

DEIR EL-GABRAWI

دير الجبراوي

Juan Carlos Moreno García

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Deir el-Gabrawi, the most important Old Kingdom necropolis of the Upper Egyptian 12th nome, is 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. Its tombs date back to the late Old Kingdom, although an earlier chronology has been suggested. However, no trace of a contemporary town has yet been found. Later on, a late Roman locality called Hierakon 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 simultaneously controlled the 12th as well as the 8th Upper Egyptian nomes during the 6th Dynasty.

يعتبر دير الجبراوي من أهم جبانات عصر الدولة القديمة بالاقليم الثاني عشر بمصر العليا، ويتشكل من منحدرين، يقع الشمالي بالقرب من قرية عرب العطيات، والجنوبي بالقرب من قرية دير الجبراوي. وتعود المقابر المكتشفة إلى نهاية عصر الدولة القديمة، بالرغم من وجود اقتراح بتأريخها الي فترة زمنية احدث ، علي اية حال لم يتم الكشف عن أية آثار لمدينة معاصرة حتى الآن. وفي وقت لاحق شيد موقع من نهاية العصر الروماني عرف بإسم «هيراكون» ومكان سكن لكتيبة رومانية ايضا شيد الي جواره، وتم دفن موتى هذه المستوطنات بمدافن الجبانة القديمة. يوجد سمة غريبة بدير الجبراوي، وهي أن بعض الحكام المحليين حكموا الاقليمي الثامن والسادس بمصر العليا في نفس الوقت الذي حكموا فيه الاقليم الثاني عشر.

Deir el-Gabrawi is the name conventionally given to the main Old Kingdom necropolis of the Upper Egyptian 12th nome (Beinlich 1975). Recent surveys in the neighboring areas have brought to light tombs dating back to the same period (Kurth and Rössler-Köhler 1987). However, their decoration and inscriptions have almost completely disappeared, except in the case of the rock tomb of *Hnw*, a high dignitary living during the 6th Dynasty and linked to the office of the vizier as his titles of *hrj-sšt3 n hwt-wrt*, “chief of secrets of the Great *but* (the Vizier’s bureau)”

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).

Research History

Although the tombs had been known to Egyptologists since the middle of the 19th century, it was not until the archaeological

expedition directed by Davies in 1900 (Davies 1902a, 1902b) that they were published. Since then, and only in the last years, 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 2007).

Layout of the Site

No Pharaonic town or administrative and residential center 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 observed. 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 third 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 *jmšhw hr Mšjt*, “the honored one before Matit,” while *Hnqw* was further called *jmšhw hr Mšjt nbt Jskmt*, “the honored one before Matit, the mistress of Iakmet,” and *jmšhw hr Nmtj [hrj-jb] prw nw Mꜣm*, “the honored one before Nemty, who is in the domains of Mam” (Kanawati 2005: 71 - 72). 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 third 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 Nikaura, son of Khafra, which was 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 6th Dynasty establishment of a network of local agents of the king and managers of the pharaoh’s

agricultural *hwt* centers (Moreno García 1994, 1999: 262, 275). As for Deir el-Gabrawi, the main phases of occupation of the site were the late Old Kingdom, when the rock tombs (about 120) were built, of which only 16 were decorated. Then, in the Late Antiquity, the locality of Hierakon is attested in documents from 288 CE, as well as the quartering of a Roman cohort in its vicinity. Deir el-Gabrawi was located between the two centers, 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).

Significance and Historical Context

Although Egyptologists agree that the Old Kingdom tombs date from the late Old Kingdom, the recent archaeological work led by Naguib 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 6th 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 to the beginning and not the end of the 6th Dynasty. Nevertheless, the appearance of early 6th Dynasty Memphite iconographic motifs in the tombs of Deir el-Gabrawi does not mean that they should be strictly contemporaneous (Moreno García 2007). One can think, for instance, of some scenes from the tomb of Ibi, which occur again in the Theban tomb TT 36 that 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 Tety and Pepy I only appear in the provincial centers of Deir el-Gabrawi and El-Hawawish, but in a late 6th Dynasty context (Moreno García 2007); even *Tij:Kꜣj-ḥp* of El-Hawawish (tomb M8), an official who served kings Pepy I and Merenra, copied a scene only known from the Memphite tomb of Debeheni, a courtier who

lived under Menkaura. Other arguments proposed by Kanawati in order to support his new chronology seem more solid, especially when considering the anthroponyms, the paleography, and the phraseology in the tombs (Kanawati 2005: 16 - 19). But here again, the phraseology as well as some themes dealt with in the inscriptions display patterns more commonly found in other provincial inscriptions of the late Old Kingdom; this is particularly evident in the tomb of Henqu (Kloth 2002: 44; more cautious, see Grunert 2008, 2009).

In any case, the titles attested at Deir el-Gabrawi are rather exceptional because they show that some local governors controlled simultaneously the 12th as well as the 8th 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 *ḥrj-tp ʿ3 n T3-wr*, “great overlord of the Thinite nome,” *Ggj* and *Ḥw-b3wj*), were buried not in their province but in the Memphite cemeteries, under the reign of Pepy II. Later on, during the First Intermediate Period, the nome was occasionally governed by officials from other provinces, like *ʿb-jḥw*, who controlled the 6th - 8th nomes of Upper Egypt (Fischer 1968: 203 - 205) or *Jnhrt-nḥt*, nomarch of the 8th and 10th provinces of the same region (Goedicke 1999: 149 - 152). But from the reign of Merenra on, three governors of Deir el-Gabrawi (*Jbj*, *Dʿw:šm3j*, and *Dʿw*) 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 point in time 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 *ḥrj-tp ʿ3*, “great overlord,” of the nome. At the end of the Old Kingdom—if the traditional chronology is accepted—Deir el-Gabrawi was administrated by two governors who were also viziers, *Ḥm-Rʿ:Jzj* [I] and *Hnqw* [II], during a period when Thinis had its own *ḥrj-tp ʿ3 n T3-wr*, “great overlord of the Thinite nome,” like *Ggj* and *Ḥw-b3wj*, buried in

Memphis, or *Tmrrj* and *Ḥ3gj*, whose tombs are located at Naga el-Deir (Moreno García 2007). 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-Gabrawi during the exact same period of the 6th Dynasty. At that time, the social elevation of a family from Abydos, who included two queens and many viziers (including the well-known Weni and quite remarkably, the lady Nebet, the only female vizier of the Old Kingdom), was contemporaneous with the exceptional careers of three nomarchs of Deir el-Gabrawi (and Thinis) who, unlike their successors of the late Old Kingdom, never held the vizierate. Later on, when Deir el-Gabrawi officials were both nomarchs and viziers, the local focus of power in the Thinite region seems to have shifted from Abydos to Naga el-Deir, from where the governors of the Late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period were issued.

When considering the ephemeral relevance of Deir el-Gabrawi in Pharaonic times, its fate, only during the late Old Kingdom, appears inseparable from other provincial centers from the beginning of the 6th Dynasty on. As the new royal lineage relied greatly on the support of the provincial potentates, the pharaohs paved the way to 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 educated members of the Deir el-Gabrawi ruling family appeared at the royal court (Moreno García 1997: 115 - 117), proudly displayed 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. When the united monarchy collapsed at the end of the Old Kingdom, the potentates of Deir el-Gabrawi faded away with it.

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The necropolis was first published by Davies (1902), and only recently has Kanawati (2005, 2007) accomplished a full excavation and publication of the tombs, including scenes and archaeological material neglected in previous work. 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, 2007), the composition of autobiographies during this period (Grunert 2008, 2009; Kloth 2002), and artistic conventions found in the necropolis (Romano and Robins 1994; Vasiljević 2004). Regional archaeological surveys have also contributed to a better understanding of the role played by Deir el-Gabrawi in its regional historical context (Kurth and Rössler-Köhler 1987; Rössler-Köhler and Dingenotto 1994).

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