

Naguib Kanawati, *Conspiracies in the Egyptian Palace: Unis to Pepy I.* Routledge, Oxon and New York, 2003, (Transferred to digital printing 2011). ISBN 10: 0-415-27107-X: ISBN 10: 0-415-61937-8

Naguib Kanawati's *Conspiracies in the Egyptian Palace* is an original study concerning claims of sensational palatial intrigues in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties which may have culminated in the assassination of King Teti. In the third century BCE, some 2000 years after the documented events, the ancient historian Manetho wrote that Teti was assassinated by his own bodyguards. Using this as a starting point, Kanawati presents the data gathered from his recent excavations in the cemeteries of Unis and Teti I and discusses the archaeological evidence which can be used to analyse the political machinations that occurred during the reigns of Unis, Teti I and Pepy I.

At present Kanawati is Professor of Egyptology in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He contributed to the formation of the Rundle Foundation for Egyptian Archaeology in the 1970s and founded the Australian Centre for Egyptology in 1989, still retaining the position of Director. He has excavated at numerous Old Kingdom sites including el-Hawish, Quseir el-Amarna, el-Hagarsa and Deir el-Gebrawi. Most recently and in a joint project between the Australian Centre for Egyptology, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and the University of Suez Canal, Kanawati has excavated in the Unis and Teri Cemeteries located at Saqqara.

As a result of these excavations it has been possible for Kanawati to analyse the evidence gathered from the numerous tombs of the palace officials and draw preliminary conclusions regarding the intriguing events of the turbulent latter years of the Fifth Dynasty and the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty. The history is far from complete and the interpretation mostly uncertain, not the least because such events were not recorded as they were highly unsuitable for perpetuity. Nevertheless Kanawati offers an interpretation which, he fully admits, is just that –an interpretation susceptible to alternate perspectives and subject to change with the discovery of additional and perhaps contradictory evidence.

To combat the paucity of evidence attesting the history and genealogy of the Fifth and early Sixth Dynasties, a time when kings and aspirants to the throne relied upon the support of priests and high officials, the text is methodically organised to present the evidence with simplicity and clarity. In the first chapter the historical validity of Manetho's claim that Teti was assassinated by his bodyguards is examined. Chapter 2 provides the evidence for the assassination claim, as understood from the tombs of the officials who may have participated in the events, while Chapter 3 provides the main arguments, as gathered from the archaeological evidence. To conclude, Kanawati suggests a hypothesis which incorporates both the textual sources, including Manetho and the Old Kingdom text *The Autobiography of Weni*, and the evidence gathered from the excavation of the Unis and Teti cemeteries.

Kanawati's methodology is systematic and straightforward and from the excavations he is able to make a number of claims, including: (1) the reign of Teti saw a dramatic increase in the number of guards which would suggest that security was of paramount importance during his reign; (2) many official titles were concerned with preserving the secrecy of all royal affairs (for example "He who is privy to the secrets of...", 151) which suggests an official policy of concealment; and (3) a significant number of tombs of palace officials had their names and/or body parts deliberately and systematically erased. Three individuals had both their name and figure erased: vizier Heri, overseer of weapons Mereri and chief physician Seankhuptah, providing the likely identity of the assassination conspirators.

Although much of the evidence is admittedly circumstantial, Kanawati's methodology is sound and his conclusions valid, insofar as the evidence allows. His further analysis of the events that occurred during the reign of Pepy I – a conspiracy by his wife, as documented in the *Autobiography of Weni*, and a later conspiracy organised by vizier Rawer – is similarly systematic. The tombs of a number of individuals experienced damage, indicative of deliberate punishment but if this was the consequence of an assassination attempt, it was unsuccessful (Pepy I lived to reign at least 32 years, prior to the accession of Merenre).

The book contains over 80 illustrations, including numerous photographs of tomb facades and scenes, several line drawings of tomb scenes and a diagram of the layout of the cemetery of Teti. They undoubtedly enhance the commentary and as such it is unfortunate a diagram of the layout of the cemeteries of Unis and Pepi I is not included, particularly when the specific manner of their composition is used in the analysis of the assassination claims. Indeed, additional information such as an overall map of the cemetery locations and a chronology of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (including the likely dates for the palace officials under scrutiny) would have been beneficial for both the casual reader and individuals utilising the text for research purposes.

Conspiracies in the Egyptian Palace presents clearly the results of the excavations conducted in the Unis and Teti Cemeteries. In addition, Kanawati provides an acute analysis of the Old Kingdom political and social situation during the reigns of Unis, Teti and Pepy I. Not only does the text inform on the administration of the palace, the likely factors contributing the attribution of officials' tombs and the architecture and decoration of the tombs themselves, but it provides a contextual outline of the history of the Old Kingdom and an intriguing argument for the possible assassination of Teti and the two likely assassination attempts of Pepy I. The text would be invaluable for students and researchers of the Old Kingdom and it is not difficult to imagine that the intriguing and scandalous nature of the subject matter would also appeal to non-scholars.

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