

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE SUPERSTRUCTURE  
OF THE MASTABA-TOMB IN EGYPT

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NUMEROUS utterances in the Pyramid Texts use the verb  $\dot{i}c$  or its causative  $s\dot{i}c$  in connection with the ascension of the deceased king to heaven. Once it offers plays on words such as: "Thou ascendest ( $\dot{i}c$ ) to her in thy name of mastaba( $\dot{i}c$ )" (§ 616). The meaning of the latter word with the peculiar determinative for a mastaba has been rendered by Sethe as "the ascending."<sup>1</sup> The obvious relation of the sign of the mastaba to the basic meaning of the verb  $\dot{i}c$  has been pointed out by Gilbert,<sup>2</sup> Rowe,<sup>3</sup> and by Mercer.<sup>4</sup>

The sign shows the elevation of a mastaba superstructure, with battered walls, rising sometimes from a low platform. The wall is occasionally shown as blank (§ 160), but more often it is divided into two halves by a central vertical line and with an upper horizontal band. Usually in each of the two lower halves a vertical or slanting line is indicated which could presumably represent schematically a false-door. The façade thus shown with its characteristic features could probably be identified as the eastern one of the mastaba. In one case (§ 1016) only the left half of the sign shows an element to be perhaps understood as the southern false-door. Quite seldom is the occurrence of a door (or false-door) in the central axis (§ 1516,

333). A very rare type of the hieroglyph (§ 1341, 1361) shows a series of slanting elements below one or two horizontal bands and could most probably represent a recessed panel façade. Some rare hieroglyphs show a stepped superstructure with one or more steps, crowned with an edicule (§ 452, 456, 462, 641) (reminiscent of the inner section of a corbeled portal) (§ 1583). They seem to represent a stepped mastaba of the type known in the archaic period,<sup>5</sup> perhaps with a naos or edicule having slanting sides erected on the terrace, such as is occasionally represented in Egyptian drawings on the top of later mastabas.<sup>6</sup> In one case the edicule is definitely quadrangular (§ 462). In another a door (or false-door?) is shown in the central axis of the edicule (§ 613). One hieroglyph has a high edicule upon an irregular base (§ 645), suggesting a side-view, with sharply slanting rear.

In all cases the signs seem to be interchangeable, whether they determine  $\dot{i}c$ , "to ascend,"  $s\dot{i}c$ , "to cause to ascend," or  $h\dot{s}t$ ,  $\dot{i}s$ , "tomb."

All the types represented can be recognized in the actual remains of the superstructures of the mastabas. The earliest could be the stepped brick superstructure (First Dynasty), which evolved into a stone graded mastaba (Fourth Dynasty). The recessed paneled mastaba (First Dynasty) and the later type with one or

<sup>1</sup> K. Sethe, *Dodekaschoinos das Zwölfmeilenland an der Grenze von Aegypten und Nubien*, p. 81, n. 2. "das aufsteigende," aus "aufsteigen."

<sup>2</sup> P. Gilbert, "Le créateur de la pyramide funéraire," *Mélanges de Philologie Orientale* (Université de Liège, 1932), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> A. Rowe, *The Museum Journal*, University of Pennsylvania, Vol. XXII, No. 1, p. 22, Pl. V.

<sup>4</sup> S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts*, II, 78, 301.

<sup>5</sup> G. A. Reisner, *The Development of the Egyptian Tomb*. Also "The History of the Egyptian Mastaba," *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 579-84. W. B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, I (1949), Pls. 21-23 (Mastaba of Sa-nakht at Bet Khallaf, No. 17 at Meidûm).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alexander Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture*, I (1954), Fig. 105.

two eastern niches is also represented somewhat schematically.

The origin of the superstructure of the mastaba has given rise to a few theories. Some would make it derive from the primitive grave mound,<sup>7</sup> others consider it a copy of the house<sup>8</sup> of the deceased, or even that it embodies elements from palatial architecture (recessed panel-

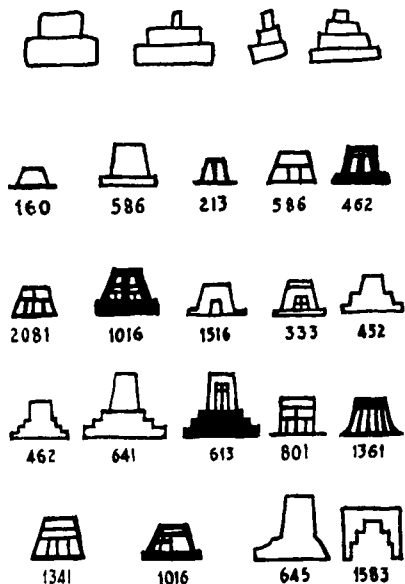


FIG. 1.—First line, graffiti of the pyramid at Meidûm. Remaining four lines, a selection of signs from the Pyramid Texts showing the battered mastaba, the stepped mastaba, some with edicule, and a corbeled portal (§ 1583).

ing). All these theories have been elaborated from the study of the actual remains of the mastabas and the sarcophagi as well as from a study of the funeral customs of the primitive inhabitants of Lower Egypt. The latter used to bury their dead under their own houses, hence the idea of a tomb imitating such

<sup>7</sup> G. A. Reisner, "The History of the Egyptian Mastaba," *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 579.

<sup>8</sup> A. Scharff, *Das Grab als Wohnhaus in der ägyptischen Frühzeit* ("Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften," 1944-46, Heft 6, Munich, 1946). W. B. Emery, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

a house,<sup>9</sup> in order to enable the deceased to live in it eternally as he had in his earthly life.

The constant use in the Pyramid Texts of the hieroglyph representing the mastaba superstructure for the verbs "to ascend," and "to cause to ascend," as well as sporadically for "tomb," could however suggest some ideological purpose. The type of stepped mastaba superstructure in brick and later in stone which appears in the earliest period cannot be solely due to an attempt at imitating a primitive mound, but it should be recognized rather as a structure with stairways ascending to a platform. The imitation of a mound could not lead to such a shallow slope with wide treads, like the one used in the peculiar mastaba of Nebetka (3038, First Dynasty) at Saqqara.<sup>10</sup> In this unique example only three sides were stepped (N., S., and E.), the western side being mostly vertical and as if cut through. Reisner has however suggested that this type of superstructure, which he calls a "layer mastaba," was obtained through the addition of brickwork layers around the base of the primitive superstructures to prevent lateral penetration.<sup>11</sup> He even seems to derive the step pyramid from such a type: "It was the layer mastaba which developed into the layer or step pyramid."<sup>11</sup> That the layers of brickwork extending out from the mastaba could not have been intended as a protective device is proved by the fact that the top terrace would nevertheless have afforded easy entrance to robbers.<sup>12</sup>

Only a few examples of the word "to ascend" in the Pyramid Texts are determined with the stepped hieroglyph,

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Badawy, *op. cit.* p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> W. B. Emery, *op. cit.*, Pl. 22.

<sup>11</sup> G. A. Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 580.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Tomb 3038, cf. W. B. Emery, *op. cit.*, Pl. 22.

while all the others use the sign for the battered mastaba. This would imply that the idea of "ascension" was not primarily connected with the stepped type of the superstructure. The basic ideology of such a use could be understood from a study of the ascension Pyramid Texts. According to an early text the first god Atum created the world and rose from the primeval abyss on (or as) a hill (*k3*). It is said to the sun: "Thou art high (*k3*) in this thy name of *k3*-hill" (§ 1587 *c*). This name could perhaps be translated as "The high one." The king, assimilated to Atum, was asked to be "above it (the earth), be thou high (*k3*) above it" (§ 199 *b*), originally with reference to his ascending the throne, but later to his ascension<sup>13</sup> to the sky after death. In a later text Atum-Khepri is addressed: "O Atum-Khepri, when thou didst mount (*k3*) as a hill (*k33*), and didst shine as *bnw* of the *bn* in the temple of the phoenix (?) in Heliopolis" (§ 1652 *a-b*).<sup>14</sup> In all three examples there is a play of words between *k3*, "to be high, mount," and *k3*, *k33*, "hill," similar to that occurring in the unique ascension texts between *i3*, "to ascend," and *i3*, "the ascending-one (=mastaba)" (§ 616). The deceased is thus addressed: "Thou art caused to ascend (*i3*) to her (Nut) in her name of mastaba (*i3*)."

Had this name of the "ascending-one" anything to do with the funeral procession ascending from the valley to the higher necropolis, or was it solely connected with some religious ideology relating to the hereafter? According to one passage in the texts the deceased is supposed to ascend to Nut "in her name of mastaba" (§ 616). This is indeed only one of the numerous ascension texts

giving as means a stairway (§ 365, 1090, 1296, 1322, 325, 1749), a ramp (§ 1717 *a*) or even, according to a solar(?) concept, steps of light (§ 852 *e*, 1680), not to mention the various other means: ladder, wing of a falcon, Thoth, boat, cloud, hail, incense, etc.

The aim of this ascension was to reach the circumpolar stars, which the deceased would lead (§ 374 *a*) or be in their forefront (§ 537 *a*) and command (§ 2173 *b*). This was the royal destiny as pictured in the stellar religion (§ 656 *c*). Other religions prepared other destinies for the king, such as that of Osiris (the Duat) or Re (the sun), and these were subsequently appended to the earlier ones of the stellar religion, through adaptation or interpolation. So the king mounted as Re: "Thou ascendest to them (the gods) as Re, in this thy name of Re (§ 1695). It is to be noticed that although the king was born in the East like a unique star he did not set any more (§ 785, 877, 878). I would tentatively suggest that the mastaba of Nebetka, with its stepped sides (N., S., and E.) would represent this idea of the impossibility of setting in the West.

It could be presumed that a further stage in the development of the mastaba as a means to ascend to the sky was the stepped pyramid, which occurred already in the Second Dynasty (two pyramids at Zâwyet el-*c*-Aryân?) and in the Third Dynasty (two pyramids at Saqqara). This would agree with the structural development as pictured by Reisner. The resemblance of the hieroglyph for the stepped mastaba with the graffiti of the Third and Fourth Dynasties representing the stepped pyramid of Meidûm is striking.

It has been propounded that the step

<sup>13</sup> H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 108. H. Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Aegypten*, p. 292, n. 2; S. Mercer, *op. cit.*, II, 95.

<sup>14</sup> S. Mercer, *ibid.*, I, 253; III, 780. Cf. also A. Moret, "L'influence du décor solaire sur la pyramide," *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 633-34.

pyramid of Neterirkhet at Saqqara could be a solar monument on the grounds that its presumed architect, Imhotep, was a *m<sup>3</sup>-wr* of the temple of Re at Heliopolis and that the hieroglyphic group *R<sup>c</sup>-nwb(?)* was written with the royal name.<sup>15</sup> Nothing definite, however, can be cited in favor of such a hypothesis. It should be added that the only mortuary temple of Neterirkhet, abutting the north face of the pyramid, points to a non-solar ritual.

A study of the interpretation of the various myths in the Pyramid Texts shows that the primitive Atum religion came to an understanding with the solar one through the introduction of Atum-Khepri (Second Dynasty) and that the latter solar ideology amalgamated with that of Osiris from the reign of Djedkare-Isesi to those of Teti and Pepi I.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the altar for the sun-cult was placed in the funerary cult-temple of the pyramids, beginning with that of Userkaf, where it was abnormally on the south.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that the original ascension, that of Atum as a primeval hill (*k<sup>3</sup>*),<sup>18</sup> served as a model to that of the king by means of the mastaba (*i<sup>c</sup>*), whether battered or stepped. The purpose of this ascension was to reach the stars and to mingle with them, according to the ideology of the primitive stellar religion. The mastaba developed into a pyramid, stepped in the beginning and perhaps only stellar in concept. It soon evolved into the true geometric pyramid, with slanting faces, probably then a monument of solar re-

ligion, the most perfect of all ascension devices.<sup>19</sup> Such a program is clearly defined in later texts on the pyramids of royal pyramids (Amenemhat III at Dahshur).<sup>20</sup>

It is also significant that the essential element of the monument for the solar cult was a truncated pyramid surmounted by an obelisk or a chapel.<sup>21</sup>

The ziggurat of Mesopotamia, resembling the stepped mastaba or pyramid even to its method of construction (accretion layers for enlargement at Ur-Warka),<sup>22</sup> was also "a stairway to heaven" (name of the ziggurat at Sippar),<sup>23</sup> and the term "ziggurat" probably meant "the pointed one" or "the high one."<sup>24</sup> Further names of the ziggurat "house of the link between heaven and earth" (Larsa), "house of the foundation of heaven and earth" (Babylon) and the existence of one sanctuary on the top and another at the bottom have led scholars to consider this structure as an actual link intended, according to Mesopotamian mythology, to connect heaven and earth.<sup>25</sup> In this respect the pyramid would have been for the pharaoh what the ziggurat was for the Mesopotamian gods.

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<sup>19</sup> The noun for "pyramid," *mr*, has been tentatively considered as a derivative from the verb *r*, "to ascend," cf. I. E. S. Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt* (1947), p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> A. Moret, *op. cit.*, p. 629.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. K. Sethe, "Die Heiligtümer des Re<sup>c</sup> im Alten Reich," *ÄZ*, XXVII (1889), 112, n. 2.

<sup>22</sup> H. J. Lenzen, *Die Entwicklung der Zikurrat* (1941), pp. 7, 51, Pl. 2.

<sup>23</sup> I. E. S. Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-38.

<sup>24</sup> A. Ungnad, *Grammatik des Akkadischen* (1949), p. 207. Also H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954), p. 236, n. 16.

<sup>25</sup> W. Andrae, *Das Gotteshaus und die Urformen des Bauens im Alten Orient*, pp. 12, 17 ff. A. Parrot, *Ziggurats et Tour de Babel* (Paris, 1949), pp. 207 ff.; *La Tour de Babel* (Neuchâtel at Paris, 1953), pp. 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> P. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 93, 100. But against this view cf. L. Speleers, "La signification des Pyramides," *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 603-21, citing J. Ph. Lauer, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 611, 619.

<sup>16</sup> H. Kees, "Das Eindringen des Osiris in die Pyramidentexte," in S. Mercer, *op. cit.*, I, 123-39.

<sup>17</sup> H. Ricke and S. Schott, *Bemerkungen zur Aegyptischen Baukunst des Alten Reichs*, II, 68.

<sup>18</sup> A. Moret, *op. cit.*, pp. 629-30.