



SPECIAL FEATURE OF TWO TOMBS FROM THE REIGN OF UNIS

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ABSTRACT: The tombs of Unisankh and Nyankhba located at the Unis Cemeteries at Central Saqqara represent – in terms of development of inner structure – a specific subtype of large multi-roomed mastabas from the latter part of the Old Kingdom. These tombs contain a special feature not attested in other tombs' superstructures – a low opening that connects outer and inner sections of the tombs that served for moving offerings and cultic inventory from the storerooms of the outer section to the chapel of the inner section.

KEY WORDS: Ancient Egypt – Old Kingdom – Unis – non-royal architecture – mastaba

Large multi-roomed mastabas of high-ranking non-royal individuals (most of them viziers or overseers of Upper Egypt) represent the climax of the residential non-royal funerary architecture of the Old Kingdom. The tomb representing the birth of this class is

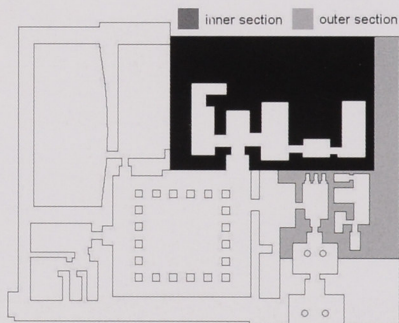


Fig. 1: Ground plan of the tomb of the vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir (after Jánosi 2006: 116).

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the mastaba of the vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir in which the principal components of the inner structure of the tombs under consideration were defined.

Throughout the period of their use, the inner structure of these tombs retained three basic components, namely the *outer section*, the *wesekhet* (a room having the form of either an open and pillared courtyard or a pillared hall) and *inner (or intimate) section* (*Kappelenraum*; Fig. 1, Pl. 1). During the late Old Kingdom (i.e. Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, ca. 2510–2180 BCE), the constitution of inner structure remained basically unchanged, only the mutual interconnection and relative position between individual parts were changing.¹

At first the *linear system (type I)* was developed. Its structure was defined by the gradual extension of the tomb of the vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir, initially an example of the so-called Abusir mastabas² which was enlarged amidst two subsequent expansions. The initial mastaba was a self-sufficient entity provided with all rear needed for the maintenance of funerary cult within the chapel.

Already during the first extension of the tomb, a pillared courtyard, or more precisely a *wesekhet (wshṯ)*, was likely appended directly to the access to the initial mastaba, and a cluster of roofed rooms – representing the outer section and presumably providing rear for the *wesekhet* – was built to the north of the pillared courtyard. The *wesekhet* was to become the second cultic point of the tomb as a place of gathering for the Tomb Owner's survivors and a place fully exposed to the sun. Within the framework of the

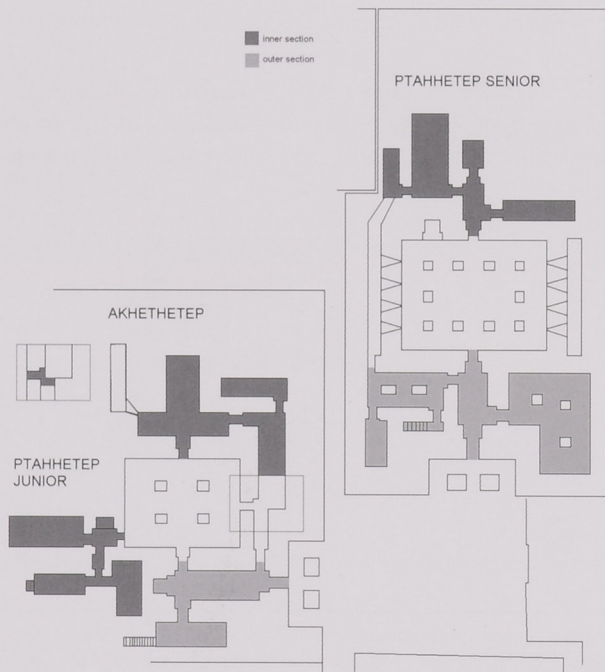


Fig. 2: The Ptahhetep-Akhetetep Complex (after Davies 1900).

¹ Cf. Onderka *et al.* 2009: Appendix B.

² Cf. Jánosi 2000.

second expansion, both the *wesekhet* and the outer section were expanded and southern annexes were added.³ The outer section, the *wesekhet* and the inner section were set into a linear relative position, which made any visitor to the tomb pass through the *wesekhet* when heading for the chapel. In this arrangement, both cultic places of the tomb – the chapel and the *wesekhet* – were provided with separate rear spaces.

The tomb of the vizier Ptahshepses together with other tombs (e.g. the initial project of the tombs of Ptahhetep Senior and his son Akhtihetep at Central Saqqara⁴ [Fig. 2, Pl. 2] belonged to this early subtype or generation of the linear type (i.e. *subtype I-A*), in which it was necessary to pass through the *wesekhet* before entering the chapel.

Only one or two human generations later a new subtype within the linear structure (*subtype I-B*) emerged. The earliest known example of this subtype is the tomb of Ptahshepses Junior II, son of the vizier Ptahshepses, constructed directly to the east of his father's tomb (Fig. 3, Pl. 3) at Abusir. In this subtype, the *wesekhet* (in the form of an open courtyard) does not necessarily need to be passed through when heading to the chapel. It is bypassed by means of a system of rooms joining the outer and inner sections.

The tombs of Ptahhetep Senior and Akhetehetep, originally of *subtype I-A*, were adapted in a similar fashion. The southern *serdab* in the tomb of Ptahhetep Senior was turned into

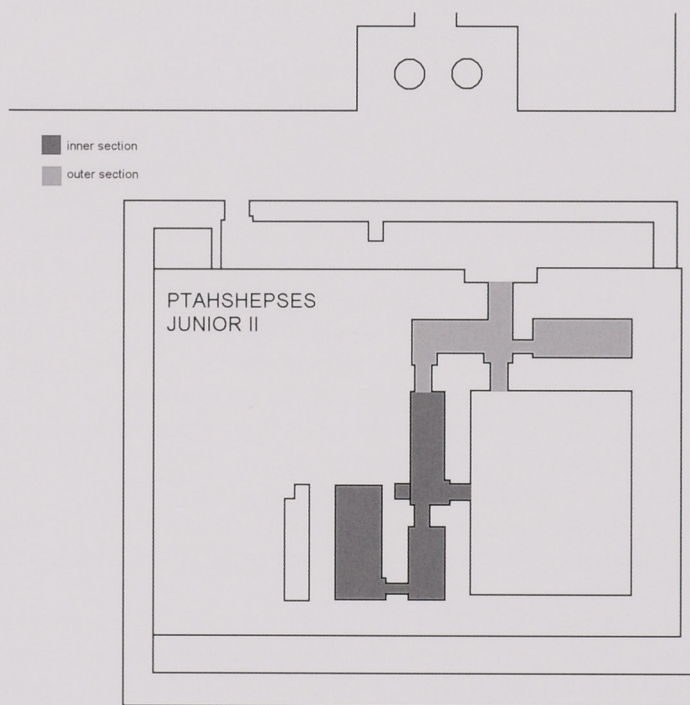


Fig. 3: Ground plan of the tomb of the overseer of Upper Egypt Ptahshepses Junior II at Abusir (after Bárta 2000).

³ For the mastaba of the vizier Ptahshepses cf. Bárta, 2005; Jánosi, 2006: 115–119; etc.

⁴ In the conjunction with the transition to the second subtype or generation of the linear type (*subtype I-B*), a secondary bypasses have been created to connect the inner and the outer part of both tombs.

a corridor bypassing the *wesekh*. In the tomb of Akhetehetep, a tunnel between two dead end rooms of the inner and outer sections was broken through. This likely happened at about the same time the mastaba of Ptahshepses Junior II was constructed and may be understood as a response to stimuli coming from the every day cultic practice in these tombs.

Further development of the inner structure of the large multi-roomed mastabas is characterized by two main trends, namely quest for an optimal form and economization of space. The latter trend of space economization made the inner section self-insufficient and the rear of the outer section became of service to both the *wesekh* and the inner section.

Architects serving Kings Nyuserre, Menkauhor and Djedkare were evidently in quest for an optimal layout of the mastabas' inner structure, as only one or two human generations after the construction of the tomb of Ptahshepses Junior II another subtype (*I-C*) of the linear system was to emerge. Besides, a brand new type (bifurcated *type II*) emerged from the local building tradition of Giza.

Both *subtype I-C* and the new *type II* were in use under the last king of the Fifth Dynasty, Unis. Unis' reign has been – by Egyptologist as well as ancient Egyptian themselves – considered as the end of an era, judging from the evidence provided by the Royal Canon of Turin, the Manethonian tradition and the traditions depicting Teti, the successor of Unis, as the founder of a new dynasty or an era.

Unis abandoned the custom of erecting a sun temple and his *nomen* did not refer to the sun god Re as those of his Fifth Dynasty predecessor had done which is considered to indicate the decrease of importance of the sun-cult at the end of the Fifth Dynasty. This trend was likely reflected in the multi-roomed mastabas' architecture as well. Initially, the *wesekh* had the form of a pillared court (e.g. the tomb of the vizier Ptahshepses, reign of Nyuserre), later that of a simple court (e.g. the tomb of Ptahshepses Junior II and those at the Unis Cemeteries, reigns of Menkauhor to Unis) and finally that of a roofed pillared hall. The earliest known example of a pillared hall comes from the tomb of the vizier Senedjemib Inti located at the north-west corner of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, dated by Browarski to the reign of Djedkare.⁵ Only during the reign of Unis the new type crossed the borders of the Giza necropolis and found its use at Central Saqqara as well. From the reign of Teti onwards, all inner rooms of the large multi-roomed mastabas were roofed.

Unis' pyramid complex and the adjoining cemeteries show several traces of inspiration by the cemeteries surrounding the Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza:

- The Unis Cemetery North-West, a cemetery destined for Unis' wives and his highest officials, may have been – in terms of social stratification – inspired by the Eastern Cemetery.
- The Unis Cemetery North-East is fronted by the two large mastabas of the vizier Akhetehetep Hemi (later usurped by the King's son Nebkauhor) and the vizier Nyankhba. Both tombs in their massive appearance resemble Fourth and Fifth Dynasty mastabas of Giza.
- For the first time since the reign of Khufu the concept of a double-mastaba was revived (double mastaba of Queens Khenut and Nebet and the double mastaba of the vizier Ihy and the overseer of Upper Egypt Unisankh) in the Unis-Cemetery North-West.

⁵ Browarski 2000: 1.

- The inner structure of most of the large multi-roomed mastabas of the Unis Cemeteries was already of the bifurcate type (*type II*). Their only known antecedent is the mastaba of Senedjemib Inti at Giza.

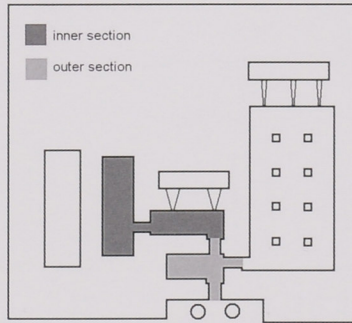


Fig. 4: Ground plan of the mastaba of Senedjemib Inti (after Reisner 1942).

Simultaneously to introducing the bifurcated system at Saqqara, the last attempts to preserve the linear system were made. The *subtype I-B* bypassed the *wesekhet* by means of a corridor. Under Unis, the corridor was replaced by a *low opening* connecting the outer and inner sections serving for moving things in and out. When compared with its predecessor, this concept was much more sophisticated and more complex. It necessitated that both sections adjoined each other – which was not always the case – and were divided only by means of a narrow wall.

Only two examples of these low openings are known so far. Both of them are temporally and spatially limited to the reign of Unis and the cemeteries around his pyramid complex (Fig. 5, Pls. 4, 5). The earliest example comes from the tomb of the overseer of Upper Egypt Unisankh (dating to the early reign of Unis) and the vizier Nyankhba (dating to the late reign of the king).⁶

In the case of Unisankh⁷ (Figs. 6, 7; Pls. 6, 7, 8, 9), the opening connects the chapel's antechamber (*Room IV*) of the inner section and an undecorated storeroom (*Room III*) of the outer section. It measures approximately 1 by 2 cubits (w. 0.53 m, h. 1.04 m) and in its shape resembles a half-size door passage.⁸

⁶ The subsequent relative chronology of the tombs may be established based on the forms of the *wesekhet*. In the case of Unisankh's tomb the *wesekhet* has the form of a simple courtyard and in the case of Nyankhba that of pillared hall.

⁷ Cf. Kanawati & Abder-Raziq, 2003; Onderka, 2007; Onderka et al., 2009; Onderka & Maříková, Vlčková 2007.

⁸ Cf. Onderka, 2007.

PYRAMID COMPLEX OF DJOSER

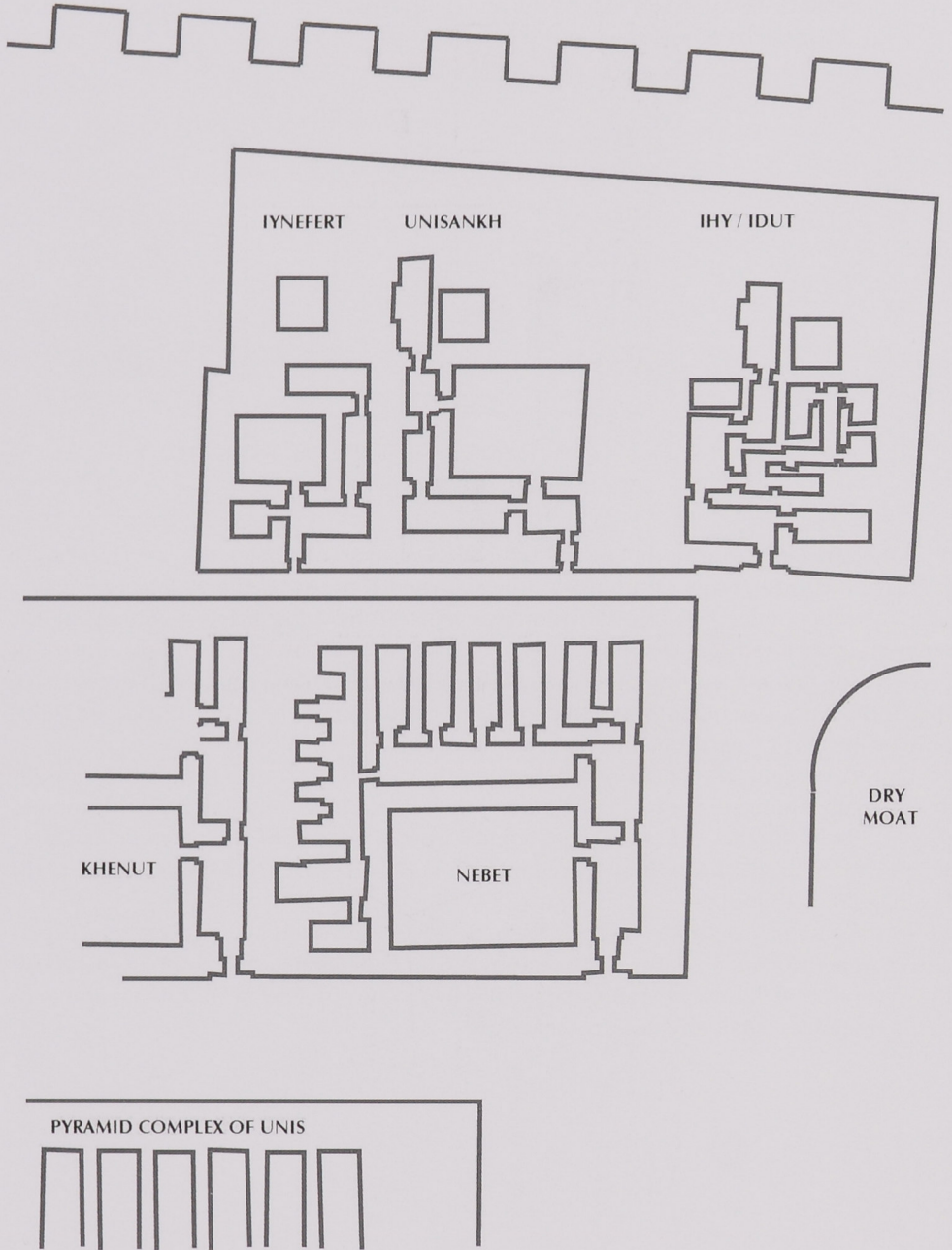


Fig. 5: General plan of the Unis Cemeteries North-West and North-East (after Munro 1993).

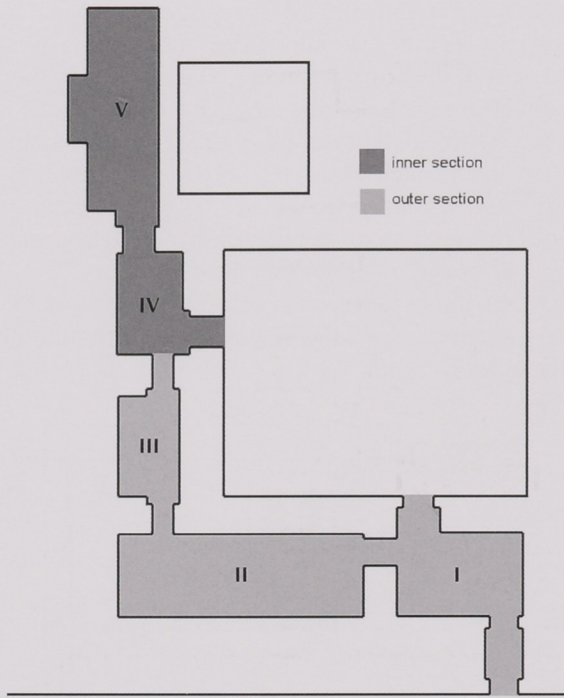


Fig. 6: Ground plan of the tomb of Unisankh (Illustration by Pavel Onderka).

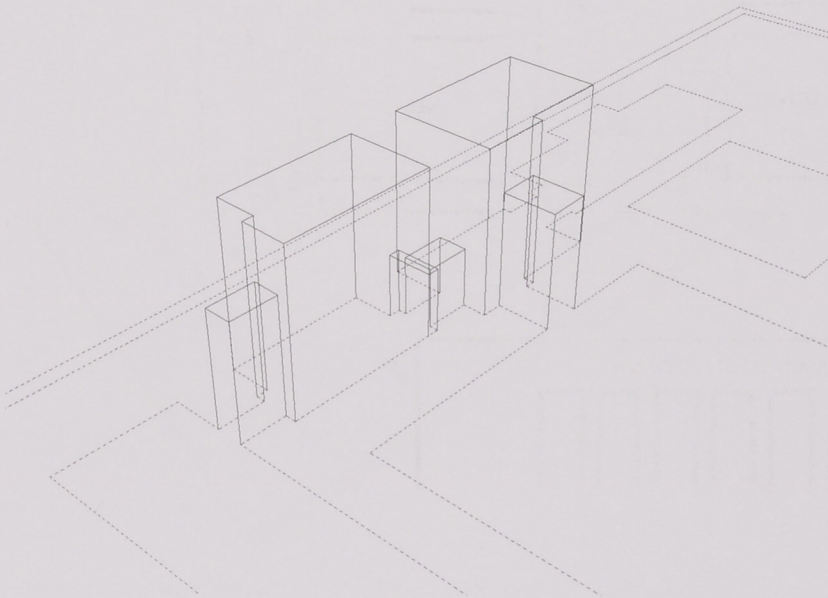


Fig. 7: The low opening in the tomb of Unisankh (Illustration by Samuel Rihák).

Only short distance away, in the tomb of Nyankhba (Figs. 8, 9; Pls. 10, 11, 12, 13), the opening connects the chapel's antechamber of the inner section and a storeroom of the outer section located west to the tomb's entrance. The opening in the tomb of Nyankhba has a much smaller dimensions – approximately 1 by 1 cubit (w. 0.52 m, h. 0.58 m)⁹ – and in accordance with the relative dating of both tombs (which may be established by the respective forms of *wesekhets*) likely represents a later specimen that was fully designed according to the purpose it was intended for, i.e. moving offerings and cultic inventory from the storerooms of the outer section of the tomb into the chapel. The opening lost its original relative proportions and no more resembled a door.

The openings in both tombs were once equipped with a door opening inside of the outer section as attested by the holes for door pivots, as the doors were logically manipulated from the outer section.

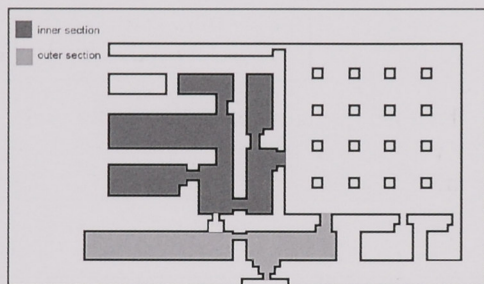


Fig. 8: Ground plan of the Tomb of the vizier Nyankhba (Illustration by Pavel Onderka).

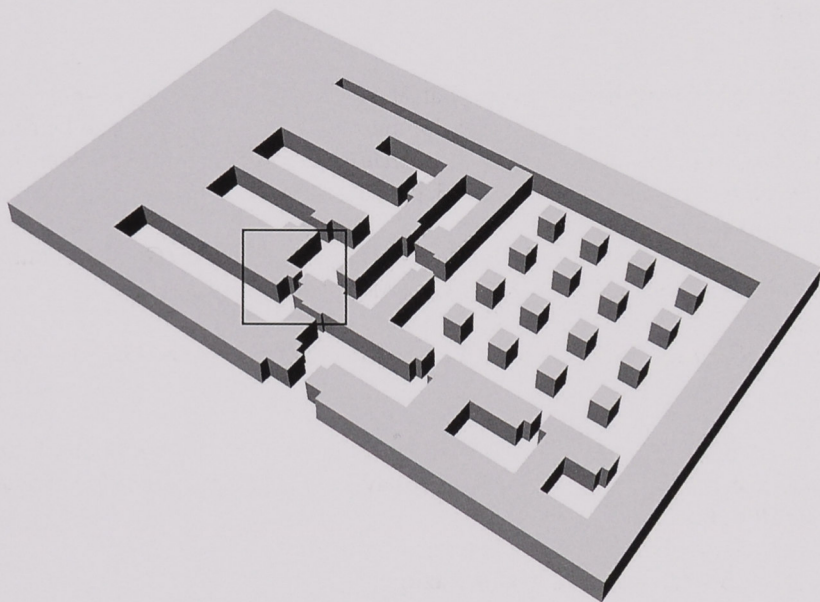


Fig. 9: The low opening in the tomb of the vizier Nyankhba (Illustration by Samuel Rihák).

⁹ Cf. Hassan, 1975: 41–48.

With the *subtype I-C*, the development of the linear system came to the end –partly due to the changes in religious beliefs, partly due to the logical development necessitated by functional requirements and last but not least also due to a complicated design of inner structure of rooms of the *subtype I-C* (the pertinent storeroom of the outer section of the tomb of Nyankhba fully stands aside the processional way of his tomb {cf. Fig. 8}).

The discussed opening represents a unique feature of Old Kingdom non-royal architecture attested only for the transitional period of the end of the Fifth Dynasty when the linear layout of tombs' inner structure belonging to Abusir-Saqqara tradition retreated and the bifurcated system stemming from the Giza tradition started to dominate residential cemeteries. The tombs of Unisankh and Nyankhba represent a specific – final – subtype of the linear type (*I-C*), being the last attempt of Unis' architects to follow the local tradition.

Many similarities exist between the tombs of Ptahshepses Junior II at Abusir and that of Unisankh at Central Saqqara in terms of architecture.¹⁰ The similarity seems to be too high to be accidental. The present writer believes that a relationship existed between these two high-ranking officials who both served as overseers of Upper Egypt and both had royal connotations. The inner structure of Unisankh's tomb belonging to the Abusir-Saqqara tradition was likely followed intentionally, whereas all other large multi-roomed mastabas of the Unis Cemetery North-West were already of the bifurcated type taken over from Giza.

To suggest a relationship between Unisankh and Nyankhba based only on the identical layout of the mastabas' inner structure would be too hypothetical to be pronounced.

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¹⁰ Cf. Onderka et al. 2009.

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Pl. 1 Mastaba of the vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 2 Ptahhetep-Akhtihetep Complex (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



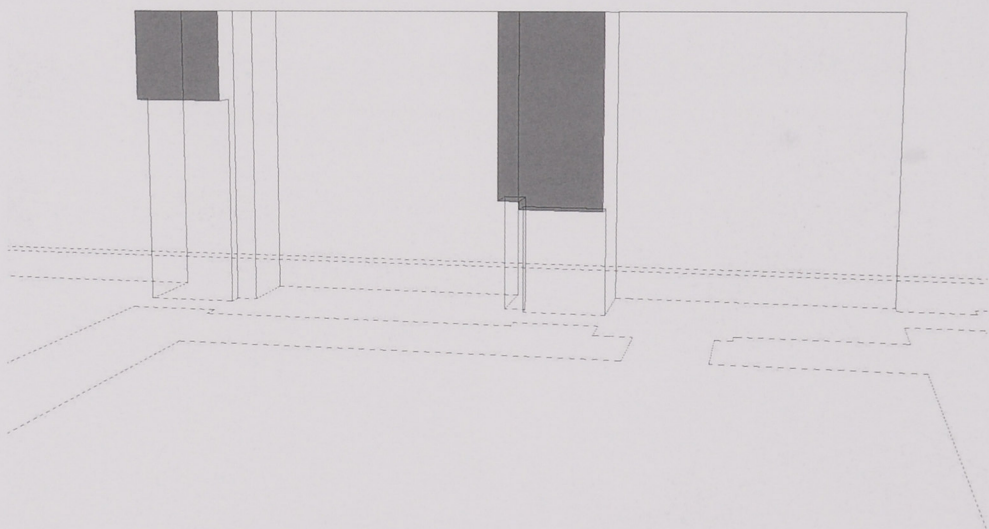
Pl. 3 Mastaba of the overseer of Upper Egypt Ptahshepses Junior II at Abusir (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 4 Unis Cemetery North-West from the top of Unis' pyramid (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 5 Unis Cemeteries North-West and North-East from the top of Unis' pyramid (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 6 Tomb of Unisankh, longitudinal section following the north-south processional axis (Illustration by Samuel Rihák).



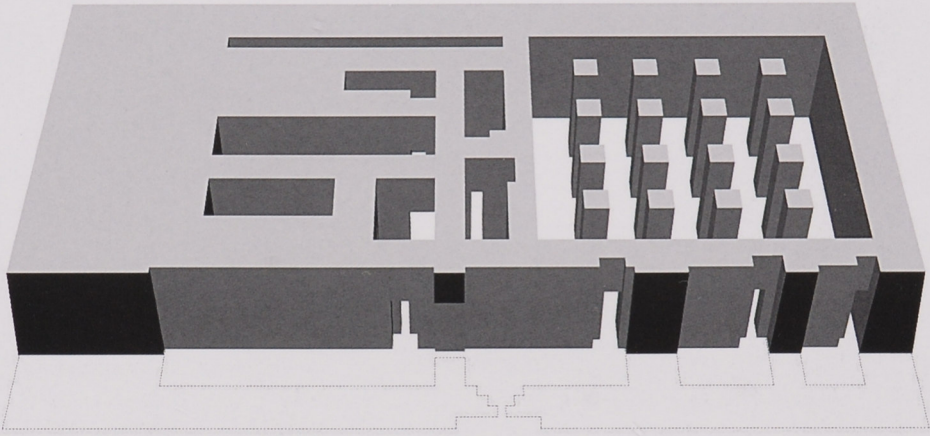
Pl. 7 Tomb of Unisankh, Room IV with the low opening in the south wall (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 8 Tomb of Unisankh, Room IV with the low opening in the south wall (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 9 Tomb of Unisankh, Room III with the low opening in the north wall (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 10 Tomb of Nyankhba, east-west longitudinal section through the outer section (Illustration by Samuel Rihák).



Pl. 11 Tomb of Nyankhba, view on the low opening from the north (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 12 Tomb of Nyankhba, view on the low opening from the south (Photo by Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 13 Tomb of Nyankhba, hole for door pivot in the low opening (Photo by Pavel Onderka).