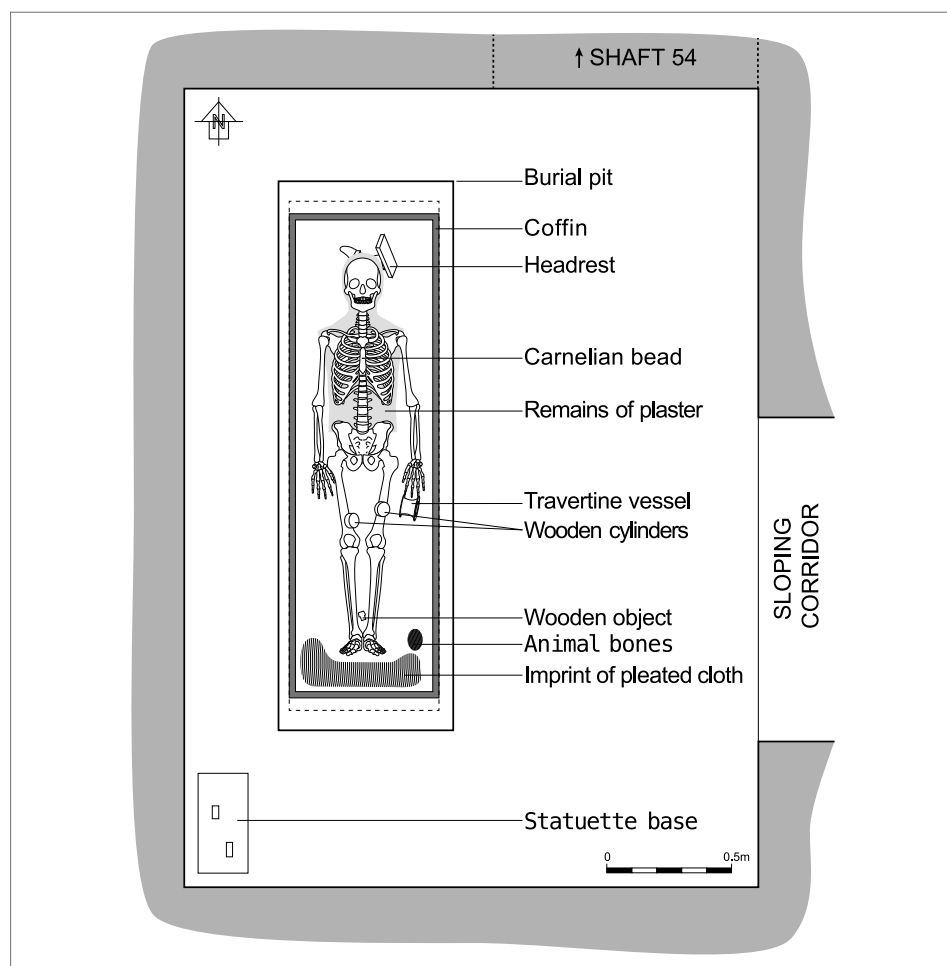


Fig. 7. Schematic plan of the burial chamber showing the distribution of the funerary assemblage (Drawing K. Kuraszkiewicz)



Inside the coffin were the remains of an adult male (approximately 20–30 years old),<sup>4</sup> lying in a supine position north–south, with the head to the north and slightly tilted to the left (toward the east), and the hands extended along the sides [Fig. 10]. The body was crushed, especially in its upper part, by the weight of stones that had accumulated on the collapsed lid. Humid conditions caused the decomposition of soft organic materials, including body tissues and wrappings.

In spite of the damage, unambiguous evidence was found that the body had been wrapped in numerous layers of fabric and plastered. Probably due to

unfavorable, humid conditions, no actual fabric was preserved in the tomb, but the wrappings left impressions in the layers of hardened mud beneath the body.<sup>5</sup> Small remains of a thin layer of plaster, with texture of fabric impressed on some fragments, were scattered over the upper body and head [Fig. 11]. The front and sides of the head were covered with a significantly thicker layer of plaster in which facial features were modeled; the state of preservation, however, precludes a full reconstruction of the mask. Based on the preserved remains, it appears that the plaster layer was applied over the wrappings, a technique well attested in



Fig. 8. Burial pit with its lid in situ (Photo J. Dąbrowski)



Fig. 9. Wooden coffin inside the burial pit (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

- 4 The human remains will be discussed in a separate anthropological report prepared by Iwona Kozieradzka-Ogunmakin.
- 5 Under the skeleton, the distance between bones and the bottom of the coffin was about 10 cm; this space was originally occupied by body tissues and wrappings that decayed and were replaced by mud. This provides an approximation of the thickness of wrappings.

the Old Kingdom (Tacke 1996; Kowalska, Kuraszkiewicz, and Godziejewski 2009; Ikram et al. 2023). In contrast to other known examples of such body treatment, in the case of Burial 702, the plaster layer was very thin (not exceeding 2–3 mm), which contributed to its poor state of preservation.

Interestingly, some traces of painted decoration were found imprinted in the mud, in the form of indeterminate blue and red spots, as well as white and blue rectangles with thin parallel black lines — most likely originally forming checker bands [Fig. 13]. These traces were observed around the head and feet, but they do not



Fig. 10. Burial 702 in the coffin (Photo J. Dąbrowski)



allow for a reconstruction of the overall decorative scheme.

In addition to the wrappings on the body, a quantity of fabric appears to have been placed in the coffin. Imprints of bundled, pleated linen —possibly a garment— were found sandwiched in mud between the feet of the deceased and the south side of the coffin (Hall 1985; Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000: 281, 289, 294–295; Donadoni Roveri 2001: 33–37).

Several other objects were also found inside the coffin, next to the body [see above, *Fig. 7*; *Fig. 14*]. A wooden headrest (18.3 cm × 16 cm × 8.4 cm; Inv. No. S/17/13)

was placed under the head and to its left. The headrest consists of five elements: a curved cradle, a square abacus, a fluted shaft,<sup>6</sup> and a rectangular base. The elements were joined with tenons (shaft to base and abacus) and pegs (abacus to cradle). A fusiform carnelian bead (1.6 cm × 1 cm; Inv. No. S/17/16) found at the chest was almost certainly part of a necklace (cf. Beck 1928: 51, Pl. IV). A cylindrical travertine vessel with a wide rim and flat foot (10.2 cm × 5.5 cm; Inv. No. S/17/11) was lying at the left hip of the deceased, close to his left hand. Upon



Fig. 11. Head of Burial 702 with remains of plaster coating; the base of the headrest is visible next to the head (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

- 6 The circular pad was an intentional structural element of the headrest, not a “patch” added to fill the space between imperfectly executed parts, as suggested by Miroslav Bárta and colleagues (2014: 100). The same solution can be seen, for example, in other objects found by the Polish mission in Saqqara (to be published in forthcoming volumes of the Saqqara series) and in a late Fifth Dynasty example found at Giza, G 5290 (<http://www.gizapyramids.org/view/objects/asitem/search@swg%27headrest%27wood%2729/title-asc?r.state:flow=61b2c4a2-cf06-41f5-b4fb-c4da8f8a871c>).

discovery, the vessel had no lid and contained no preserved traces of its contents. This type of vessel, occasionally found as part of Old Kingdom funerary equipment, has traditionally been described as a “kohl-pot”, but a compelling reinterpretation identifies it as a water-pot



Fig. 12. Base of a wooden statuette found in the burial chamber (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

used by scribes, and a token of their profession (Jirášková 2016; cf. Bárta et al. 2014: 102–103, Pl. 3.1a–b). In light of this and a recent study of trauma markers (Brukner Havelková et al. 2024), the remains of the owner of Chapel 32 will be examined from this perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Approximately in the same area, at the level of the thighs, two small wooden cylinders were found (approximately 5.35 cm in diameter and 2.7 cm high; Inv. No. S/17/10a–b). One flat surface of each cylinder bears traces of pigment: red on one, black on the other. Additionally, a disc of red pigment (approximately 4 cm in diameter and 0.2–0.3 cm thick) was found embedded in mud beneath the left thigh. These objects are likely to be interpreted as components of model scribal equipment (Kowalska 2013b: 443).



Fig. 13. Imprints of painted fabric (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

7 The remains are currently being investigated by Kozieradzka-Ogunmakin.

In the lower part of the coffin, slightly above the ankles, a small unidentified wooden object was found, shaped roughly like a mushroom (approximately 3.39 cm high and 2.75 cm in diameter; Inv. No. S/17/12). A poorly preserved skeleton of a small animal was also discovered in the southeast corner of the coffin.<sup>8</sup>

The burial corresponds to other known, though relatively uncommon, examples from the Old Kingdom, both in body treatment and positioning (Ikram et al. 2023). In terms of the position and treatment of the body, as well as the funerary goods placed within the

coffin, the burial finds a close parallel in the mastaba of Neferinpu (Bárta et al. 2014: 35–38, 98–103; Bárta 2016).

It has been observed that while the preferred position for the deceased in the Old Kingdom was typically on the left side, facing east with flexed legs, there were notable exceptions to this norm (Junker 1950: 13–14; Seidlmayer 1990: 109–110; Roth 1995: 19; Ikram and Dodson 1998: 24, 109–113, 155–156, 195–196; Raven 2005: 40; Kaczmarek and Kozieradzka-Ogunmakin 2013: 349–354).

The most notable exception is a body buried on its back in an extended position, which Hermann Junker associ-



Fig. 14. Objects found with Burial 702 (Photo J. Dąbrowski)

8 Accidentally, a mouse skeleton was found in a similar position in the sarcophagus of Neferinpu (Bárta et al. 2014: 38).



ated with burials in sarcophagi.<sup>9</sup> This appears to hold true also for embedded sarcophagi and burial pits, both of which may be regarded as imitations of stone sarcophagi — and, occasionally, for coffins as well.<sup>10</sup> Ann M. Roth adds that this position is observed in principal burials.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, it may be expected that the primary burial in a tomb was more elaborate than secondary ones, and the tomb owner was typically provided with more expensive equipment, including — when possible — a sarcophagus. Thus, the co-occurrence of a sarcophagus and a supine body position seems quite natural. It may also be supposed that the position itself was regarded as more prestigious, associated with venerable individuals, regardless of whether they were buried in a sarcophagus.

Another interesting aspect of Burial 702 is the presence of a wooden coffin inside the burial pit. While coffins made of wood or reeds are attested in numerous Old Kingdom tombs, they were usually placed directly in burial chambers or pits, but apparently not inside sarcophagi. It seems that coffins were initially perceived as more affordable equivalents of sarcophagi. At the same time, both sarcophagi and coffins provided an additional layer of protection for the body, enclosing it within a discrete container

separate from the burial chamber itself. Embedded sarcophagi or burial pits, being cut from the same rock as the burial chamber, lacked this property — possibly explaining why coffins were placed in them when circumstances allowed.

Moreover, Salima Ikram and Aidan Dodson (1998: 195) note that it was only from the reign of Unas onward that wooden coffins were placed inside royal sarcophagi. Although at least one example is known of a wooden coffin placed within a sarcophagus (Kuraszkiewicz 2013: 276), this appears to be an exception that confirms the general rule — perhaps contributing further to the reluctance to combine coffins with sarcophagi in non-royal burials.

Considering the location and form of the tomb, as well as the features of Burial 702 itself, it may be tentatively dated to the late Fifth Dynasty, probably to the reign of Unas. It thus appears to be among the earliest burials discovered so far in the cemetery west of the Step Pyramid enclosure, representing a distant extension of the Unas cemetery. As such, it offers valuable insights into funerary practices and their development during the final phase of the Fifth Dynasty, especially when compared with evidence from the main cemetery of that period at Abusir.

9 Junker (1950: 13–14): “In den Särgen wird die Seitenlage nicht streng eingehalten, man legte die Leiche auch auf den Rücken oder neigte sie nur ein wenig nach links”, cf., e.g. Reisner 1913: 58.

10 Cf., e.g., two cases dating from the Sixth Dynasty, within the discussed cemetery: Burial 389 in Shaft C2/10 (body supine and extended, in an embedded sarcophagus, without coffin or plaster coating (Myśliwiec 2004: 121); Burial 551 in Shaft 64 (body supine and extended, probably in a wooden coffin, plaster coating: Kowalska, Kuraszkiewicz, and Godziejewski 2009: 108–109; Kuraszkiewicz 2013: 95).

11 Roth (1995: 19): “The position of the body is most often extended in the principal burials and contracted to varying degrees in the secondary ones. The head normally lies to the north and faces east, even in the extended burials”, cf. Reisner 1936: 12.



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