

# The Early Dynastic Mastabas of Naga ed-Deir

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*The site of Naga ed-Deir is located on the east bank of the Nile near Abydos. The Early Dynastic portion of the site consisted of four cemeteries. Cemeteries N1500 and N3000 contained primarily tombs of Dynasties I and II, while the tombs in cemeteries N3500 and N500 dated to Dynasties II and III.*

*The preserved tomb superstructures were rectangular in plan and oriented roughly north-south. The mastabas had mud brick walls with little or no batter constructed around inner cores of gravel, rubble, sand or mud brick. Evidence of enclosure walls and of small, walled courtyards on the western side of some mastabas was found. Super- and substructure walls were often coated with mud plaster over which a layer of white plaster was sometimes applied. The earliest and largest mastabas had niche paneled façades on at least their western (valley-facing) and southern sides. The back panels of some niches were painted red. Most mastabas were small and had only two niches on the western side. These niches, whether simple or compound, were short and topped with a lintel.*

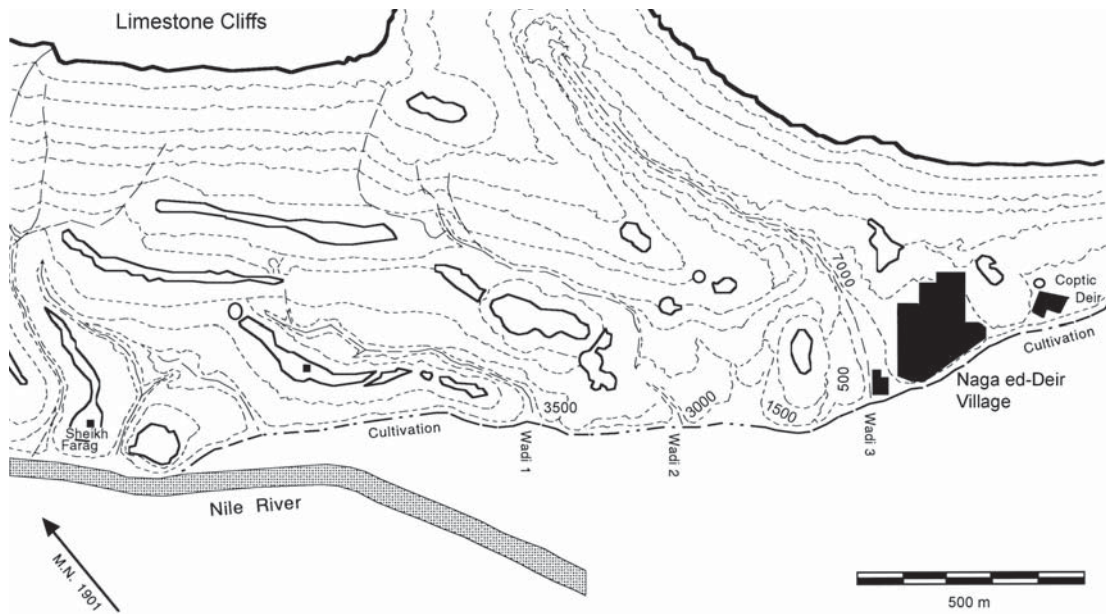
*The most common form of grave was a simple pit, the lower portion of which consisted of a single burial chamber, often lined with mud brick and roofed. Roofs were either flat and made of wood and mud plaster or mud brick, or vaults made of mud brick. Multi-chambered tombs were rare. Some burial chambers were accessed by a ramp or stairway, which was sealed with mud brick and, occasionally, large limestone slabs. Most tombs contained only a single burial. Pottery and stone vessels were the most common grave goods, but unusual finds such as the metal tools of a carpentry kit and an elaborate parure of gold testify to the ancient importance of the site and its inhabitants.*

The site of Naga ed-Deir, on the east bank of the Nile opposite the modern town of Girga, is a rich source of archaeological material and information relating to many aspects of early Egypt. Naga ed-Deir is composed of a series of cemeteries that served one or more towns in the region of Abydos.<sup>1</sup> These cemeteries cover a remarkable span of time,

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1. Individuals from This (Thinis), the capital of the 8<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome, located on the west bank of the Nile south of Abydos, were buried at Naga ed-Deir in Dynastic times (Brovarski 1982: 296; Brovarski 1985: 475; Wilkinson 1999: 354). Although the cemetery was used by residents of This, it may have been founded by local inhabitants of Naga ed-Deir. I think it less likely that the early Predynastic residents of This would have taken the trouble to establish a cemetery across the river, some kilometers away from their home village.

**Fig. 1**  
Locations of early  
cemeteries at  
Naga ed-Deir.  
After Reisner  
1908 : map IV,  
pl. 79.



beginning in the early Predynastic period, and continuing through Dynastic and Coptic times, into the recent era (Reisner 1908: vi). Naga ed-Deir is more correctly identified as an archaeological region, the core of which extends from Sheikh Farag in the north for almost two kilometers to the abandoned Coptic *dêr* southwest of the modern town (Brovarski 1982: 296; Fisher 1913: 22) (**fig. 1**). The portion of the site used during the Early Dynastic period (Dynasties I through III) consisted of four cemeteries located between Wadis 1 and 3. Cemeteries N1500 and N3000 were the earliest, followed by N3500 and N500. These cemeteries also contained burials from other periods of Egyptian history.

The cemeteries of Naga ed-Deir were first excavated by the Egyptian Expedition of the University of California between 1901 and 1904 under the direction of Dr. George A. Reisner (Reisner 1908: vi; Podzorski 2000: 483).<sup>2</sup> Additional work was done at the site, again under Reisner's direction, by the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition in 1910–1912 and 1923–1924 (Brovarski 1982: 296). The earlier expedition was sponsored by Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst on behalf of the University of California (Reisner 1908: v). The

original field notes and photographs from these excavations are currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Copies of the Hearst Expedition records are also held at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology of the University of California at Berkeley. Objects and human remains recovered from the site are housed in various institutions, most importantly the P.A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, and the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Information on the early remains from Naga ed-Deir has been published in a number of sources. The most important are: *The Early Dynastic Cemeteries of Naga-ed-Dêr*, Part I by George Reisner (1908) for cemeteries N1500 and N3000; *The Early Dynastic Cemeteries of Naga-ed-Dêr*, Part II by A.C. Mace (1909) for cemetery N3500; and *A Provincial Cemetery of the Pyramid Age* (Reisner 1932) for cemetery N500. Dows Dunham edited and published Albert Lythgoe's field notes on *The Predynastic Cemetery N 7000* in 1965. Reisner frequently cited Naga ed-Deir in his seminal work on *The Development of the Egyptian Tomb Down to the Accession of Cheops* (1936).

2. J.E. Quibell called Reisner's attention to the site due to plundering by local residents (Reisner 1908: vi).

It has been suggested that the mortuary architecture of the Early Dynastic period in Upper Egypt evolved from materials and methods developed during the Predynastic period with influences from Lower Egypt and, perhaps indirectly, Mesopotamia (Arnold 2003: 162; Lacovara 2000: 198; Spencer 1979: 15). At Naga ed-Deir the earliest phase of tomb construction is preserved in cemetery N7000 (**fig. 1**), sometimes known as the “Early” Predynastic cemetery, because it lacks a late Predynastic (Naqada III) component (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: *passim*; Brovanski 1982: 300). The excavated tombs of the earliest Predynastic at Naga ed-Deir (Naqada I, c. 3900-3600 BCE) were simple round, oval or irregular pits dug into the gravel. The body was placed in a flexed position, with the knees drawn up before the body, and laid on the left side with the head usually oriented southward (upriver) and facing west. Multiple interments within one tomb were not uncommon during this period (e.g. N7128, N7179). When preserved, there is evidence that the body was either dressed or wrapped in cloth (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: *passim*), and occasionally leather or animal hide (e.g. N7032, N7387) (*ibid.*: 13, 19, 191, 233). The body was then either wrapped in reed matting or laid between two layers of reed matting, or both (*ibid.*: XI). Grave goods consisting of ceramic vessels, stone cosmetic palettes, beads, amulets, etc., were placed around or on the body. The upper matting sometimes covered the grave goods.

The Middle Predynastic (Naqada II, c. 3600-3300 BCE) tombs from Naga ed-Deir cemetery N7000 were often larger than those of the previous period and oval or rectangular in shape. The body was buried in the same position and orientation as earlier and wrapped in layers of cloth, hide or leather and matting (*ibid.*: 323). Although tomb size increased, the number of multiple burials decreased slightly in this period.<sup>3</sup> A new feature which appears to presage the coffin

was the erection of a lining or “box” without lid or base within the pit (*ibid.*: xiv-xv, 366). This box was made of wood planks laid lengthwise along the walls of the grave pit and held upright by small wooden stakes imbedded in the ground on either the inside or the outside of the planking. Vegetal fiber twists passed through holes in the planks tied the boards to the uprights (e.g. N7185, N7190 and N7531) (*ibid.*: 106, 110 and 345; Reisner 1936: 1, fig. 7). Occasionally, linings of sticks held together with twists of vegetal fiber and sometimes strengthened by wooden frames (e.g. N7520, N7525), were placed on the bottom (e.g. N7264, N7522, N7525) and sides (e.g. N7265, N7243) of the grave pit, or above the burial (e.g. N7525) (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: xiv). As in the earlier period, reed matting was found on the grave floors and laid over the burial and grave goods. The quantity and variety of grave goods generally increased, although there were some apparently undisturbed tombs contained no grave goods (e.g. N7397, N7557).

At cemetery N7000, many tombs exhibited no trace of roofing (*ibid.*: xiv) and earth may have been placed directly on the matting which covered the burial (Reisner 1936: 1). Other tombs, however, preserved clear traces of roofing. Surviving remains of roofs indicated the simplest construction method employed branches covered with two or more layers of matting (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: xiv, 47, 270). The matting would have prevented soil from sifting onto the body below. An alternative protection for the body was a “frame or tray” of woven branches placed above the body (e.g. N 7525) (*ibid.*: 15). Lythgoe reports that the roofs were constructed at ground level, with the ends of the branches spanning the width of the tomb pit (e.g. N7085b, N7280, N7443) and that the typical tomb depth was between 75 cm and 100 cm (*ibid.*: 14, 205, 271, 325).<sup>4</sup> An unusual variation is seen in tomb N7548, which had branches averag-

3. Multiple burials comprised about 20% of the Naqada I graves and approximately 15% of the Naqada II burials.

4. Note however, that evidence from other sites indicates that roofs were situated below the ancient ground level (Reisner 1936: fig. 10 & fig. 15).

ing 3.5 cm in diameter spaced at 15 cm-20 cm intervals. They had apparently been laid on top of the wooden box which lined the grave and presumably supported a layer of matting (*ibid.*: 365-366). An innovation of the Naqada II was the use of wooden planks for roofing (N7338, N7510).<sup>5</sup> Some roofs were made of multiple layers of branches and/or planks laid in alternating length- and crosswise layers over the tomb pit (*e.g.* N7443, N7305).

No traces of any superstructures were found at Naga ed-Deir cemetery N7000 (Reisner 1936: 3). Lythgoe speculated in his field notes that the tomb pits may not have been filled with earth, but rather were covered at ground level with a layer of matting supported by wooden cross bracing or roofing (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: 325). Reisner suggested that, after the burial had taken place, earth and possibly large rocks<sup>6</sup> were piled on top of the burial or grave roof, creating a mound above ground level (Reisner 1936: 1-3, 367). This mound may have been intended not only to mark the grave for future funerary rites and prevent accidental intrusion by later burials, but also to protect the burial from scavenging animals and tomb robbers. Reisner (1936: 1-2, 5, 367) also suggested that the mound may have been enclosed by “wattle or wooden walls” which would have served as the focus of the funerary cult.

The temporal link between the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods is the Late Predynastic (Naqada III, c. 3300-2950 BCE).<sup>7</sup> Only

a few Naqada III tombs have been identified at the site of Naga ed-Deir proper. These were found scattered through the early Predynastic, Early Dynastic and later cemeteries. It has been speculated that the cemetery of Mesaeed, located a few kilometers south of Naga ed-Deir,<sup>8</sup> may have served as the Naqada III burial site (Brovarski 1982: 300). It is also possible that a Naqada III cemetery at Naga ed-Deir remains unexcavated (Reisner 1905: 1)<sup>9</sup> or has been destroyed. It has also been suggested that some late Predynastic populations declined or were displaced due to events surrounding the unification of Egypt, which lead to temporary abandonment of some cemeteries (Wilkinson 1999: 354, 355). This apparent lack of Naqada III tombs at Naga ed-Deir is unfortunate, since we know from other cemeteries that certain late Predynastic tomb construction methods, such as mud brick burial chamber linings (Reisner 1936: 7, 16-17) and “side chamber” tombs (*ibid.*: 52-56; Reisner 1932: 9), continued to be used into the Early Dynastic period.<sup>10</sup>

At Naga ed-Deir, tombs dated to Dynasties I and II were identified in cemeteries N1500 and N3000, while cemeteries N3500 and N500 contained Early Dynastic tombs primarily of Dynasties II and III. When preserved, the tomb superstructures (mastabas) at the site were generally rectangular in plan, oriented roughly north-south, with one long side facing toward the Nile Valley (local “west”).<sup>11</sup> The mastabas had mud brick walls

5. The planks of the roof in N7338 were laid across the width of the grave and were supported by wooden posts “in the middle of each end” (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: XIV, 205, fig. 90d). In N7510 the end of a rectangular plank was found embedded in the fill 95 cm above the grave floor (*ibid.*: 323, fig. 144c,d). Boards from N7533 measured 3-5 cm thick; N7519 and N7510 had boards 5 cm thick; N7330 had one preserved plank 210 cm long, 30 cm wide and 5.5 cm thick (*ibid.*: 205, 347, 330, 323.).

6. Four large limestone rocks were found in the fill above N7595 (*ibid.*: fig. 174a,c,d).

7. Each phase of the Naqada represents an archaeological construct based on objects of material culture that have a recognized distribution across space and time. These phases are not historical, text-based periods. The Naqada III continues well into Dynasty I.

8. The cemeteries of Mesaeed and Mesheikh, excavated by the HU-MFA Expedition in 1911 and 1912 respectively, have been described as part of the “Naga-el-Dêr concession” (Fisher 1913: 22; Brovarski 1982: 296). Currently unpublished, Mesaeed was slightly larger than cemetery N7000 and contained graves from the earliest Predynastic to Dynasty I (*ibid.*: 300). Also unpublished, the Mesheikh cemetery was smaller and had fewer Predynastic burials (Fisher 1913: 22; Brovarski 1982: 301).

9. Reisner (1905: 4-6) mentioned two unexcavated early cemeteries in his 1905 report to Mrs. Hearst. One he dates to the Predynastic period and the other was “probably” Early Dynastic. These may refer to the cemeteries of Mesaeed and Mesheikh.

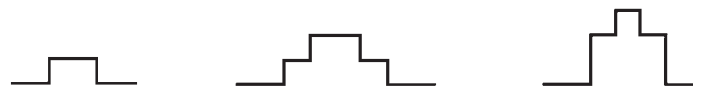
10. The chambers were usually located on the east or west side of the shaft in the earlier periods, and on the south side later (Reisner 1932: 7; 1908: 18).

11. Only tombs known or thought to have had mastaba-form superstructures are discussed here.



with little or no batter (Reisner 1936: 258, 367), which were constructed around inner cores of gravel, rubble, sand or, rarely, mud brick (N689) (Reisner 1932: 245). Evidence of enclosure walls of unknown height and of small, walled courtyards on the western side of the mastabas were found. The substructure (the underground portion of the tomb) was usually smaller than the mastaba above. Substructures varied in detail, but consisted of a pit, at the bottom of which was one or more chambers, the latter sometimes roofed. Super- and substructure walls were frequently coated with mud plaster and evidence of a finish coat of white plaster was also found (Reisner 1908: 5-6; Reisner 1936: 258; Mace 1909: 13). Reisner's (1936: 7-8) detailed typology of tomb form, which treated the large and small tombs independently,<sup>12</sup> will not be presented here. Due to the poor preservation of superstructures compared to substructures, the above- and below-ground portions of the tombs will be discussed separately.

The earliest preserved superstructures at Naga ed-Deir date to Dynasties I and II and belong to four of the larger mastabas known from the site: N1506 (early Dynasty I), N1581 (later Dynasty I), and N1514 and N3017 (Dynasty II).<sup>13</sup> The area covered by the mastaba superstructures ranged from a low of about 31 square meters (N3017), to a maximum of approximately 140 square meters (N1581).<sup>14</sup> None of the other, mostly smaller, tombs from cemeteries N1500 or N3000 had preserved superstructures.<sup>15</sup> Although the four mastabas were badly damaged and not all sides were preserved for each structure, enough of the lower courses of their walls remained to clearly indicate that they had been constructed using a pattern of alternating simple and compound niches on at least their western (valley-



**Fig. 2**

Examples of simple (left) and Compound (right) niches from Naga ed-Deir.



**Fig. 3**

Lower courses of niche paneled façade of mastaba N689, photo circa 1903. From Reisner 1932: pl. 16b.



**Fig. 4**

Niches from Naga ed-Deir

**a.** Façade of N689 (Dynasty III) with compound (left) and simple (right) niches. From Reisner 1932: pl. 16d.



**b.** Façade of mastaba N1514 (Dynasty II) showing compound niche with traces of white plaster. Reisner negative C9471.

Photo courtesy Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Regents of the University of California.

facing) and southern walls (N1506 and N1514)<sup>16</sup> (fig. 2-4). The eastern (back) sides of N1581 and N3017 were plain (no niches), as was the northern end of N3017. The exterior faces of the mastaba walls had a coating

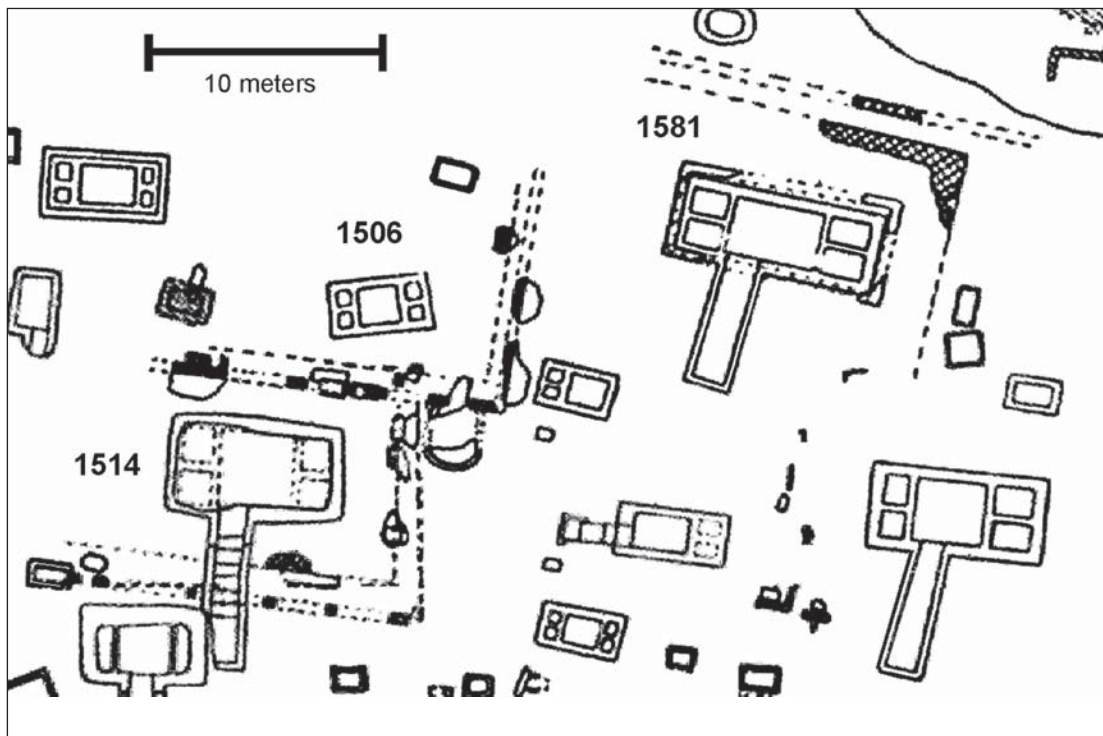
12. Small tombs were defined as those with burial chambers of less than 3 square meters (Reisner 1936: 42).

13. Dating of the tombs is as given by Reisner (1908; 1932; 1936) and Mace (1909).

14. The surface area for N1506 was about 50 m<sup>2</sup> and for N1514, just under 60 m<sup>2</sup>.

15. According to Reisner (1908: 7; 1936: 367), the lack of superstructures associated with the smaller tombs was due to denudation of the ancient surface and not because such structures had not existed.

16. One section of mastaba N1581 was preserved to a height of 50 cm. Reisner (1908: 6) notes that it was "not possible to determine the height" of the walls at the time of excavation.



**Fig. 5**  
Detail from map  
of cemetery  
N1500 showing  
plans of mastabas  
N1506, N1514,  
and N1581.  
From Reisner  
1908: pl. 79.

of mud plaster which was in turn covered with a thin layer of “pinkish-white” plaster (Reisner 1908: 7) (fig. 4a). The back walls of the compound niches of N1506 and N1514 were painted red, perhaps imitating wood (*ibid.*: 5-6, 34, 37, 45, 72, Map II, pl. 77; Reisner 1936: 258).<sup>17</sup> A very slight inward batter of the unfired mud brick walls was noted for two of these mastabas.<sup>18</sup> The interiors of these mastabas were filled with gravel, limestone chips, or rubble (e.g. N1581, N3017). The burial chambers were much smaller than the above ground portions of the tombs. The mastabas were apparently surrounded on all four sides by plain (no niches) mud brick enclosure walls of unknown height,<sup>19</sup> coated on both faces with layers of mud plaster covered with white plaster. The walls were placed 45-100 cm out from the mastaba faces (fig. 5). The space between the western

(valley) enclosure wall and the mastaba face was larger, presumably to accommodate offering activities associated with the cult of the deceased. Between these enclosure walls and the mastaba the ground surface had been coated with a layer of beaten mud or mud plaster (N1514, N3017), with traces of white plaster (N1506). Evidence of a doorway or entrance through the enclosure wall was only preserved for N1506. There, a U-shaped, white plastered platform of pounded mud edged with mud brick had been constructed on the outside of the southern end of the western face of the enclosure wall (Reisner 1908: 34). The niche paneled or “palace façade” type of mastaba was not common at Naga ed-Deir and only two other mastabas of this form, also large, and which Reisner dated to the late third and fourth dynasties, were found (Reisner 1932: 232, 245).<sup>20</sup> (fig. 3)

17. Wood panels were found at the back of the niches in the Third Dynasty mastaba of Hesy-Re (Reisner 1936: 248).

18. N1514 “nearly perpendicular” and N1581 “very slight batter” (Reisner 1908: 45, 37).

19. None of these mastabas had preserved traces of the enclosure wall on all four sides. Reisner describes the walls around N1506 and N1514 as “low,” although it is unclear if he meant the preserved or original height of the walls (*ibid.*: 34, 45).

20. Naga ed-Deir 689 (late? Dynasty III, palace façade enlargement over a two-niche original construction) and 610 (Dynasty IV). The use of multiple complex niching across a surface has been called the “palace façade” motif (Reisner 1936: 243; Arnold 2003: 170-171; Lacovara 2000: 198).





**Fig. 6**  
Remains of  
superstructures of  
small mastabas  
from cemetery  
N3500. From  
Mace 1909:  
pl. 8f.



**Fig. 7**  
Offering  
niche with  
limestone lintel,  
tomb N5301.  
From Mace  
1909: pl. 8d.

The earliest small tombs with preserved superstructures at Naga ed-Deir came from cemetery N3500 and dated to Dynasty II and early Dynasty III.<sup>21</sup> Cemetery N500 contained tombs dating from later Dynasty II through the Old Kingdom. The surface area covered by the individual mastabas varied from less than 2 square meters (N5302) to over 11 square meters (N4506). This type of mastaba has a very different form, with plain walls on three sides and only two niches in the western (valley) wall of the superstructure.<sup>22</sup> The niches, which may have served as *ka* doors (Reisner 1936: 244-245), were placed, one each, near the northern and southern ends of the wall (fig. 6). The southern niche was sometimes larger than the northern and its emphasis was perhaps related to the southern orientation of the head of the burial below (*ibid.*: 12). The niches in the western wall, whether simple or compound, were usually short, starting at or just above ground level, and did not

continue the full height of the superstructure, unlike the niches in the large mastabas.<sup>23</sup> Short niches with preserved tops ranged from 10 to 36 cm in height (Mace 1909: 12).<sup>24</sup> The crudest niches were cut or scraped into the flat mud brick wall (Reisner 1936: 242). Each niche was usually protected by a top or lintel of stone or, more rarely, wood (*e.g.* N5302) (Mace 1909: 12; Reisner 1936: 244.)<sup>25</sup> (fig. 7).

As with the larger mastabas, the walls of the two-niche mastabas were made of unfired mud brick on a rectangular plan, which enclosed fillings of sand and stones, 'rubbish', large stones, or gravel (*e.g.* N4136, N4702, N4771, N530) and were vertical (*e.g.* N4193) or leaned slightly inward (*e.g.* N4702, N5103).<sup>26</sup> The tomb shafts were usually only slightly smaller than the superstructure (Mace 1909: pl. 58).<sup>27</sup> The best-preserved mastabas at the site were found in cemetery N3500, where some structural remains survived to a height of 70 cm

21. The oldest is N4774, which Mace (1909: 65, pl. 58) dated to Dynasty II.

22. Naga-ed-Deir 4774 (Dynasty II), 4376, 4598, 4734, 4973, 4990, 4991 and 5175 (Dynasty II-III). These tombs were published by Mace (1909) and the majority probably date to the later end of the range (early Dynasty III). Reisner indicated that the two-niche mastaba originated in Dynasty I (Reisner 1936: 368) or Dynasty "0" (Reisner 1932: 7).

23. There is one known exception from cemetery N3500. Mastaba N5301 had a tall niche, although this niche was crossed by a stone lintel close to the ground (Mace 1909: pl. 8d).

24. According to Mace (1909: 12), simple niches ranged in width from 7-33 cm and were 8-14 cm in depth. Compound niches varied from 26-41 cm wide and were between 11-16 cm deep in the outer step and 9-16 cm deep in the inner portion.

25. Reisner (1908: 6 n. 2) also notes the use of a brick or a thick line drawn in the mud plaster to mark the top of the niche. He interpreted these lintels as a roof protecting the *ka* door (Reisner 1936: 256).

26. A variant form of superstructure had a few courses of mud brick which served as foundation walls for arched caps of stones embedded in mud plaster over the mastaba fill (*e.g.* N4901, N5104, N5147).

27. N5302 had a shaft that was larger than the mastaba above, clearly demonstrating that the mastaba could only have been constructed once the burial was completed and the shaft filled (Mace 1909: 23, fig. 42).



**Fig. 8**  
Back side of superstructure of mastaba N4506 showing the low enclosure wall. From Mace 1909: pl. 9a.



**Fig. 9**  
Offering area with jars before southern niche between mastaba wall and courtyard wall for mastaba N4947. From Mace 1909: pl. 9e.

(*ibid.*: 10). Enclosure walls around all four sides of the small mastabas were rare (e.g. N4506, N5103), but one example (N4506) demonstrated that these walls were probably low (**fig. 8**). It was more common for the two-niche mastaba to have a low wall that projected from its front side only, enclosing the offering area (**fig. 9**). Although the height of these walls is uncertain (*ibid.*: 12), the small size of these offering areas (sometimes as little as 30 cm wide), the close proximity of the mastabas in the cemetery, and the absence of evidence for doorways through the walls, probably precludes the presence of high walls. The offering area was often paved with mud plaster or brick and may have been white plastered (*ibid.*: 12-13). As with the larger mastabas, mud plaster covered most exposed wall surfaces and there was evidence of white plaster (*ibid.*: 13; Reisner 1932: 190). Mace (1909: 13, 27) mentions one mastaba (N4974) where the entire western wall was painted red, rather than just the niches.

Although the number of examples is small, at Naga ed-Deir the large niche paneled mastabas were more common in Dynasties I and II (four examples), than in Dynasties III to IV (two examples). All of the surviving smaller mastabas of Dynasty II and III were of the two-niche form. There was no preserved evidence for the superstructures of the smaller mastabas of Dynasty

I. Reisner (1936: 13) theorized that the palace-façade and two-niche mastabas had separate origins. At Naga ed-Deir, the mud brick superstructures of the mastabas appear fully formed, with no evidence for the local evolution of either type. Although the origin of the niche paneled mastaba is still debated by Egyptologists,<sup>28</sup> it is generally stated that the mud brick palace façade form was a northern, Lower Egyptian invention (perhaps inspired or influenced by Mesopotamian sources) which was imported into Upper Egypt at a very early date (Arnold 2003: 162; Spencer 1979: 15). Reisner (1936: 245, 367-368) suggested that the plain form of brick mastaba superstructure with two small offering niches on the west wall was perhaps derived from Predynastic soft material (wattle or wood) superstructures with offering doors and may have been the older form. Clearly, the niche paneled façade form is the oldest preserved at Naga ed-Deir, but since all smaller mastabas of the earliest period lack positive evidence either for or against a brick superstructure, we can not be sure that the form was originally limited only to the largest tombs, and therefore only the local social and political elites. It is interesting to note that tomb N689 was originally a large two-niche mastaba which was expanded to a palace façade type of superstructure (Reisner 1932: 245).

28. Jiménez-Serrano (2007: 23-24); Lacovara 2000: 198; Hendrickx 2001; Spencer 1979: 5-6.



The substructures of the mastabas at Naga ed-Deir exhibit a variety of forms, but have two basic components: the shaft and/or access pit, usually square or rectangular in plan, and the burial chamber(s). These can be further subdivided into four elements: pit or shaft with or without stairway, chamber(s), lining, and roofing. The pit or shaft might be a simple vertical hole, more or less regular in shape, which could be modified to accommodate various features, such as stairs, or ledges to support the burial chamber's roof. The bottom of the tomb pit comprised the basic burial chamber, but chambers cut into the gravel or the limestone bedrock to the side of the shaft or pit are also known from the site. The lower portion of the tomb shaft was often lined in order to set aside and protect the burial and multiple chambers were sometimes constructed using lining materials, particularly mud brick. The burial chamber may or may not have been roofed (Reisner 1936: 349). The simplest and most common form of Early Dynastic grave pit at Naga ed-Deir was a narrow, rectangular shaft or wide rectangular hole. The shaft, which was often slightly wider at the top than at the bottom, was commonly modified by a ledge cut back into the shaft on two or more sides (e.g. N1501). This ledge was set at the height of the burial chamber ceiling and supported the roof (e.g. N1637, N3014).<sup>29</sup> As tomb substructures at the site became larger and their construction more time consuming, a modification to the substructure was introduced in the form of a ramp or stairway which allowed access to the burial chamber (Reisner 1908: 6, 6 n.1). To accommodate the stairway or ramp, one side of the pit was dug out at a sloping angle. Steps could be cut directly into the gravel slope (e.g. N1584, N3013, N3551, N586)<sup>30</sup> or they might be built of mud brick (e.g. N1512, N1611, N587), or a combination of the two methods (e.g. N1513, N1581). Reisner (1936: 183) describes a variation on the stairway access

which he calls a "stairway + shaft," where the upper portion has a stairway or ramp and the lower portion a vertical shaft from 1 to 2 meters deep (e.g. N3551, N593). The side-walls of the stairway were sometimes lined with mud brick or consolidated with mud plaster (e.g. N1605, N1584, N3031, N689, N574). In cemetery N1500, the earliest stairways usually were located on the western (valley-facing) side of the tomb (fig. 5). In the later tombs in cemetery N500, the stairways usually entered the short, northwestern end of the burial chamber. The stairways necessitated a method of entry through the brick wall which often lined the burial chamber. This was achieved by a doorway which passed through the wall. When the stairway was no longer needed, the door was sealed with mud brick or mud brick and stones and covered with mud plaster (e.g. N1586, N3014, N4598). A slightly later addition was the placement of a large limestone slab over the door on the stairway side (e.g. N 3022, N573, N689) (fig. 10). Lastly, the entire pit and shaft would be filled with



**Fig. 10**  
Stairway entrance to burial chamber N689 showing limestone door block (center) and hole through brick lining for the burial chamber (left). From Reisner 1932: pl. 17a.

29. This is distinctly different from the surface-level roofs suggested by Lythgoe for the Predynastic cemetery N7000 (Lythgoe & Dunham 1965: 325).

30. A layer of mud plaster was sometimes applied to consolidate the gravel-cut stairs (e.g. N1584).

boulders, gravel and sand, or other rubble (e.g. N1586, N616).

As mentioned above, the basic plan for the most common form of grave was a simple pit, the lower portion of which consisted of a single burial chamber, perhaps lined with mud brick or some other material and often roofed to protect the burial from the shaft filling. This simple type of burial chamber varied greatly in size, from barely one half square meter in floor area (N4942) to over 30 square meters (e.g. N1513, N1586). Ceiling heights varied from ca. 40 cm (N559) to, rarely, more than 2 meters (N1647), with the most common heights between 70 cm and 120 cm.<sup>31</sup> Another, less common, form of tomb chamber was gravel-cut and separated from the access by a doorway. Access to the one or, rarely, two chambers was by a straight shaft (e.g. N566, N625) or sloping ramp or stairway (e.g. N574, N689). The gravel walls and ceilings of these chambers were sometimes coated with a thick layer of mud plaster, which might then be covered with white plaster or whitewash and, rarely (N689), enhanced with red paint.<sup>32</sup> In tomb N689, a section of the floor of the second chamber was slightly lower, perhaps to accommodate the coffin (Reisner 1932: 244-246). The least

common form of burial chamber found at Naga ed-Deir in the Early Dynastic period was the side chamber tomb (Reisner 1936: 52-56).<sup>33</sup> In the side chamber tomb, the burial chamber formed a small enlargement off the end of shaft and was meant for the body and a few objects, and the bottom of the tomb shaft might contain some of the grave goods. The side chamber was usually sealed off from the shaft by a wall of mud brick or mud plastered stones (Reisner 1932: 7). This type of burial chamber appears in the later Predynastic and was used at least through Dynasty III at Naga ed-Deir (*ibid.*: 7-9; Reisner 1936: 52-56). The shaft of the side chamber tomb was usually vertical (e.g. N591).

The sides of the lower portion of the tomb shaft in the Early Dynastic period were often lined with mud brick or other materials which defined the burial chamber, kept the gravel of the shaft from slumping onto the burial, and could be used to support the roof. Mud brick linings are known from Predynastic tombs of the Naqada II and III periods.<sup>34</sup> In the Early Dynastic tombs at Naga ed-Deir, the most common lining preserved was mud brick (e.g. N616, N1501, N3013, N5175), although partial or complete linings of stone (e.g. N4337, N5396, N662), mud plaster or mud bricks with stone chips (e.g. N4774), or mud plaster applied directly to the sides of the shaft (e.g. N1647) were also used. The linings were laid out on a more or less regular rectangular plan, although a few examples with one rounded, apse-like end are known (e.g. N617). Multi-chamber tombs were created at the bottom of large pits by the erection of interior walls of mud brick (fig. 11). The preferred plan was to divide the large, rectangular burial chamber into three or five chambers by adding small cross walls at one or both ends. The central room was the largest and held the burial itself. There might or might not be openings that allowed physical access between the chambers (e.g.

**Fig. 11**  
Pit grave with multiple chambers created using mud brick dividing walls in tomb N1532. Photo courtesy Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Regents of the University of California. Reisner negative A2234.



31. This is similar to the roof heights noted for the Predynastic tombs from Naga ed-Deir.

32. Tomb N689 was painted with a red band about 8 cm wide (Reisner 1932: 246).

33. Reisner (1936: 228) noted 14 examples of the side chamber tomb from cemetery N500, dating from Dynasty II through Dynasty IV. A few side chamber tombs were also identified in cemetery N1500 (i.e. N1522).

34. Hierakonpolis tomb 100 ('Painted Tomb'), El Ahaiwah tomb 88, etc. (Reisner 1936: 16-17, 18, 377).

N1533, N1506). In instances where no doorway existed between the rooms, rectangular outlines were scratched into the plastered surfaces of the walls between the main and subsidiary chambers (N1506), creating ‘spirit’ doorways through which the *ka* of the deceased might access his possessions.

The brickwork which lined the shafts at Naga ed-Deir was laid in a number of different ways, but the most common patterns were two layers of stretchers and a header course, or an irregularly alternating pattern of single headers over paired stretchers, or all stretchers (Reisner 1908: *passim*; Mace 1909: 10; Reisner 1932: *passim*). Stretchers were usually set in a running bond,<sup>35</sup> not stacked. Rarely, bricks were laid on their narrow edges (e.g. N1607, N559). Thicker walls had side by side courses of stretches overlain by full headers (e.g. N1506), while the headers on thinner walls were only half a brick in depth. Interior walls were usually all stretchers. Mortar is rarely mentioned, but Reisner (1932: 234) notes “bricks laid in mud-plaster” for tomb N617. Bricks were, on average, 26 x 12.5 x 7 cm in size (Mace 1909: 10).<sup>36</sup> All accessible interior brick surfaces as well as the tops of the walls were often covered with a layer of mud plaster (e.g. N617, N1607, N3012). Only minimal traces of matting were identified in the Early Dynastic tombs at Naga ed-Deir, although it was very common in the Predynastic graves from the site. The scant traces of wood found within the tombs were interpreted by the excavators as coffins, not as wood linings for the burial chamber (e.g. N559). Again, this is unlike the remains from the Predynastic cemetery, where wooden burial chambers linings were well documented. Two different types of roofing were identified in the Early Dynastic tombs at Naga ed-Deir: flat and vaulted. Flat roofs were most often made of branches or small logs,<sup>37</sup>

usually laid across the width of the burial chamber. The upper surface of the branches might be coated with a thick layer of mud plaster (e.g. 1581, N1637), or with one or more courses of mud bricks,<sup>38</sup> usually finished with mud plaster (e.g. N1532, N1647). Limestone chips might be embedded in the plaster coating. Shaped wooden planks were also used.<sup>39</sup> The roofs were most often supported by the mud brick walls of the tomb lining (e.g. N1501), or by ledges cut into the tomb shaft (e.g. N1506, N1607), or both (N1581, N1606). Some tombs had double roofs—added insurance to keep tomb robbers and the shaft filling out of the burial chamber (e.g. N1506, N1581). In Dynasty II and Dynasty III, limestone slabs were sometimes used to cover the burial chamber (e.g. N4774, N524, N559). These were supported using the same techniques as the wooden ceilings: laid on top of the mud brick tomb lining (e.g. N524) or on ledges cut into the tomb shaft (e.g. N577). Limestone slabs were also used to cover small, unlined burial chambers that held pottery or wood coffins. The stones would rest directly on the coffin, occasionally even serving as the coffin lid (e.g. N662) (fig. 12). The upper sides of

**Fig. 12**  
Pottery coffin with limestone blocks used as lid, N662. From Reisner 1932: pl. 10e.



35. Reisner (1932) uses the terms “joints broken” and (1908) “overlapping stretchers”.

36. Bricks from N516 were 27 x 13 x 6 cm (Reisner 1932: 196).

37. The “logs” used in the roof of N1506 were 15 cm in diameter (Reisner 1908: 33-34), and those in N1606 were reportedly 10 – 18 cm in diameter (*ibid.*: 23-24).

38. N1532 reportedly had “several” courses of mud brick above the wooden ceiling supports (Reisner 1908: 29-30), while N1533 had four courses (*ibid.*: 28-29).

39. The remains of a wooden “beam” from N1532 was 13 cm thick (Reisner 1908: 29-33).



these slabs were usually covered with a thick layer of mud plaster (e.g. N5396, N560), sometimes with embedded limestone chips (e.g. N617). Once the ceiling was in place, the tomb shaft was filled with sand, gravel and stones.

Vaulted ceilings made of mud brick have been dated at Naga ed-Deir to Dynasty I (N3053), although they were in common usage only in Dynasty II and later (Reisner 1908: 80-81). Both simple corbel (e.g. N3017, N645) and groin corbel (e.g. N1586, N1611, N3014) vaults were built (fig. 13). Spaces between the bricks of the vault were sometimes packed with mud (e.g. N3022) or mud and limestone chips (e.g. N3017).<sup>40</sup> The interior of the vault might be plastered with mud to smooth the jagged ends of the corbel (e.g. N1633, N3022).<sup>41</sup> The outer surface of the corbel was sometimes mud plastered as well (e.g. N1626, N3014, N3022), perhaps to prevent sand from sifting between the bricks and onto the burial below. The tops of the mud brick walls which lined the burial chamber might be thickened to support the corbels (e.g. N1562, N1619) and ledges cut into the tomb shaft also helped support the vaulted ceilings (e.g.

N1633, N3014). In multi-chamber tombs, a single vault might cover the entire tomb (e.g. N3022), or each chamber might have a separate vault (e.g. N1584, N1630). As with the flat-roofed tombs, sand, gravel and stones filled the shaft above the vault.

The purpose of the Early Dynastic tombs at Naga ed-Deir was the protection and provisioning of the occupants for the after-life. There was usually only one body per tomb. Double tombs were an uncommon feature. Tomb N546 + N604 had two tomb shafts and burial chambers below a single superstructure, while N573 + N587 had two immediately adjacent but independent superstructures and substructures. As in the Predynastic period, the body was usually placed in a contracted position, on the left side with the head oriented to the south (up river) and surrounded by grave goods. Traces of cloth and matting were only rarely observed in the Early Dynastic cemeteries (Reisner 1908: 89). Mace (1909: 33-34) noted that bodies in the Dynasties II and III graves were more tightly contracted than those of the Predynastic period, perhaps a function of the small size of coffins. Traces of wooden coffins have been identified at the site (e.g. N616, N1647, N3022),<sup>42</sup> but only the mud and pottery coffins were relatively well preserved.

The social stratification documented for Egyptian society during the Predynastic period, based on variations in grave size and contents, is even more clearly evident in the Early Dynastic cemeteries at Naga ed-Deir, with a small number of very large, well-provisioned tombs surrounded by many smaller, less well-furnished graves of the same period. Grave goods from the Early Dynastic period differed notably from those of the Predynastic period. Pottery, typically coarse Nile silt wares, some with a red slip occasionally enlivened by line burnishing, was the most common type of object found in the tombs. Stone vessels, for which the

**Fig. 13**

Mud brick corbel vault ceiling from tomb N3014. Photo courtesy Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Regents of the University of California. Reisner negative B9983.



40. Reisner (1908: 52-53) describes the vault in tomb N1584 as constructed of alternating courses of headers and stretchers, with "careless" packing behind the interior surface of the vault.

41. Such interior finishing was only possible in tomb chambers accessed by stairways or ramps, e.g. N3022.

42. Reisner (1908: 78-79) noted the remains of one wooden coffin which bore traces of yellow paint over plaster.

Early Dynastic period is justly famous, were a popular grave good in both the small and large Early Dynastic tombs, and the cemeteries at Naga ed-Deir produced several hundred specimens (Reisner 1908: 99-100; Reisner 1932: 36-56). A common Predynastic tomb object, the stone cosmetic palette, fell out of use in the Early Dynastic period and only a few were found at the site (e.g. N3016). A number of new types of objects appear in the Early Dynastic period. One of the most important is the offering table, a short-pedestalled tray or dish, usually of Egyptian alabaster or limestone (*ibid.*: 50-52). These were relatively rare in Dynasties I and II and became more common at the end of the period (e.g. N530, N5175). A rare form of artifact found at Naga ed-Deir was the cylinder seal. Over a dozen cylinder seals of dark stone, most with figures of the deceased seated before a table of offerings, were recovered from cemetery N1500 (Reisner 1908: 119-122). Flint tools were also rare, the most notable being a knife with handle from tomb N1581 (*ibid.*: 38, pl. 40a). Tools, weapons and vessels of copper were not common at Naga ed-Deir and when found, occurred more frequently in the larger mastabas (*ibid.*: 114-117; Mace 1909: 47-48; Reisner 1932: 154). Tomb N1513 yielded an apparent carpenter's kit with two chisels, an adze and an axe (Reisner 1908: 49, pl. 40). Beads and amulets of

stone and, occasionally, Egyptian faience were recovered in some of the Early Dynastic graves of Naga ed-Deir (*ibid.*: 117-119; Mace 1909: 47-48; Reisner 1932: 105-108). One of the most notable finds from the site was a collection of gold and stone bead jewelry and amulets found *in situ* on the body in tomb N1532 (Reisner 1908: 29-31, fig. 54, pl. 5, 6). Apparently protected from looters by the collapsed burial chamber roof, the assemblage included a flat gold circlet still in position at the head of the deceased, a necklace with gold foil beads in the shape of shells, gold bracelets, and gold foil amulets of a bull, oryx, and beetle, the latter inlaid in dark blue paste with the crossed arrows of the goddess Neith (Aldred 1971: 174-175, pl. 2; Reisner) (**fig. 14**).

**Fig. 14**  
Gold jewelry *in situ* around badly decayed remains of skeleton in N1532. From Reisner 1908: pl. 5.



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