

Roeten, Leo: 2016 *Chronological Developments in the Old Kingdom Tombs in the Necropoleis of Giza, Saqqara and Abusir. Toward an Economic Decline during the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom*, Oxford: Archaeopress, xiv + 144 pp. [Archaeopress Egyptology 15].

Book review by Miroslav Bárta

The analytical study by Leo Roeten is dedicated to a metrical analysis of the principal tombs of Old Kingdom Egypt, focusing on the cemeteries of Abusir, Saqqara and Giza. It is these cemeteries which provide the bulk of information concerning the period, and which mediate the principal characteristics of the long era that comprises the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom, understood in a classical way as consisting of the Third to Sixth Dynasties (about 2950–2200 BC). In fact, this latest publication by Roeten develops some of his former ideas related to the Old Kingdom tomb development, formulated in his 2014 study which appeared under the title *The Decoration on the Cult Chapel Walls of the Old Kingdom Tombs at Giza. A New Approach to their Interaction* (Leiden – Boston: Brill [Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 70]).

The principal issue dealt with in the present volume is whether and how some principal metrical characteristics of non-royal tombs can reflect the development within the society, and, moreover, be used for dating purposes and interpretation of the society's development over longer periods. For this purpose, Roeten produces a detailed catalogue of many tombs, which he groups into several categories based on known and mostly well-established dates and measurement properties. The basic inquiries examined within the volume are concerned with the diachronic changes and are as follows:

- the percentage of tombs with two or more false doors,
- the tomb surface,
- the cult chapel surface,
- the relation of the chapel and its surface,
- the width of the chapel in relation to the length of the western wall of the chapel,
- the relationship between the number of false doors and the surface size of the tomb (p. 5).

In fact, the basic issue, namely the changing size of non-royal tombs, was already addressed by Naguib Kanawati in connection with his study on the governmental reforms in the Old Kingdom (it was published as *The Egyptian administration in the Old Kingdom. Evidence on its economic decline*, Warminster: Aris & Phillips). It was Kanawati as early as in 1977 who posited that tombs during the Old Kingdom feature a tendency towards smaller size. He was also able to show that ancient Egyptian officials may be classified into three basic social groups based on its status as reflected through the titles and position in the administration. More than twenty years later Nicole Alexanian in her dissertation *Die provinziellen Mastabagraber und Friedhöfe im Alten Reich*, defended in Heidelberg in 2000, (online version see <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/20538/>) approached the issue of provincial tomb development from a new perspective (this study is missing in the bibliography used by Roeten). In this study, Alexanian also makes the observation that

tombs decline in size in time as far as the Old Kingdom is concerned.

Roeten divides his study into four parts: Part I is dedicated to Giza cemeteries, which is also the largest collection as the Giza tombs feature the most relevant corpus in the monographs. Roeten uses the Giza evidence to develop his dating theory based on specific tombs' measurements and their relationships. Part II is dedicated to the tombs of Saqqara and Abusir, in which the author verifies his approach; eventually Part III focuses on additional methods of dating and verifying proposed tomb dates. Roeten approaches the question of diachronic tomb development with respect to the different histories of individual sites. While he acknowledges the fact that most of the Fourth Dynasty tombs in Giza were built as a consequence of a pre-planned strategy on the part of the ruling kings, he also considers the incomplete record for many Saqqara tombs excavated and insufficiently documented in pre-modern times. He also includes the still relatively less known history of the Abusir cemeteries with a limited number of known non-royal tombs, which necessarily limits the potential for advancing more general principles on their development over the Old Kingdom period. Part III is also the section where general conclusions and assessment of the developed method is presented. The concluding Part IV is in fact not an independent text *per se* but a series of appendixes with separate tables for tombs in Giza, Saqqara and Abusir and Early Dynastic mastabas from Saqqara, with the principal measurements used for building the explanatory model used throughout the book. These are the surface of the tomb and chapel, the width of the chapel, the length of the chapel's western wall and the number of false doors.

Naturally, the principal question is whether the categorization of the tombs according to their sizes was relevant to the ancient Egyptians or not, and this basic issue Roeten leaves unanswered while he diametrically follows a line of measurement analysis. However, he is

correct in referring to the importance of the tomb's size in biographical inscriptions of, for instance Debeheni in Giza, Djau in Deir el-Gebrawi or Sabni I in Assuan, indicated in the Egyptological evidence. Nonetheless, it would not be a bad idea if a section dealing with the ancient Egyptian perspective of the tomb's size were included.

The main conclusion of the study is rather straightforward. The author demonstrates that the sizes of tombs decrease from the Early Dynastic Period down to the late Old Kingdom. Yet some of the statements presented in the text would deserve perhaps more careful treatment. One of them is the assumption that the inclination to a higher symbolism (represented by offerings being part of the offering lists and formulas and decoration on the walls of individual chapels) happened during the first half of the Fifth Dynasty, while there is ample evidence for this already happening in the early Fourth Dynasty in the reign of Sneferu. According to Roeten, the tendency towards the standardization of non-royal tombs was introduced by Khufu in Giza. This may be not the full picture of the issue, however, as there is evidence for this policy again already during the reign of Sneferu in Dahshur (see e.g. Bárta, M.: 2012 *Journey to the West: The world of the Old Kingdom tombs*, Prague: Charles University in Prague, Czech Institute of Egyptology).

There is also a methodologically moot point concerning the location of the Abusir South tombs. For sure, Abusir South is a correct toponym to be used nowadays, but in the Old Kingdom, and a long time after its demise as well, this area adjacent to the former Lake of Abusir undoubtedly belonged to the Saqqara zone of cemeteries. For the sake of identification and analysis of the outstanding general trends dating to the Old Kingdom, it is difficult to see why these tombs should be associated with the Abusir cemeteries.

What is without further elaboration especially problematic to accept is the suggestion that the transfer of high administrative offices from the royal to non-royal sphere, which took place during the late Fourth and early Fifth Dynasty, was a consequence of an approaching climate change (p. 127). Certainly, external factors always played a significant role in the development and adaptation strategies of a given society, but such a flat statement makes a rather mechanistic impression. This also leads to another point I wish to stress – every kind of analysis dealing with the major trends of Old Kingdom development should not pay little attention to the inner dynamics that were manifested in different parts of the society, be it administration, religion, ideology or social ranking. Without considering these aspects, any theoretical works remain far from complete.

It is logical that no monograph dealing with Old Kingdom cemeteries may be considered comprehensive. However, as for the pyramid field of Abusir (or Central Field of Abusir), the tomb of Ptahshepses Junior is entirely missing (see Bárta, M.: 2000 “The mastaba of Ptahshepses Junior II at Abusir”, *Ägypten und Levante* 10, pp. 45–66), even though it has a built area of 376 m². Roeten also postulates three social categories of Old Kingdom society reflected through three different general groups of tomb sizes Roeten's. This is interesting as it seems to confirm Kanawati's 1977 results gained on the basis of an analysis of the administrative system of the country.

Furthermore, when demonstrating the tendency towards tombs decreasing in size over the period of the Old Kingdom, Roeten does not consider that such a tendency cannot be taken at face value, i.e. as proof of the declining fitness of the state. Quite to the contrary, one has to ask whether the strong tendency towards the costly decoration of the tombs, apparent in and developing from the early Fourth Dynasty, could not be seen as compensation and a tendency towards a stronger symbolical conceptualization of the tomb on the part of the Egyptians, as witnessed by the same line of development in the royal mortuary complexes (comp. Bárta, M.: 2005 “Location of the Old Kingdom pyramids in Egypt”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 15/2, pp. 177–191).

All in all, Roeten's study is really a volume that makes you to rethink several substantial issues of Old Kingdom development, as reflected through monumental architecture. It is also a useful analytical tool that offers data suitable for future work. The potential reader may also get the impression that there is much more to the topic, and in the end, this is good, as science never stops developing. Moreover, anyone who delivers work based on an analysis of the data should be appreciated. The more so in this case because it is very likely that the Egyptians themselves paid attention to a tomb's size, and Roeten's study shows not only this but also confirms in most cases the currently accepted dating. On the other hand, I wish to emphasize that the present volume shows, by what is missing in the text, that there is probably much more to be added to the issue than it may seem.

Addendum

The climate change argument plays a pivotal role in Roeten's volume as one of the key factors used for his explanation of the tombs' decrease in size, practically from the Early Dynastic Period. Therefore, a chapter, however long or short, dealing with the primary evidence for climate evolution and climate change during the Third Millennium BC is seriously missing, as are references to primary research in this field, for instance:

Bond, G. C. *et al.*

1997 “A pervasive millennial-scale cycle in North Atlantic Holocene and Glacial climates”, *Science* 278, pp. 1257–1265;

Dalfes, H. N. – Kukla, G. – Weiss, H.

1997 *Third millennium BC climate change and Old World collapse*, Berlin – New York: Springer [NATO ASI Series, Series I: Global Environmental Change 49];

Kuper, R. – Kröpelin, S.

2006 “Climate-controlled Holocene occupation in the Sahara: Motor of Africa's Evolution”, *Science* 313, pp. 803–807;

Macklin, M. G. *et al.*

2014 “A new model of river dynamics, hydroclimatic change and human settlement in the Nile Valley derived from meta-analysis of the Holocene fluvial archive”, *Quaternary Science Reviews* 130, pp. 109–123 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2015.09.024>); to name but a few important studies.

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