

Continuity, Discontinuity and Change in the Saqqara New Kingdom Necropolis

From Landscape Biography to the Social Dimension of Burial



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This lecture proposes to study the development of the New Kingdom (1539–1078 BCE) necropolis at Saqqara (near Memphis) by focusing on the day-to-day use of the site. The built environment (a mix of contemporary tomb structures and older monuments) provides the setting for human activity.

The necropolis as a place of the living will be illustrated by proceedings highlighted in the Sokar festival – one of many occasions for the inhabitants of Memphis to visit their cemetery. It will be proposed that the nearby royal monuments (temples of Millions of Years) played an important part in the site-specific development in terms of tomb distribution. The brief biography of one section of the Unas South Cemetery, as illustrated with the recently identified tomb of Ry (late Eighteenth Dynasty, immediate post-Amarna), shows that it developed rather organically. This development reflects departures from the desired life-paths or emic ideal biographies of tombs. It shows that the life history of a tomb continues where the life of its builder ends, and whatever happens to such a tomb subsequently (in terms of architectural layout, occupancy, etc.) may not necessarily reflect the pre-conceived image that motivated its construction.

The same applies to the broader setting, i.e. the landscape in which the tombs are located. By adopting a biographical approach to studying the history of a necropolis site, one is steered away from a view centred exclusively on the tomb owner and his (self-)interests. Instead, this approach emphasises the enduring influence that the landscape, including old monuments, can have on the behaviour of people. In that view, tombs should be regarded not as ready-made monuments but rather as “works in progress in a continuous state of becoming”. It is the necropolis at large where individuals and groups interact with and shape their environment, and where the environment influences the actions of individuals and groups. Like the tombs, the landscape is “never complete: neither ‘built’ nor ‘unbuilt’, it is perpetually under construction.”



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