

Zawyet Sultan: the pyramid and the tomb of Khunes in context

Fieldwork at Zawyet Sultan in September 2017 focused on the area around the pyramid and on the late Old Kingdom rock tomb belonging to the official Khunes. **Richard Bussmann** and **Gianluca Miniaci** continued the exploration of these two monuments to understand better their use over time and the topography of the site.

The pyramid and its context

The pyramid of Zawyet Sultan is one of seven small layer pyramids of the early Old Kingdom known from provincial sites in Upper and Middle Egypt. It consists of a core and two outer layers built from local limestone, while the outer casing is made from a bright limestone that was possibly brought to the site from elsewhere. It is not yet clear whether it was part of the original building or added later. Inside the pyramid, two aisles run from west to east and from south to north, meeting at the centre. A chamber has not been detected in the subterranean structure so far. Since

many stone blocks of the pyramid have collapsed inside, it is currently difficult to examine this area and study the building history of the pyramid in greater detail. Traditionally, the building is interpreted to represent a small version of the step pyramid at Saqqara, although Barry Kemp argued that it could very well have resembled a mastaba instead.

In 2017, the surface around the pyramid was cleared to investigate the topographical context of the building. At all four sides of the pyramid, the current floor level lies below the lowest layer of the outer casing. This makes it unlikely to find parts of the original floor level from



View of the pyramid from south-east.

Detail of the south-eastern corner of the pyramid, showing the outer casing resting on the desert rock.



Photos: Joint Archaeological Mission of Zawyet Sultan

the time when the pyramid was built, in the early Old Kingdom, c. 2700 BC.

The outer casing at the local east side of the pyramid, the side located towards the hill, turned out to rest directly on the surface of the desert rock. On the western, opposite side, which visitors face upon entering the archaeological site, the outer casing is placed on two layers of foundation blocks. The foundations were set into a massive layer of coarse sand, whose composition is similar to the sand of the desert surface today. The desert rock has not been reached in this area. Trenches along the southern side showed that the number of foundation layers increases from zero to one and finally two towards the west.

Apparently, the surface of the desert rock slopes down significantly below the pyramid from the desert to the river. When the pyramid was built, the bed rock was covered with sand, which sloped down less steeply. The foundation blocks of the pyramid (or of the outer casing only?) were placed on the sand to level the surface. The pyramid seems to have been built along the edge, where the desert rock projected from the desert sand. Previous authors have remarked that the pyramid was not oriented along cardinal directions, astronomical features or the ancient course of the Nile. Perhaps the orientation of the pyramid was motivated not so much by religious ideas but is rather a result of these topographical conditions.

Clearance of the northern side of the pyramid did not yield satisfactory results. As photos of the pyramids taken over the course of the 20th century show, this side was affected badly by the removal of casing blocks

and subsequent restoration when the excavator Raymond Weill attempted to open the pyramid from here and find the burial chamber (1912–33).

Barry Kemp had cleared the surface in a test trench in front of the western side, near the northern corner. He found a few mud bricks toppled down and remains of predynastic burials. His discovery fits well Weill's comments on the location of his predynastic 'cemetery M' near the pyramid. In 2017, this area was re-investigated by the joint mission of the University of Cologne–University of Pisa and Kemp's trench extended to the north. Several mud-brick walls appeared immediately below the surface, whose stratigraphic relation to the pyramid requires further investigation. They raise hopes to discover a larger proportion of the archaeological context of the pyramid in the future.

The tomb of Khunes

Along the eastern desert escarpment, a row of Old Kingdom rock-cut tombs dominates the site. They were sketchily documented by the Prussian Expedition led by Richard Lepsius, who visited Zawyet Sultan in 1843. In four days, the team recorded the architecture of 19 rock tombs at the site. Among those, the tomb no. 2, belonging to Khunes, a late Old Kingdom official and member of the local elite, was object of special attention, as large part of the carved reliefs along its chapel walls were recorded. According to Lepsius, the tomb had a pillared entrance hall (room 3), a second, oblong room (room 2) and a cult chamber at the rear (room 1). Whereas his plan of the tomb is fairly

accurate, there are mismatches between the decoration, as published in his *Denkmäler*, and what is preserved on the walls today. In Lepsius' plan only a single rectangular shaft is marked in the southern corner of the pillared hall, probably the only one visible at that time (other shafts might have been covered with sand and rubble) or because it was considered, unlike the others, a part of the original layout of the tomb. In fact, four other square shafts were cut into rooms 2 and 3, but not recorded by Lepsius. Two of them are located in the oblong chamber, two in the pillared hall. During the 2017 season, we removed the stone blocks that had collapsed into the shafts. Some of them show remains of decoration and inscriptions, as do some of the flakes and fragments lying on the floor of the pillared hall. They likely belong to the original wall decoration of the tomb, although it is also possible that they have been moved here from adjacent tombs. The recording and cataloguing of the relief blocks and fragments from the area of Khunes is one of the aims of the mission in order to reconstruct the original decoration.

The mission has now started a survey of the material poured into the two shafts located in the eastern side of the structure and the clearing of the first layers: the type of objects coming from these layers points to re-use of the tomb in the 1st millennium BC: a few Bes amulets made of faience, bronze statuettes of Osiris and bronze feathers from crowns. However, all of them have been found in the filling layers, where modern (21st century) material has been documented as well. In addition, the mission recorded several human-

shaped cavities cut into the original floor of the rooms 2 and 3. They probably served as burial spots and were certainly cut after the square shaft had been constructed and filled with debris. Perhaps some objects found in the square shafts may have originally belonged to the burials placed in these cavities.

The tomb of Khunes is today one of the better-preserved structures in the rock cemetery. However, like many other rock tombs at Zawyet Sultan, it fell victim to quarrying activities after Lepsius' visit. Almost the entire roof and a large proportion of the walls in the pillared hall, where most of the decoration was discovered by Lepsius, have disappeared. Stone blocks and rubble from higher up the escarpment have slipped into the tomb and cover the floor, particularly in the pillared hall.

Work at Zawyet Sultan has just begun, and much remains to be explored at the site. We are grateful to the Egypt Exploration Society for making possible the two seasons of 2015 and 2017.

Below right: shaft 10, room 1, filled with stone rubble, bones and debris.

Below: decoration of the chapel of the tomb of Khunes.

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Below left: view into shaft 10. Blocks have collapsed into the shaft.

Below: Osiris amulet in bronze found in the shaft filling of the tomb of Khunes.

