

# Extroduction

Resurrecting every day at dawn on the horizon on the eastern side of the Nile, the sun sends a sign out into the desert, located on the western side of the river: a sign in the form of a deep shadow cast by Djoser's pyramid, making it possible for the archaeologists to enjoy a breath of fresh air for the first two hours of the daily excavations. Then the shadow grows shorter by the minute, leaving us in the sultry embrace of the god Re. We are left with the question of what the next day of excavations will bring us. We expect to find answers to questions provoked by the discoveries made the previous day. Meanwhile, instead of solutions to these first mysteries what usually appears are new questions which we will be pondering the following day. Which ones will we have to store up for the next year? Excavations are almost a synonym of patience.

An equally long shadow is cast by Djoser over the whole history of Egypt. What would the fate of this exceptional civilisation have been like if the idea to use stone building material to erect the first pyramid had not popped into the imagination of the ingenious Imhotep? This question refers not only to the architecture but also to the entire culture of the pharaonic period. Would the largest compendium of earlier religious literature have ever been immortalised in stone, as in the case of the *Pyramid Texts* carved onto the walls of the burial chambers in the pyramids of the last few Old Kingdom pharaohs? Would this rich eschatological literature, with such milestones as *The Coffin Texts* (Middle Kingdom), *The Book of the Dead* (New Kingdom) and numerous texts from the Late Period, have even developed without this source? They are an irreplaceable testimony to the mentality and creative imagination of pharaonic-period Egyptians, an inexhaustible intellectual treasury, which later inspired the Greeks and the Romans, but also an artistic one, which through the syncretic forms of the Hellenic *koine* made its way into Early Christian art, resonating, though today barely noticeably, in later European culture.

Since an archaeologist must know a lot, interlocutors from outside the field frequently expect him or her to know everything. It is time to make them realise their misconception. While it is commonly thought that Egyptian artefacts, including those found in the museums and collections of various countries, constitute a third of the ancient artefacts in the world, an Egyptologist would probably state, 'I know that I know nothing.' This is because he or she knows that a very small number of this culture's written sources and artefacts have been preserved to this day. This is true particularly for certain areas and epochs, constituting blank spots in the over 3000-year-long

history of ancient Egypt. We are still missing, for example, many of the links in the earliest history of the language, which in the *Pyramid Texts* appears in a form so mature that we have to assume a long evolution over an earlier period. Increasingly more frequently, thanks to new discoveries, we are surprised by the wealth of content and artistic forms from the time when the Two Lands (Upper and Lower Egypt) joined into a single whole, functioning in perfection under the pharaoh's rule. The creative role of the so-called Intermediate Periods, separating the epochs of the greatest splendour, i.e. the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, continues to be underestimated, especially as they remain largely a mystery. These intermediate periods are commonly considered to be ones of decline, while it is often forgotten that the temporary relaxation of social and artistic norms provides space to voice elements that go beyond the patterns thus far followed, creating the foundations for original cultural phenomena in the subsequent period.

We know much too little about the relations Egypt maintained with neighbouring countries and the mighty powers of the ancient East, which frequently played an enormous role in the evolution of Egyptian civilisation. In terms of the sphere of spiritual culture, the culminating moment in mutual influences seems to have been the so-called religious revolution, which for a short period during Akhenaten's times brought the country of countless deities closer to monotheism. The genesis of this ideological concept remains a mystery to this day.

When, during the subsequent period, contacts between Egypt and the external world took on the form of aggressive imperialism, the economic crisis brought about the decomposition of the internal cohesion of the state, which for over 1000 years became an easy target for its neighbours. From the fall of the New Kingdom until the end of the Roman epoch, Egypt, usually ruled by 'pharaohs' of foreign origin, functioned as a pawn on an extensive political chessboard. Only twice during the first millennium BC (the Twentieth-Sixth and the Thirtieth Dynasties) were rulers of local origin able to unite the country again, though only for a short time, under their reign. This entire long period, referred to generally as the Late Period, still hides an abundance of mysteries, even though we know many details. However, this information rarely comes together to form a coherent whole.

A special role was played during this period by the conquest of Egypt conducted by Alexander the Great. He sealed the prominent role of Hellenic culture in the country by the Nile. Greek became an official language, on equal footing with the local language written using demotic script, a simplified form of hieroglyphic writing. The symbiosis of the Old Egyptian element with Greek culture transformed Egypt into the lair of Hellenic civilisation, surviving until the end of the Roman epoch and having a profound impact on early Christian culture. Despite the obvious osmosis of cultural elements

of various origins, the researchers of the Greek and Roman period until recently were divided into two separate groups, only rarely looking over each other's shoulders to check if the other had not reached some exactly opposite conclusions based on the material they studied. Classical archaeologists perceived Greek-Roman Egypt from the perspective of Hellenistic Alexandria and its cultural radiation onto Egyptian provincial areas, assuming *a priori* the epigonic, not-too-original nature of indigenously Egyptian culture during this period. It was not until the last quarter of the previous century that the classicists and Egyptologists understood the extent to which their knowledge about the epoch would be better grounded if – instead of looking down on each other – they would merge their research into one organic whole. This enabled the significance of the mutual influences of different cultures to be perceived fully. It is from this intellectual and artistic melting pot that Christian Europe drew to the fullest extent possible.

In terms of the topography, the largest gap in our knowledge pertains to northern Egypt, i.e. the Nile Delta. During the pharaonic period, for various reasons, including its close neighbourhood to other cultures, this was the most innovative region of Egypt, with such important centres of administration, religion and culture as Tanis, Bubastis or Athribis. Unfortunately, the climatic conditions and political circumstances led to this plateau's damp ground, intersected by thousands of canals and channels, preserving much less artefacts than the dry areas of Upper Egypt, lying on both sides of the Nile. The progressing urbanisation of the Delta terrains actively influences the act of destruction. As is rightly proposed by Egyptologists, especially Egyptian ones, the archaeology of the Delta requires an enormous rescue campaign. For example, their postulate seems justified that concessions for excavations in Upper Egypt be dependent on the simultaneous conducting of rescue excavations in the northern part of the country, much less extensively studied, but also much poorer in terms of preserved artefacts. In turn, the proposal to suspend all excavations in the Nile Valley and focus exclusively on the threatened Delta area is debatable. The political events of recent years have confirmed the fear that this would only bring benefits to artefact looters. The new authorities of the ex-Supreme Council of Antiquities no longer have any doubts that both for the artefacts and for Egyptology as an academic field, with archaeology as its main tool, the best solution would be the systematic activities of excavation missions from various countries, with the application of the most modern research and conservation methods. One remains with the hope that the further development of political events will encourage those researchers to return who suspended work for safety reasons.

Saqqara lies at the crossroads between Upper and Lower Egypt. It is the middle point of the largest royal necropolis in the world, which functioned

for over 3000 years. Our excavations on the western side of Djoser's pyramid have disproved the certainty some researchers held that the only thing that could be found there was at most an 'ancient waste dump.' They have instead made it possible to establish that this place had been of a sepulchral character even before the 'step pyramid' was built, and that this earlier necropolis must have been for noblemen, if one takes into account the structure of the mud-brick building on top of which Imhotep had the stone recessed wall erected encircling the pyramid *temenos*. There is no doubt that the future saint treated the tombs of the dignitaries, who might have lived even a few dozen years earlier, with a certain unceremoniousness typical for totalitarian systems. The construction site was probably similar to the area around the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science, when the rest of the preserved pre-war houses were being demolished.

We have determined with complete certainty that the constructors of the pyramid did not look very far for the raw material they used. The entire area adjacent to Djoser's holy complex became a quarry, up until the giant moat, which was probably also formed as a place for the extraction of half-products, later processed on site to take the form of cuboidal blocks in a shape similar to brick. This structure testifies to the investment genius of the creators of the first pyramid. Already in how the 'Dry Moat' was conceptualised it was given such a shape as to perform later a few different functions. This was not only to be a source of building material but also an abyssal moat separating the sacred, i.e. the area directly adjacent to the pyramid *temenos*, from the profane, or the desert extending further westward. Encircled from all four sides by the 'Dry Moat,' as if by a unique, gigantic negative of a wall, the area of the sacred was expanded westward by such means by over 100 m.

The preserved remnants of the architectural structure that had been erected partly directly on the surface of the depleted quarry, partly in the rock grotto located lower down, almost on the axis of the pyramid, indicate that soon after the construction of Djoser's monumental tomb the quarry became a sacral structure. While the items found in the crypt at the end of the long subterranean corridor attest to a cult from 300 years later, they make it possible to assume that a place of cult dedicated to the gods Osiris, Horus and Seth had been created here earlier, leaving its original mark on the necropolis which began to develop around it almost exactly in the same years when the first versions of the *Pyramid Texts* appeared in the nearby royal pyramids.

One of the most peculiar features of the burials we discovered at this cemetery are the coffins plaited from Nile reed, probably in reminiscence of the basket into which Isis placed Osiris's body, dismembered by Seth, which

enabled the lord of the afterworld to be resurrected and then sire his son, Horus, identified frequently with the pharaoh.

Did Imhotep foresee that the abandoned quarry by the pyramid would also perform sepulchral functions aside from its sacral ones? It seems that he did not, since the oldest among the noblemen's tombs we discovered at this cemetery come from the end of the Fifth Dynasty, i.e. they are at least 300 years later than Djoser's pyramid. The necropolis, which then functioned in this place for two centuries, until the fall of the Old Kingdom, and perhaps even also during the so-called First Intermediate Period, turned out to be an exceptionally rich and original source for acquiring knowledge about the social relations during this stormy period of history, i.e. during the first half of the Sixth Dynasty. Both the architecture and the decoration of the tombs attest to a progressing downfall, expressed not only in the increasingly poorer burials but also in the usurpation of royal prerogatives by dignitaries, even those belonging to the middle class of officials. This is clearly visible in the beautifully decorated tombs belonging to Merefnepf and Nyankhnepf, probably the oldest of the well-preserved funerary structures at this necropolis. Some of the hieroglyphic texts and scenes adorning the walls of their cult chapels fell prey to iconoclasts, while their vandalism turned out to be diagnostic for the family conflicts, which had frequently resulted from political reasons. Despite this, the reliefs sculpted onto the walls of both chapels belong among the most original works of Egyptian art from the final phase of the Old Kingdom.

The revival of the necropolis on the western side of Djoser's pyramid took place only 2000 years later. Suddenly, the deceased belonging to the middle class began to be buried in the layer of sand which had in the meantime covered the ruins of the ancient mastabas and in the rubble. The first phase of this 'revival' can be dated to the end of the fourth century BC, i.e. the beginnings of the Ptolemaic period. What led the inhabitants of Memphis to return to this necropolis that had remained forgotten for ages? The close neighbourhood of the *dromos* and the Ptolemaic exedra, objects decorated with monumental sculptures in the Greek style, but most frequently made from local limestone, and bearing many features of a commemorative monument linked to the posthumous cult of Alexander the Great, suggests the hypothesis that the cemetery we discovered was constructed in the neighbourhood of the first, provisional burial of the great commander, for whom it would be difficult to imagine a better place of final rest than a spot near the Serapeum and the oldest pyramid, the monumental work of the still revered Imhotep. In support of this hypothesis, it should be remembered that precisely this part of Saqqara was the cult centre of the Memphite necropolis during the reign of the last indigenous dynasty, directly before the second short rule of the Persians, who were soon expelled by Alexander the Great.

However, the significance of our discoveries for broadening our historical knowledge cannot obscure the unique value of the artefacts that we unearthed. The polychromy of the reliefs in the tombs of the two dignitaries from the beginnings of the Sixth Dynasty, preserved better than in any other tomb from this period, has changed our perception of the craftsmanship of the artists from the epoch of the construction of the great pyramids. It turned out that the painter's palette had been much richer than we had thus far imagined, primarily with reference to the nuances making it possible to render the impression of three-dimensionality in a two-dimensional image. It can clearly be observed that overcoming the barrier of two-dimensionality was one of the fundamental elements towards which the creative efforts of the sculptors and painters were dedicated, also in the composition of the individual scenes. The original evidence of this formal quest can be found primarily in Nyankhnefertum's funerary chapel. Its unfinished decoration reveals the subsequent stages of the work done by the artists and craftsmen.

In this context, it takes on special significance that the decorators of these burial complexes had to work in exceptionally brittle rock, requiring constant repairs and fillings. This can best be understood by our conservators, who today rescue these artistic treasures for posterity. Throughout the world, their efforts are appreciated as highly as the research conducted by archaeologists. In many cases, they develop new methods of saving artefacts, imitated later by other schools of conservation in various countries. This constitutes Polish archaeology's substantial input into the work of saving world cultural heritage.