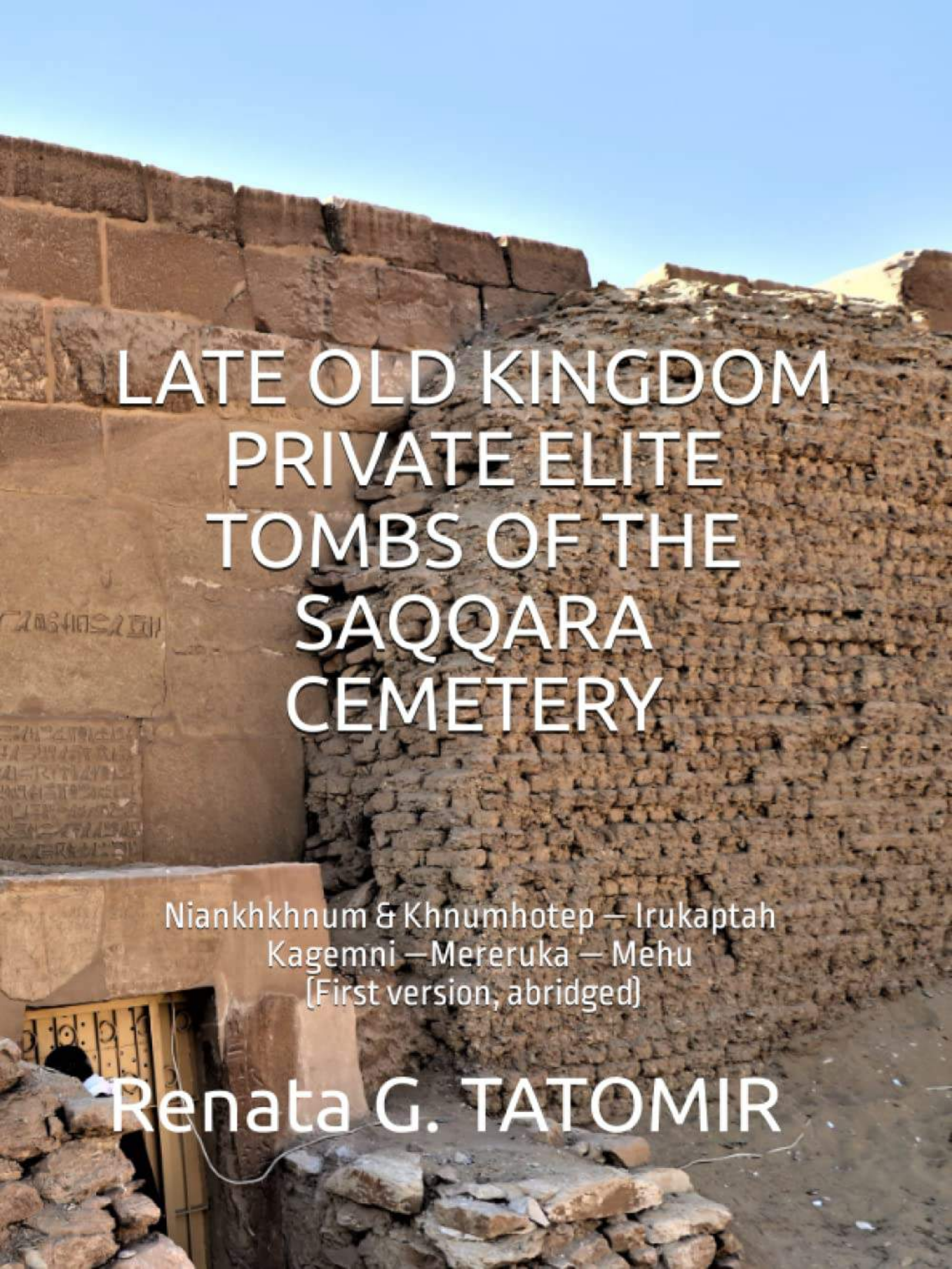




LATE OLD KINGDOM PRIVATE ELITE TOMBS OF THE SAQQARA CEMETERY

Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep — Irukaptah
Kagemni — Mereruka — Mehu
[First version, abridged]

Renata G. TATOMIR



Professor Randa Tawfik is a PhD-based Professor of Archaeology and Egyptology at the Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo University. She is also a member of the Egyptian Archaeological Society and the International Association of Egyptologists. She has published several books and articles on the history and culture of ancient Egypt, including 'The History of Egypt' and 'The History of Egyptology'. She is also a member of the Egyptian Archaeological Society and the International Association of Egyptologists.



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Period	Dynasties	Date and duration
Predynastic Periods (Neolithic)	-	ca. 5300 – 3150 BCE (ca. 2150 years)
Early Dynastic Period (Archaic)	1 st – 2 nd	ca. 3150 – 2686 BCE (ca. 537 years)
Old Kingdom	3 rd – 6 th	ca. 2686 – 2181 BCE (ca. 505 years)
First Intermediate Period	7 th – 11 th	ca. 2181 – 2055 BCE (ca. 126 years)
Middle Kingdom	11 th – 14 th	ca. 2055 – 1650 BCE (ca. 405 years)
Second Intermediate Period	15 th – 17 th	ca. 1650 – 1550 BCE (ca. 100 years)
New Kingdom	18 th – 20 th	ca. 1550 – 1069 BCE (ca. 481 years)
Third Intermediate Period	21 th – 25 th	ca. 1069 – 664 BCE (ca. 322 years)
Late Period	26 th – “31 st ”	664 – 332 BCE (ca. 193 years)
Macedonian Era	Argead Dynasty	332 – 304 BCE (ca. 28 years)
Ptolemaic Era	Ptolemaic Dynasty	305/304 – 30 BCE (ca. 275 years)
Roman Era	-	30 BCE – 395 CE (365 years)
Byzantine Era	-	395 – 641 CE (246 years)
Arab conquest	-	641 CE

INTRODUCTION

I remember it was in the mid- 1980’s. I think I was no more than five or six years old, when, at that time, in the short TV program of the only national television in Romania (TVR) - a program dominated by the cult of personality of Nicolae Ceausescu - due to the brilliant minds of its directors, a weekly science show had managed to pass censorship. The show presented – and it still presents today – science documentaries from Western Europe, that part of our continent and civilization otherwise so blamed by the propaganda of the ruling Romanian Communist Party. For 30 minutes, every Saturday evening, along with my parents, I watched with fascination the impeccable short science and research films about Jacques-Yves Cousteau’s aquatic research, the archaeological excavations in Minoan Crete, the Amazon jungle or Thor Heyerdahl's expedition and many other amazing sites on planet Earth. But of all things, the images from one documentary remained imprinted on my retina. And even now, after 45 years, I relive the same emotional intensity of immersion in that mysterious and fabulous universe alike. The documentary I am talking about presented the pyramids and tombs of the 5th and 6th Dynasties at Saqqara. The lecture was done by a well-known Romanian actor, Dinu Ianculescu, whose one-of-a-kind vocal timbre threw the listener directly into the deepest past; a sort of “Ptah-voice”, I thought to myself, when, a few years later, I found out from books about Ancient Egypt who Ptah was. In my mind’s eye, I still see the cinematic effect made with simple means yet with a strong visual impact, of how a flashlight slow lighting revealed, in the millenary darkness of the royal and noble tombs, the hieroglyphs of the cartouches and the lively scene-reliefs from the mastabas.

Ever since I opened my consciousness’s eyes to this world I have been fascinated by the history of the remotest times, and by the archaeological discovery of the mysterious and valuable vestiges. And those moments of my early childhood were my very first encounter with the overwhelming Pharaonic civilization. Fast forward seven years later - and a millennium apart between the historical periods. This time, at a famous 1982’s cinema in Bucharest of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s time, and also thanks to my beloved parents who, during my summer holiday, took me to see an American movie – Sphinx - I have been privileged of my first meeting with the Valley of the Kings, the Sheikh Abd-el Qurna peak, the tombs, the funerary treasure and the names of Tutankhamun, Seti I and, of course, the profession of Egyptologist. It was at that moment that I realized that my fate had been sealed for the rest of my earthly life. Or had I chosen my destiny?

However, the direct contact with the Pyramids with texts of Unis, Pepi, Teti and the powerful elite owners of the mastabas at the Old Kingdom Saqqara necropolis took place much later.

I first visited Saqqara in 2004, due to an opportunity for which I would like to express my gratitude to three distinguished specialists from the prestigious Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO) from that time.

First of all, I am heartfelt grateful for the possibility to study in Egypt to Professor Dr. Bernard Mathieu, the director of IFAO during those years, an erudite Egyptologist, a refined intellectual, a generous and kind scholar, supportive to fault of young researchers at the beginning of their careers as I was. The scholarships I received from Ifao during his directorship provided me with ample opportunity to undertake documentation and research both in the IFAO library and in the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, managing also to visit some of the most important archaeological sites in my little free time.

It was at that time when, due to a positive conjuncture, I had the privilege to visit Saqqara in the company of the late well-known IFAO Egyptologist Dr. Jean-Pierre Corteggiani, and of a Coptologist in full ascension (today Professor Dr.) Victor Ghica. On that occasion, together with

these experts in Egyptology and Coptology I entered for the first time “the tomb of the two brothers”, the royal manicurists and barbers Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep.

Fast forward... Nine years later... in 2013, during an international conference at Cairo University, thanks to the distinguished colleagues and Classicists Professor Dr. Ali Abd-el-tawab and Professor Dr. Adel Elnahas, along with other participants in the conference, I visited the mastaba of the vizier Kagemni.

Then, Fate decided that within another four years I would return to Saqqara and stay longer, documenting an important number of mastabas and rock-cut for the current project. I consider myself so blessed and happy that at that time, the two pillars of my life - my beloved mother (physically present with me) , along with the spirit of my late dear father - accompanied me there.

I think all these were blessed synchronicities and the present book is their result.

I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to my dear friend, colleague and brilliant Egyptologist, Professor Dr Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska for her helpful comments and suggestions.

The third part of this study, in its abbreviated form, contains a minimal yet suggestive selection of photographs I have taken during my last six-year explorations at Saqqara cemetery, in the area of the tombs subject to research and analysis. Most of them are outer photographs of the area and of the five tombs with which I chose to exemplify the analysis in its current form. However, I also chose some representative interior details of larger shots from each tomb. Where appropriate, I provided my transliteration and translation of each extant inscription. Unfortunately, publishing on Amazon did not allow me to use other fonts than the default ones, therefore an incinvenient was that that I could not utilize the special fonts for transliterating hieroglyphic inscriptions.

If an international publishing house is interested in publishing an extended version of this study, the author will provide it with more tombs, with a more extensive illustration, and, as in the present case, with the author’s transliteration and translation.

*

Although there is a considerable scientific bibliography on the Old Kingdom mastabas and rock-cut tombs, without a doubt there will still be much to discover and say on their importance and significance as complex mortuary/funerary monuments, on their construction techniques, architecture, art, on their funerary inventories, their ideology and symbolism, as well as on the powerful characters who were their owners, buried underground. Despite their owners’ final earthly destination within the sarcophagi, over almost five millennia since their construction, the rock-cut tombs and the mastabas keep conveying to the visitors a burst of eternal life.

PART ONE

PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

This is where the first two parts of the book end.

This book is an Egyptological study of particular historical, archaeological, funerary, and religious aspects of the Late Old Kingdom. More precisely, it addresses the general issue of five private elite tombs (rock-cut tombs and mastabas) of the 5th and the 6th Dynasties at the Saqqara cemetery, as an attempt to in-depth analysis and understanding of the various levels of relationship between the elite members of the central apparatus at the top of Egyptian society, through their tombs - monumental funerary symbols of prestige and power.

The focus of the study is on pursuing the process of the genesis and evolution of the Egyptian central elite and its funerary/mortuary monuments and symbolism on several levels, as it developed in the complex and profound framework of the socio-political and religious-funerary transformations that marked the central authority of Ancient Egypt and the unified state throughout the Old Kingdom, and particularly in its late part. The particular features of this phenomenon are exemplified in a detailed presentation and analysis in the second part, where, together with essential information provided on their owners, are described five tombs: two rock-cut tombs of the 5th Dynasty medium-rank elite members Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep, and Irukaptah, and three impressive in size and grandeur mastabas of the 6th Dynasty highest central elite, the viziers Kagemni, Mereruka and Mehu.

At the same time, the study also raises the issue of the relationship between life and death in the Egyptian mindset, the latter understood as a continuation of life on an invisible plane.

The third part of the book contains a minimal yet suggestive selection of photographs taken by the author in the area of the tombs subject to research and analysis in the Saqqara cemetery. When inscriptions exist, the author provides her own transliteration and translation.

Finally, in the last part - **Excursus: DEATH IS NOT THE END** - the author proposes for analysis of a possible link between the latest discoveries in the medical field on Near-Death experiences and the hypothesis that the ancient Egyptian approach to the afterlife was influenced by this very type of deep transformative experience.

As the title suggests, the first chapter, **ELITE AND POWER IN LIFE AND THE AFTERLIFE**, introduces the essential idea of the present study: monumentality, artistic and aesthetic refinement, and luxury attest not only to the high level reached by Egyptian civilization almost five millennia ago, but they also speak of those members of society who had the relational intelligence to access top positions in the administrative hierarchy of the state, which brought them the huge economic power necessary to order the realization of some grandiose constructions. In the case of the 5th and 6th Dynasties which mark the Late Old Kingdom period, this behavior is attested by the tombs of the members of the high central administrative elite at the Saqqara cemetery. Sometimes, the purest vital force that emanates from the polychrome reliefs and hieroglyphs of the 5th and 6th Dynasties mastabas and rock-cut tombs of the courtiers and the viziers seems to exceed that of the royal pyramids with texts in the immediate vicinity - with which the members of the elite (and their tombs implicitly) had connections not only of a hierarchical type (this type was created subsequently), but primarily based on economic interests, acquaintance/friendship (mainly by virtue of the first type), and family ties (by virtue of the first

two types). Through symbols of status, their décor expresses not only the relationships and hierarchy established at the societal level, in the second half of the 3rd millennium BCE, but also the beliefs of the higher Egyptian aristocracy in at least two principles: the eternalizing of the earthly hierarchy in the hereafter; the change, in the sense of the “nobilization” of the afterlife, i.e., the free access the higher private elite got to royal funerary ritual privileges, until then the exclusive prerogative of royalty, and, implicitly, the free access to the exercise of the supreme power of the higher members of central administration to the detriment of the kings. Thus, through large tombs, some rivaling the monumental pyramid tombs of the kings, high-ranking courtiers make visible their economic power and social-political influence.

The first chapter is followed naturally by **THE STATE OF RESEARCH** which summarizes the main studies devoted so far to the five tombs I chose to exemplify my analyze-presentation in the second and the third part of the book.

The next chapter, **THE OLD KINGDOM IN ITS ESSENTIALS**, provides a compact view of the first extended period of historically attested centralized government of the unified state, when Egypt attained its first continuous pinnacle of civilization development in complexity as well as in achievements. During Old Kingdom emerged many of the essential institutions and trends of the future Egyptian state, based on earlier patterns. It was also the time of the development of the royal monumental mortuary architecture, when the pyramids were built. The royal funerary complexes of stone architecture around the king's tomb in the region of the capital at Memphis as well as the private tombs of higher administrators record the establishment of formal stone architecture conventions and the funerary standards of the Egyptian society. They provide an insight into the political efficacy and social stability trends subsumed under the **mAat** concept.

In the following chapter, **THE EMERGENCE OF ADMINISTRATION, THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ELITE**, I explain the genesis and the evolution of the numerous ruling and dominant elite, at the beginning of the 4th millennium BCE, as a result of the unification of Egypt and the development of a religious-political monarch-centred ideology. The members of the elite formed the interface between the king and the rest of the population. The emergence of the centralized state brought profound social change, as a result of which Egyptian society became more clearly hierarchical. The members of the ruling elite set the instruments of governance, developed the techniques of power, and status display, while exerting their power based on a specifically created ideology which supported the actual social alignment. Using rare and imported commodities, got via long-distance controlled trade, they expressed their high ranks. Still there was another element which was progressively included in the system of privileges granted by the king and became important with respect to the elite status: monumental architecture. This whole structure helped keep the entire system under control. Among the many privileges which define their high status, these state officials, important (= useful) enough in the eyes of the monarchs because of their abilities, growing power, wealth and connections, enjoyed the king's favours and the royal gifts, including plots of land to build their tombs. They were also wealthy enough to afford to build a monumental tomb building, because such a funerary monument was a privilege reserved for the highest class. They belonged to the groups of state high officials who built their massive non-royal tombs in the Memphitic necropolis, the groups of administrators that hold executive power which was conferred by kings in various forms, and thus forming the cultural, administrative and executive core of the Egyptian society. Furthermore, some of the viziers (e.g., **Merire-ankh**) were granted by the king a rare privilege, that of inscribing their names in the cartouche, just like the sovereigns.

The research on the ancient Egyptian state administration is based on the chains of titles used by ancient Egyptian high officials and currently considered one of the major sources for its analysis. Essentially, there are two different perspectives on how these chains are to be understood: they either represent strings of titles/offices acquired by their owners during their careers, or can be viewed as sets held by the high officials during the time, they were building their tombs.

The next chapter, **A PRIMARY OF THE 5TH AND 6TH DYNASTIES**, presents the main historical stages and the political and religious-funerary key-features of these dynasties whose administrative elite includes the characters whose tombs will be presented in detail in the second and third parts of this volume. The proliferation and importance of the administrative offices can be inferred from the titles of these courtiers and nobles. It also emphasizes the importance of the office of the vizier (**TAity zAb-TAti**) in the central organization of Egypt from Memphis. The office combines judicial and executive functions. This is the first and the highest official to become the second man in the state after the king.

Then, in the chapter **THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMBS**, I focused on several features essential for understanding the whole picture of which private elite tombs are part: the methodological framework of contextual archaeology to explore cemetery data; the Egyptian approach on death, afterlife and the tomb structure seen as the “house of eternity”; the false-door meaning and function; the everyday life scenes depicted in private funerary chapels as an invaluable source for our understanding of life in ancient Egypt, having the main roles to magically recreate the earthly physical world the deceased had left, and to provide him/her an additional source of eternal nourishment; the emphasizing on the two opposite conceptions on the afterlife in the Old Kingdom: the one involving the journey of the deceased sovereign in the hereafter, who after death joined his divine siblings, the sun and the stars, in their daily journey across the sky, each night receiving the capacity of this new kind of life through union with Osiris; the other, that of the ordinary people, including the members of the elite. Seen already as a divine living being, the king’s nature inferred daily communion with the gods, hence his divine status and connection had to be perpetuated in the invisible yet eternal afterlife. Therefore, the royal tombs had to reflect the monarch’s status not only by their impressive dimensions, especially vertically, towards the sky/heaven, particularly compared to the non-royal elite burials, but also being significantly less domestic in the sense that the style of buildings replicates that of the royal audience hall, while the access to the mortuary temple – the deceased’s interface with the living - was restricted. In the same way, the non-royal afterlife reflects the association of the king’s deceased elite subjects with the environment and activities of ordinary mortals, while being unrelated to the universe of the gods. It is generally agreed that the Saqqara tombs of the high officials are closer to domestic traditional life, with houses in a village displaying courtyards and interior rooms and even streets between the individual buildings, these being very likely meant to be visited by the deceased’s family and friends. the prevailing understanding of the non-royal afterlife in the Old Kingdom was as an eternal existence centred on the tomb seen as an interface for as well as an accelerator of the hereafter which replicates the human environment. Therefore, the significance of the decoration of the tombs with scenes of daily life surpassed the guarantee level of provisions offered to the deceased and magically perpetuated by means of visual representations. The chapter also addresses the issue of the king and kingship ideology as reflected through royal tombs.

The next chapter, **MASTABAS AND ROCK-CUT TOMBS**, points at the ideological function of funerary architecture which linked rulers and the elite through the stonework and monumentality to their forefathers and expressly linking them (at least as far as the kings are concerned) to the cosmos. It thus argues that in Ancient Egypt the establishment of a monumental tomb was an act requiring the expenditure of both intellectual and material property. The tomb representations depict it as a place where the tomb owner intends to start a new life “in the hereafter”, similar in munificence to that of his previous life. It is the result of beliefs shared within a society whose intention was realized in the physical act of building a tomb and the decoration of the interior, developed in the socio-cultural and physical context of Egypt. All levels of society can now be reached: both as an expression of status during the life of the tomb owner, and a source of commemoration and possible competition for his peers on his death.

For the 5th and 6th Dynasties of the Old Kingdom, the First Intermediate Period and the

Middle Kingdom, the peculiarity of the tomb construction was the participation of all those involved – from the owner to the architects, designers, civil engineers, decorating craftsmen, and supervisors - in the ritualic performing art, implying magically activation effects of the walls representations.

The tombs of the elite are essential components of the construction of the sacred space in tomb architecture. Its iconography means the whole set of symbolic-ritual representations, including the hieroglyphic texts and the images of the deceased in various situations of daily life, as well as one's activities and occupations during one's life, both in society and in the family. The current general understanding is that this iconography must be seen as a very book of life of the tomb' owner, whose author was himself and was based on the foundation of cultural memory. The reverence the ancient Egyptians paid and showed for their past was meant to preserve their cultural and civilizational memory and strengthen their social bonds. The preservation of their traditions was an expression of their "craving for immortality". However, this kind of eternity was a luxury, the high costs being allowed only by the members of the elite.

Although the esthetical aspect was not neglected, the work of art had just a utilitarian purpose: to provide the necessary elements for the survival of the deceased in the afterlife, equipping thus one's tomb with a set of scenes and texts aimed only for this purpose. In this respect, the Egyptian set of beliefs in the afterlife convey a powerful message: all representations of the human body – and in fact the representations of the bodies of all beings – are recipients for their **kA.w**, the **kA** viewed as the immortal principle of the spirit (~ the vital energy) which survives death and which must be fed in order to survive. That was what food offerings were placed in the tomb for.

Never meant to be viewed by the living – except for the outer supraterritorial chapel, the section of the tomb devoted to rituals and food offerings -, the Egyptian burial chambers were packed with an astounding array of "artwork" which spoke only to the "highest" invisible elite group of visitors: the deceased and the gods. As the point of contact between the mortal and the immortal, the burial chamber representations had the function of reconnecting the deceased with his previous earthly life, providing their **kA.w** with the energy of the offerings as visual symbols of the goods they enjoyed during their lives. The tomb is a replica of this world model; through its architecture, paintings, reliefs, and funerary goods it reproduces an illusion of a unified reality of life. The totality of these is made to function for the use of the tomb owner in his afterlife by the process of the cultic rituals, and the concept of sympathetic magic. Building also monumental tombs, the elite became an extension of the power of the king and the central government of which he, as a member of the elite, was an integral part. The indirect cultural effect was to glorify and consolidate the power of the officials and the divinity of the king.

The last chapter of the first part, **THE SAQQARA NECROPOLIS**, presents the origins and the development of the oldest and most famous Memphitic necropolis, Saqqara, as well as its position and royal cemeteries during the 5th and 6th Dynasties, particularly. Then it addresses the issue of the burial trends in monumental architecture in Saqqara necropolis as manifestations of power in life and the afterlife.

Particularly during the 5th and 6th Dynasties the general developments and innovations on the royal level had consequences on the non-royal elite one. In this regard, the return of the kings to Saqqara as a royal cemetery in the 5th Dynasty resulted firstly in the rapid growth of the private necropolis. These changes must be contextualized into a heavily exploited economy, with resources being directed to centralised state-building projects such as the pyramids. Afterwards, to the end of the Old Kingdom when the royal authority increasingly collapsed, the non-royal cemeteries developed more freely, being less dependent on royal mortuary location.

The effects of this activity can be observed in the important evolutions in the mortuary cults and architecture of the non-royal elite category.

At the end of the first part of this study are presented the issues of the dating of private

tombs of the 5th and 6th Dynasties and the identity of the owners of the tombs described in details in the second and the third part.

The second part of the book consisted of five subsections containing the detailed presentations of each tomb, chronologically organized based on each dynasty. This section is organized in two subdivisions, devoted to the tombs from each of the two dynasties, the 5th and the 6th. The description of each tomb broadly follows the same essential points - to which are added the specific, original elements that give identity to each tomb: location and dating the tomb; dimensions of the tomb; titles and duties of the owners; general description; the features of the tomb; the chambers.

The third part consists of five sections of annotated plates based on a selection of photographs of each tomb made by the author, accompanied captions and by comments, transliteration and translations of the inscriptions shown in the pictures.

*

From what has been presented throughout this study, it can be concluded that an in-depth analysis of the semantics of the concepts associated with the experience of the transition from life to “death” in ancient Egyptian funerary formulas in the inscriptions in the mastaba tombs at Saqqara of the 5th and 6th Dynasties’ high elite, and then extended to texts of the same type in later times can contribute to the closest possible understanding of the reality of those times of the Egyptian perspective on the role and importance of the deceased belonging to the then elite and the tomb in Egyptian society.

At the same time, the new paradigm of interpretation that I propose, from the NDEs perspective, completely changes the direction and meaning of interpretation, the religious domain becoming a set of constructs starting from the confrontation with a new type of potential reality for which we still do not have tools to check.

PART THREE

ANNOTATED PLATES

**THE JOINT MASTABA/ROCK-CUT TOMB
COMPLEX OF NIANKHKHNUM
AND KHNUMHOTEP**



The north-east view of the tomb after reconstruction,
with the entrance.

THE ROCK-CUT TOMB OF IRUKAPTAH



On the way to the rock-cut tomb of Irukaptah. On the west, left side, and under the level of the Unis's causeway there is a line of rock-hewn tombs, among which Irukaptah's is located at 9.5m under the Unis's causeway.

THE MASTABA OF KAGEMNI



It is located to the north of the temenos wall of the Pyramid of Teti at Saqqara, and to the northeast of the step pyramid of Djoser (3rd Dynasty). The 32 x 32m squared mastaba was created in local grayish yellow limestone, for the main body and for the doorway and its doorposts, and the lowest foundation course, and was cased with fine white Turah limestone for the rest and notably the external facing. Panels incised with fragments of some of the deceased's main titles and names are still preserved on the casing and on the blocks:

THE MASTABA COMPLEX OF MERERUKA



The access causeway to the mastaba complex of Mereruka

THE MASTABA OF MEHU



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The access way to the mastaba of Mehu. Beneath the enclosure wall of the Step Pyramid Complex there are rock-cut tombs. Mehu's burial is among those to the north of the Unis causeway, and to the east of the mastaba of Princess Idut. The tomb is in row "A" of the Unis cemetery and there set back slightly to the north, at a sunken spot, east of the mastaba of Vizier Ihy. Between the two rows of the mastabas in the distance there is a narrow street.

The next and final two mirroring post-columns on each side consist of the main titles of the vizier Mehu:

iry-pat HAti a smr-wati Xri-Hbt Hri-sStA n pr-dwAt imi-r gs-pr Xri-Hbt Hri-tp nswt
imi-r Hwt-wrt 6
tAiti zAb TAty imi-r zS(w)/zHA(w)-a nswt imi-r Snwti imi-r prwi-HD jmAxw-xr
nTr-aA MHw
= hereditary prince/nobleman, count, sole companion chief lector-priest, secretary/privy
to the secret of the House of Morning, overseer of the gs-pr (the troop-house of
workers/the work place), royal chief lector-priest, overseer of the six great law courts, chief
justice and vizier, overseer of the great royal scribes, oversser of the two granaries, overseer
of the Two Treasuries, the imAxw before the Great God, Mehu.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renata G. TATOMIR is a Romania-based Professor Dr and scholar, a historian and author specialized in Egyptology, who teaches mostly courses on Egyptology, Egyptian antiquities, hieroglyphic writing and ancient Egyptian grammar at the Hyperion University of Bucharest, Romania.

In addition to her B.A. and PhD in history, she also earned a B.S. and a M.S. in Physics.

So far, she authored more than 80 articles, studies, books and volumes on Egyptological and interdisciplinary yet related topics.

At the Hyperion University of Bucharest, Renata G. TATOMIR is currently the Director of the Center for the Study and Promotion of Egyptology, the East and the Mediterranean, as well as the Director of the Department of Social and Natural Sciences. In this capacity, she regularly organizes international and national academic events, in partnership with other notable international academic institutions, such as the distinguished Institute for the Mediterranean and Oriental Culture – Polish Academy of Science.

Upon the agreement of the Director of the “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest of the Romanian Academy, Renata G. TATOMIR is also responsible for the research and publication of the Egyptian antiquities in the collection of this prestigious Romanian academic institution.

During her doctoral studies Renata G. TATOMIR was granted scholarships from the renowned IFAO - Institut français d'archéologie orientale. It was at that time when she undertook research into various historical, archaeological and religious aspects on the ancient Egyptian god DHwty – Thoth.

Over the years, she participated in high-profile international academic events in Egypt and other academic centers abroad.

Renata G. TATOMIR is a member of the International Association of Egyptologists.

Recently, upon the proposal of the “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest, of the Romanian Academy, Renata G. TATOMIR was included in the *Enciclopedia reprezentanților scrisului istoric românesc* (*Encyclopedia of Representatives of Romanian Historical Writing*), of the Romanian Academy, Karl A. Romstorfer Publishing House of the Bucovina National Museum, Suceava, 2021, vol V (S-Z), p. 254.

The results of her research activity can be accessed at hyperion.academia.edu/RenataTatomir