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# THE ART OF THE THIRD AND FIFTH DYNASTIES

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(Translated by Ethel W. Burney)

The architecture of the buildings in the sacred enclosure of the Step Mastaba[1] at Saḳḳārah has been the subject of lively discussion ever since its discovery, because the delicacy and lavishness of its forms contrast sharply with the severe, massive style of the following dynasty, whose nature corresponds much more nearly with the idea that one is inclined to form of Old-Kingdom culture.

After the fall of the Fourth Dynasty, art takes a remarkable and completely unexpected course, and becomes again elegant, imaginative, bright, and facile, instead of remaining heavy and stiff. A loosening, so to speak, of the dominating style of Gīzah may well have been due to the changed political situation within the country (the strivings of the nomarchs towards independence), though this is but a partial explanation of the change.

Our first impression on considering these cultural manifestations will be that the art of the Fifth-Dynasty kings, as we know it in the Pyramid Temples of Abusīr and the Sun Temple at Abu Ghurāb, is only a further development of Third-Dynasty art, as shown in the Step-Mastaba enclosure. The absence of connecting links in the larger architecture is due to the Fourth Dynasty, which as it were with a brutal hand interrupted the normal course of evolution, at least in the explored parts of Egypt. And, indeed, formal connexions between the Third and Fifth Dynasties can be reconstructed—their spiritual affinity is so striking that it would be superfluous to demonstrate it.

One of these connexions is supplied by the sarcophagus of Mycerinus,[2] of which the exterior shows both the niche-structure found in the sacred enclosure of the Step Pyramid, and the torus-moulding and cavetto cornice, which in buildings appear for the first time in the Fifth Dynasty. As the sarcophagus imitates a palace, it is permissible to argue from it to architectural monuments.[3] Another connexion is offered by the stars painted on the ceilings of some of the Step Mastaba chambers by Djoser's artists, and furthermore by blocks bearing stars in relief which were re-used in the passages beneath.[4] These stars in painting and relief remind us of the star-decoration of temple ceilings from the Fifth Dynasty on, but nothing corresponding to them is known in the Fourth Dynasty.

If there really exists a historical connexion between the art of the Third and of the Fifth Dynasties, then the problem of their common origin is all the more important. Now, developing a hypothesis of Balcz,[5] Professor Walther Wolf[6] has very convincingly argued that the Saḳḳārah style of the Third Dynasty originated in Lower Egypt. It does not seem necessary to repeat the details, but it should be noted that according to Manetho the Third Dynasty came from Memphis, *i.e.* from Lower Egypt. Essentially the same origin (a little

[1] More often called the Step Pyramid. [2] Perrot-Chipiez, *Histoire de l'art dans l'antiquité*, I, Fig. 289.

[3] This does not imply that the palaces of the period were really built in this style; the form of the sarcophagus may belong to an earlier period.

[4] This information was kindly supplied to me by Dr. K. H. Dittmann, of Cairo.

[5] *Die altägyptische Wandgliederung* in *Mitt. deutsch. Inst. Kairo* 1, 38 ff.

[6] *Bemerkungen zur frühgeschichtlichen Ziegelarchitektur* in *ZÄS* 67, 129 ff.

farther to the north, at Sakhebu in the Letopolite nome) is assigned by the Westcar Papyrus to the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty,[1] and thereby the link between the art-forms of the Third and Fifth Dynasties, which at first sight appears so strange, is established. A Lower-Egyptian origin explains what was obscure to us in Fifth Dynasty art: its delicacy, liveliness, and suppleness.

The hypothesis of a Lower-Egyptian origin for the Third-Dynasty Saḳḳārah style, and the style of the Fifth Dynasty, is supported by the fact that in both epochs a culture of astonishing loftiness, refinement, and richness for such early times seems to have prevailed; this points again to Lower Egypt, whereas a derivation of the art in question from Upper Egypt would encounter very great difficulties.[2]

To Upper Egypt, however, belongs the spirit of the Fourth Dynasty, which deliberately breaks with the tradition of the Saḳḳārah style, and promotes the ascendancy of a simple, powerful form of art, which by all appearances had long been native to Upper Egypt.[3] The reverse process can be observed after the fall of this dynasty; the old Lower-Egyptian tradition is revived by the Fifth Dynasty. The art of the new dynasty has been influenced by Upper Egypt certainly in the new form of pyramid, probably also in the ground-plans of the mortuary temples, and further in its general character, which is now more austere and solid than that of the art of Saḳḳārah, although it appears loose and unstable in comparison with the Gīzah style.

What has taken place? It appears to me that during the Third and Fifth Dynasties reactions came about in Lower Egypt, directed against the union of the country by southern kings.[4] In the reign of Djoser the influence of Lower Egypt was perhaps on the whole peaceable; Djoser himself probably came from Upper Egypt,[5] and he may have made the art of the Delta the official art of the kingdom as a result of the insistence of Lower-Egyptian relatives. But the Lower-Egyptian Fifth Dynasty seems to have come into power following a rebellion against the Fourth Dynasty.[6] To national dissensions were apparently added social ones.

[1] According to Manetho the Fifth Dynasty had its origin in Elephantine, but there is nothing to support this view, and much against it.

[2] It is very probable that Lower-Egyptian culture was older and higher than that of the South. How was it that the inhabitants of a country for the most part marshy, thinly populated, and barbarous, as it is often depicted, were able long before Menes to bring about a really lasting and effective union of Egypt, with important historical consequences? The very fact that they had invented a script shows that the people of Lower Egypt had reached a relatively high stage of culture—in any case higher than that of the inhabitants of the South, who were still without writing. For details compare Newberry, *Egypt as a Field for Anthropological Research* in *British Association for the Advancement of Science, Report of the* 91*st Meeting* (93*rd year*), *Liverpool, 1923, Sept. 12–19* (London, 1924), pp. 175–96, also in *Smithsonian Report* for 1924 (Washington, 1925), pp. 435–59, translated as *Ägypten als Feld für anthropologische Forschung* in *Der alte Orient*, 1927; Junker, *Die Entwicklung der vorgeschichtlichen Kultur in Ägypten* in *Festschrift für P. W. Schmidt*, 890 ff.; Sethe, *Urgeschichte*, §§ 104 ff., 139 ff., 187, 213; Ed. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, I 2, §§ 192 ff.

[3] Compare, for instance, the royal tombs at Abydos, which in spite of the destruction of their superstructures may be quoted as parallels, and especially the brick mastaba of Djoser at Bēt Khallāf; see Wolf in *ZÄS* 67, 131.

[4] We must not picture Egypt, provisionally united as it was under Menes, as completely unified, pacified, and quiet, but we must allow for the possibility of a preponderance of power alternating between North and South. It is just in the Third Dynasty that we know of contests against Lower-Egyptian rebels (under Khaʿsekhem; compare Sethe, *Untersuchungen*, III, p. 34, No. 14), and we may learn much from the Seth-name of Peryebsen (temporary limitation of the power of Upper Egypt?) in the Second Dynasty (Gauthier, *Livre des rois*, I, p. 23, No. xiii).

[5] Compare the Upper-Egyptian style of his brick mastaba at Bēt Khallāf.

[6] The Westcar Papyrus tells us that the young kings of the coming dynasty were persecuted by the preceding dynasty.

Although I prefer to refrain from propounding definite theories here, because I hope in another work to be able to say something positive about Ancient Egyptian economy and society, I must at least say that in the prehistoric and archaic periods the geo-political situation of the Delta, different from that of the South, caused methods of production, of exchange, and of social life, to develop on lines somewhat at variance with those of Upper Egypt. As a visible expression of this difference—despite the fundamental elements which they have in common—we have already observed the inequality of culture in the Two Lands.

The struggle in the South for independence on the part of the nobility, held down by an absolute monarchy, and the movement towards liberation in Lower Egypt, thus worked together. As frequently happens in Oriental struggles for liberation, priests placed themselves at the head of the insurrection; the great influence of religion at that period even secured the crown for at least one of the priestly leaders.[1]

It is Upper and Lower Egypt struggling for power and cultural influence, the duality of the 'Two Lands' as still a fully living reality, that the art of the Third and Fifth Dynasties shows us. And when we follow the threads, the beginnings of which we can do no more than recognize, it seems that in the elaboration of 'Egyptian' culture, the North contributed to the development of the art most of the inspiration, imagination, delicacy, and charm, while the South gradually appropriated these elements, worked on them, and moulded them into shape.[2] What presents itself to us as 'Egyptian style' on the slate palette of Narmer has its parentage both in Upper and in Lower Egypt.

[1] According to the Westcar Papyrus the eldest of the three young kings was to become High Priest of Rēʿ in Heliopolis.

[2] Actually, instead of freer drawing and a predominance of the decorative point of view in the filling of spaces, we find a severer composition combined with a division of the surface into bands, simultaneously with the second (or third) union of Egypt under Narmer-Menes, which came indeed from Upper Egypt.