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C.J. EYRE



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BURIED PYRAMIDS AND LAYERED THOUGHTS:
THE ORGANISATION OF MULTIPLE APPROACHES
IN EGYPTIAN RELIGION

ANN MACY ROTH

Despite the indisputable conservatism of the ancient Egyptians, their construction of the world was never entirely static. They used the same cultural forms and ideas repeatedly throughout their history, but they were constantly developing new versions of these forms and ideas and adding them to their repertoire. That they saw no contradictions between the new versions and the older forms is usually attributed to their 'multiplicity of approaches', a phenomenon elegantly described by J.A. Wilson: 'The way of the Egyptian was to accept innovations and incorporate them into his thought, without discarding the old and outmoded. This means that it is impossible to find in ancient Egypt a system in our sense, orderly and consistent. Old and new lie blandly together, like some surrealist picture of age and youth on a single face¹.'

It can be argued, however, that while the Egyptians clearly retained mutually contradictory forms and ideas, these elements did not lie, as Wilson believed, blandly side by side. Instead, successive revisions enveloped the older versions, so that over time a concept or an object became encapsulated in multiple layers. Each earlier version was layered beneath a more recent one, or nested inside it. Burying the old within the new created a hierarchy of layers, inherent in which lay the logical system that Wilson found lacking in Egyptian thought. While this hierarchy cannot always be recovered, positing its existence can lead to a productive analysis of the contradictory shapes, concepts, and metaphors that we find nested within each other throughout Egyptian textual, iconographic, and archaeological remains. The Egyptians' tendency to nest ideas and forms offers an important key to the mechanism of religious evolution in ancient Egypt, and to the meanings of the richly layered religious texts, images, and objects that were its result.

It is clear from many examples that the burying of outdated versions inside newer versions, like the burial of old cult statues under temple floors, was more than simply a respectful way of preserving them. Nested within the new forms, the power and antiquity of the older versions lent historical authority and effectiveness. The

¹ In H. Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, J.A. Wilson, T. Jacobsen, and W.A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: an essay on speculative thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago, 1977), 33.

accretion of layers over time was characteristic of objects and concepts that had been venerated for many centuries. In time, a multiplicity of nested layers not only signalled the great value and antiquity of an idea or form, but came in itself to convey sacred power.

Nested objects are particularly common in stories about magic. In Papyrus Westcar, when Redjedet finds the magical singing bag of grain left by the gods, she puts the bag in a wooden container, which she in turn places inside another container, seals, wraps in a hide, and finally stores in a sealed chamber². She clearly believes that the appropriate place for a magical object is inside multiple layers. Nesting also occurs in the demotic stories of Setne Khaemwase. The magical Book of Thoth, for example, is found in a box of gold, nested within successive boxes of silver, ivory and ebony, juniper, copper, and lead³. That the value of the containers increases from the outside to the inside is an initial example of the hierarchy that can be expressed by such layering. These nested boxes cannot have been meant to deter theft, since they open easily, once the snakes protecting the outer box are defeated. The purpose of the nesting lay elsewhere: it marked the value of the book and ensured its magical effectiveness. R. Ritner has noted that ‘Egyptian [magical] terminology generalized the notion of “surrounding” rather than “binding”,’ in contrast to other ancient Mediterranean cultures⁴. That the verb commonly used to mean ‘to conjure, work magic upon’ (*šnj*), had as its basic meaning ‘surround’, ‘enclose’⁵ demonstrates how fundamental such nesting was to Egyptian religion.

The ‘nesting’ of multiple approaches can be seen in all areas of Egyptian religious production. Illustrations from the realms of myth, ritual, iconography, mortuary archaeology, and architecture are described below. The first four examples argue for the general principle, while the fuller discussion of the fifth example demonstrates some of its analytical possibilities.

Ritual: the ‘Opening of the Mouth’

By the end of the Old Kingdom, the mortuary version of the opening of the mouth ritual already contained a sequence of several successive revisions of the ritual, some of which mimicked developments of birth and childhood in order to allow the

² P. Westcar 12, 4-8.

³ Setne I 3, 34-5.

⁴ R.K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Egyptian Magical Practice*, SAOC 54 (Chicago, 1993), 143 n. 167. The importance of swallowing as a magical technique (ibid. 102-10) may also be in part due to the ‘nesting’ of words and other powerful substances inside a person, who becomes magically charged as a result.

⁵ R. Anthes, *ZÄS* 86 (1961), 86-9. As Anthes argues, the more general meanings (‘inquire’, ‘speak’, ‘pronounce’) are not present in the Pyramid Texts, and are probably later generalisations from its more specialized magical function. (The *šn* hieroglyph itself represents an enclosing or wrapping.) As a term of magical enchantment, the transitive verb denotes a wrapping that can either protect a favoured object by enclosing it, or prevent a dangerous object from doing harm by restraining it.

deceased person to be reborn and mature sufficiently to receive sustenance⁶. The earliest attested form of the ritual was embodied in the type A offering list that developed during the Fourth Dynasty⁷. This sequence includes a ‘mouth-washing bread’, as well as green onions, which represent the teeth of Horus⁸ and which are presented just before a series of meat offerings. Even this early version shows several repeated sequences of offerings, which suggests that the A list may already have incorporated more than one redaction of the ritual. In the mid-Fifth Dynasty, Barta’s B-sequence was added at the front of these older offerings. It included the opening of the mouth with two finger-shaped iron blades (the *ntrwy*) and five cloves of garlic, also identified as teeth and followed by meat offerings. The A-B list⁹, incorporating both sequences, represented a new redaction of the older ritual, the redaction recorded in the earliest Pyramid Texts. In the mid-Sixth Dynasty, however, the ritual was revised again, and another new sequence was added, again at the beginning of the ritual. The new version used an adze and a bull’s foreleg to open the mouth¹⁰, and buried the B sequence, just as the B sequence had itself buried the earlier A sequences.

The Egyptians themselves clearly saw these rituals as a series of historical revisions. Other Pyramid Text passages associate the earlier tools with successively earlier generations: Pyr. 1329-30 lists (following the later adze and blades) the earliest tool, the human little finger, said to have been used by Horus to open the mouth of Osiris; while Pyr. 1983 associates the finger-shaped iron blades of the B sequence with the next generation, the Sons of Horus. In Pyr 1983 the adze is the first mentioned, and hence the present-day tool; but Pyr. 1329-1330 lists an even more recent tool preceding the adze, the *sšš*, which may represent an innovation that did not catch on. The older versions of these ritual acts, retained in secondary position, reinforced the current version in which they were embedded. By the New Kingdom, the accumulated implements, all with the same basic function, were often shown piled on an offering table¹¹. They were not redundant, but added historical depth and effectiveness to the ritual.

⁶ For arguments supporting the development of the ritual described here, see A.M. Roth, *JEA* 78 (1992), 113-47; id., *JEA* 79 (1993), 57-79.

⁷ W. Barta, *Die altägyptische Opferliste*, MÄS 3 (Berlin, 1963), fig. 4.

⁸ According to Pyr. 79ab, the later Pyramid Texts spell accompanying the onions.

⁹ Barta, *Opferliste*, fig. 5. This list type was first attested as part of a royal offering list in the mid-Fifth Dynasty; see Altenmüller, *MDAIK* 22 (1967), 17-18.

¹⁰ Pyr. 13-14. This sequence was never incorporated into the standard offering list (Barta, *Opferliste*, 78), although collections of ritual equipment used in ‘opening of the mouth’ rituals do occur in the Nineteenth Dynasty (ibid. 129-33).

¹¹ See Roth, *JEA* 79 (1993), 57 n. 2, for references to examples.

Myth: the Memphite Cosmogony

Mythical explanations of natural facts also frequently incorporated older explanations. The Memphite Cosmogony¹², best known for its innovative creation through the spoken word, firmly ties its creator deity and his creative acts to older cosmogonies. In the first section of the text (lines 7-16c), Ptah is identified with Horus and Seth, descendants of the ennead created by Atum in the older Heliopolitan cosmogony. Genealogy is used here to establish the historical sequence of development, just it was in the previous example. In a later section (lines 50-51), Ptah is syncretised with the primeval divinities of the Hermopolitan creation myth, Nun and Naunet, who are said to have created Atum himself. The central section of the text (lines 48-61) recounts Ptah's creation of his Ennead by means of the spoken word formed by his mind and his tongue, but his activities do not entirely supplant Atum's creation. Instead, Ptah's Ennead is identified first with Atum's teeth and lips (recalling his creation by spitting), and then with Atum's semen and fingers (recalling his creation by masturbation) (line 55). Like the adze in the previous example, Ptah is the effective actor; but just as the earlier tools added historical weight and power to the adze, the older and more physical creative acts of Atum were incorporated into Ptah's creation, and gave it historical and mythological authority.

The phenomenon can also be observed in even later creation accounts, such as the Khonsu Cosmogony at Karnak¹³, where the actions of the new creator god incorporate the creative acts of both Ptah and Atum, as well as a host of other cosmogonies for which we have no 'purer' antecedents.

Iconography: the Bark of Amun

With iconography, the nesting of multiple versions was more clearly physical. The divine bark of Amun (fig. 1a) first appeared in the New Kingdom. Although it is often described as a boat, it in fact combined three means of transportation. The carrying poles and the open-frame shrine over the naos were remnants of the covered sedan chair that was a common mode of transport for gods in the Archaic Period and Old Kingdom¹⁴. The carrying bark also incorporated a sledge, which was probably the earliest means of transporting statues of divinities¹⁵. These elements were nested together rather subtly, with the boat clearly the most prominent, the 'uppermost', part of the assemblage. The older modes of transport literally underlay and supported the present-day one

¹² J.H. Breasted, *ZÄS* 39 (1901), 39ff and pls 1-2.

¹³ R.A. Parker and L.H. Lesko, in J. Baines et al. (eds), *Pyramid Studies and Other Essays Presented to I.E.S. Edwards* (London, 1988), 168-75 and pls 34-7.

¹⁴ B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London and New York, 1989), 94-5.

¹⁵ That the sledge is used to write the name of the primeval god Atum himself attests to its early association with divinity.

and reinforced its symbolic statement: the vehicle conveyed an important and venerable god, one who had been worshipped long enough to acquire such accretions.

The depiction of the ancient festivals of Min and Sokar in the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu perhaps preserves some earlier combinations of sacred transport. The figure of Min (labelled Amun-Kamutef) rests on only a sledge and carrying poles¹⁶, as does the standard of Nefertem¹⁷. The bark of Sokar (fig. 1b) is particularly

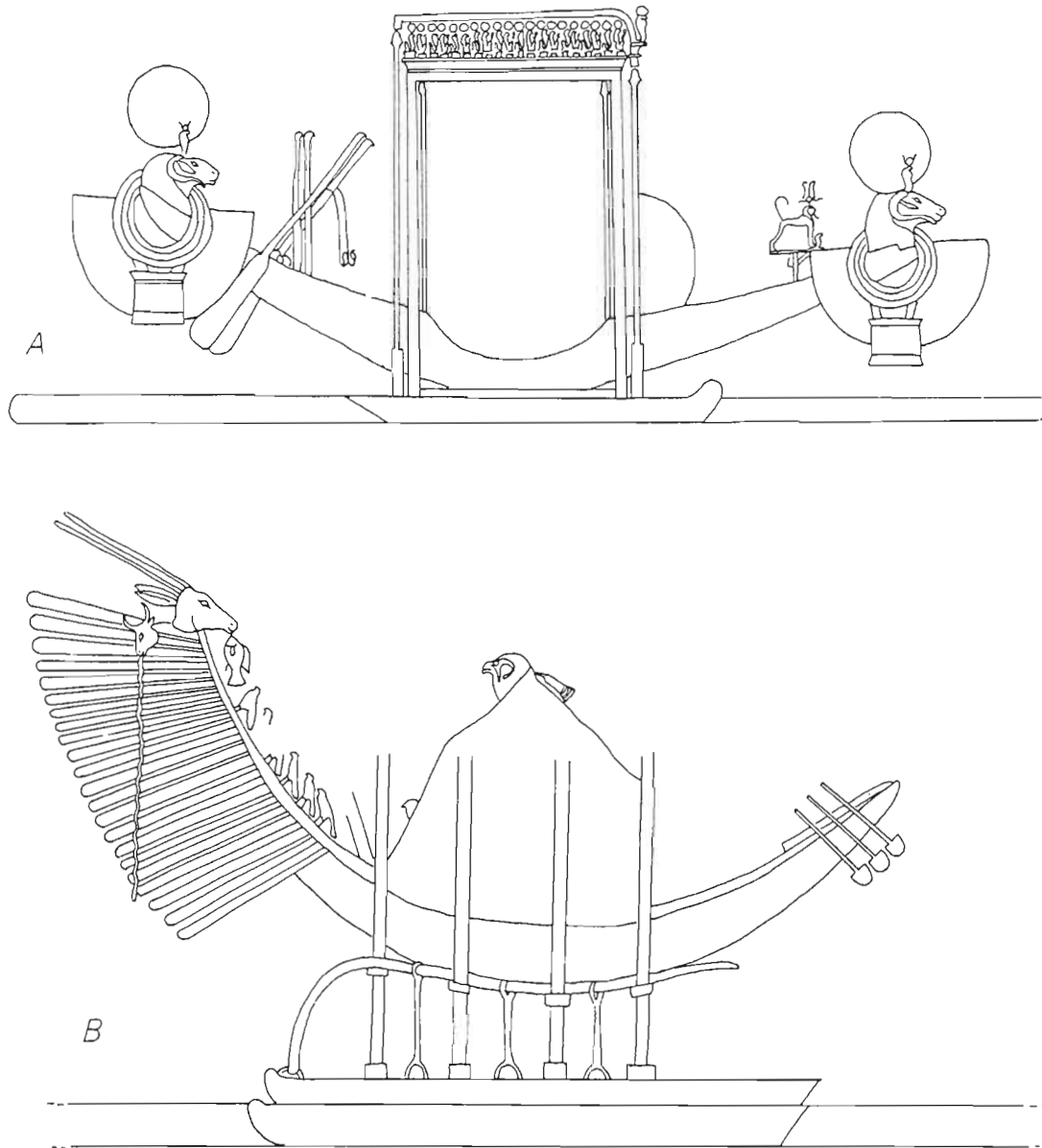


Fig. 1. Nesting in divine barks: (a) the bark of Amun (after H.H. Nelson, *The Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak*, I/1 (Chicago, 1981), pl. 76); and (b) the bark of Sokar (after *Medinet Habu* IV, pl. 22).

¹⁶ The Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, IV (Chicago, 1940), pl. 200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pl. 224.

interesting: the boat rests on supports and is carefully tied to the underlying sledge. This sledge, presumably dating from the period when the boat was dragged, now rests on another sledge, which is itself attached to carrying poles¹⁸. These combinations may represent earlier versions of such nesting, since the festival in which they are attested is very old.

Mortuary archaeology: the Burial of Tutankhamun

The layers that surrounded the body of Tutankhamun (see fig. 2a) exceed in number even the nested layers that enclosed the book of Thoth. In form, the three outermost shrines and the sarcophagus itself were of the standard shrine-shape introduced into the funerary tradition in the New Kingdom (the outermost one anomalously doubled). However, the canopy frame between the outer two shrines had a gabled roof and the innermost shrine was shaped like a vaulted *qrst*-coffin, both forms that go back into the Old Kingdom. Inside the sarcophagus itself were three anthropoid coffins, the outer of gilded wood, the next of gilded wood ornamented with glass and stone inlays, and finally the innermost coffin of solid gold. Again, there is a hierarchy of sizes and values; but there is also a chronological hierarchy. Anthropoid coffins were a development of the Middle Kingdom and the styles of the three trace back styles of three periods of the New Kingdom in reverse chronological order¹⁹. Within the innermost coffin lay a gold mask, a form dating to the First Intermediate Period²⁰; and the body itself was wrapped in linen, a practice that went back to the beginning of Egyptian history²¹.

That the number of these nested layers continued to increase over time can be seen by the plan of the tomb of Ramesses IV at Turin²², which shows the addition of a fifth nested shrine to the four shrines and canopy frame found in Tutankhamun's tomb (see fig. 2b).

¹⁸ Ibid. pl. 221. The caption speaks of 'the dragging of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris around the walls by the king himself', so clearly the poles were a later addition to the procession.

¹⁹ Although they are somewhat differently placed, the embracing winged figures of the vulture and cobra goddesses below the broad collar of the innermost gold coffin resemble those on the gilded coffin of Sekenenre Tao II in the late Seventeenth Dynasty (CG 61001) and other coffins of the period. The coloured inlay of the middle coffin represents a style limited to the reign of Amenhotep III and the Amarna period (Aidan Dodson, unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the ARCE, Toronto, 1994). And the outermost coffin of the three presumably represents the post-Amarna abandonment of that style in the reign of Tutankhamun himself.

²⁰ E. Brovarski, in S. D'Auria et al., *Mummies and Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt* (Boston, 1988), 119.

²¹ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: the One and the Many*, John Baines, trans. (Ithaca NY, 1982), 35-6, has suggested that the early Egyptians wrapped things in cloth as a way of imparting divinity, for example, mummies and the 'flag' hieroglyph *ntr*. Excavation photographs of the tomb of Tutankhamun show that most of the statues of gods and other figures were similarly wrapped. This concept is undoubtedly related to the 'nesting' phenomenon.

²² H. Carter and A.H. Gardiner, *JEA* 4 (1917), 130-58, especially pl. 29.

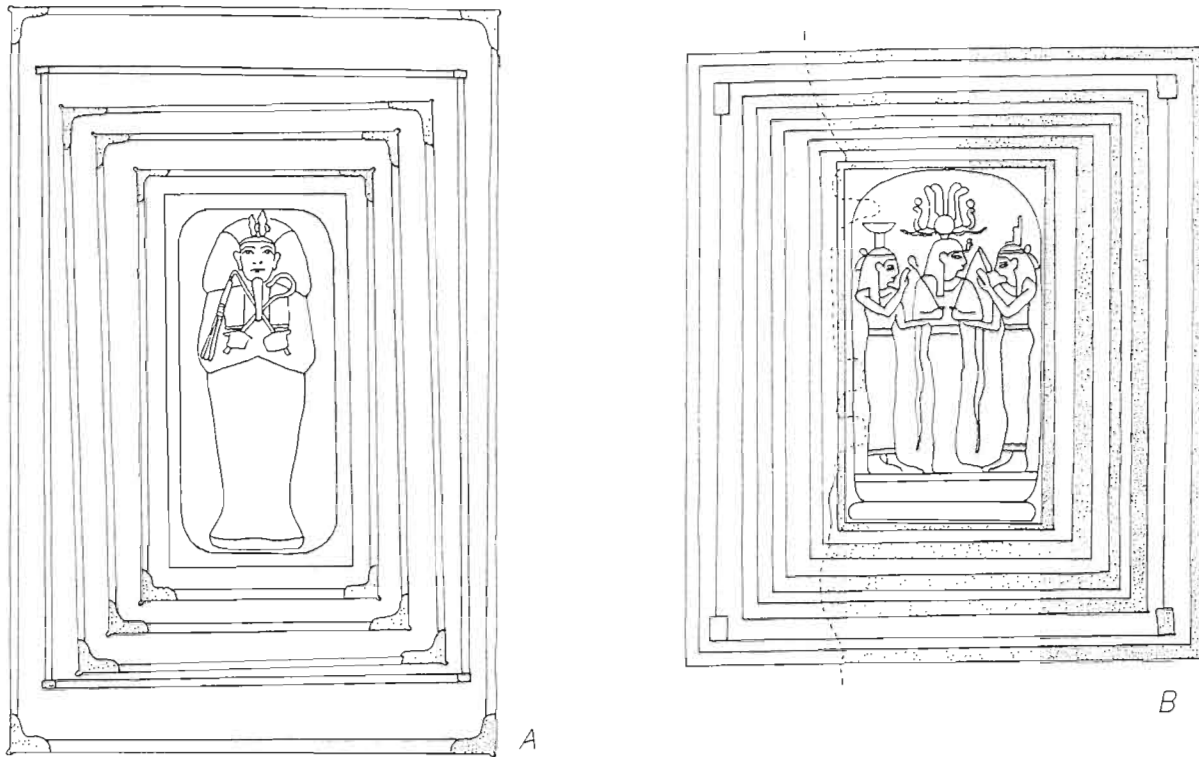


Fig. 2. Burial shrines and coffins: (a) as discovered in of the tomb of Tutankhamun (drawing based on N. Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun*, 85) and (b) as recorded on the Turin plan of the tomb of Ramesses IV (Carter and Gardiner, *JEA* 4 (1917), pl. 29), which shows an additional shrine.

Architecture: Old Kingdom Royal Superstructures

By the early Fourth Dynasty, five different shapes had evolved to cover royal tombs. These shapes continued to be used until the end of the Old Kingdom and beyond, in consciously selected combinations that reflected varying views of the past and past ideas. The oldest royal tomb shape was probably a simple mastaba, a low mound built of the fill removed from the substructure that marked and protected the burial below. The early Egyptians may already have connected these mastabas, where re-birth took place after death, with the primeval mound that emerged from the flood waters at the birth of the world.

By the beginning of the First Dynasty, elite tombs had adopted the form of a rectangular niched mastaba, with a north-south axis. The niching was apparently derived from the frame and matting of domestic architecture²³ and probably related to the view, common in this period, that the tomb was a 'house of eternity', in which

²³ The pattern is said to be that of exterior matting; however, it may be an externalisation of the decorative matting that ornamented the inside of the house. One wonders whether the niched facades themselves were not originally an externalisation of the decorative matting that adorned the early burial chambers. since internal spaces and external forms seem to be rather congruent during this period, as will be argued below.

the deceased would live his afterlife²⁴. The niched form was used as a superstructure over the burial only in private tombs²⁵; however, larger niched structures with hollow interiors were built on the plain at Abydos, some distance from the royal tombs on the Umm el-Qab, and probably served as cenotaphs and cult places²⁶.

A third type of superstructure, the stepped mound, is also clearly associated with these Abydos tombs. Although these superstructures have not survived archaeologically at the Umm el-Qab, their existence is suggested by iconographic sources. The name of the tomb of Anedjib, $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}Hr$, is written in a frame that appears to rest upon a stepped platform²⁷; and the same platform appears in 53 potmarks from the Umm el-Qab itself, where the general part of the name, $z\beta\text{-}h\beta$, surmounted the steps²⁸. Moreover, two stepped structures were buried within a non-royal Saqqara mastaba dating to the reign of Anedjib, and probably imitating the royal form²⁹. It thus appears likely that G.A. Reisner was correct in his suggestion that stepped platforms were used for the superstructures of the royal tombs on the Umm el-Qab³⁰, at least from the time of Anedjib.

A fourth type of superstructure must have been developed in the Second Dynasty. Two tomb substructures of the period, that of Hetepsekhemwy at Saqqara and that of Khasekhemwy at Abydos, are too long to have had either a stepped pyramid or a niched mastaba superstructure. R. Stadelmann has suggested for these tombs a long, vaulted superstructure³¹, which may have been related in its form to the vaulted shrines known from archaic iconography. The only clear surviving early superstructure of this fourth shape is the vaulted South Tomb in the Djoser complex, although

²⁴ See particularly the latrine and lavatory installations recorded in Second and Third Dynasty tombs at Saqqara, in J.E. Quibell, *Archaic Tombs, 1913-1914*, Excavations at Saqqara 6 (Cairo, 1923).

²⁵ I assume here that the niched Saqqara mastabas of the First Dynasty were private, as it is becoming increasingly obvious that they were.

²⁶ D. O'Connor, *JARCE* 26 (1989), 51-86.

²⁷ This name clearly represents the tomb of Anedjib, as suggested initially by P. Lacau and J.-P. Lauer, *Pyramide à degrés*, IV/2 (Cairo, 1961), 16, and accepted by several authors. R. Stadelmann, *Die ägyptische Pyramiden* (Mainz, 1985), 23-4, also believes the name to refer to the tomb of Anedjib, although he equates it with one of the Saqqara structures. Similar names, in which some other royal reference replaces the element *Hr*, can be associated with other early kings, although none has a stepped base. These names include the $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}nb$ (associated with Qa'a), $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}tj$ (or *msn*?) and the $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}k\beta$ (both associated with Hetepsekhemwy), and the $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}Hr\text{-}R'\text{-}nb$ (associated with Raneb). For different reasons the $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}nb$ was identified as the tomb of Qa'a by W.M.F. Petrie (*Royal Tombs*, I (London, 1901), 21) and by the present author (A.M. Roth, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago, 1991), 166-8).

²⁸ Petrie, *Royal Tombs* I, pl. 44, 111-57, and id., *Royal Tombs*, II (London, 1901), pl. 55, 16-26. Almost half of these potmarks came from the tomb of Anedjib, but several, including examples from intact or largely intact vessels, came from other royal tombs. One such potmark gave the fuller name $z\beta\text{-}h\beta\text{-}k\beta$, which presents a problem, since Hetepsekhemwy has no known tomb on the Umm el-Qab.

²⁹ W.B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, I (Cairo, 1949), 82-91.

³⁰ G.A. Reisner, *The Development of the Egyptian Tomb down to the Reign of Cheops* (Cambridge MA, 1936), 332-7.

³¹ In *Mélanges Gamal Eddin Mokhtar* II, BdE 97/2 (Cairo, 1985), 295-307.

Stadelmann has argued that one of the vaulted storeroom groups in the same complex was actually a vaulted Second Dynasty tomb, engulfed by Djoser's construction³². The rounded vault, most familiar from the later *qrst* coffin, may have represented the vault of heaven itself.

The final form developed in the Old Kingdom was the true pyramid, which appeared at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty. This form is thought to represent the rays of the sun and correspond to the increasing importance of the solar cult. These new true pyramids did not entirely supplant the preceding forms, but incorporated them, a process for which there was already a long tradition.

Although the absence of clear royal superstructures before the Step Pyramid complex of the Third Dynasty makes it impossible to trace the tradition further back in royal tombs, non-royal structures contained buried forms during the First and Second Dynasties, when several of the mastabas at Saqqara exhibit buried niched faces³³. Two further examples from the period are quite well known: S 3507, a very early niched mastaba from Saqqara, had buried within it a flat, brick-encased mound (fig. 3a); and another niched mastaba from the reign of Anedjib, S 3038, contained two separate stepped mounds (fig. 3b). The second example demonstrates an important fact: buried architectural forms did not always take different shapes³⁴. Identical

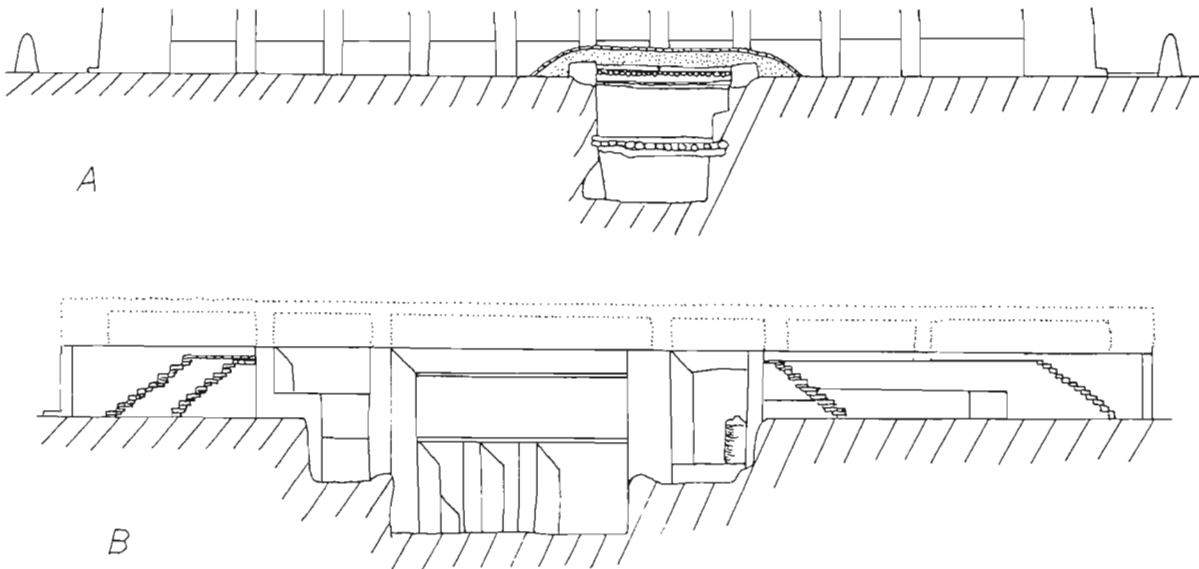


Fig. 3. Buried structures in two Archaic Period tombs from Saqqara; (a) S 3507 (after W.B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, III (London, 1958), pl. 85); and (b) S 3038 (after Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, I (Cairo, 1949), 89).

³² Ibid. 299-304.

³³ Quibell, *Archaic Tombs*, pl. 2, shows several examples of such faces buried in later construction.

³⁴ The two sledges underlying the bark of Sokar (fig. 1b) suggest that this duplication also occurred in other realms of religious production.

structures could be buried to reinforce each other, and perhaps simply to add to the complexity of the nesting. The buried mounds in S 3507 and S 3038 have generally, and properly, been considered to be symbolic³⁵; but in other cases, buried architecture has been explained as an earlier plan or as a structural support.

The burying of older forms continued in non-royal tombs of later periods³⁶, but the phenomenon is even more striking in royal monuments. The Djoser complex, our first relatively intact royal superstructure, incorporated all four of the specialised royal tomb forms attested before it. The niched facade, an early First Dynasty form, enclosed a stepped pyramid, which evolved slightly later, and also a vaulted form that dated to the Second Dynasty. The oldest form, the low mound, was also present in the flat-topped platform with sloping sides that was buried inside the Step Pyramid, regularised in shape for architectural reasons. This mound is usually seen as an early building stage, but the frequency of nested symbolic forms should caution us against automatically assuming that buried architectural elements were not buried intentionally. (It is perhaps significant that this inner mastaba appears to have horizontal coursing, not the inclined coursing of the Step Pyramid above it and of all other Step Pyramids.) Each of these tomb shapes has a symbolic significance that derived from a revised view of resurrection after death; by invoking the architecture associated with these views, the architect incorporated these differing ideas themselves into Djoser's complex, albeit with varying prominence.

The royal pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty and later also contained symbolic structures. The principal buried form is an inner stepped pyramid, which in Fourth Dynasty pyramids can be deduced from the accretion faces visible when passages cut through them³⁷. The interior construction is even clearer in pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, where partial collapse has revealed the stepped casemates³⁸. Practical reasons have been argued for these internal structures³⁹; but given the tradition of nested historical forms, they are probably at least partially symbolic, referring to an earlier form of royal tomb and an earlier metaphor for resurrection. Other buried forms may remain undetected within the pyramid's masonry: no pyramid has ever been systematically dismantled.

³⁵ For example, Stadelmann, *Die ägyptische Pyramiden*, 21; I.E.S. Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1985), 24. The excavator, however, considered them to be building phases: Emery, *Great Tombs I*, 82-92.

³⁶ An example might be seen in the stepped inner casing buried within the smoothly battered outer facades of the large Fourth Dynasty core mastabas in the Giza cemetery.

³⁷ Edwards, *Pyramids*, 253-4.

³⁸ D. Arnold, *Building in Egypt: Pharaonic Stone Masonry* (New York and Oxford, 1991), 159-61. Arnold suggests that the stepped inner forms may not have been present in the major later Fourth Dynasty pyramids; however, since the queens' pyramids of Menkaure show such structures, it seems likely that the more intact kings' pyramids contained them as well.

³⁹ For example, M. Lally, *JARCE* 26 (1989), 207-18, believes they might have been useful in controlling the angle of the pyramid.

But it was not necessary to bury masonry within masonry to incorporate older forms within a pyramid. Other methods of nesting were possible. One was to create a miniature tomb within the burial chamber by decorating the sarcophagus to resemble either a niched mastaba or a vaulted tomb, or a combination of the two. Similarly, in many pyramids, the walls of the internal chambers were decorated with the palace facade pattern to evoke the niched mastaba. Using burial equipment and decoration to duplicate and elaborate the forms of the superstructure was to be an enduring practice: as noted above, it was used by Tutankhamun over 1000 years later.

A final technique for burying older forms in newer architecture was to create the form in negative space. The clearest example is in the burial chambers of the Bent Pyramid at Dahshur, where the ceilings over the chambers are stepped in on all four walls to form doubly corbelled vaults (fig. 4). The double corbelling serves no structural purpose: the stepping in of two walls would have sufficed to support the ceiling. However, the double vault creates a stepped pyramid of empty space over the burial, a pyramid that must have been both intentional and symbolic.

The only other unambiguous Old Kingdom example of the use of negative space to create one of these nested superstructures is the rounded ceiling vault used in the burial chamber of Menkaure. His ceiling creates a shape in negative space that is similar to the superstructures of the tombs of his two successors, Shepseskaf and Khentkawes, both of which look back to the coffin-shaped tombs of the Second Dynasty⁴⁰. A third form, the simple flat-topped mound or mastaba, might be seen in the flat ceiling of some burial chambers, notably Khufu's, but flat ceilings are too common to be convincing as a symbolic statement.

It is striking, however, that the most common roof types used in Old Kingdom royal burial chambers create negative spaces that have the same cross-section as the two pyramid forms: an ordinary corbelled ceiling creates an elongated profile of the stepped pyramid, while a gabled ceiling does the same for the true pyramid. The fact that these negative and solid shapes share only two dimensions hardly presents a difficulty, since the Egyptians often let two dimensions stand for three in their art and architecture.

In the Eighteenth Dynasty, the silhouette of a shrine was similarly used in one of the four quadrants in the transverse hall of the upper tomb of Senenmut (TT 71), along with three other forms in negative space (see figure 4b)⁴¹. Like Senenmut's chapel, these ceilings of burial chambers of Old Kingdom pyramids created spaces

⁴⁰ Stadelmann states that the corridor and storerooms surrounding the central chamber of Peribsen's tomb on the Umm el-Qab were roofed with brick vaults (*Mélanges Mokhtar* II, 298). If this was so, these internal vaults may also have been an allusion to the earlier Second Dynasty vaulted superstructures; alternatively, they might duplicate First Dynasty vaulted storerooms that represent the origin of the exterior form.

⁴¹ P.F. Dorman, *The Tombs of Senenmut* (New York, 1991), 27 and fig. 22.

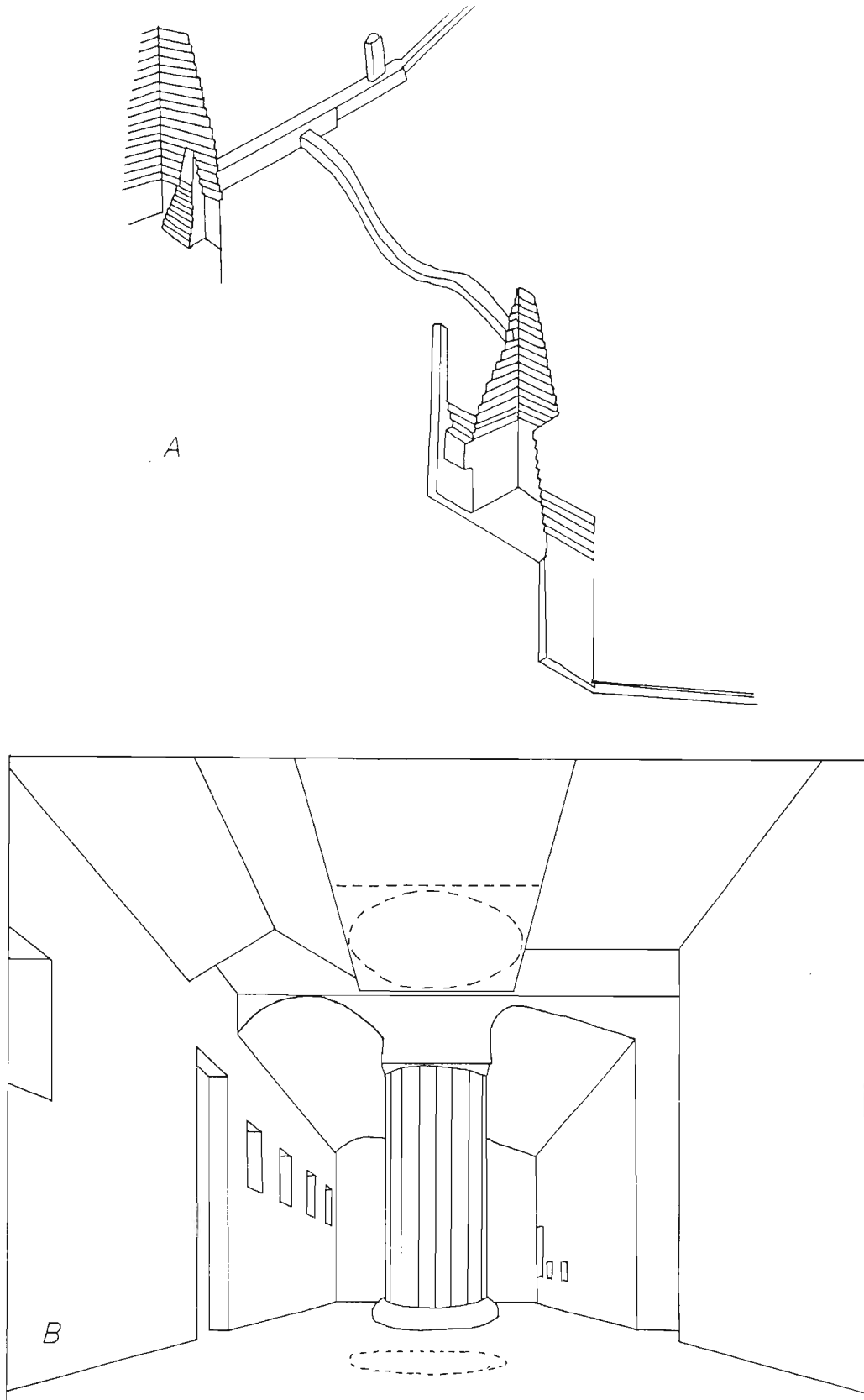


Fig. 4. Architecture in negative space: (a) step pyramids created by the doubly corbelled chambers in the Bent Pyramid (after W.S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd edn, W.K. Simpson, ed. (Harmondsworth, 1981), 79); and (b) the four ceilings of TT 71 (after P.F. Dorman, *The Tombs of Senenmut* (New York, 1991), fig. 22).

that reinforced the externally visible superstructure or supplemented it with references to older forms, demonstrating another way in which the Egyptians buried their past in their present.

It is clear, then, that different combinations of internal structures were consciously combined inside the pyramids by their builders, just as older rituals, myths, and iconographic elements were buried inside new ones by theologians and artists. The pyramids are not identical, in part because each builder has selected elements from the older repertoire to highlight, effectively revising the history of the evolution of the forms to conform with present beliefs and needs. Analysis of these buried shapes may elucidate both the beliefs held by the pyramids' builders and their view of the beliefs held by their predecessors.

These five examples demonstrate that the nesting of forms and concepts was pervasive in Egyptian religion, and that this nesting in some cases created a hierarchy of the nested elements. The outermost layer tended to represent the most up-to-date version, but the innermost had the greatest historical authority, and sometimes the greatest intrinsic value. The phenomenon is by no means limited to these examples, or even to religious production. It can be found in many other areas as well, including the strings of successively held titles of officials, the construction of additions to the fronts of cult temples, and the story-within-a-story framework so popular in Egyptian narratives. The motive in all these spheres is the same: to add historical and symbolic reinforcement and resonances that enhanced the whole. When the use of nested and buried elements is recognised, it can be analysed symbolically, to illuminate for us the earlier periods of their own history that the Egyptians were invoking, as well as the prevalent hierarchy of ideas and concepts at the period when the work was created.