

## 1839 DEIR EL-GABRAWI

French: Deir el-Gebraoui

German: Dair al-Gabrâwi

ABSTRACT. *Deir el-Gabrawi is the name conventionally given to the main Old Kingdom necropolis of the Upper Egyptian 12th nome. Formed in fact of two cliffs, the northern one near the village of Arab el-Atiyat and the southern one near the village of Deir el-Gabrawi, its tombs date back to the late Old Kingdom (although an earlier chronology has been proposed). However no trace of a contemporary town has yet been found. Later on, a late Roman locality called Hieracon and the quartering of a Roman cohort were built in its close vicinity, and the dead from these settlements were buried in the tombs of the old necropolis. A rather peculiar characteristic of Deir el-Gabrawi is that some local governors controlled simultaneously the 12th as well as the 8th Upper Egyptian nomes during the 6th Dynasty.*

Deir el-Gabrawi is the name conventionally given to the main Old Kingdom necropolis of the Upper Egyptian 12<sup>th</sup> nome. Recent surveys in the neighbouring areas have brought to light new tombs dating back to the same period (Kurth and Rössler-Köhler 1987), but their decoration and inscriptions have almost completely disappeared, except in the case of the rock tomb of *Hnw*, a high dignitary living during the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and linked to the office of the vizier as his titles of *hrj-sšt3 n hwt-wrt* “chief of secrets of the Great *hwt*” and *jmj-r wsht* “overseer of the Court” show (Kurth and Rössler-Köhler 1987: 133-185). Consequently, Deir el-Gabrawi remains the main pharaonic provincial cemetery in this area. It is actually formed of two cliffs, the northern one near the village of Arab el-Atiyat and the southern one near the village of Deir el-Gabrawi (Kanawati 2005: 7). Although their tombs had been known by Egyptologists since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their publication should await until the archaeological expedition directed by Davies in 1900 (Davies 1902). Since then, only in the last years a more methodical digging and publication, under the auspices of the Australian Centre for Egyptology, have added new evidence as well as improved the overall interpretation of the site and suggested a different chronology, not universally accepted by specialists (Kanawati 2005, 2006, 2007; Moreno García in press).

No pharaonic town or administrative and residential centre related to the necropolis has yet been found, but it could well have been located quite apart from Deir el-Gabrawi, closer to the surrounding areas where other Old Kingdom tombs have been noticed. However, a survey carried out in an old settlement at Al-Ma’abda, where the tomb of *Hnw* was discovered, has not produced any evidence of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium levels (Rössler-Köhler and Dingenotto 1994). Another approach consists of considering some cults attested in the nome during the late Old Kingdom and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Thus the governor *Hnqw* and his son *Tmjj* are both described as *jm3hw hr M3tjt* “the honoured one before Matit”, while *Hnqw* was further called *jm3hw hr M3tjt nbt Bkmt* “the honoured one before Matit, the mistress of Iakmet” and *jm3hw hr Nmtj [hrj-jb] prw nw Mm* “the honoured one before Nemty, who is in the domains of Mam” (Kanawati 2005: 71-72), but hardly any more is known about these places, and even their status as “capitals” of the nome is dubious (Helck 1974: 101). Nevertheless, the province appears in the administrative sources of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium as the place where

several agricultural domains were founded by king Sneferu (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 131) and where some property was held by prince Nykaure, son of Khafre, and later transferred to his wife (Strudwick 2005: 200 [111]). These elements suggest an economic interest of the crown in the local agricultural resources; they probably laid the foundations of the later, 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty establishment of a network of local agents of the king and managers of the Pharaoh's agricultural *hwt* centres (Moreno García 1994; 1999: 262, 275). As for Deir el-Gebrawi, the main phases of occupation of the site were the late Old Kingdom, when the rock tombs (about 120) were built and decorated (only 16). Then, in the Late Antiquity, the locality of Hieracon is attested in documents from 288 CE, as well as the quartering of a Roman cohort in its vicinity. Deir el-Gebrawi was located between the two centres, and the dead from these settlements were buried in the tombs of the old necropolis. Finally, an important Christian community was based in the area (Kurth and Rössler-Köhler 1987: 186-194).

Although Egyptologists agree that the Old Kingdom tombs date from the Late Old Kingdom, the recent archaeological work led by Dr. Kanawati has been accompanied by a thorough revision of the traditionally accepted chronology, with important consequences for the comprehension of the provincial political history during the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and afterwards. Thus, Kanawati follows the suggestion made by Davies more than a century ago and proposes, mainly on an iconographic basis, that the tombs of the Northern group should be dated from the beginning and not from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Nevertheless, the appearance of early 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty memphite iconographic motifs in the tombs of Deir el-Gebrawi does not mean that they should be strictly contemporaneous (Moreno García in press). One can think, for instance, in some scenes from the tomb of Ibi which occur again in the Theban tomb TT 36, which belonged to a man of the same name from the reign of Psammetichus I, about 1600 years later (Baines and Malek 2000: 122). In other cases, some rare scenes in Memphite tombs of the reigns of Teti and Pepy I only appear in the provincial centres of Deir el-Gebrawi and El-Hawawish, but in a late 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty context (Moreno García in press); even *Tj:K3j-hp* of El-Hawawish (tomb M8), an official who served kings Pepi I and Merenre, copied a scene only known from the Memphite tomb of Debeheni, a courtier who lived under Mycerinus. Other arguments proposed by Kanawati in order to support his new chronology seem more solid, especially when considering the anthroponyms, the palaeography and the phraseology in the tombs (Kanawati 2005: 16-19). But here again, the phraseology as well as some themes dealt in the inscriptions display patterns more commonly found in other provincial inscriptions of the late Old Kingdom, and this is particularly evident in the tomb of Henqu (Kloth 2002: 44; more cautious: Grunert 2008, 2009).

In any case, the titles attested at Deir el-Gebrawi are rather exceptional because they show that some local governors controlled simultaneously the 12<sup>th</sup> as well as the 8<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nomes. Such an uncommon situation is probably best understood when considering the peculiarities of the Thinite nome, when two of its governors (the *hrj-tp ʕ3 n T3-wr Ggj* and *Hw-b3wj*) were buried not in their province but in the Memphite cemeteries, under the reign of Pepi II. Later on, during the First Intermediate Period, the nome was occasionally governed by officials from other provinces, like *ʕb-jhw*, who controlled the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> nomes of Upper Egypt (Fischer 1968: 203-205) or *Jnhrt-nht*, nomarch of the the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> provinces of the same region (Goedicke 1999: 149-152). But from the reign of Merenre on, three governors of Deir el-Gebrawi (*Jbj*, *Dʕw:Šm3j* and *Dʕw*) also directed the Thinite nome. Perhaps this situation was also related to the

position of provincials holding the vizierate: these three governors were not viziers, precisely at a period when a powerful family issued from the Thinite area (Abydos) became related by marriage to the Pharaohs and displayed the title of vizier but never that of *hrj-tp* ʕ3 “great overlord” of the nome. Later on, at the end of the Old Kingdom—if the traditional chronology is accepted—, Deir el-Gebrawi was administrated by two governors who were also viziers, *Hm-Rʕ:Jzj* [I] and *Hnqw* [II], when Thinis had its own *hrj-tp* ʕ3 *n T3-wr* “great overlord of the Thinite nome”, like *Ggj* and *Hw-b3wj*, buried in Memphis, or *Tmrrj* and *H3gj*, whose tombs are located at Naga ed-Der (Moreno García in press). Given the scarcity of the data any historical narrative would be inevitably speculative. But it is difficult to avoid seeing some relation between the exceptional fates of Abydos and Deir el-Gebrawi exactly during the same period of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Then, the social elevation of a family from Abydos, who included two queens and many viziers (including the well-known Weni or, quite remarkably, the lady Nebet), was contemporaneous with the exceptional careers of three nomarchs of Deir el-Gebrawi (and Thinis) who, unlike their successors of the late Old Kingdom, never got the vizierate. Later on, when Deir el-Gebrawi officials were both nomarchs and viziers, the local focus of power in the Thinite region seems to have shifted from Abydos to Naga ed-Der, where the governors of the Late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period were issued from.

When considering the ephemeral relevance of Deir el-Gebrawi in pharaonic times, only during the late Old Kingdom, its fate appears inseparable of other provincial centres from the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty on. As the new royal lineage relied greatly on the support of the provincial potentates, the pharaohs paved the way to the social promotion, monumental visibility and enrichment of a formerly rather obscure sector of the Egyptian elite, made up of provincials (Moreno García 2002, 2005). Many members of the Deir el-Gebrawi ruling family appeared then educated at the royal court (Moreno García 1997: 115-117), displayed proudly their merits in their autobiographical inscriptions (Strudwick 2005: 363-368) and accumulated substantial power as viziers, high officials and supra-regional leaders. Nevertheless, their prominence was also related to the politics of their time and to the service to the king. And when the united monarchy collapsed at the end of the Old Kingdom, the potentates of Deir el-Gebrawi faded away with it.

### **Bibliographical notes**

The necropolis was first published by Davies (1902) and only recently has Kanawati accomplished a full excavation and publication of the tombs, including scenes and archaeological material neglected in previous work (Kanawati 2005, 2007). The wealth of private titles and inscriptions from the Old Kingdom has been widely used in discussions about the provincial administration of the Old Kingdom (Fischer 1968; Moreno García 1994; 1999; in press) and the composition of autobiographies during this period (Grunert 2008; 2009; Kloth 2002). Regional archaeological surveys have also contributed to a better understanding of the role played by Deir el-Gebrawi in its regional historical context (Dieter and Rössler-Köhler 1987; Rössler-Köhler and Dingenotto 1994).

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