

A report on the excavation of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in the sacred animal necropolis at the Bubasteion in Saqqara

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some preliminary results of the excavation in the sacred animal necropolis at the Bubasteion in Saqqara. This work examined the rock façade further west of the New Kingdom cemetery that was uncovered previously by the French mission in the eastern part of the site. Several tombs were discovered during this excavation, four of which date to the Old Kingdom. One of these tombs, which belongs to a lector priest, Wahty, is beautifully decorated with reliefs and statues. Another of these tombs was built by the overseer of the builders of the Great House, Khufuemhat. In addition, three New Kingdom tomb-chapels were uncovered, all of which were largely unfinished. In the debris that covered the site, much archaeological data was obtained and many objects were discovered, dating to the period between the Old Kingdom and New Kingdom. These included canopic jars, scribal palettes, pottery jars, headrests, etc. During the Late Period, the site was used as part of the sacred animal necropolis associated with a temple of Bastet built in this area. These tombs were used to bury cats. In addition, many various Late Period artefacts were found on the site, such as limestone and wooden coffins for scarabs, wooden and bronze statues of cats that represent the goddess Bastet, many amulets in the shapes of various gods, but also, for instance, fragments of papyrus. The work on the site still continues and in the near future more data and objects are expected to appear.

KEYWORDS

Saqqara – Bubasteion – Old Kingdom – New Kingdom – rock-cut tomb – relief – statue – false door – animal mummies

تقرير عن أعمال حفائر المجلس الأعلى للآثار بجبانة الحيوانات المقدسة بالبواباسطيون بسقارة

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ملخص

تقدم هذه المقالة بعضًا من النتائج الأولية للحفائر بجبانة الحيوانات المقدسة بمنطقة البواباسطيون في سقارة. وامتدت تلك الأعمال إلى الجهة الغربية من الواجهة الصخرية والتي تقع أيضًا إلى الغرب من مقابر الدولة الحديثة التي اكتشفتها سابقًا البعثة الفرنسية بالجزء الشرقي من الموقع. وخلال عمل البعثة المصرية تم الكشف عن العديد من المقابر الصخرية، أربع منها تعود إلى عصر الدولة القديمة. حيث تعود واحدة من تلك المقابر إلى الكاهن المرتل واح تي، والتي نقشت مقصورة قرابينها بمناظر رائعة وتمثاليل. كما شيدت في تلك المنطقة مقبرة أخرى للمشرف على بناء البيت الكبير (القصر الملكى)، والذي كان يدعى وفوخ حات. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم الكشف عن ثلاث مقابر صخرية أيضًا من الدولة الحديثة، وكلها لم يكتمل نحتها إلى حد كبير. وتمكنت البعثة من جمع العديد من المعلومات والاكتشافات الأثرية من خلال دراسة الحطام الذى كان يغطى الموقع، والتي يرجع تاريخها إلى الفترة ما بين الدولة القديمة والدولة الحديثة. وشملت تلك اللقى الأثرية أواني كانوبية، ألواح كتابة، أواني فخارية، مساند للرأس، وغيرها من اللقى. وقد تم استخدام الموقع خلال فترة العصر المتأخر كجزء من جبانة الحيوانات المقدسة المرتبطة بمعبد للإلهة باستت شيد في هذه المنطقة. حيث استخدمت تلك المقابر خلال العصر المتأخر في دفن القطط المقدسة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم العثور على العديد من القطع الأثرية المتنوعة التي تؤرخ بفترة العصر المتأخر، منها توابيت صنعت من الحجر الجيري والأخشاب لموميאות جعارين، وتمثاليل خشبية وبرونزية للقطط التي تمثل رمز الإلهة باستت، والعديد من التماثيل ذات الأشكال المختلفة للإلهة، هذا بالإضافة أيضًا إلى العثور على بقايا لفائف من البردى. ولا يزال العمل بالموقع مستمرًا، ومن المتوقع في المستقبل القريب العثور على المزيد من المعلومات واللقى الأثرية.

الكلمات الدالة

سقارة – البواباسطيون – الدولة القديمة – الدولة الحديثة – مقبرة صخرية – نقوش – تماثيل – باب وهمى – موميאות حيوانية



Fig. 1 General view of the site in July 2019 (photo M. Youssef)

The work of the Egyptian mission was carried out during two archaeological seasons between April and June of 2018, and again from August 2018 until April 2019. The mission includes, besides the authors, Sabry Farag, Mohamed El-Saidy, Ahmed Zekry, Hamada Shehata and the foremen Mustafa Sadeq and Maray Abu-Elyazid.

The work was conducted in the rock-cliff in the sacred animal necropolis at the Bubasteion further west of the tombs uncovered by Alain Zivie (for recent publications of his work, see *e.g.* Zivie 1988, 1990, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007 and 2009). The currently explored site is located to the west of the tomb of Raiay Hatiai, which dates to the time of Akhenaten (tomb Bubasteion I.27; Zivie 2007: 141).

During the work, the cliff was cleaned and the examined area extends about 30 m in an east-west direction along to the cliff, 20 m in a north-south direction, and reaches a height of *ca.* 6–10 m (fig. 1). A number of openings and entrances were uncovered on the cliff, which were carefully examined. These included several rock-cut tombs, four of which were of Old Kingdom date (for an overview of this type of tomb at Saqqara and Abusir, see Bárta 2011), while three belonged to the New Kingdom period (see fig. 2). The suggested dating of the structures is based on their architecture as well as on the objects found in and around the tombs. In addition, many burials and artefacts from the Late Period were discovered during the work. Their numbering reflects the sequence in which they were unearthed. In the following pages, however, the tombs will be briefly introduced according to their suggested dating.

THE OLD KINGDOM TOMBS

Four of the newly uncovered tombs can be dated to the Old Kingdom period. One of them contained a splendid

chapel with rich decoration in relief, containing numerous high relief figures. The other three tombs were simpler but revealed some remains of decoration, including inscribed false doors and an offering list.

TOMB NO. 7 = SBW18/VII: THE TOMB OF WAHTY

This exceptional Old Kingdom rock-cut tomb was found well-preserved. It belongs to the royal purification priest of King Neferirkare, the third king of the Fifth Dynasty, and is the westernmost structure in the so far explored area. More tombs seem to continue further west, but they had not yet been fully explored during the writing of this preliminary article.

The entrance to the tomb is hewn in the wall of the bedrock, and the east and west walls of the entrance feature statues or rather high-relief figures, carved in the rock. The entrance itself was discovered closed with a mud brick wall, covered with a layer of plaster. This wall was constructed at a later point in time when the area in front of the tomb was used as a rectangular shaft, while the tomb chapel full of debris was blocked and the gaps around the statues were filled with mud to make the walls of the shaft straight.

The north façade of the entrance area contains a limestone block which is set into the rock above the entrance of the chapel and covers the entire width of the wall (fig. 3). This block constitutes the entrance architrave; it is decorated with three lines of hieroglyphic inscription which is carved in sunken relief and reads from right to left. This inscription contains the usual offering formula, the name and titles of the tomb owner, and it ends with an enlarged determinative of the seated owner and his wife. The drum in the entrance underneath the architrave, as well as the side walls of the entrance seem to have also been inscribed.

The entrance of the tomb is carved in the rock, and it leads to a room 10.50 × 2.70 m large, and 2.70 m high.

The fill of the chapel from the entrance sloped from south to north and contained many pottery vessels and sherds of Old Kingdom pottery. At the rear end of the chapel, there is an unfinished serdab in the north side, which measures *ca.* 2.75 m from east to west, 1.70 m from north to south, and is 1.80 m high on its east side but only 1.50 m high on its west side.

The inner walls of the tomb are decorated with coloured scenes (fig. 4) executed in both low and sunken relief, which depict the deceased with his mother, wife and children, as well as motifs of making pottery, wine, offerings, musical performances, the sailing of boats, the manufacturing of the funerary furniture, and hunting (for the decorative motifs of Old Kingdom tombs, see especially Harpur 1987). Besides the reliefs, the tomb walls also contain niches with large coloured high-relief figures of the deceased and his family. The decoration thus reminds us of the tomb of Irukaptah (*e.g.* Rachewiltz 1960; McFarlane 2000; Harpur – Scremin 2017), but the details of the design of course differ, and Wahty's tomb exhibits a larger variety of motifs and types of sculptures.

The decoration provides us with information on the tomb owner and his family. The owner, Wahty (*W3h.t*) (Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 316 [811]), held the following titles:

1. *šḥd ḥ-ntr* – inspector of the god's palace (not attested in Jones 2000),
2. *šḥd ḥwt Nfr-ir-k3-rḥ* – inspector of the temple of Neferirkare (not attested in Jones 2000),
3. *wḥb nzw* – royal *wab*-priest (Jones 2000: 373, no. 1382),
4. *šḥd n imywt ntr wi3* – inspector of those who are in the divine boat (not attested in Jones 2000).

The family of Wahty included his mother Meretmin (*Mrt-Mnw*; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 396 [1380]), his wife Weretptah (*Wrt-ptḥ*), his sons Seshemnefer (*Sšm-nfr*; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 663–665 [3229]), Kaiemakhnetjer (*K3-m-ḥ-ntr*), Sebaib (*Sb3-ib*) and a daughter named Seket (*Skt*).

Five shafts were hewn in the floor of the tomb, which presumably belonged to the main owner and his family members. Three of these shafts are unfinished and one of them (the second one from the north) is the main burial shaft of Wahty. It is 1.35 × 1.35 m large

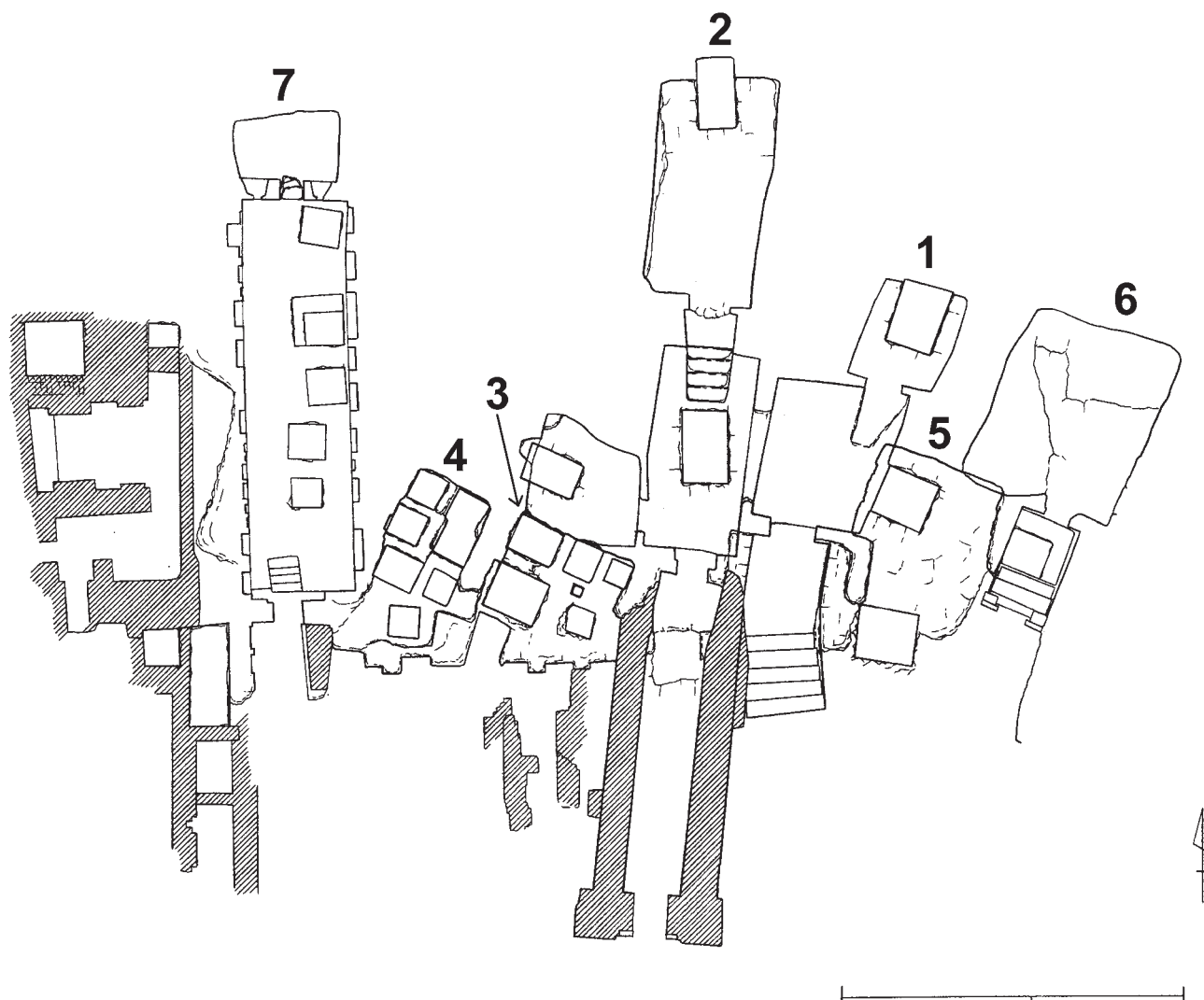


Fig. 2 Plan of the explored area showing the newly uncovered tombs under their sequence numbers (drawing H. Kashiwagi)

Fig. 3 Detail of the façade of the tomb of Wahty (tomb no. 7) with its closed entrance (photo M. Youssef)



to a depth of 0.50 m and then becomes only 1.00 × 1.05 m large, with a final depth of 5.00 m. The shaft was filled with debris of tafla mixed with sherds of Old Kingdom pottery. A small burial chamber to the west of the shaft measures 2.00 m in a north-south direction, 0.82 m in an east-west direction and 0.70 m in height. The debris contained a wooden coffin in a poor state of preservation (1.60 m in length, 0.60 m in width and 0.36 m in height) with its cover moved. The coffin still held a skeleton of a person who may have been Wahty himself. No objects were discovered inside except the remains of Old Kingdom ceramic jars.

TOMB NO. 3 = SBW18/III: THE TOMB OF KHUFUEMHAT

The tomb of Khufuemhat is situated slightly to the east of that of Wahty, and it can be dated to the late Old Kingdom, probably the Sixth Dynasty, based on the finds in the debris. The northern façade is about 3.3 m in width in an east-west direction. It contains reliefs in very bad condition and scenes of daily life, mostly destroyed, which are very difficult to trace. We can recognize a part of the tomb owner sitting in front of an offering table. To his left, the western wall starts, on which we can see the false door of Khufuemhat (*Hwfw-m-h3t*) (fig. 5). It is 1.0 m wide, 1.3 m high and some of its features are today lost. The name of the deceased,



Fig. 4 The rock-cut tomb of Wahty from the north (photo S. Vannini)



Fig. 5 The false door of Khufuemhat on the façade of tomb no. 3 (photo M. Youssef)

Khufuemhat, and his titles are preserved, carved in sunken relief, and has not been attested before (see Ranke 1935: 268, nos. 5–10; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014). The three titles shown on the false door include the following:

1. *imy-r3 kd(w) (n) pr-3* – overseer of builders of the Great House (Jones 2000: 259, no. 938),
2. *mdh nzwt m prwy* – king's architect in the two houses (Jones 2000: 463, no. 1730),
3. *hry-s3t3 n wdt* – privy to the secret of commands (Jones 2000: 616, no. 2260).

Further south in the rock façade another, smaller false door is carved. It is in a very bad state of condition

and the remaining part bears the name of its owner, Iry (*Iry*; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 254 [406]), and a title, which is the same as one of Khufuemhat's titles, namely, the overseer of builders of the Great House.

In front of the tomb, five shafts are located, which belong to the tomb of Khufuemhat and his family. One of them contained two wooden scribal palettes at a depth of *ca.* 1 m, followed by mummified cats at a depth of *ca.* 8 m. At the bottom of the shaft, there is a small burial chamber containing a small limestone sarcophagus. Its inner measurements are 1.90 m in length, 0.55 m in width and 0.68 m in height. Inside the coffin, the upper part of a wooden headrest was found and part of a schist tool,



Fig. 6 A part of the offering list in the burial chamber of Old Kingdom tomb no. 5 (photo M. Youssef)

which is probably an instrument for the Opening of the Mouth ritual.

TOMB NO. 4 = SBW18/IV: THE TOMB OF TWO LADIES, MEFI AND SEKHETSOBEK

This is an unfinished rock-cut tomb dating to the Old Kingdom, possibly to the Sixth Dynasty based on the objects found in the debris. It lies between the tombs of Wahty (no. 7) and Khufuemhat (no. 3). Its dimensions are 2.1 m from east to west, and it is carved in the rock to a depth of 1.8 m. The tomb contains only a small false door carved in the rock in the western wall. The door is in a bad state of condition and the inscriptions in sunken relief are only partly preserved, providing us with the names of two ladies, Mefi (*Mfi*) and Sekhetsobek (*Sht-sbk*). Both these names have not been attested before (Ranke 1935: 149, 320; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 372, 664).

The tomb contains seven burial shafts, and the remains of Old Kingdom artefacts were found in some of them.

TOMB NO. 5 = SBW18/V: ANONYMOUS TOMB

This unfinished rock-cut tomb dates to the Old Kingdom, Sixth Dynasty. It is located further east in the eastern part of the explored area, between the New Kingdom structures. It measures 3 m from east to west,

and it is carved inside the rock to a depth of 2 m. Its western wall features an unfinished false door, which is 1.3 m high and 1.0 m wide.

In front of the false door, a shaft is hewn, which is 1.20 × 1.35 m large and 14 m deep. At its bottom, cut in the rock is a small burial chamber of irregular shape around 3 × 3 m. Its height was 0.55 m in the east part and 0.75 m in the west part. The remains of a base of a wooden coffin were found in the chamber, which were 1.68 m in length and 0.45 m in width. The remains were in a poor state of preservation, but some of them exhibit traces of hieroglyphic signs. The west half of the north wall (1.60 m long and 0.75 m high) is covered with a plaster coating, which bears a list of offerings in a poor state of preservation (fig. 6). Judging from the position of this offering list, the tomb can be dated to the Sixth Dynasty (Barta 1963: 82–83). The offering list (Barta 1963: 47–49, but see also 73–74) is written in black ink on the plaster. In the fill of the shaft, some small artefacts were discovered, including model and symbolic stone vessels, the base of a limestone headrest, and part of a copper offering table.

THE NEW KINGDOM TOMBS

In the close vicinity of the Old Kingdom structures described in the previous section, three New Kingdom

chapels were uncovered and documented. In these tombs, no epigraphic evidence was uncovered, and therefore the tomb owners remain unknown. The tombs, however, show architectural features that allow us to date them to the Eighteenth Dynasty.

TOMB NO. 1 = SBW18/I

This tomb, dating to the New Kingdom (Eighteenth Dynasty), was carved into the rock in the east part of the explored area, just west of anonymous Old Kingdom tomb no. 5. It is unfinished, but its façade is decorated with a cornice (fig. 7). The entrance leads to a square hall, which is 3×3 m in size and is 2 m in height. A doorway in the east part of the north wall of this room leads to another, small room *ca.* 2×1 m large and 2 m high. It contains a shaft 1.5×1.0 m large and 5.0 m deep. At the bottom of this shaft is a small burial chamber, measuring 3×3 m and 2 m in height.

TOMB NO. 2 = SBW18/II

Another New Kingdom tomb dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty based on its architecture and the later objects that were discovered around it, was carved into the rock to the west of tomb no. 1. This one is unique. In front of it, there is a vaulted entrance room constructed of mud bricks, 8.0 m long, 1.2 m wide and 2.0 m high. The vault is partly destroyed at the north end near the rock façade. It was unfinished but its façade was decorated with a cornice, similarly to the previously mentioned tomb.

The tomb is hewn in three different levels. The first level of the rock cut tomb consists of several chambers, each of which contains a burial shaft. The entrance of the tomb leads to a rectangular hall (6.0×3.0 m, 2.2 m high), in the center of which is a shaft (2.0×1.5 m, 5.0 m deep). At the bottom of this shaft is another room (3.0×3.0 m, 2.0 m high), and in its eastern part another shaft follows (1×1 m large, 4 m deep). This second shaft leads to yet another room (3×3 m large and 2 m high).

At the rear end of the rectangular hall is a niche with a staircase, which gives access to another room situated further north (6.0×3.0 m, 2.5 m high). In its north-east corner a shaft is hewn (1×1 m, 4 m deep), which leads to a burial chamber (3×3 m, 2 m high).

In the west wall of the rectangular hall is yet another entrance, which leads to a room (3×3 m, 2 m high), which contains a shaft (2×1 m, 5 m deep). At its bottom is a burial chamber (3.0×3.0 m, 2.2 m high).

TOMB NO. 6 = SBW18/VI

This tomb dates to the New Kingdom (Eighteenth Dynasty), based on the architectural elements. It is carved into the rock in the east end of the explored area, between tomb no. 5 to the west and the tomb of Raia to the east. Although it is unfinished, its opening features a limestone gate which represents its façade. This gate was found cracked and required restoration, and it is



Fig. 7 Entrance of New Kingdom tomb no. 1 (photo M. Youssef)

decorated with a cornice similar to other surrounding tombs of this period.

From the façade, stairs lead down to a small court covered with ceiling slabs, which are mostly destroyed. This court is situated in front of the entrance and measures around 1.7×1.7 m. Its walls are covered with plaster prepared for drawn decoration, which was, however, never finished. The floor of the court seems to have been used in later times. Under the last step, a shaft was hewn that reaches only 50 cm deep. Another small shaft (1×1 m) was hewn in the south-west corner of the court, to a depth of 6.0 m but remained unfinished.

In the rear side of the court is the entrance to the chapel, which is decorated with a cornice similar to the outer gate and other surrounding tombs of this period.

The entrance gives access to an unfinished room, which measures 4.2×4.7 m in size and 1.0–1.7 m in height. The walls and floor of this room are rough and unfinished, and it was full of debris that included mummified cats.

THE SURROUNDING AREA

In the surrounding area, which measures *ca.* 30 m in an east-west direction and 20 m in a north-south direction, included the removal of huge amounts of debris, *ca.* 6–10 m in height. The debris in this area (outside the

tombs) contained various artefacts, including seven lids of canopic jars in the shape of human heads, fragments of canopic jars, as well as two wooden scribal palettes, one of which contained wooden pens and the remains of black and red material used as ink. In addition, kohl cosmetic jars, parts of statues and many pottery vessels were discovered in this area. Among the artefacts were some which dated to the Late Period, such as wooden statues of cats which represent the goddess Bastet, a bronze statue of a cat and also some bronze cat heads. Some of the wooden statues of cats are coloured and some were covered with a gold foil. Many of them still contain the mummy of a cat inside (for cat burials at Saqqara, see Kessler 1989: 105–107). In addition, around 1,000 amulet pieces were found, in different shapes of various gods, such as Horus, Anubis, Taweret, Thoth, Khnum, Ptah, Sekhmet, the *wedjat*-eye, red and white crowns and other common amulets. Two wooden crocodile figures were also found in the debris, each of which contained a crocodile mummy (for other crocodile burials from Saqqara, see Kessler 1989: 121). There are also wooden statues of a lioness, an Apis bull, Khnum, and a cobra. Besides these objects, fragments of papyrus were discovered in the area, one containing spells from the Book of the Dead. Among the unusual finds belong two limestone coffins of small size with black ink drawings of scarabs on the lid. One of these chests is cubic in shape and measures 12.5 × 12.5 cm and 11.0 cm in height. It contains two large mummified scarab beetles, each one wrapped alone in linen cloth. The other chest is 26.0 × 17.0 cm in size and 9.5 cm in height, 15.0 cm high including the lid. It contained hundreds of small mummified scarab beetles. Judging from parallels so far known from Saqqara, these scarabs might be dated to the Ptolemaic Period (Kessler 1989: 56). In addition, there were some wooden coffins for the scarabs and some stone scarab in a wooden base.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in the sacred animal necropolis at the Bubasteion in Saqqara is still continuing, and this article presents some preliminary results of the work. Of the so far uncovered tombs, four can be dated to the Old Kingdom. These structures not only enlarge our knowledge of various examples of rock-cut chapels dating to this period, but also provide interesting epigraphic information on their owners. Of the uncovered Old Kingdom rock-cut tombs, the one belonging to Wahty is with no doubt the most important one. It contains a splendid artistic wealth of decoration in relief and high-relief figures of various types and sizes, which constitute a great contribution to Old Kingdom art.

The uncovered New Kingdom rock-cut tombs are more modest and provide no information concerning their owners. Despite this, however, they enlarge the number of the so-far known New Kingdom tombs in this area of Saqqara, and allow us to study the various

architectural designs. Particularly interesting is the combination of a rock-cut chapel and a long, mud brick vaulted entrance room.

The tombs that were so far uncovered in the area of the sacred animal necropolis at the Bubasteion provide evidence on part of the long historical development of the Saqqara necropolis. This site shows that tombs were hewn in later periods in the closest vicinity of earlier funerary structures, which were, however, not necessarily destroyed or re-used. In addition, the vast layers of debris from the area in front of these tombs contain yet further evidence on the activities associated with the sacred animal necropolis during the Late and Ptolemaic Periods. More tombs of similar date as well as later evidence including animal mummies can be expected to be uncovered during the ongoing work on this site.

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