he 13th Dynasty of ancient Egypt, roughly 1800–1630 BCE, was a politically turbulent period with more than 50 kings coming to the throne in succession. Most rulers were short-lived and constructed few monuments, leaving modern scholars in the dark as to the nature of kingship at this time. Even the identity and order of some of the kings remain a rather hopeless enigma. Nonetheless the re-examination of one of the royal tombs from this period at South Abydos is contributing further data, allowing for a better understanding of the period.

When the 13th Dynasty began, the kings achieved their legitimacy to the throne by connecting themselves to one or more of the Amenemhets of the 12th Dynasty through their names. It is currently unknown whether or not these rulers were actually blood relatives of the preceding group of kings, but even a symbolic connection seems to have been beneficial until around 1765 BCE. At that point, there was a drastic change in the ways in which kings legitimized their reigns. Not only did they no longer connect themselves to an Amenemhet, some even stated directly that their parents were not royal. Several of these kings had relatively successful and lucrative reigns, bringing stability to the state and providing tombs and monuments for members of the elite class.

ROYAL TOMBS AND SOUTH ABYDOS

We have not yet discovered the locations of most of the royal tombs from this or any other part of the 13th Dynasty, although a number of possible sites lie in the Sakkara–Dahshur region. As of now, we have identified the owners of three tombs in the region near Cairo (Ameny Qemau, Awibre Hor, and Khendjer), and we have an additional five excavated tombs with unknown occupants. Two of these monuments are at South Abydos, one of which, “Mastaba” S9, is the focus of current excavations.

S9 and the other tomb, S10, are located adjacent to the Senwosret III tomb in the cemetery under the Mountain-of-Anubis. These monuments were both quickly excavated by Arthur Weigall, a 21-year old protégé of Flinders Petrie, in 1901–1902. Our work at S9 has determined that Weigall rarely fully excavated the deposits in the structure. Instead, he seems to have been interested in the basic outline of the architecture and the sarcophagus chamber and its contents. For this reason, our excavations often uncover intact deposits, which give us clues to the identity of the tomb owner as well as insights into the cultic and political practices of the mid-13th Dynasty kings.

A STAIRCASE, A RUBBISH HEAP, AND AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

In the 2011 season, we uncovered a staircase that was briefly mentioned by Weigall. This mudbrick staircase is constructed in such a way as to allow objects, like a coffin, to be maneuvered through a confined space into the tomb. The connection between this staircase and the limestone corridors is currently unclear since a large displaced ceiling stone sits in this position. However, it does appear that the preservation of the limestone sections of the tomb is better than originally expected, and we will continue our work here in the future.
Along the northern enclosure wall, there was a large spoil heap left over from the excavations of Weigall and possibly other intrusions into the tomb dating back to antiquity. Thus, we set out to carefully remove this debris, hoping to be able to identify the layers within the heap and to recover the artifacts that had been discarded. In this material, we found a number of interesting items, such as fragments of an alabaster vessel in the form of a trussed duck and a seal impression containing the name of a non-local official, the god’s father of Sobek-Shedty, Menu. This non-local official may be a man with the same name and title who has been dated to the reigns of Neferhotep I-Sobekhotep IV (ca. 1750–1730 BCE). Though the precise date of this tomb is still unclear, the pottery we have found at S9, suggests that at least some of the activity here, and possibly the tomb itself, may belong to a king well within the 13th Dynasty.

At the base of the spoil heap, we were greatly surprised to find the walls of a relatively well-preserved cult building with up to 0.5 meters of intact deposits inside. Weigall appears to have been unaware that this structure was here. In the two side rooms we have excavated thus far, these deposits contain fabric, pottery, sticks with resin on them, and most importantly, seal impressions. These two small rooms contain 70 sealings, more than we have recovered from the rest of the excavated parts of S9. The name that surfaces the most frequently is that of an overseer of the necropolis workers, Seneb, who is also known from a few sealings from the Senwosret III temple near the cultivation. Among the other individuals represented in fragmentary sealings, we may have a treasurer and a king. It is likely that this building served either as the place of mummification of the king, the site of his cult chapel, or both.

In our next season, excavations will begin with a thorough investigation of the remainder of this cult structure. Its deposits likely hold much information concerning the cultic and administrative activities that took place at this tomb during the reign of one of the 13th Dynasty kings. We will also take a close look at the nature of this monument as Weigall called it a mastaba, which suggests that it was a solid, rectilinear structure. However, up to this point, we have not been able to prove that the structure was in this form. Other 13th Dynasty tombs in the region of Cairo are pyramids; thus, we have important questions to address regarding the nature of the superstructure of S9.

By fully investigating S9, we are discovering important evidence as to the nature of kingship in the 13th Dynasty when the economic and political circumstances of ancient Egyptian rulers were not optimal. The situation required adaptations in the succession and ideology of kingship, changes which impacted the rulers and elite from that point forward.

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FOR FURTHER READING