

DYNASTIES 2 AND 3

الأسرات الثانية والثالثة

Toby Wilkinson

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Dynastie 2 und 3
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The 2nd-3rd dynasties were crucial for the early development of Pharaonic civilization, yet they remain obscure due to a paucity of contemporary texts and securely dated material. The broad historical outline has been established with some certainty, but numerous questions remain unanswered. Royal funerary monuments dominate the archaeological record and help to chart changes in the underlying ideology. Religion as a whole was virtually indistinguishable from the royal cult, and the disconnect between state and private worship reflects a wider division between the ruling elite and the populace. Nevertheless, the demands of pyramid building led to the opening up and professionalization of government. Long-lasting initiatives to enhance economic productivity included better record-keeping, greater exploitation of Egypt's mineral wealth, and increased foreign trade.

لعبت الأسرات الثانية والثالثة دوراً حاسماً في بدايات تطور الحضارة الفرعونية، إلا أنها لا تزال غامضة بسبب عدم وجود نصوص معاصرة ولقى أثرية مؤرخة بشكل موثوق. تم تحديد الإطار التاريخي بشئ من اليقين، ولكن مازال العديد من الإستفسارات مطروحة. تسيطر الآثار الجنزية الملكية على السجل الأثري وتكشف التغيرات في المذاهب الفكرية الأساسية. بوجه عام تقريباً يمكن تمييز الدين من الشعائر الملكية، ولكن الانقسام بين ديانة الدولة والعقيدة الشخصية يعكس انقساماً أوسع بين النخبة الحاكمة والشعب. ومع ذلك، أدت مطالب بناء الهرم الى التوسع والمهنية من قبل الحكومة. وشملت التدابير تعزيز الإنتاجية الاقتصادية وحفظ أفضل للسجلات، واستغلال أكبر للثروة مصر المعدنية، وزيادة التجارة الخارجية.

The 2nd-3rd dynasties span the end of the formative phase of ancient Egyptian civilization and the dawn of the Pyramid Age, and are crucial for our understanding of the early development of Pharaonic government, society, religion, and material culture in their classic forms. Yet the 2nd-3rd dynasties remain among the most obscure periods of ancient Egyptian history. This is largely the result of a dearth of contemporary texts (cf. Kahl et al. 1995, but see Pätznick 2005 and Regulski 2010 for

important new material), and—with the exception of royal funerary monuments—a paucity of archaeological evidence that can be securely dated to the period. By contrast, the preceding 1st Dynasty is relatively well attested, and is thus better known. There is a considerable degree of continuity in political, economic, and cultural matters between the 2nd and the 3rd dynasties, which makes it appropriate to consider the two dynasties together, despite the fact that some scholars place the 3rd Dynasty in the Old Kingdom,

creating a somewhat artificial division with the preceding Early Dynastic Period (i.e., the 1st-2nd or 1st-3rd dynasties).

The broad historical outline of the 2nd-3rd dynasties has been established with some certainty (Wilkinson 1999: 82-105; Kahl 2006; Seidlmayer 2006). The 2nd Dynasty (c. 2800 – 2670 BCE) began with a line of three kings buried at Saqqara—Hetepsekhemwy, Raneb, and Ninetjer—who are attested predominantly from sites in the Memphite region (fig. 1). At



Figure 1. Stela of Raneb, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

the end of the dynasty, the focus of royal activity seems to have switched to Upper Egypt, to judge from the surviving funerary monuments of the last two kings, Sekhemib/Peribsen and Khasekhem(wy), both of whom were interred at Abydos (Petrie 1901). Between these two groups of rulers, internal political developments and the precise sequence of kings remain uncertain. Inscriptions from the Step Pyramid complex of Netjerykhet (better known to posterity as Djoser; fig. 2) name five ephemeral rulers—Ba, Sneferka, Weneg, Sened, and Nubnefer—who, on archaeological and epigraphic grounds, can plausibly be dated to the 2nd Dynasty (Wilkinson 1999: 82, 87-89; Ryholt 2008). The fact that they are, to date, unattested outside Saqqara suggests that their authority may have been confined to the north of Egypt. By contrast, graffiti in the Western Desert record an otherwise unknown king who, it seems, controlled or had access to parts of southern Egypt (Wilkinson 1995). Taken together, these six poorly-attested royal names and an obscure reference in the royal annals (Wilkinson 2000: 125-126) may suggest political fragmentation and a period of civil unrest during the middle of the 2nd Dynasty; but such a hypothesis remains speculative in the absence of more substantive evidence. A recent re-examination of the surviving inscriptions of Weneg suggests the possibility that he and Raneb may have been one and the same ruler (Kahl 2007); while not yet fully proven, this tantalizing suggestion merely underlines the extent to which our knowledge of 2nd-Dynasty history is incomplete and lacking in sound foundations (Dodson 1996). Ongoing excavations in the early royal cemeteries at Saqqara (van Wetering 2004; Dreyer 2007) and Abydos (Dreyer et al. 2006, and regular reports in *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo*) may help to clarify our understanding.

The 3rd Dynasty (c. 2670 – 2600 BCE) is scarcely better known (cf. Baud 2002; Ćwiek 2009). It is dominated by the monuments of Netjerykhet—notably his Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara (Lauer 1936 – 1939). The king himself is now firmly established by



Figure 2. Unfinished statue of Djoser in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara.

archaeological evidence as the first ruler of the 3rd Dynasty, despite the (erroneous) testimony of some ancient king-lists (Dreyer 1998a). It is interesting that Netjerykhet is nowhere directly named as his predecessor's son; rather, contemporary inscriptions emphasize the role of a woman, Nimaathap—referred to as “mother of the king's children” in the reign of Khasekhemwy, and as “king's mother” in the reign of Netjerykhet—in the royal succession (Wilkinson 1999: 94). Together with the prominence given to Netjerykhet's wife and daughters on his monuments, and the fine, contemporary statue of a royal princess (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999: Catalogue nos. 4, 7b, 16), the influence of Nimaathap may point to an important political and religious role for women in the 2nd-3rd dynasties.

By contrast with the spectacular and lasting achievements of Netjerykhet, his three successors—Sekhemkhet, Khaba, and Sanakht—are shadowy figures, sparsely attested in contemporary inscriptions and signally lacking in major monuments. They

seem likely, therefore, to have enjoyed only brief reigns, none more than ten years. Sekhemkhet's own step pyramid enclosure, adjacent to his predecessor's, never rose much above ground level (Goneim 1957). The equally unfinished “Layer Pyramid” at Zawiyet el-Aryan is attributed to Khaba on the basis of scanty, circumstantial evidence (Dunham 1978; Wilkinson 1999: 99), while Sanakht appears not even to have embarked on a pyramid or similar monument—unless the unexcavated “Ptahhotep enclosure” to the west of the Step Pyramid dates to his reign (Swelim 1991). Partly through this lack of major dated monuments, the precise position and sequence of Khaba and Sanakht within the 3rd Dynasty also remain uncertain. Only Netjerykhet's fourth successor and the last king of the dynasty, Huni, is firmly placed within the order of succession and reigned long enough to undertake a significant building program. Yet even he seems to have eschewed colossal architecture on the scale of the Step Pyramid, settling instead for a series of small monuments throughout Egypt to mark his power and serve as foci for the royal cult (Dreyer and Kaiser 1980; Seidlmayer 1996; for a later attribution see Ćwiek 1998).

The surviving examples of royal mortuary architecture, at Saqqara and Abydos, thus dominate our view of the 2nd-3rd dynasties. While it may be misleading to place too much emphasis on this well-documented aspect of Early Dynastic culture (as against internal political, economic, and cultural change, for which there is precious little evidence), there is no doubt that royal funerary ideology and its architectural manifestation were particular concerns of the state, and were areas of innovation during the two centuries between the accession of Hetepsekhemwy and the death of Huni (Wilkinson 2004).

Hetepsekhemwy, having presided at the burial of his predecessor, Qaa, and overseen the sealing of the latter's tomb at Abydos (Dreyer et al. 1996: 71-72, fig. 25, pl. 14a), took the radical decision to re-locate the royal cemetery to the Memphite necropolis, specifically to North Saqqara. The site had

been a focus for elite burial since the early 1st Dynasty, but had never before been used for kings' tombs. The reasons for Hetepsekhemwy's innovative policy can never be known, but they may have included family ties, political concerns, and theological developments. Certainly the form of the royal tomb in the early 2nd Dynasty suggests an evolution in the concept of the royal afterlife, with an explicit northward orientation of the tomb's main axis signifying a new emphasis on the celestial realm—and, in particular, the circumpolar stars—as the king's post-mortem destination. The name of Hetepsekhemwy's funerary domain, *Hr-ḥꜣ-sbꜣ*, "Horus rises as a star," points in the same direction (Wilkinson 2004: 1139). The geology of North Saqqara also influenced the design of the royal tomb, which now became rock-cut rather than brick-built. In other respects, however, such as the provision of a suite of rooms for the dead king's *ka*, the tomb of Hetepsekhemwy maintained traditions established in the late Predynastic Period at Abydos (Dreyer 1998b).

A tomb similar in design and proportions to Hetepsekhemwy's and located immediately adjacent has been attributed to his second successor, Ninetjer (Munro 1993; Dreyer 2007), leaving the intervening king, Raneb, without a securely identified tomb. That he was buried at Saqqara can, however, be deduced from the discovery nearby of a finely carved funerary stela of red granite bearing Raneb's serekh. It is clear from ongoing excavations at Saqqara that the early 2nd-Dynasty necropolis extends beyond the tombs of Hetepsekhemwy and Ninetjer, to the west, north, and south (Giddy 1997: 28; van Walsem 2003; van Wetering 2004), so the tombs of additional kings almost certainly lie underneath the New Kingdom cemetery or among the subterranean galleries beneath the western massif of the Step Pyramid complex.

When the royal necropolis was moved back to Abydos in the reign of Sekhemib/Peribsen (again, for unknown political and/or religious reasons), the design of the king's tomb likewise reverted to a 1st-Dynasty model. But this may have been driven as much by geology and the

absence of locally available high-quality building stone as by theological influences. Khasekhemwy seems to have aiming at a compromise design in his tomb at Abydos, which was built largely of mud brick (in 1st-Dynasty fashion), but with a longitudinal layout incorporating galleries of storage chambers (like the early 2nd-Dynasty royal tombs at Saqqara). His program to re-unite Lower and Upper Egypt and their distinct cultural traditions, announced also in the dual form of his name (Khasekhemwy, "the two powers have appeared"), was further emphasized in his construction of vast funerary enclosures at Hierakonpolis, Abydos, and Saqqara—the three most prominent ancient centers of royal mortuary and ceremonial architecture. The "Fort" at Hierakonpolis and the Shunet el-Zebib at Abydos stand to this day as the world's oldest mud brick buildings (fig. 3). Khasekhemwy's stonebuilt enclosure at Saqqara—assuming, as seems almost certain, that the Gisr el-Mudir is to be dated to his



Figure 3. Shunet el-Zebib, Abydos.



Figure 4. Exposed masonry wall with the Step Pyramid in the background, Gisr el-Mudir, Saqqara.

reign—is now much denuded, but its scale far surpasses that of its southern counterparts (fig. 4; Tavares 1988; Mathieson and Tavares 1993; but note Ćwiek 2009).

Indeed, a richer understanding of the Gisir el-Mudir, including its architecture and construction, provides the context for the design and execution of the Step Pyramid complex in the following reign: Netjerykhet's monument did not require as great a leap of imagination, organization, or technology as was previously thought. Nevertheless, by combining the royal funerary enclosure and the king's tomb in a single monument, adding spaces for the eternal celebration of royal rituals, and orienting the whole complex towards the circumpolar stars, the Step Pyramid complex effectively brought together all the different strands of Early Dynastic royal funerary ideology and can be regarded as the summation of theological and architectural developments during the first two dynasties (figs. 5-7). In its unprecedented use of stone, its innovative design (employing a visible pyramid to cover the burial chamber), its colossal scale, and the administrative effort required to build it, Netjerykhet's monument marked the beginning of a new age and laid the foundations for the cultural achievements of the Old Kingdom.

The scale and growing sophistication of royal funerary monuments during the 2nd-3rd dynasties contrast sharply with the near-invisibility of temples or shrines to deities. Only a handful of sacred buildings are attested outside the royal necropoleis (Bussmann 2009), but even here—at Hierakonpolis, Elkab, Gebelein, and Heliopolis—the surviving fragments of relief decoration emphasize the king and his role as founder of temples and companion of the gods (e.g., Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999: Catalogue nos. 7a-c). At Buto in the northwestern Delta, a large, official building of the 2nd Dynasty (Hartung 2007) has been identified as a royal cult complex rather than a temple; a limestone pedestal in one of the innermost chambers may have supported a cult statue of the king, now lost (von der Way 1992: 7; 1996). Hence, at sites



Figure 5. Entrance gateway in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara.



Figure 6. Heb-sed court in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara.



Figure 7. Cobra frieze, Step Pyramid at Saqqara.

throughout Egypt, worship of the monarch rather than of local deities seems to have been the dominant feature of state religion in the 2nd-3rd dynasties. Likewise, contemporary seal-impressions and inscriptions on stone vases (Kaplony 1963), when they mention deities at all, tend to emphasize gods and goddesses intimately connected with kingship—for example, Ash, the god of royal estates, or Hedjet, the divine embodiment of the white crown (Wilkinson 1999: 282, 285).

Taken together, the evidence—albeit slim and fragmentary—suggests that Pharaonic religion in its classic form was not yet established during the Early Dynastic Period. Rather, it seems to have been a development of later eras, a theological elaboration of a system designed, from the outset, to magnify the monarch and serve his interests. Beyond the royal court, private religious observance was an aspect of daily life from earliest times, but it seems to have had little connection with the realm of official, royal theology. Hence, archaeological excavations on Elephantine have revealed an early shrine underlying the later temple of Satet (Dreyer 1986), but the extensive corpus of votive material does not point to any particular deity having been worshipped at the site; rather, the shrine may have been a general “sacred space,” used from Predynastic times as a focus of community worship.

The disconnect between state and private spheres of religious activity reflects a broader division in Egyptian society—present at all periods of Pharaonic civilization, but especially marked in the early dynasties—between the small ruling elite (*pat*) and the mass of the population (*rekhyt*). The sharp distinction between the *pat* and the *rekhyt* was one of the defining features of a society run by and for a restricted circle of royal kinsmen and acolytes. The structure of the Early Dynastic administration can be reconstructed from officials’ titles and the names of institutions preserved on seal-impressions (Kaplony 1963), and it is the treasury—tasked with funding the state and its projects—that emerges as the most important department of government,

closely followed by the royal household itself (Wilkinson 1999: fig. 4.6). Yet there are signs in the 2nd-3rd dynasties that the administration, including the highest offices of state, was beginning to be opened up to commoners. In the reign of Netjerykhet, several officials of apparent non-royal origin were appointed to prestigious posts. These included the controller of the royal barque, Ankhwa; the master of royal scribes and chief dentist, Hesira (Wilkinson 2007: 30-32); the controller of the royal workshops, Khabausokar; and, most famous of all, the overseer of sculptors and painters, and presumed architect of the Step Pyramid complex, Imhotep (Wilkinson 2007: 32-36). It seems that, for the first time, the early 3rd-Dynasty state, with its focus on large-scale royal building projects, relied on a close-knit cadre of trusted professionals to carry out the principal tasks of government.

The introduction of job specialization within government circles can be seen in the same context: the 1st-Dynasty pattern of bureaucracy, with its diffuse portfolios of responsibilities (Wilkinson 1999: 148-149), was simply not up to the task of managing an increasingly complex governmental machine. It is no coincidence that the post of “vizier”—a single individual, directly responsible to the king for the workings of the entire national administration—is first attested in inscriptions from the Step Pyramid complex (Wilkinson 1999: fig. 4.5). While the tripartite title of the vizier, *t3jtj z3b t3tj*, echoes an earlier model of officialdom that combined courtly, civil, and religious duties, the creation of the post itself reflects the new challenges faced by the Egyptian government at the dawn of the pyramid age. The emergence in the 3rd Dynasty of a fully diversified and professionalized national administration with a hierarchical structure is demonstrated in the autobiographical inscription of Metjen, who took full advantage of the opportunities afforded to ambitious and talented men (Goedicke 1966; Wilkinson 2007: 37-39). His career progression exemplifies the changes wrought in Egyptian society as a whole during the 2nd-3rd dynasties.

Alongside changes to the composition and structure of the administration, measures to improve the country's economic productivity can also be linked to the state's focus on royal building projects with their vast resource requirements. From tentative beginnings in the 1st Dynasty, provincial government via the nome system was fully realized during the 2nd-3rd dynasties (Wilkinson 1999: 141-142; Engel 2006), and district administrators such as Sepa and Ankh enjoyed commensurately high status at court (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999: 180-182, 184-186). By the beginning of the 4th Dynasty, state interference in local affairs extended to the forced resettlement of entire communities as royal estates were established and reorganized (Wilkinson 2000: 143). To give the state better information for the purposes of taxation and economic control, a regular census of Egypt's agricultural and mineral wealth was introduced in the early 2nd Dynasty, to judge from the royal annals preserved on the Palermo Stone (Wilkinson 2000: 120, 122, 133). Decisive steps were also taken, at home and abroad, to increase government revenue. Mining expeditions to exploit Egypt's mineral resources became a regular occurrence, yielding copper from Wadi Dara, el-Urf/Mongul South, and Gebel Zeit in the eastern desert, and turquoise from Wadi Maghara in Sinai (Wilkinson 1999: 165-172). At the latter site, three 3rd-Dynasty kings—Netjerykhet, Sekhemkhet, and Sanakht—left commemorative inscriptions, emphasizing the royal/state character of the expeditions (Gardiner and Peet 1952: pls. I, IV; Giv'eon 1974).

Beyond Egypt's borders, an intensification of long-distance trade swelled the state's coffers still further. At the end of the 2nd Dynasty, the Egyptian government seems to have formally chosen Byblos, on the Lebanese coast, as the center of its trading activity (Wilkinson 1999: 92, 160-162; Montet 1928: fig. 1)—attracted, no doubt, by the port's long history as an entrepôt for high-value commodities, and by the abundant supplies of good-quality timber in the vicinity. Access to these forests of coniferous wood permitted an upsurge in ship-building (Wilkinson 2000: 134-

135), which, in turn, facilitated a sharp increase in the volume of trade between Egypt and the Near East. The results of this commerce—notably the import of tin from Anatolia—can be seen in the tomb equipment of Khasekhemwy, which included the earliest bronze vessels yet discovered in Egypt (Spencer 1993: fig. 68).



Figure 8. Heb-sed statue of Khasekhem from Hierakonpolis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

If Egypt's engagement with the Near East in subsequent eras can be used as a guide to earlier periods, it is probable that the rise in economic interaction between Egypt and the Levant in the 2nd-3rd dynasties was accompanied by an increase in the number of foreigners settling in the Nile Valley. Because of the demands of Egyptian artistic and cultural decorum, such immigrants are difficult to identify in the textual or archaeological records, but a few examples from the early 4th Dynasty may indicate a more widespread phenomenon (Wilkinson 2002: 517-518). From the beginning of the 2nd Dynasty, as far as we can judge, there also seems to have been a diminution in the official xenophobia directed

against *Sejjet* (the Near East), and the two trends may be connected. A final manifestation of Egypt's increased economic activity, and its relentless search for mineral resources and trading opportunities, may have been a greater interest in its southern neighbor, Nubia. Evidence from the earliest levels at Buhen, near the second Nile cataract, suggests a permanent Egyptian presence as early as the 2nd Dynasty (Emery 1963).

The availability of a richer array of raw materials combined with the rise of royal workshops led to advances in craftsmanship and technology, as attested by surviving artifacts from the 2nd-3rd dynasties. Sculptors achieved greater levels of refinement and sophistication, as shown in the terracotta lion and the large-scale statues of Khasekhem from Hierakonpolis (fig. 8; Malek and Forman 1986:

30, 36), the statues of princess Redjief and other 3rd-Dynasty worthies, and the beautiful carved wooden panels of Hesira (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999: Catalogue nos. 11-17). A greater confidence in the handling and dressing of stone was both a prerequisite for, and the result of, the realization of the Step Pyramid complex. Advances in metallurgy, with the advent of bronze technology, have already been noted. Beyond these few inscribed or royal objects, however, our knowledge of material culture in the 2nd-3rd dynasties is severely limited by the paucity of securely dated material from controlled excavations. There is, thus, immense potential for the study of unpublished data, the re-excavation of known sites (Köhler et al. 2005), and new fieldwork to add to our understanding of this crucial, formative period.

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The most comprehensive treatment of the 2nd-3rd dynasties is Wilkinson (1999), which is organized thematically and is more up-to-date than Emery (1961). Wilkinson (2010) provides a concise summary of the subject, incorporating the latest discoveries. Other useful introductions for a general readership are Bard (2000) and Brewer (2005). Helck (1987) remains a fundamental study. The papers in Hendrickx et al. (2004) offer original and provocative perspectives, as do Kemp (2006) and Wengrow (2006). The last takes a theoretical approach unusual in Egyptological works. The specialist literature is extensive and is listed in Hendrickx (1995), with annual supplements in the journal *Archéo-Nil*.

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Figure 2. Unfinished statue of Djoser in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 3. Shunet el-Zebib, Abydos. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 4. Exposed masonry wall with the Step Pyramid in the background, Gisir el-Mudir, Saqqara. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 5. Entrance gateway in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 6. Heb-sed court in the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 7. Cobra frieze, Step Pyramid at Saqqara. (Photograph © Toby Wilkinson.)

Figure 8. Heb-sed statue of Khasekhem from Hierakonpolis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (E 517). Photograph by Jon Bodsworth. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution CC-BY-4.0.
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