From Mariette’s Fieldwork to Louvre’s Excavations
The Mastaba E 17
The rediscovery of the mastaba E 17 represents a decisive step in the fieldwork of the Mission archéologique du Louvre à Saqqara, which I founded in 1991. The aim of the first campaigns was to find out the exact location of the Akhethetep chapel, which was about to be published by the Louvre. This richly decorated chapel was sold by the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte to France in 1903, but unfortunately the funerary monument to which it belonged was not recorded on the maps. The only information known in 1991 was that it was located at Saqqara, to the north of Unas’ causeway, about 500ft. from the S.E corner of the temenos of the [Step] pyramid, after H. Petrie and M. Murray publication' and that it was probably built with a small tomb alongside buried into the sand since more than a hundred years. This tomb has been recorded as mastaba E 17, after the list established by the great egyptologist Auguste Mariette (Fig. 1).

With an uncommon conviction Auguste Mariette began his archaeological career at Saqqara, a site to which he devoted most of his scholar life. Born in 1821 in Boulogne-sur-Mer and dead in Cairo in 1881, he was the worthy successor of J.-Fr. Champollion. Showing an uncommon strength, he behaved entirely to preserve and study the Egyptian antiquities. After being hired as an assistant at the Conservation des antiquités égyptiennes du Louvre, he dwelt mostly in Egypt from 1850 forward. At that time, he conducted his first excavations at Saqqara, which led to the discovery of the Memphis Serapeum, a complex of burials and sanctuaries dedicated to the sacred bull Apis. Consequently he kept regulating excavations in Egypt and organizing the protection of sites under threat of plunder (Fig. 2).

In spite of many obstacles, he succeeded in convincing the Viceroy of Egypt to set up necessary resolution to protect the Egyptian heritage: the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte. He supported firmly the creation of the Service des Antiquités in 1858 and the Bulaq Museum, ancestor of the Egyptian Museum, in 1863. A. Mariette was the first director of both institutions. Untiring archaeologist, he dug major sites such as Tanis, Giza, Saqqara, Meidum, Edfu, Abydos or Thebes. He let clear and study lots of monuments and many of the masterpieces he found are now at the Egyptian Museum.

When Mariette ‘discovered’ Egypt in 1850, the Pyramids in the Cairo area were well known in Europe since a long time, in opposition to the ‘mastabas’, the Old Kingdom tombs of private persons. Neither the authors of the Description de l’Égypte, nor Champollion did pay real attention to those massive stone or mud-brick structures, which can be seen in the western desert of Memphis. Things changed with the expedition set up in 1842–1846 by K.R. Lepsius when two of these richly decorated tombs were dismantled in order to be exposed in at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin.3

3 These mastabas are those of Metjen (LS 6) and Merib (G-2100-I), exposed from 1850 in the Museumsinsel, and currently on display in the Neues Museum, Berlin.
1. E 17 location at Saqqara (after PM II.2, Pls LXI–LXII).
In October 1850, Mariette encountered quite by chance his first mastabas while searching the Serapeum:

...Two of the tombs which line the alley did attract my attention. The first is on the north side and is from the Old Kingdom. It was devastated from top to bottom, and with great trouble do I reconstruct the original plan. We discover, among the ruins where they were pell-mell thrown, five painted statues, whose fragments, which readjust to each other, have been carefully collected and put aside. Two niches, hidden in a wall, which has not been completely put down, are open. Here we find, still at their antique place, two admirable statues. These are the one of the famous scribe of the Louvre⁴ and the one of Pehernefer.⁵

This wonderful discovery is just an example among many others which punctuate Mariette’s career. The following years, his exploration of the desert around Saqqara led to the spectacular detection of the Memphis Serapeum. Yet the great egyptologist showed also a deep interest for the Old Kingdom monuments: What make them deserving notice, he wrote in

---

⁴ Louvre N 2290.
⁵ Louvre N 118.
1869, *that is not only their quantity, their conservation, their greatness, the perfection of their workmanship; it is the period to which they trace back.*

Appointed *Ma’mur du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* in 1858, he explored all of Egypt, but his heart stayed firmly bound to Saqqara. Until his death, he kept digging the site, which was familiar to him. He excavated tombs, which are now appreciated by thousands of tourists and the numerous masterpieces he collected form the core of the actual Egyptian Museum, such as the statue of ‘Cheikh el beled’. Not only did he excavate Saqqara’s mastabas, but he preserved and studied them as well. He even thought to photograph them by using modern techniques. It is quite clear that his perseverance in creating a service dedicated to the conservation of the Egyptian heritage has his roots in the first experiences he had on this site: *I lived 4 years among the fellahs, and in the course of these four years, I saw, which is hardly believable, seven hundred tombs disappearing from the plain of Abouzyr and Saqqarah* he wrote in 1857 to Ferdinand de Lesseps.\(^8\) Untiringly he dug, studied, numbered, drew plans, collected hieroglyphic inscriptions and examined architectural features. In 1869 his first study on the 142 mastabas he discovered is published and he shed light on both the importance and the difficulty of this task: *There is no other place where the Old Kingdom tombs are more numerous and more interesting than at Saqqarah. The work we have started is a difficult and long-term one* wrote Mariette.\(^9\)

In a major posthumous book of nearly 600 pages published by Gaston Maspero in 1883, Auguste Mariette developed and enriched his analysis. His introduction, which is unfortunately unfinished, summarizes his researches about private tombs from the Old Kingdom at Saqqara and shows how much modern Egyptology owes him. Indeed, we have kept his descriptive system, especially the vocabulary he created: the terms used for the ‘classical monuments’ could not be adapted for this new and ‘exotic’ archaeology. So he chose other ones: first the word ‘mastaba’, taken from modern Arabic, which names *the stone seat or platform which can be seen in the Egyptian cities on front of each shop. A carpet is laid on the mastaba and the customer seats there in order to talk business, often next to the shopkeeper.*\(^11\) Then he specified the different elements of the architecture of these private tombs: the superstructure of the ‘mastaba’ (*Fig. 3*) (*the mastaba is a construction with a massive and heavy appearance, which plan (is) a rectangle, and which 4 sides are*...
4 squares quite similar, symmetrically bent towards a common centre\textsuperscript{12}); his ‘serdab’ – word borrowed from Persian – points the storeroom for statues; concerning the substructure, he defined the shaft and the burial chamber. He described the chapels included in the monument, with their decoration intended to perpetuate the funerary cult; he mentioned the steles, particularly the ‘false-doors’, gateway between the world of the dead and world of the living, and whose elements he defined very carefully. He went on with the statues, the coffins and the funerary furniture. Eventually, he mentioned the inscriptions: his copies of hieroglyphs as well as the transcription of titles and proper names indicate that his knowledge of Ancient Egyptian was close to the one of the best specialists of these times. In 1877 in Assiut, far from Saqqara, he established the list of the tombs he studied at Saqqara and which contains more than 100 numbers with the name of the owner and the tomb’s date.\textsuperscript{13} It introduces the study of each tomb, carefully described and sorted out chronologically. We stay amazed in front of the accuracy of the dating set by Mariette; as it is the case today, it was based on the crossing of different criteria. If these criteria are no more the same, the conclusions are surprisingly still valid.

His publications are richly illustrated with plans, drawings and copies of texts, all remarkable at that time. Eventually if the map he drew up stayed unpublished in his lifetime, later completed by J. de Morgan, it is at the present time the only general map of the Saqqara necropolis\textsuperscript{14} and its numbering of the mastabas is still in use.

The tomb E 17, studied recently by the Mission archéologique du Louvre, can be found on this map. It is sorted in the Sixth Dynasty tombs, because among many titles of the owner called Akhethetep, Mariette had already deciphered the title of priest of King Unas’ pyramid (Fig. 4).

The monument was already ruined: \textit{It is so demolished that the original plan of the mastaba could not be known} noticed Mariette,\textsuperscript{15} who added further, whilst describing the chapel: \textit{the south side has partly disappeared}.\textsuperscript{16} The degradations followed their course. Indeed, Luigi Vassali’s drawings done in 1857,\textsuperscript{17} went with this commentary: \textit{six cartouches were hammered by Arabs few days after the discovery}.\textsuperscript{18}

In Mariette’s publication is also a drawing of mastaba E 17’s façade (Fig. 5). We notice that it is placed against a higher structure. Thanks to this drawing, it has been possible to find again the location of the chapel bought in 1903 by the Louvre.\textsuperscript{19} In fact this very

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 23–24.
\textsuperscript{13} Mariette intended to add about fifteen others – their list can be found on p. 463, as well as the additional plates.
\textsuperscript{14} J. De Morgan, Carte de la nécropole: Dahshour, Sakkarah, Abou-Sir, [Paris?] 1897. It illustrates the cover of the proceedings of the conference \textit{Abusir and Saqqara in the year 2000}, Prague 2000.
\textsuperscript{15} Mariette, Mastabas, p. 421.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 421.
\textsuperscript{17} Copy held in Gaston Maspero’s Archive, Ms 4051(1), at the Library of Institut de France, Paris.
\textsuperscript{18} Mariette, Mastabas, p. 428. This must be the false-door placed outside the mastaba since inside the chapel there are no traces of hammering.
\textsuperscript{19} Loc. cit.
year a team of British archaeologists headed by M. Murray and H. Petrie made drawings of five tombs of this area of Saqqara. The publication, published in 1952, includes a short but accurate description of the mastaba E 17 and of its decoration. The drawings, done in few days, as did Vassali, show though some incorrectness.

One indication caught our eye: the authors quoted a remark done by the archaeologist G.A. Reisner about a second tomb, belonging to another Akhethetep, the Louvre’s one: adjoining the above; probably the mastaba against which Mariette shows E. 17 as
being built.\textsuperscript{20} In order to localize the later, which appeared on no map, it was necessary to find out first the mastaba E 17. For more than a century, the sand covered all these monuments and the modern maps did not remember them.\textsuperscript{21}

The first step of the rediscovery of mastaba E17 occurred at the beginning of the excavation plan in 1995, when we found the monolithic lintel, which topped the entrance of the chapel (\textbf{Fig. 6}). The block was found in the sand, lying c. 3m far from his original place. Since Mariette’s time, his right end, which was the start of the three lines of cut in incised hieroglyphs, has been lost. Mariette’s copy enables to restore the complete text whose signs are rather high (between 10 and 12cm high for vertical signs) and very detailed: some are really small masterpieces like the \textit{tp} sign formed after Akhethetep’s profile, the coffin \textit{krs} as well as the finely detailed feathers of the birds. The inscription is an offering formula, usual during the Old Kingdom, with an invocation to the god Anubis, protector of the dead:

\begin{quote}
An offering that give the king and Anubis who rules over the divine pavilion, on the top of his mountain, in order that he could be buried in the necropolis in the western desert after a nice old age; an offering that gives Anubis in (all) his places in order that he could walk on the good paths on which walk the revered ones. Then follow the beneficiary’s titles: king’s liegeman, overseer of the division(s) of divine offerings in the Two Houses, administrator of the jackal, (possessor) of a pre-eminent place, pillar of kenmout, king’s liegeman, staff of the rekh, and eventually his forename – Akhethetep, whose large image extends on the whole left height of the lintel.
\end{quote}

Some days later, we discovered the chapel’s entrance of mastaba E 17 placed 3m to the east of the lintel. The monument was under the sand and we completely excavated the chapel only in 1997, when we drew facsimile and took photographs. The eastern part of the mastaba, buried under great rubble, was dug in 2000. The shaft leading to the subterranean burial chamber, recovered by an accumulation of very big flagstones has not yet been explored. During all that time I have built up with the great egyptologist Karol Myśliwiec friendly and respectful relations at Saqqara where our diggings were close. From year to year, visiting each other’s excavations, comparing our discoveries, we had fruitful conversations, attempting to explain the history of this area situated close to the Djeser Pyramid.

The chapel of mastaba E 17 is very small. Its floor space covers 1.045 x 1.80m, i.e. about 2 x 3.5 Egyptian cubits. The ceiling’s height is 2.83m. The decoration starts at 0.85m from the ground. We reach the chapel thanks to a decorated corridor of 1.81m long and 0.59m wide. In contrary with the big Louvre mastaba on which the north wall rests, his architecture shows negligence through the choice of the materials and their fitting together. The internal walls of the chapel underline the construction’s rusticity and the will to work

\textsuperscript{20} G.A. REISNER, The development of the Egyptian tomb down to the accession of Cheops, Cambridge 1936, p. 409.

\textsuperscript{21} Recently, 	extsc{Chr. Ziegler}, Recherches sur Saqqara au musée du Louvre: bilan et perspectives, \textit{[in:]} M. Bartá, J. Krejčí (Eds), Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2000, \textit{ArOr-suppl.} 9, Praha 2000, pp. 43–54.

6. Monolithic lintel which topped the entrance of the chapel E 17 (Phot. © C. Décamps/Fouilles du Louvre à Saqqara).
The bottom of the walls is of rough limestone while the decorated surfaces are
in a fine white limestone. The walls are built with thin vertical flagstones, fitting together
with the compression of the roofing’s flagstone. The lack of any pointing system explains
the stones’ dismantling and the unwedging between the texts’ columns and the decoration.

Behind the walls is a rough filling which forms the shape of the mastaba of 12.70 x 5m wide
for an approximately height of 4.20m. The facing was built with blocks of local limestone.

The south and west walls, which were already very damaged under Mariette’s time,
are now almost completely destroyed; only the main wall with the chapel’s entrance is
almost completely preserved (Fig. 7). Here the owner’s name and titles are inscribed on the
jambs. The upper part is now lost but it is possible to restore the complete text thanks to
Mariette’s drawings; they give us also the unique evidence of a stele which was originally
outside. Both architectural parts have been lost at the beginning of the twentieth century
since H. Petrie and M. Murray did not mention them in their publication. They must have
been taken away at the same time of a monumental cornice (still lost) and a decoration frag-
ment of the corridor that we found again in 1995, 5m to the east of the chapel’s entrance.
The inside is decorated with finely low-relief carving scenes. Some colours are preserved: red ochre and black on the body and hair of the human figures, turquoise blue for the barks, yellow and red for the animals, blue and red for the hieroglyphs. On top of a plinth, then decorated with red and yellow stripes, registers of the corridor show the beginning of the procession of offerings bearers walking towards the chapel (Fig. 8).

Corridor’s scenes are symmetrical and have, on some registers, the bearers bringing to the deceased the production of his estates. From bottom to top, we can see: the procession of the bearers holding young animals in baskets, poultry, geese, then the animals of the desert and eventually the cattle. All are walking towards the large representations of the deceased. On the north wall, he is shown standing as he is *contemplate the [...] which are brought from the nice fields* and above, seating in front of a table covered with breads, he is holding a perfume vase to his nose (Fig. 9). In front of him appears the traditional menu inscribed in small squares.

The south wall, very damaged, holds only few traces of a similar scene. The offerings bearers converge also towards the false-door, which covers the entire western wall (Fig. 10). Here is the link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The monumental false-door of 2.52m high is built with two monolithic limestone flagstones: the one on the bottom reaches the middle of the scene where the deceased figures in front of his offering table. The incised texts were painted in green. They consist in a series of offering formula and the mention of different titles of the tomb-owner.

10. Western wall of the chapel: the false-door (Phot. © C. Décamps/Fouilles du Louvre à Saqqara).
On the floor is a big limestone offering table.

On the opposite eastern wall is a large register on the top of the entrance’s opening, which depicts the hunting and the fishing in the marshes (Fig. 11). On each side of the opening, symmetrical scenes are arranged on three smaller registers. There we see the bringing of oxen and poultry as well as butchery scenes. While the figures on the upper register are facing each other, those of the lateral registers are walking to the exterior, like following the scenes on south and north walls.

The upper register shows the deceased, twice, in the marshes, standing on a bark and escorted by his sons Rekhuef and Pehernefer. On the left, he fishes with a harpoon while on the right he hunts the birds with a throw stick. Both scenes and relating inscriptions are symmetrical. The axis of symmetry is symbolized by the stylized bush of papyrus, figuring on top of the door and towards which converge the characters. A cloud of birds spreads in two directions, towards the figures. Its left part shows the montagne d’eau, a usual theme in the scenes of harpoon fishing\(^{22}\) while its right part figures the traditional fauna of the marshes. Unfortunately the decoration is not much legible because of the

\(^{22}\) J. Vandier, Manuel d’archéologie égyptienne IV/1, Bas-reliefs et peintures de la vie quotidienne, Paris 1964, pp. 731–733.
limestone’s erosion; but parallel scenes enable us to identify the fishes and animals of the marshes: butterfly, kingfisher feeding his nestlings, genet, bird nesting, and ichneumon.

The three north lateral registers show servants presenting geese, an ox and also a scene of butchery. On the south lateral registers, scenes are quite similar but with some differences in the attitude. Here the geese are replaced by cranes, which, following the text, are ‘1200’.

The mastaba E 17 represents one of the rare well-dated monuments in the Saqqara necropolis. As Mariette already noticed it, the presence of King Unas’ cartouche in the titles of its owner constitutes a terminus ante quem: it is contemporary or posterior to this king who ruled around 2350 BC. The mastaba E 17 is posterior to the Louvre mastaba on which it rests: its north structures are built against the north wall of the great Louvre mastaba. The Louvre chapel can be dated, after several criteria,23 of Unas’ predecessor, King Djedkara Isesi, around 2400–2380 BC. It seems that the mastaba E 17 owner was the grandson of Louvre mastaba owner, as each other’s location of the tombs and their names Akhethetep, prove it.

After Mariette’s conclusions, the Louvre excavations brought of course many new data to complete our knowledge about this area of Saqqara. First, the original location of the mastaba to which belongs the Louvre chapel: its architecture has been studied, its reliefs have found their original context, its shafts has been explored and three statues of Akhethetep I have been discovered.24 Today we know that the Louvre mastaba is part of a large Old Kingdom complex with numerous parallel streets running North/South, along which stone or mud-brick mastabas have been built. In the eastern area, many small intact shafts have been dug into the gebel. Apart the mastaba E 17, which must have been spared because of this smallness, these mastabas have been reused during the first millennium BC. Some tombs have been dug in their superstructures and their shafts but we have succeeded in identifying their original disposition. For instance, the west wall of gallery Q1A, in which was found an amount of material from the first millennium BC, was decorated with several Old Kingdom false-doors. In the tomb N1B, a drum is inscribed with the name of a ‘workers supervisor of the necropolis’ called Sabef. The text is characteristic of the Old Kingdom. But the most spectacular discovery in this tomb is the intact mummy of the Lady Nephthys-iyty, who was buried there 1500 years after the original arrangement of this place. She represents another Golden Age of Saqqara, i.e. the Late Period, on which Mariette shed light as well, with his discoveries in the Serapeum.

(Translation: Hélène Virenque)*

---


* I am very grateful to Hélène Virenque for translating this article into English.