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# Evolution of ancient Egyptian funerary architecture from the Badarian culture until the end of the Old Kingdom

*In this article author gives review of the evolution of Ancient Egyptian funerary architecture and burial practice from the oldest predinastic cultures (Badari, Maadi, Nagada I-III) until the end of the Old Kingdom (c. 4400-2160 BC). Review contains all important architectural elements from simple grave pits, through mastaba structures to the pyramid complexes of Old Kingdom (from the first step pyramid in Saqqara to the huge pyramid enclosures in Giza). Author also describes development of funeral customs and grave goods.*

## *1. Funeral architecture and customs during predynastic periods (c. 4400-3000 BC)*

### *1.1. Badari culture*

Early Egyptians believed that their vital life force continued to live after death and that could only return to the body if it will be preserved in various type of graves. That's why they buried the deceased into burial pits. During the period of Badari culture (c. 4400-4000 BC) in Upper Egypt simple pit-graves and wealthy pit-graves firstly appeared.

Badari culture was excavated between 1922-1925 by Brunton and Caton-Thompson (*Brunton* 1927) in the region of el-Badari near Sohag. They uncovered and recorded 650 graves from which more then fifty percent contained items older then Petrie SD 30 (*Hoffman* 1980, 136).

The most common type of Badari graves was surface pit (max depth 1-1.2 m) with poor grave goods (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 153). In the separated parts of the cemetery pit graves with wealthy grave goods were also found (*Hendrickx & Vermeersch* 2000, 40). The bodies in these graves were tightly contracted on left side (*Brunton* 1927, 15) with the head turned to the south and face looking west (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 153; *Hendrickx & Vermeersch* 2000, 40).

In graves various types of artifacts such as hand made pottery vessels, figurines, weapons, tools, combs, bracelets, beads and cosmetic palettes where found (*Brunton* 1927; *Hendrickx & Vermeersch* 2000, 40-41; *Midant-Reynes* 2000a,



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153-166). The most common pottery containers were polished red, polished black, and black-topped and red painted with black inside surface.

*1.2 Nagada I (c. 4000-3500 BC)*

The site of Nagada in the Upper Egypt was first excavated by de Morgan during early 1890's. In 1895 Petrie and Quibell (*Petrie & Quibell* 1896; *Petrie* 1920) discovered Nagada cemetery where they uncovered several thousands predynastic graves (*Hendrickx & Vermeersch* 2000, 47).

During Nagada I (*Amratian*, c. 4000-3500 BC) the dead were usually buried in a simple oval surface pits dug between 1-1.2 m deep in the ground. These graves where covered with a roof of woven branches and a low mound of earth. Deceased were uncovered in a contracted position lying on the left side with the head turned to the south and face looking west (*Gardiner* 1961, 382; *Hoffman* 1980, 109; *Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 170; *Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 47; *Reeves* 2000, 94). Goods placed in the graves were usually a rather simple mat below the deceased, and in some cases a pillow of straw or leather beneath the head. Simple figurines and variety of decorated vessels were also found. The deceased and the offerings where usually covered with the skin of goat or gazelle (*Hoffman* 1980, 110; *Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 47). During the Amratian period graves with a woman and child were also uncovered (*Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 47). Difference in hierarchy in this period can be seen through larger burials where deceased was buried in coffins made of wood or clay with wealthy grave goods. The good examples for this social distingtion are very large but plundered tombs found in Hierakonpolis (2.5x1.8 m) made in rectangular form where in two cases disc-shaped maceheads where found (*Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 47). A rather small number of graves with goods that contained standing figurines of male/female with emphasis of the primary sexual characteristics (*Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 49) shows they probably belong to the most prominent members of society.

*1.3 Nagada II (c. 3500-3200 BC)*

During Nagada II (*Gerzean period*, c. 3500-3200 BC) new types of graves appeared. The oval or round pits with poor grave goods were still very common. From Nagada II deceased where also buried in graves within pottery vessels (children) or in rectangular pits subdivided by mud-brick walls with special compartments for offerings (*Reeves* 2000, 94; *Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 53). The most prominent members where buried in much larger brick lined tombs with variety of offerings (pottery, vessels, beads, bracelets, flint knives, palettes, clay or ivory figurines). The good examples for this trend of burial are the cemetery T at Nagada[1] and Tomb 100 at Hierankopolis where individuals were buried in

[1] 57 graves were uncovered.



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much larger brick lined tombs[2]. Multiple burials up to five individuals[3] and in some cases dismemberment of the body also occurred (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 187). The good examples for this practice are Tomb T5 at Nagada or graves found at Adaïma where bones and skulls were found along the tombs (*Hoffman* 1980, 116; *Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 53-54).

The bodies were usually uncovered in fetal position wrapped in animal skin (rare cases), mats or linen cloth (the much common cases). In Gerzean period coffins where deceased was place inside the richer tomb firstly appeared. They were rectangular and made from basketry, clay and wood (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 187).

### *1.4 Maadi culture (c. 4000-3200 BC) in Upper Egypt*

In the Lower Egypt the most important site is Maadi complex where 600 graves where found. Maadi graves are the very simple oval pit where body was placed in a fetal position shrouded in mat was the most common. Offerings are poor and the mostly likely includes one or two pottery vessels (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 187). In the cemeteries at Maadi, Wadi Digla and Heliopolis small number of graves contained wealthy offerings (*Midant-Reynes* 2000b, 59).

### *1.5 Nagada III (c. 3200-3000 BC)*

The most important Nagada III burial sites were excavated at Nagada, Abydos and Hierankonpolis. The class and hierarchy difference is now clearly seen in elite cemeteries in Nagada and Adydos. Excavated cemeteries of elite in Upper Egypt shows that they built much larger graves with brick walls. Grave goods found in tombs include weathy offerings with various exotic artefacts made from gold and lapis lazuli (*Bard* 2000, 61; *Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 234-235). Wealthy offerings found in elite cemeteries like cemetery T at Nagada proved the existence of small group which acquired their wealth trading with Lower Egypt and Mesopotamia (*Bard* 2000, 61-63). Elite were buried in coffins made from clay or wood with bodies lay down on the left side (*Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 235). Such wealthy tombs were found in Hierakonpolis, Nagada and Abydos and they were equipped with luxurious goods (*Bard* 2000, 63-64; *Midant-Reynes* 2000a, 235).

Around 3200 BC really large “royal” tombs firstly appeared at Abydos. They belonged to the rules of so-called Dynasty 0 which precedes the kings from dynastic Egypt. For example the famous Nagada III tomb U-j, where 150 inscribed labels of early rulers where found, contains twelve chambers which covers 66.4 $m^2$. It was equipped with variety of luxury artifacts made from bone or ivory and

[2] The largest 4 by 2.75 m

[3] For example Tomb T15 at Nagada



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even 400 jars with probably wine from Palestine (*Lehner* 1997, 75; *Bard* 2000, 63; *Reeves* 2000, 112) where found inside that tomb which can determine the wealth of these first rulers.

## *2. Funeral architecture and customs during Archaic Egypt (c. 3000-2686 BC)*

### *2.1 Royal tombs*

When Petrie and Amélineau started first major excavations in Abydos (1897-1899) they discovered royal tombs of predynastic (Scorpion, Narmer) and early dynastic rulers (Hor-Aha, Djer, Merneith, Djet, Den, Anedjib, Semerkhet, Qaa, Peribsen, Khasekhemwy) (*Hoffman* 1980, 267-273; *Wilkinson* 1999, 231-238; *Reeves* 2000, 109-110). These tombs where made in the form of very large brick-lined pit graves dug in the desert (ranging from 100 $m^2$ to 1000 $m^2$) with several storage rooms for very rich funerary equipment and the burial chamber lined in wood (*Emery* 1961, 49-104; *Hoffman* 1980, 270; *Reeves* 2000, 111; *Bard* 2000, 70-74). These superstructures were buried below surface and covered by timber and brush roof filled with rubble, gravel mud-brick and mound of sand. This new style of tomb was low bench like building known as mastaba (*Gardiner* 1961, 404-409; *Emery* 1961, 129-130;

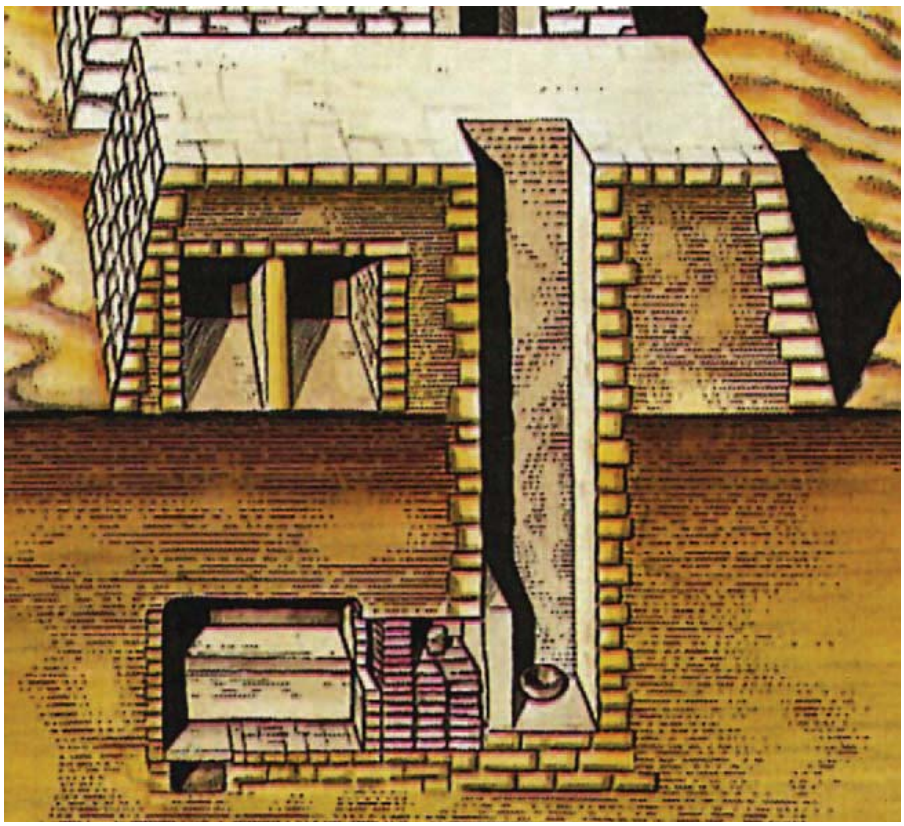


*Fig. 1 Schematic cross-section of mastaba*



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*Hoffman* 1980, 217; *Trigger* 1983, 55). Firstly they where only marked as mound of sand with a free standing stele bearing the Horus name of the king (*Kemp* 1989, 53). The whole of the exterior wall was painted in gay colors. This structure was surrounded by the row of graves of the owner's servants who supposed to service him in afterlife (*Emery* 1961, 131). In later periods these servants were replaced by shabti figures (*Tomorad* 2004, 92-93). The walls of burial chamber were also decorated with colored mats stuck to the walls (*Emery* 1961, 134). These structures around royal mastabas were the funerary enclosures. They were built in an isolated spots for one main purpose, the pharaoh wants to separate there last resting place which will provide him an eternal life from the rest of surrounding world and Egyptian citizens (*Wilkinson* 1999, 225-229, 238; *Kemp* 1989, 53-57).

The oldest royal tombs from Narmer and Hor-Aha were simple rectangular structures divided into two rooms by mud-brick wall (*Emery* 1961, 130; *Hoffman* 1980, 272). During the time of king Djer multiply chambers were built inside mastabas (*Hoffman* 1980, 272). At the time of king Den a long sloping stairway was made as the new improvement of mastaba design (*Emery* 1961, 130; *Hoffman* 1980, 272; *Lehner* 1997, 77).

During 1935-1939 Emery excavated Saqqara necropolis where he discovered various mastaba tombs of high officials dating the archaic period which were where bigger then mastabas in Abydos. That's why Emery believed that some of them were the "real tombs" of early rulers (*Emery* 1949-1958; *Emery* 1961; *Hoffman*, 1980, 280; *Lehner* 1997, 78-81; *Reeves* 2000, 111, 182-183). Kemp later determine that each of Abydos tombs was part of large mortuary enclosures destroyed in later times. He also liked them with the largest mastaba built by Khasekhemwy (*Kemp* 1967). His tomb was the build in the royal cemetery at Abydos and it comprise one long gallery[4] divided in 58 rooms with central burial chamber made of limestone[5]. This is the earliest known large scale construction where ancient Egyptian used cut limestone and granite blocks as the new materials to cover the structure and to block corridors (*Wilkinson* 1999, 240-243; *Bard* 2000, 86).

Tomb 3038 is on of the most unique tombs excavated in Saqqara because it contains the stepped superstructure like the first stepped pyramid of king Djoser. It was build during the reign of Anedjib like a stepped rectangular brick structure which covered the burial chamber by some very high official or maybe the king Anedjib himself (*Stevenson Smith* 1981, 42-43; *Lehner* 1997, 80).

The early rulers of 2nd dynasty abandon the royal cemetery in Abydos and start to build their royal enclosures in Saqqara. These tombs were found south of Djoser Step Pyramid complex and they comprise large number of galleries, magazines, private chambers which can imitate the private rooms of the palace (*Wilkinson*

[4] 68 x 39.4 m

[5] 8.6 x 3 m, preserved height 1.8 m



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1999, 240; *Bard* 2000, 85). According to Munro these tombs were not covered by mastaba superstructures because there is the lack of evidences for their existence (*Munro* 1993, 50).

### *2.2 Burial structures of other Egyptian classes*

Elite and higher nobility were buried in smaller mastaba structures. Like the royal ones they also contain couple of niches and superstructure above the burial chamber. The offerings were made of simple materials and they contain much smaller number of artefacts (*Emery* 1961, 134-136; *Bard* 2000, 74-76, 86). During later 2nd dynasty tombs in Saqqara were build in a form of vertical shaft cut in the bedrock which leads to the burial chamber covered by a small mud-brick superstructure with two niches on the eastern side (*Bard* 2000, 87).

Servants and artisans were buried in small version of mastaba tombs. They were small pit roofed with timber and covered with rectangular superstructure (*Emery* 1961, 137-138). Peasants where still buried in oval pits cuts in gravel along with small number of grave goods (pottery, stone vessels, tools and toilet implements). After the burial their graves were surmounted with circular low mound made from the soil taken from the grave pit (*Emery* 1961, 139).

## *3. Funeral architecture and customs during Old Kingdom (c. 2686-2160 BC)*

### *3.1 Old Kingdom pyramid structures*

The new pyramid structures which developed during the Old Kingdom have several purposes:

1. tomb or reliquary of a king,
2. pyramid complex where temple of the Horus (or king as divine ruler) and main ritual center,
3. link with sun god,
4. place of preservation of the body and link with eternal life,
5. economic values. Large scale building projects like pyramids gave work to thousands of artisans, labors and peasants during longer periods of time.

According to Palermo stone annals pyramid like structures were introduced into Egyptian architecture during the end of 2nd dynasty. Nothing is preserved from them so if they really existed they were just the first stage in the pyramid building (*Malek* 2000, 91).

The next or first stage of the pyramid building was the Djoser's Step pyramid which was built by the 3rd dynasty ruler known only by his Horus name Netjerikhet. Imhotep, architect, Vizier and high priest the sun god Ra, built this complex within 19 year of Djoser reign (c. 2667-2648 BC). The Step pyramid is the central structure of this complex. According to Lauer (*Lauer*, 1936-39; *Lauer*



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*Fig. 2 Complex of Step pyramid of Djoser*

1948; *Lehner* 1997, 84) it was build in six stages ($M_1$ - $M_2$ - $M_3$ - $P_1$ - $P_1$ - $P_2$) from initial rectangular mastaba with central shaft to the six-step pyramid with many shafts, galleries and chambers. They were two access corridors leading to central mastaba structure which was build like underground palace with private apartments, magazines, corridors and galleries. Decorations were organized in six panels. Three on the north side were topped by an arch and *djed* pillars and the Horus name Netjerikhet was also framed in the limestone. Southern panels are framed as false door and the king is shown during a rituals (*Edwards* 1991, 36-40; *Lehner* 1997, 88). The burial chamber was made as granite vault right beneath the central shaft (*Lehner* 1997, 88). The complex contained the area of 15 ha was surrounded by large enclosure wall which was 10.5 m high and 1645 m long. Northern temple, north and south pavilions, court of the serdab, Heb-Sed court, Temple T, southern altar, large court, south tomb with the chapel and west massifs were placed inside this enclosure (*Lehner* 1997, 84-85).

Until the end of the 3rd dynasty several stepped pyramids were build in Saqqara and Zawiyet el-Aryan (*Edwards* 1991, 58-70; *Lehner* 1997, 94-96) but none of them as so huge proportions and style.

The next stage of pyramid building were three pyramids build by the first ruler of 4th dynasty, Sneferu (c. 2613-2589 BC). First of them was build in Meidum and like Step pyramid of Djoser it was build in several stages. According to the first plan it supposed to be seven step pyramid but during the building of fourth and fifth step Sneferu deceided to build eight step. It was build during the first



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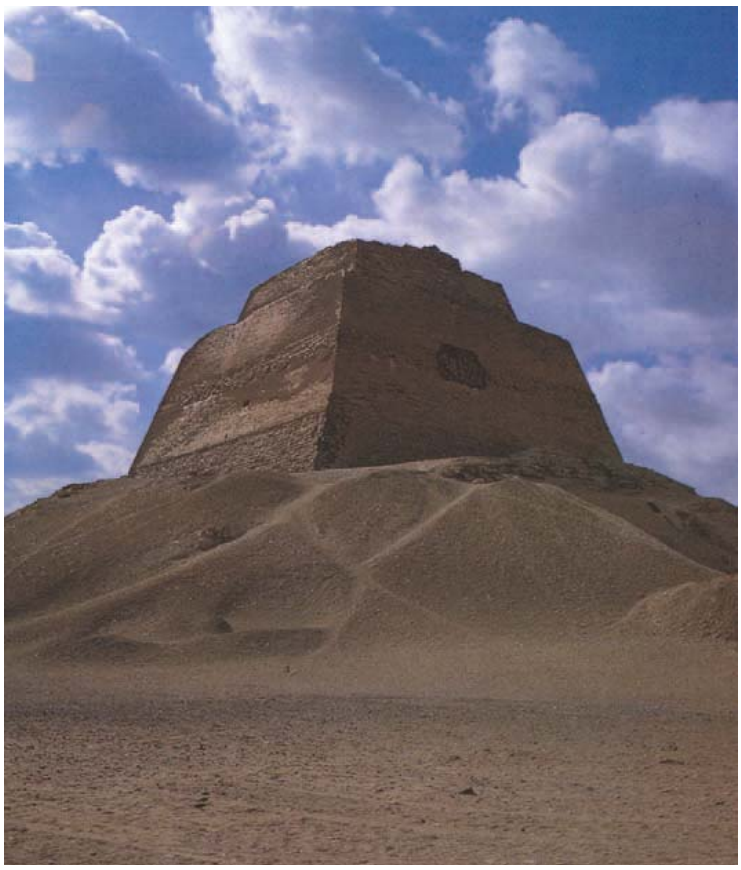


*Fig. 3 Meidum, Step pyramid of Sneferu*

14 years of his reign and abandon until the 28th or 29th year of Sneferu reign when decieded to transform step pyramid into true pyramid as cenotaph not as real tomb. Today only the three steps are still visible. In the center of the pyramid there is a small granite burial chamber[6] with no trace of sarchophagus (*Edwards* 1991, 75). Two niches with several corridors and shafts were also build inside the pyramid (*Edward* 1991, 71-77; *Lehner* 1997, 97-98). During his excavations of the pyramid complex Petrie found the remains of enclosure which contains a large wall, small pyramid on the south side and the long causeway that leads to the center of the pyramid (*Lehner* 1997, 99).

In the 15th year of his reign he found the new necropolis at Dahshur where he build two pyramids, the Bent and North or Red pyramid. The first Bent pyramid has rhomboidal shape because the angle of the sloaping sides was changed at some 2/3 of its height. The North of Red pyramid is the first real pyramid and also the final resting place of Sneferu (*Edwards* 1991, 78-97; *Lehner* 1997, 101-105; *Malek* 2000, 93). Both pyramids where surrounded my large enclosures which includes causeway, mortuary temple and chapels (*Lehner* 1997, 102-105).

6 5.9 x 2.65 m



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*Fig. 4 Dahshur, Bent pyramid of Sneferu*



*Fig. 5 Dahshur, North or Red pyramid of Sneferu*

His son and succesor Khufu (c. 2589-2566 BC) move the royal necropolis to Giza where he build the biggest ancient Egyptian pyramid. His succesors Khafra (c. 2558-2532 BC) and Menkaura (c. 2532-2503) also build pyramids at Giza plateau



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*Fig. 6 Giza, Khufu pyramid on the left and Khafra pyramid on the right side*

with smaller proportions. The pyramids at Giza where surrounded by pyramid complex which includes the mortuary temple, causeway, the valley temple and in some cases the queens' pyramids where near the main pyramids (*Edwards* 1991, 98-151; *Lehner* 1997, 106-137). On the north east side of the Khafra pyramid the Great Sphinx was also build along with the Sphinx temple.

Three main chambers linked by passages and shafts where found inside Khufu pyramid: the Kings' chamber[7] situated in the core of the pyramid, the Subterranean chamber 30 m below the surface, and Queen chambers below King's chamber. The pyramid was surrounded with limestone wall. In the middle section of the east wall was a enclosed court with the access through valley temple, causeway and mortuary temple. Near the enclosure walls several boat pits were found. On the east side of the pyramid were pyramids of three queen. East of the causeway were the settlement of the priests and artisans and the valley temple. West of the pyramids are mastabas for his highest officials and on the east side are mastabas of his royal realtives. On the southeast corner of the pyramid the satellite pyramid was found probably for his *ka*. (*Lehner* 1997, 108-117; *Malek* 2000, 95). The most of these structures were made from cut stone and mud-bricks and were demolished by the time. Pyramid and their complexes where robbed many times so today we can only presume how wealthy the grave goods really were.

Later pyramids were build in much smaller proportions usually in necropolis at Saqqara, Abusir, Lisht or Dahshur all the way to the 13th dynasty (*Edwards* 1991; *Lehner* 1997).

[7] 10.5 x 5.2 m, h. 5.8 m



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*Fig. 7 Giza, Menkaura pyramid*

| **Pharaoh** | **Location** | **Base (m)** | **Height (m)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Djoser | Saqqara | 121x109 | 60 |
| Sneferu | Meidum | 144 | 92 |
| Sneferu | Dahshur - Bent pyramid | 188 | 105 |
| Sneferu | Dahshur- North or Red pyramid | 220 | 105 |
| Khufu | Giza | 230 | 146,5 |
| Khafra | Giza | 215 | 143,5 |
| Menkaura | Giza | 102,2 x 104,6 | 65 |

Table 1: *Dimensions of the most important pyramids*

*3.2 Shaft tombs and mastabas*

During the Old Kingdom elite and higher nobility were buried in stone build mastaba structures. These tombs consists burial shaft, burial chamber with sarcopagus, chapel with false door stele and offering table, and serdab for statue of the tomb owner. The inside walls of the tombs was decorated with offering formulas, reliefs and colorful wall paintings with the scenes from daily life (*Shaw & Nicholson* 1995, 173). Good illustration for this type mastaba is the tomb of Per-Neb, Chancellor of 5th dynasty kings Djedkare and Unas excavated by Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (*Ransom Williams* 1932).

Servants and artisans were buried in smaller mastabas, shaft tombs with two or more chambers or simple shaft pits. Peasants where still buried in simple oval



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pits but from this period they were buried inside simple wooden coffins (*Dawson & Gray* 1968, 4-5).

## *4. Conclusion*

From prehistoric times to the end of Old Kingdom Egyptian burial customs evolved from simple surface burial in small pits to the pyramid superstructures. During this research author noticed several types of burial structures which developed during longer period of time (c. 4400-2160 BC). He analyzed each of them in separate sections of this work. As the conclusion of this work he systemized evolution of ancient Egyptian burial architecture in table 2.

| **Type of burial** | **Social class** | **Culture/Dating** |
|---|---|---|
| simple surface burial pit | Everyone | Badari culture<br>Nagada I<br>Maadi |
| pit-graves with wealthy grave goods | Elite | Badari culture |
| large burial pits with wealthy grave good | Elite | Nagada I |
| burial within pottery vassals | Children | Nagada II |
| rectangular pit graves subdivided by mud-brick walls with special compartments | upper classes; elite | Nagada II-III |
| royal mastaba tombs with multiply chambers, superstructure and enclosure | Kings | Dynasty 0-II |
| staircase tombs with burial chamber | elite; upper classes | Dynasty I-III |
| simple oval pits surmounted with circular low mound | Peasants | from Dynasty I |
| smaller mastaba tombs | servants and artisans | from Dynasty I |
| simple shaft burial tombs | servants and artisans | from Dynasty III |
| shaft burial tombs with chambers | servants and artisans | Old Kingdom |
| step pyramids with surrounding complexes | kings, queens | Dynasty III |
| stone mastaba tombs | elite; higher nobility | from Old Kingdom |
| pyramids with surrounding complexes | kings, queens | Dynasty IV-XIII |

Table 2: *Evolution of ancient Egyptian burial architecture based on this work*



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In each period from predynastic Egypt to the end of Old Kingdom burial practice, rituals and grave goods also changed from simple pottery and weapons to the all elements of common household (goods, furniture, religious symbols etc.). They were all systematically analyzed by the author.

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## Razvoj staroegipatskih pogrebnih običaja i arhitekture od kulture Badari do kraja Starog kraljevstva

U članku autor obrađuje razvoj staroegipatske pogrebne arhitekture i pogrebnih običaja od predinastičkog razdoblja do kraja Starog kraljevstva.

U prvom poglavlju obrađuju se rani oblici grobnica (razni oblici grobnih jama, preteče mastaba) i pogrebni običaji (položaj tijela u grobnici, pogrebni prilozi).



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Pregled se temelji na dosadašnjim arheološkim istraživanjima najvažnijih predinastičkih kultura Gornjeg (Badari, Nagada I-III) i Donjeg Egipta (Maadi) u periodu od 4400. do 3000. god. pr. Kr.

U drugom poglavlju autor analizira najvažnije promijene u arhitekturi i pogrebnim običajima tijekom arhajskog razdoblja (I. i II. dinastija). Obrađuju se kraljevske mastabe, male mastabe viših velikodostojnika, stepenaste grobnice s pogrebnim odajama, ali i jednostavne ovalne grobne jame s njihovim pogrebnim prilozima koje su karakteristične za niže društvene slojeve.

U trećem poglavlju autor obrađuje dalji razvoj pogrebne arhitekture te pogrebnih priloga tijekom Starog kraljevstva (od III. do VI. dinastije). Svi arhitektonski oblici grobnica sistematizirani su prema skupinama od jednostavnih građevinskih konstrukcija, poput grobnica u obliku okna, preko kamenih mastaba do kompleksa piramide (od stepenaste piramide do savršenih piramida okruženih ogradom) koje su karakteristične u razdoblju od III. dinastije nadalje. U članku se nalaze i dvije tablice, nekoliko crteža i slika.

Ključne riječi: *Stari Egipat – pogrebni običaji – kompleks piramide – mastaba – odaja*
Key words: *Old Egypt – funeral customs – pyramid complex – mastaba – chamber*



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