



When travelers visit ancient sites in modern Egypt, they experience a static and often re-created snapshot of a moment in time from which other episodes of the site's life history have been tidied away. Through the processes of excavation and development for tourism, a sense of these places as dynamic landscapes, created and experienced sometimes over millennia, is obscured.

Ancient Egyptian cemeteries are a good example of this phenomenon. All too often their original excavators were interested in only the most spectacular remains: monumental graves guaranteed to yield a rich harvest of museum-worthy objects. These early scholars paid little attention, and devoted no space in their publications, to building a comprehensive picture of mortuary practices in a given cemetery. They rarely considered the implications of patterns of use of a cemetery space over time. Questing for dramatic objects or visit-worthy reliefs, such scholars tended to overlook details — even in spectacular

elite graves — that gave clues to the way these burial sites were used over time.

It is precisely these clues that can yield the most compelling insights into ancient Egyptian society and mortuary practice. Such ancient keys are guides into the ways that subsequent generations of living Egyptians interacted with these neighborhoods of the dead, as well as into the events of eras of poorly understood political history.

Deciphering the ancient Egyptian development of a mortuary landscape, and of specific areas and graves within it, often requires detective work that goes beyond the excavation and analysis of newly emerging remains. Most major cemeteries of the Dynastic era (ca. 3200–332 B.C.) have undergone previous episodes of exploration, official or otherwise. In order to “see” these sites in totality, decipherment begins in the publications of preceding excavators and in the museums their work helped to furnish.

**EARLY WORK IN THE CEMETERY**

Scholars have known since the late 18th century that a vast and long-lived cemetery landscape existed at the

site of Abydos in southern Egypt. For almost 130 years a nearly constant stream of antiquities hunters and archaeologists worked in different parts of the site, documenting remains from the Predynastic through the Coptic Periods. Prominent among these early explorers was Auguste Mariette, the first director of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, whose primary goal was to harvest stelae and artifacts for the national museum he planned to found. In 1860, Mariette's workers excavated the massive autobiographical inscription of Weni the Elder, a Sixth Dynasty governor of Upper Egypt, which has since been used as a key source for the political history of



the Old Kingdom (ca. 2750–2260 B.C.). Weni's inscription on what Mariette called the “high hill of the Middle Cemetery,” along with those of several other government officials of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (ca. 2544–2260 B.C.), marked the existence of an important provincial cemetery during a crucial period of Egyptian history. Yet given the paucity of detail in Mariette's publications, and the reluctance of subsequent excavators to excavate in the areas worked over by Mariette's men, neither the overall character of this late Old Kingdom burial ground, nor its exact situation within the Abydos landscape, was ever known.

MAP: G. COMPTON; PHOTO: J. RICHARDS, ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT



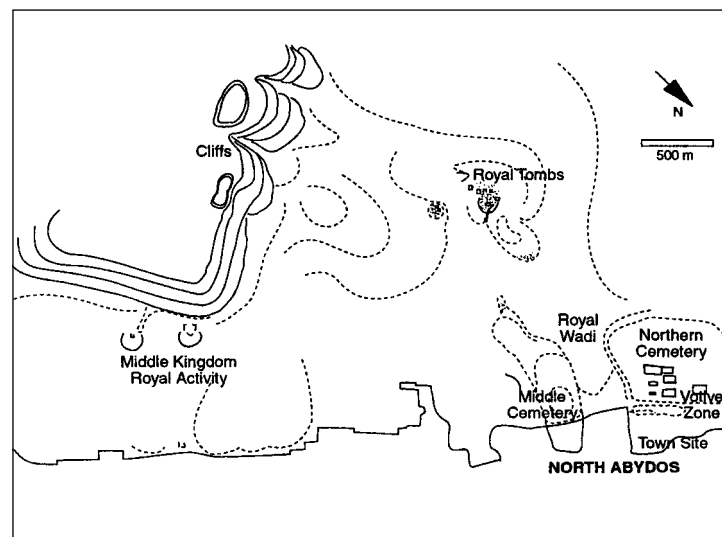
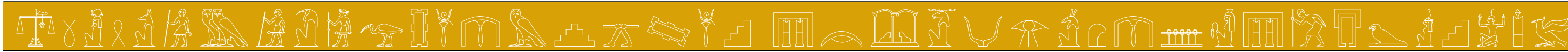
TOP: Map of Egypt, showing location of Abydos in Upper (southern) Egypt; BOTTOM: View of the great cliffs from the Mariette area

*The Dynamic History of Ancient Sites*

# time and memory

## in Ancient Egyptian Cemeteries

By Janet Richards



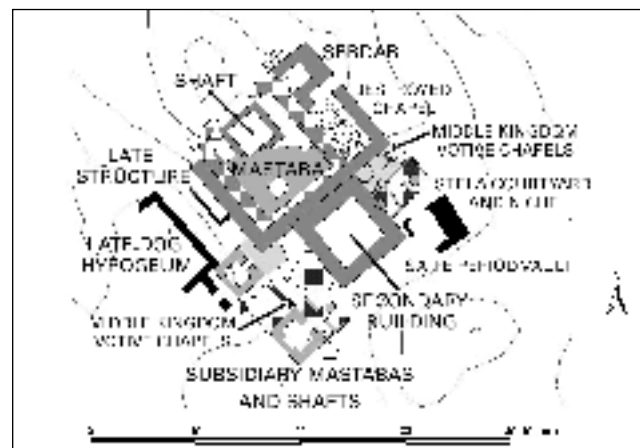
**THE ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT**

Since 1995, the Abydos Middle Cemetery Project has focused on the most likely area for Mariette’s “high hill.” After two seasons of survey (1995 and 1996), research in the Egyptian Museum, and two seasons of excavation (1999 and 2001), archaeologists have finally confirmed the location of this hill. It is the highest part of the North Abydos low desert escarpment that overlooks the ancient town. This context includes the sites where Weni’s inscription and several other objects now in Cairo’s Egyptian Museum were originally found, allowing us to visualize them within their ancient spatial and material setting. Just as important, the Abydos Middle Cemetery Project has opened a window into the operation of time and memory in the development of the cemetery, and it has yielded tantalizing material evidence that may corroborate literary accounts of dramatic historic events.

**IDENTITY AND APPROPRIATION: THE NEKHTY COMPLEX**

In 1996, we documented a badly ruined mud brick mastaba (bench-shaped) chapel that we thought might well be the original context of the Weni inscription. We believed this in part because the chapel was so badly destroyed, a regrettably frequent by-product of excavation in the 19th century. Then, excavation of this area in 1999 revealed a large complex focused on the chapel and a number of subsidiary monuments constructed around it in the late Old Kingdom, the First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom, and the Late Period. The primary chapel originally had completely

LEFT: The Abydos site [after Kemp 1975]; TOP RIGHT: Nekhty/Idi Complex, original structures (late Old Kingdom) and later votive and re-use episodes (in black); CENTER RIGHT: Overview of the Nekhty/Idi complex, with miniature Middle Kingdom votive chapels in the right foreground, and small mastaba chapels beyond the main structure. The niche visible in the left half of the image is the original context of the Sixth Dynasty stela for a woman named Mezenet, excavated by Mariette in the 19th century and now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Fragment of Saite wall visible at far left; BOTTOM RIGHT: View down shaft of Nekhty/Idi grave to lintel to monumental doorway



TOP RIGHT: G. COMPTON; CENTER RIGHT: B. BAKER, ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT; BOTTOM RIGHT: K.D. TURNER, ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT

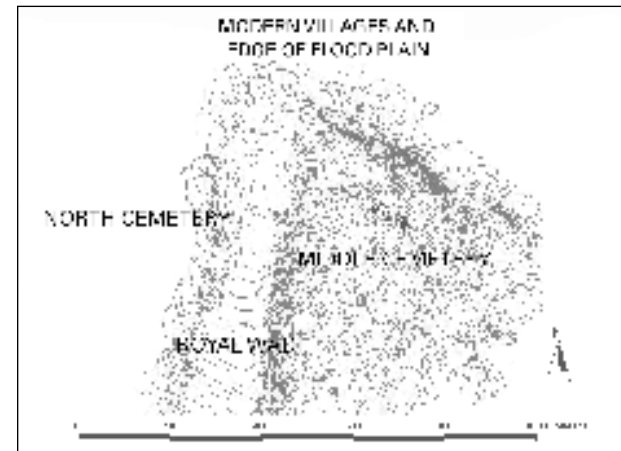
TOP: G. COMPTON, D. ANDERSON, J.J. SHIRLEY; BOTTOM: Y. KOBYLECKY AND R. FLETCHER, ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT

covered a well-built mud brick shaft, at the base of which lay a monumental lintel over the entrance to a burial chamber. Inscribed with the name and titles of an individual, Nekhty — a prince, mayor, sole companion, and chief priest — the lintel and the grave seemed to belong to a person not documented in Mariette’s work.

We left excavation of the chamber to the following season when it became apparent that this elite grave had had an unusual sequence of ownership. The inscribed lintel discovered in 1999 surmounted an entrance whose lowest blocking stones were still in place. These blocks had closed off an antechamber of roughly finished limestone, the ceiling of which was only a meter and a half tall. Another lintel, more finely executed and painted, surmounted the doorway to the burial chamber itself. (See cover image.) Curiously, it bore different titles than those on the outer lintel, and no name. The limestone sarcophagus dominating the space in the burial chamber did, however, incorporate Nekhty’s name and titles on its northern end.

The chamber was precisely constructed of finished

Closeup showing Nekhty’s name painted on plaster. Throughout the chamber and in the interior inscription of the coffin, Nekhty systematically plastered over Idi’s carved name and substituted his own in blue paint. Scarring from the secondary floor is visible in the bottom third of the photograph; note better-preserved paint beneath the level of the floor.



Cemetery and town: the Weni and Nekhty/Idi complexes in their broader topographic setting

**THE ABYDOS LANDSCAPE**

Abydos (ancient *3bdw*) lies several kilometers west of the Nile River in southern Egypt, at the juncture of floodplain and desert. North Abydos is set against the backdrop of a great bay of cliffs, which embraces an extensive sweep of low desert, in some places 20 meters above the ancient town. A broad shallow wadi, stretching out to the cliffs, bisects this expanse. On either side of the wadi, the desert rises to steep plateaus that we now call the Middle and North Cemeteries. Around 3100 B.C., the first kings of politically unified Egypt situated their graves near an opening in the cliffs thought to be the entrance to the next world. These graves, together with their associated funerary palaces on the North Cemetery plateau, dominated a sacred landscape restricted to royal use. From then until the late Fifth or early Sixth Dynasty, approximately 500 years later, no private activity took place on the low desert plateaus of North Abydos. At that time, important officials gained access to the Middle Cemetery for burial, while the North Cemetery remained off limits. The relaxation of royal exclusivity on the Middle Cemetery may have been part of an overall reconfiguration of the Abydos landscape to reinforce the power and legitimacy of the central government. This was accomplished through extensive development of the Osiris temple and with the construction of massive graves for state officials. By the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1650 B.C.), both the Middle and North Cemeteries were given over to private use.



Interior of Nekhty/Idi coffin, showing *wedjat* eyes inlay. A powerful symbol of regeneration, these eyes are located at the head end of the coffin; the mummy of the deceased would be placed on its side, “seeing” through these eyes east toward the rising sun.

limestone blocks and roofed with massive slabs of the same material. The south, east, and west walls of this room were covered

with very fine raised decorative relief and inscriptions, on which much of the original paint survives. A horizontal line of inscription circled the chamber just under the ceiling, including the titles Royal Treasurer, Lector Priest, and Overseer of Priests, plus Nekhty’s name. Given the quality both of execution and materials, construction of this grave clearly involved a significant expenditure of effort and resources, and access to royal workshops. Yet why was a secondary floor later installed that covered the lowest 60 centimeters of decoration on the walls of this costly facility? Why was Nekhty’s name simply painted over plaster wherever it occurred on the chamber walls when all other inscription in the room was beautifully carved? And why was Nekhty’s name painted in a particular shade of blue that did not occur elsewhere in the decorative scheme?

#### MEMORY AND HISTORY

We realized then that Nekhty’s name was painted over the inscribed name of the original owner of the grave, Idi, a lector priest, royal treasurer, nomarch (local leader or chief administrator) and governor of Upper Egypt. The secondary floor seems to have been deliberately laid to cover numerous repetitions of that original name, which occurred at the bottom of the east wall. Reconsideration of the painted interior lintel revealed that the rough limestone blocks of the antechamber walls had been put in place deliberately to cover Idi’s name at the edge of that lintel and at the back of the exterior lintel, as well as its associated doorjambs, and the entire decorative scheme of the antechamber’s original walls was almost completely hidden. Additionally, we found the lid of

the sarcophagus to be five centimeters shorter in length than its base. It appeared that Nekhty’s workers shaved away an earlier inscription to place his new inscription on the coffin exterior. Inside the coffin, Nekhty’s name was again painted on plaster over the original grave owner’s name; and an elaborate pair of *wedjat* “eyes,” inlaid into plaster inside the sarcophagus, might actually overlay an original inscribed relief.

This expensive grave was originally built for Idi and then either given to or appropriated by Nekhty. The identity shift was accomplished both practically and magically by the substitution of one name for another where easily done, or the covering of Idi’s name where substitution would have been time consuming or visually too overt.

Did Idi hand over his exceedingly well-built funerary monument willingly, for instance, if he was promoted to the capital and granted a second grave there? Or was Idi evicted in a provincial power play, his prestigious burial facility co-opted as part of a usurping political event? At what point in Egyptian history might either of these scenarios have taken place?

Idi’s name and titles, combined with epigraphic evidence for family relationships with known historical individuals from elsewhere in his complex, indicate a Sixth Dynasty date for the construction and original ownership of this grave. Additionally, the decorative scheme of the grave chamber is very similar — even in the smallest details — to that of the nearby grave of Weni the Elder (see page 22). It seems likely the two chambers were constructed at the same time, with their relief decoration perhaps even executed by the same hand. Nekhty’s name and titles, in contrast, suggest a date closer to the First Intermediate Period, around 2260–2040 B.C., as does the vivid blue paint used for his name. At Abydos, such blue paint is a color more characteristic of stelae dating to the First Intermediate Period or later. Finally, the use of *wedjat* eyes in the decoration of coffins, documented inside the Nekhty/Idi sarcophagus, is also a decorative and symbolic feature more common to the First Intermediate Period or the Middle Kingdom.

Seidlmayer has suggested that local rulers during the First Intermediate Period often bore the title “Overseer of Priests,” one of Nekhty’s titles, and that these overseers combined this cultic function with the secular responsibilities of the nomarch, which

was one of Idi’s titles (Seidlmayer 2000). Ceramic fragments from fill beneath the secondary floor indicate a date for reuse of the grave that falls within the range of the late Old Kingdom into the First Intermediate Period. It is possible that the usurpation occurred as a statement of, or as a result of, the appropriation of power by local officials during the First Intermediate Period. This action may well be attested to in a literary text, *The Teaching for Merikare*, set during that decentralized time. One line of the text seems eerily pertinent: “Destroy not the monuments of another; build not your tomb chamber from ruins” (trans. Parkinson 1997).

The nearby massive grave of Weni the Elder, also excavated during the 1999 and 2001 seasons, seems also to have felt the impact of political events a hundred years after his burial. In Weni’s case, his grave chamber was burned, possibly a deliberate strategy to obliterate his memory (“...destroying tomb chambers in a destruction of deeds...,” Ibid.). Further, his surface inscriptions were bricked over at some point, and the statues in his serdab deposit (hidden surface chamber) were crushed, perhaps as part of the same strategy.

#### TIME AND MEMORY

Yet despite these indications of turbulence, the Abydos cemetery continued to grow throughout the later Old Kingdom and seemingly without interruption into the First Intermediate Period. Burials were made in simpler and smaller facilities surrounding the contested elite graves.

The Weni grave was the focus of simple shafts and surface burials radiating out from its northern side.

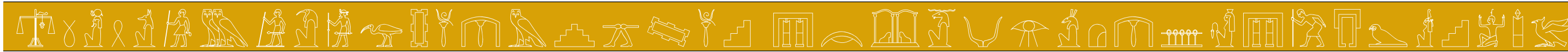
### EGYPT IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM B.C.

Egyptian history after the Early Dynastic Period (which saw the consolidation of the Egyptian Nile Valley into a unified state) is generally divided into “kingdoms” versus “intermediate periods.” Kingdoms and intermediate periods each include a number of dynasties, or groups of rulers related in some way. The primary difference between these two broad categories is in the degree of centralized government achieved and maintained by the royal court. Kingdoms possessed strongly centralized authority, were territorially expansive, were characterized by unified ideologies of kingship and hierarchy, and revealed extensive royal building programs. Intermediate periods, by contrast, had an internally fragmented authority, experienced competing ideologies of rule, saw enhanced social mobility, and asserted little outward aggression or internal building. The strong centralization of power and resources of the Old Kingdom slowly unraveled throughout the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties as provincial elites wrested increasing autonomy. The establishment of high officials’ graves at Abydos and elsewhere may have represented an attempt to reestablish centralized control. By the beginning of the First Intermediate Period, however, the provinces were effectively ruled by their local elites, leading to a series of struggles between factions in Upper and Lower Egypt. The struggles culminated in the reunification of the state in the Middle Kingdom. This political upheaval may be what is documented in the archaeology of the Abydos Middle Cemetery.

### A CHRONOLOGY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Predynastic Period	4800–3100 B.C.
Early Dynastic Period	3100–2750 B.C.
Old Kingdom	2750–2260 B.C.
First Intermediate Period	2260–2035 B.C.
Middle Kingdom	2040–1650 B.C.
Second Intermediate Period	1720–1570 B.C.
New Kingdom	1570–1070 B.C.
Third Intermediate Period	1070–656 B.C.
Late Period	525–332 B.C.
Ptolemaic-Roman Period	332 B.C.–A.D. 285

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To the south, a series of smaller mastabas and shafts extended and continued parallel to the Nekhty/Idi complex. These chapels were mostly decorated with painted plaster, and associated with simple, shallow shafts cut into the desert subsurface. The areas excavated recently display no evidence for appropriation or destruction, suggesting such symbolic acts were aimed at particular higher-ranking individuals and their more visually prominent burial facilities.

Adding the evidence from British excavations in the early 20th century, we can see that over time the cemetery grew westward beyond Mariette's high hill toward the great bay of cliffs, ultimately covering as much as 40 hectares. In the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1650 B.C.), 500 years after



the construction of Idi's and Weni's graves, the primary burial ground shifted to the North Cemetery, across the great wadi (dry waterway) bisecting the low desert in North Abydos. This newly accessible landscape, which had previously been restricted to royal use for nearly a thousand years, developed into one of the largest private cemeteries in the Egyptian Nile Valley. An extensive votive zone was also initiated near the floodplain temple of Osiris, representing a widening access to the divine. Here, private individuals from all levels of society could dedicate stelae and statues, sharing in offerings to Osiris at the time of this funerary god's festivals. At the same time, the site of the Early Dynastic royal tombs at the cliffs was identified as the burial place of Osiris. Honoring the ancestors being central to establishing legitimacy, 12th Dynasty kings subjected the site to an excavation and restoration campaign.

As of the 1999 season, we had documented that this royal commemorative activity at Abydos was echoed on the private level among the graves of local ancestors, the builders of the late Old Kingdom mastabas. In the area of the Nekhty/Idi complex, 50 centimeters above the original use surface of the cemetery, and located both in association with the primary chapel and the smaller mastabas, miniature chapels were erected, meant to contain votive figures or stelae. In one of these small chapels, aligned neatly with the Nekhty/Idi complex but not directly associated with any burial, a basalt pair statue of a man Intef and his wife Ita still stood. The style of the statue,



TOP: Pair statue of Intef and his wife, Ita, later 12th Dynasty, in situ. Intef and Ita dedicated this votive statue in one of the small chapels oriented toward the late Old Kingdom grave of Nekhty/Idi. This private commemorative activity in the nonroyal cemeteries at Abydos echoed the royal ideological emphasis on honoring the ancestors prevalent during the Middle Kingdom; CENTER: Statue of Weni as a boy. Weni the Elder's massive grave included a serdab feature, an interior sealed chapel that originally contained more than 30 wooden statues of the deceased and of workers on his estate. The entire deposit was badly destroyed at some point; this limestone statuette was excavated from within a jumble of wooden debris; BOTTOM: Burning in the Weni chamber

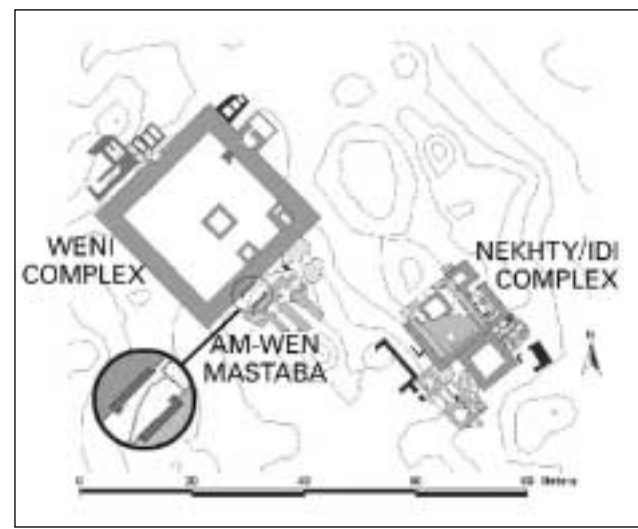
the names of the individuals, and associated pottery confirm a 12th Dynasty date for these votive chapels (ca. 1991–1783 B.C.). A nearby plaster-processing area suggests the possibility that partial excavation and refurbishment of this elite cemetery went hand in hand with royal activities at the remote early royal burial site near the cliffs, perhaps as a way of repairing the destruction of monuments in the cemetery during the First Intermediate Period and rehabilitating the memory of the targeted individuals. These individuals' monuments became a kind of cult center in their own right, echoing the votive area near the Osiris temple.

Throughout succeeding periods, while widespread recycling of Middle and New Kingdom grave facilities took place in the North Cemetery, the tradition of respect for the central Old Kingdom burial ground persisted. No intrusive burials took place there until 1,000 years later, when burial vaults were carefully situated among these ancestral structures during the Saite Period (ca. 685–525 B.C.). The placement of these graves demonstrates clear knowledge, perhaps gained through ancient excavation, of the location of the Old Kingdom mastabas. Our own excavations have established that these Saite vaults



Basalt pair statue of Intef and Ita, detail

were either erected very close to Old Kingdom structures at the level of the original use surface (for instance, on the eastern sides of both the Nekhty/Idi and Weni complexes), or built nested into the exterior walls of Old Kingdom structures, as in the case of the small vault wedged between Weni's southern wall and a subsidiary mastaba. The owners of these later graves did not hesitate to quarry the exterior surfaces of older structures for



The Weni and Nekhty complexes over time; note Saite period structures (in black and purple) carefully situated near Old Kingdom structures.

**FOR FURTHER READING**

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TOP: G. COMPTON; BOTTOM: K. D. TURNER, ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT

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LEFT: Recycling with respect: the mortar processing area southeast of Weni's mastaba. The Saite period vault is between the Weni southern wall and the smaller mastaba; RIGHT: Janet Richards with Reis Ibrahim Mohammed, Excavation Foreman, and Adel Makery Zekery, Supreme Council for Antiquities Inspection



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building materials. For instance, bricks from the southeast corner of Weni's mastaba were processed into mortar for a nearby Saite vault. However, the builders of that period never demolished the interior structures of their ancestors' graves, even when they used the interior space. A small cemetery of coffin burials distributed around the mouth of Weni's shaft were carefully positioned among the more than 500 beer jars that had been deposited at the earlier time of Weni's funeral.

This persistence in memory of the importance of the ancestors, 1,500 years after they built and furnished their graves, speaks volumes both of the strength of local traditions and networks, and of the powerful connection ancient Egyptians experienced between the worlds of the living and the dead. In succeeding periods, respect for these earlier remains eroded. Later graves were built without regard to the location and preservation of the Old Kingdom facilities, in many cases directly above them. However, the long-standing sanctity of that particular component of the Abydos mortuary landscape had already ensured a level of preservation in the cemetery that is perhaps unparalleled elsewhere at the site, and allows us to decipher the complex stratigraphy of this important provincial cemetery. 

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